Invisible Hand

By Larry K. Mason

This book may be read for free online at www.nopom.info and there are also additional supporting articles on the website, as well as MP3 files of the entire novel in the author’s own voice. It is also available in print.
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Prologue

From our perspective here in 2028, the time of troubles and its aftermath seems so unnecessary and even, in some ways, silly. But what is obvious in hindsight is often cloaked in mystery while one is living through it.

The people who were responsible for the transition and its myriad consequences were just ordinary people. They had no great insights into what the future would bring. They certainly had no idea at the time how future generations would view them. But if we present the story of one man's reactions to the changes as well as some historical material, perhaps the gentle reader will come to understand both what happened and why it came as such a surprise to almost everyone.
Chapter One: Coming Home

In which our unlikely hero lands squarely in the middle of a culture he hasn't seen in over a decade; we learn the reason why; he meets a cute lady and a not so cute computer, and among other things, learns that however much other things may have changed, he will still have to wait in airports.

There it was again: The soft crunch of straw under sandals. He cringed, and then wordlessly cursed, preparing himself for another round of the staccato questions, the slaps to the face, ice water dashed into his eyes - and this wasn't even their definition of torture, though it sure as hell worked for him. Then as he scooted backwards along the floor of the small box, leaning against the back wall as far from his pisspot as possible, the door creaked open and a wedge of light fell across the floor of his box, a cleansing light revealing the pathetic result of trying to cover an Earthen floor with straw in an environment of extremes. There was a noise and then a person he hadn't seen before stood profiled in black in front of the light. It was, no, it couldn't be, but it looked like…

"Bring your seat backs to the upright position and replace your tray tables."

The steady drone of the SST-2's wing engines rose an octave as the image of the flight attendant recited the standard landing announcements, just as she would have done years ago, before the Supersonic Transport-2 series had halved the transatlantic time of its historic prototype. The resulting cacophony of tray tables automatically being raised and clicked into place, briefcase laptops snapping shut, video screens retracting, and the infant in 23C bawling with the change in cabin air pressure all served to rouse 29A, a rumpled, late middle-aged man who had been sporadically napping since the London-Washington leg began and was now pulling himself into the moment, refolding his lanky frame into what would pass for a semi-upright position. As usual, the dream disappeared around the corner of his consciousness as he woke to the engine whines, and he again couldn't remember who it was standing in the doorway.

Outside the window a crystal clear view of the Washington Monument slid smoothly by as he tried to push the sleep from his mind and the soreness from his neck muscles. The plane touched down and he had to start thinking of what he was going to do now that he was "home" again.

He appeared to be in his mid-50s (assuming reasonable living). He was dressed in what one might call "business casual" in an open-necked pink oxford cloth shirt and a medium grey suit. His shoes, though unpolished, were good quality soft black calf leather, not one of the newer chemically-derived leathers that never dulled. They were shoes that his aunt Bessie would have considered "sensible", and for the most part, the man in them could also fit that description. His greying hair had once been auburn shading to chestnut brown, and the clean-shaven face was framed with a strong chin and broad forehead. And, if one looked behind the thin frames of the tortoise-shell sunglasses, looked closely, one might see in his steady brown eyes an unspoken hesitancy. He began the ritual of collecting his belongings while waiting for the wave of motion to reach his row so he could join the other deplaning passengers and get on with his day.

For Niall Campbell, however, this was a return to the home he left in 2011 for two years that had become 17 years, before the war, before his capture and eventual release and before his gradual reentry into what he now hoped he would appreciate more than ever as "polite society". But it was and wasn't his home, was and wasn't the USA of his life before, just plain was and wasn't. He had tried his best to prepare for shocks and frustration, but it had to happen in reality; no amount of discussion and Q&A would do it for him. He had been warned to expect a changed society. Changed just how much, he was about to find out.
17 years before, when he had left for the Middle East, his daughter Brianna had been just 11 years old, so Niall couldn't actually say he now knew her. It was, in retrospect, just one piece of a weird puzzle that included his own divorce, a three-month pity party, three weeks of it gin-soaked, and to top it all off, a "why the hell not" agreeing to the hellish posting to the panoramic zone of the Middle East, serving as a consultant to the parliament of what used to be the separate nations of Iran and Iraq. Para-Iranoia, as the region was informally known among the restoration contractors, had been formed, grudgingly on all sides, as a stabilizing factor, from the debris left of the second Iranian civil war and the pieces of Iraq, restructured after the Third Gulf War.

Niall was still surprised when he and the other four members of his educational and economic mission were kidnapped by Jihadists, smuggled into Pakghanistan, and held for what would become fifteen years. Given the International protocols since the Third Global Congress on Terrorist Acts, his country could not bargain for their release, as that would be seen as a successful end to the lawless act. Rather, they tried for a time through diplomacy backchannels and not-so-covert economic pressures to persuade the kidnappers to return the educators, but given the tumult in the United States at the time of the kidnapping, there was little time and even less ability to reach half-way round the world to effect the release of political prisoners, especially, it seemed, those on the "educator" level of the totem pole.

Niall had had very little information and none of it had been firsthand until today. His posting to Pakghanistan 17 years ago and his subsequent imprisonment had left him ignorant of everything that was not within sight of the valley in which he had lived as a prisoner. From what he had learned during his 60-plus day rehabilitation process in London prior to this homecoming, his release was fortunate indeed. "Damned strange ideas those folks have over there now about money," his handler Derrin had told him when he arrived in England. "Said it was necessary and all, 'cause of the economic mess, you know. I still don't quite think I understand how that new money of theirs is supposed to work. But it does, damn my eyes, it bloody well does."

During the two months Niall had been in London, Derrin had damned his eyes over everything from the food on a given day to the weather, so Niall really didn't have a firm hold on what he was being told. "Just be cool and take it easy," had been the refrain, "it's still the good ole USA." But after all was said and undone (to the best of their abilities), it was still just 60 days to make up for 15 years - a bad trade by anyone's book.

Niall was trusting his daughter that there was room in her apartment for him. Having someone drop in to live with her without more than a couple of days warning would have made his wife crazy. Of course, she wasn't really his wife any more. That was something else the middle-east war had cost him, 17 years and his family. He hoped it was worth it.

He'd tried to explain to his wife that he could hardly come home in the middle of a war. She might have accepted that but when other men rotated back and he still didn't come she'd said it was the last straw. But that was 17 years ago. At least the government of the province he had been in was now stable.

Okay, now to get through Security and Customs and find Brianna. Niall checked that he still had his carry-on, his book, and his passport. That should do it.

The huge lobby looked about the same, except for some moving sidewalk-things and the overhead tram shuttle bubbles, which Niall thought looked pretty cool. They didn't have those in London, and he wondered what other differences he would find in his old hometown. What he did note was the stylistic, proscenium-arch structures framing each major entrance into the airport proper. He knew these to be the latest in scanning technology, capable of accuracy far better than the standards of the primitive devices of the late 20th century.
As Niall followed a young woman with a tight, rhythmic bottom in a navy business suit, he noticed as they approached that the Customs section looked pretty much the way he remembered it. The swaying suit stopped so suddenly that he narrowly averted an embarrassing introduction, but he managed it as they formed the end of the line of their fellow passengers from flight TA-636 into the "returning citizen" queue. Niall cleared his throat, and looking past the blonde hair in front of him, said "Excuse me, but is there a separate line for customs, or do we stay in this one?"

The suit pivoted to show a better than average looking woman in her twenties, wearing a ruffled white silk blouse, confirming his conclusion about the business suit. "This is one and then they move us into another somewhere, I think. I've never been to this one before," she responded, only slightly looking at him, more or less at a space above and a half-inch to her right of his left ear.

"Well, I declare," he said, hoping the corny joke might crack the ice that was quickly surrounding them in the climate-controlled terminal.

"Uh?" the young woman managed to get out through her obvious indifference to him.

"You know: Customs? Well, 'I declare'. It's an expression," he continued, the laugh dissolving as suddenly as he wished he could. "Get back in with people," they had drilled into him from the first day he had arrived at the London Centre. "You've got a lot to relearn, just being around people, for starters. Hell, man, you've barely heard any English for a dozen years, and seen nobody from home in at least that long. You'll have to relearn a lot of things, but the most important is your social intercourse." They really said that. Niall imagined the USA he had left, where someone looks at another person, a virtual stranger, and suggests some "social intercourse".

There'll always be an England.

"Oh, Customs." she slowly repeated, "customs." If she had been any colder she would have been on a slab in the morgue. And the look that came with it told Niall that he was about one half-assed comment away from… from what, he wondered? Looking around he saw only the usual sleepy guards hanging around the scanning area, but then decided that this venture "back in" to socializing had reached its end.

"Thanks," he said, and instantly wondered why in the hell he had said that? But when he looked up she was gone, through the scans and walking-in perfect 2/4 time-to the women's lounge. No doubt to describe the creep she had just met on-line to whoever might listen.

He got to the Customs desk and they had him run his carry-on through the machine.

The woman behind the counter was an attractive brunette, though to be honest, they were all attractive to him, as they would be to any sighted individual, after burkhas and yaks. She wore a tailored burgundy wool suit, fitting in all the right places, as Lew Archer might say. A patch with an unfamiliar logo, some type of crossed parabolas in red and yellow, and the metallic nameplate reading "Arden: How May I Assist YOU?" over her heart, finished the ensemble.

"I've only got one bottle of scotch." Niall said as he put his carry-on on the counter between them.

"That's fine, sir, I'm sure," said Arden, "but would you please step over on this mat?" There was a spongy looking greenish mat about three feet square off to his right, and Niall got behind the man who had preceded him through the scanner, someone he remembered as walking up and down the aisle during much of the time Niall had not been napping on the plane.
"What is that for, um…? Arden?" Niall asked, bloodied but unbowed from his recent feeble flirtation. She actually was attractive once the second look got you past the institutional anonymity these costumes inspire.

"The mat…?" she began.

"Yes. What does it do? I mean didn't the scanner…"

"It doesn't get everything," she said, finishing the sentence. "With this, we can scan for various contagious materials and chemical substances not allowed in this country," she told him, adding "and not detectable by magnetic image," with a look that as much as said "which rock have you been living under?" Had he noticed, she might have been surprised that he could have told her just which rock he had literally been living under, or in, if you count a cave as a big rock, or how he was "unaccustomed" to being here. Ha Ha. He thought to himself, "You're a riot, Campbell, a regular laugh-riot," as his old TV buddy Ralph Kramden would have said.

With Niall standing on the mat, Arden ran what looked like a vintage vacuum cleaner attachment around his waist and looked at a display screen off to her right.

"That's fine, sir. Welcome to Washington," she said, peremptorily resheathing the wand in a slot in the counter beside her.

As he moved from the mat to make room for the woman behind him - he couldn't place her from the plane - Niall asked Arden "The scotch. How much do I owe?"

"There's no duty, sir," she responded, smiling in a sincere way even as she looked slightly past him to the next person.

"Thanks," he said. Realizing he had nothing but the fat roll of Euro currency in his pocket he added, "Could you tell me where I can change some money?"

"Change some money, sir?" she queried.

"Yes. I have some Euros I'd like to convert to dollars. I need pocket money to get around in town. I'm afraid I don't have a penny of American money on me."

"You don't have an account, sir?" her eyebrows rising. His answer had for one reason or another arrested her attention enough for her to look from the woman behind him and back to Niall, settling on him. Hmmm. What was that look for?

"An account?" He said. "What kind? Look, I've been, uh, away for some time, and I don't know from bank numbers," he responded with more swagger than he felt.

Why was she asking about accounts? He wondered how this had slipped by his ReIntel team? Or maybe he should have read that brochure on the new money they had given him. He thought back through his memory. Finances: Brianna has power of attorney and that's all with her, so just what is this?

For the first time since leaving what had become his comfortable surroundings outside London, Niall had the fleeting discomfort of not knowing. Not knowing about this account business, not knowing about the lack of duty on Scotch, no currency exchange. What else? He was sure that he was
looking, as well as feeling, on edge, so he glanced up at the nearest ARRIVAL/DEPARTURE monitor, hoping to catch his breath, a little time, and maybe a clue. Before he pulled his eyes back to the person, he noticed that whatever those things up there were, they weren't ARR/DEP monitors. If he had been within ten feet of a restroom he would have gone in for a much-needed splash in the face. No such luck. All he could come up with was Derrin's all-purpose admonition, and he played it for what he hoped would be cool. "Why, uh, are you with a bank?" he added, with what he thought was a wink-wink tone, if a vocal tone could have a physical characteristic.

"No. No, Sir. You don't understand," she said, her broad smile barely concealing a laugh that came through anyway in her voice. Niall had the sudden sensation that he was the diversion of the hour, a bobbleheaded doll with a goofy face. "Money is always in an account. You have to have an account to have money, Sir. There's no other way."

"Oh," he said relieved that he understood, even though on second thought he wouldn't give three to five that he did. "What kind of account? I really don't want to convert much, a thousand Euros or so."

No sooner had Niall said this when he wondered why he had added that bit about the amount of money. Years of cells and locked rooms with nothing but a straw pallet on a stone (or Earthen) floor, and a pot tend to make one Non-communicative. She - Arden - wasn't the enemy, but hey, habits are habits. Maybe he was assimilating faster than he thought. They had told him the drugs they had given him would stop the unreasoning fears and sudden anger and persistent paranoia after a time, in addition to blocking most of the memories better forgotten. He was no longer waking up in a panic every night, just some nights. He no longer hoarded food he didn't need. Perhaps they knew what they were talking about. "Must send Derrin a message of congratulations for his cerebral douches", as he had called them, to the disdain of the men and women who had worked so hard to make the drugs work for him, easing his transition. But they understood. He was a corny jokester, and it was a good sign that he cared enough to joke about stuff like that.

Speaking of which, Niall wondered if the smile he was feeling inside showed. After, how long? His face and demeanor spoke more to gravity than easy humor. His 50's had so far been kind to him, no doubt due to his status as an unwilling guest of the Pakafghani warlord. He had avoided the middle-age paunch, that not being a problem in a life of constant half-starvation. Give thanks for small favors. People knew how to handle obesity now, as opposed to the turn of the century, when the USA was a land of "the larded gentry", as one of his friends in the service had commented upon reading a pictorial history of the time. The three-tined fork (unfortunate image) of reasonable diet, the rediscovery of exercise, and the resulting social sanctioning of obesity as a sign of misplaced attention joined certain pharmacological compounds to make the affliction much less a threat to the population than it had been.

Well-toned at 5' 11" and back up to 155 pounds now, he was not hard to look at. His ex-wife Katherine once had told him that his ultimate appeal had been based roughly 60% on his looks and the remaining 40% or so on what she had discovered about him after they met and thus his look/discover ratio had been 60:40. That wasn't too bad, according to her. But then, Niall had never heard anyone, ever, make a reference of that kind to someone, so he had to take her at her word. In fact, he would not have been surprised if she alone had been the only one to have such a system; which would mean that he was the best ever – and the worst as well, as she would emphasize a few years into their marriage.

"I'm sorry," Arden was continuing. "I didn't make myself clear, uh, Mr…" she looked down at her manifest display.

"Campbell comma Niall" he said, "TA-636 from London, that would be."
"Yes, I see. Thank you, Mr. Campbell," Arden continued in a sweet, clear voice. "As I was saying, I don't think you understood what I meant just now by your account." Saying this, she caught the eye of a grey-suited fellow team member and inclined her head slightly in the universal "come on over".

"Susan, would you help me out here for a moment while I assist this gentleman?"

"Sure," said Susan, who would never see the day when she challenged Arden in the looks department, Niall thought to himself. Ratio 20:80, maybe. God. Now she's got me doing it. The movies you replay during stressful times.

"…account is not what I meant," Arden was finishing as Niall rejoined her from his reverie.

"I'm sorry," he said, brushing his hair back from his forehead with his left hand before continuing. "Didn't catch all of that." He sure wasn't making it easy for her to help him. And the hell of it was that he liked her, and not just as the first attractive woman to take anything near an interest in him in the past, well... years? Good God, he was glad he hadn't thought overmuch along those lines, the ease of depression being what it was. He jerked back to reality before he lost track again and made himself look even dumber than he must look at this moment. He smiled and nodded.

"That's okay," she was continuing. "The account I'm talking about is different from what you referred to. It's not a bank account, I mean. I was talking about your money account, your luxury account?"

She glanced at him; half fearing he would return an expression registering zero comprehension. She wasn't disappointed.

"Please step this way for a moment."

"I have quite a lot of money," he said following her. "I got my severance pay in Euros just last week."

"That won't do you much good here," she said. "Not many people will accept it outside the airport. If you want to spend money it'll be a lot easier if you put it in your account."

"OK." he said grinning. "Where do I sign?"

"Oh, you don't have to sign anything." She turned into a small, rather austere room with a TV screen on one wall. "Just step over here to the ID station and we will get you set in a jiffy." She turned to her left and pointed to what looked like an eye examination device from an optometrist's office sitting on a small table with what looked sort of like a coffeemaker's hotplate below the TV screen. There was no chair to sit in so Niall walked in the direction she pointed but was looking at her rather than the blank TV.

"First tell the computer that you want an account."

"I want an account," Niall said to the eye machine.

"What is your full name?" The TV asked.

Niall only twitched a little, then to the TV said "N. D. Campbell."

"I need to have your full name, not just initials," the still darkened TV said. "I'll be looking over your records and it will be easier and quicker if I have your full name. When I address you in public I'll use whatever name you like."
He noticed that Arden had left the room. Oh, well.

"All right. My full name is Niall Davitt Campbell. I was born in Minot, North Dakota in 1970, January 6th."

"Is that Niall spelled with an 'IA'?'" the TV asked.

"Yes it is. Will that do?" Niall replied beginning to wonder what he was getting into.

"Oh yes, that does quite nicely. Then you do want to be your previous self and don't want to adopt a new identity" it said.

"Why would I want to be anyone other than myself?" he asked incredulously. "What kind of runaround are you giving me?" Niall was getting a little angry. The TV wasn't acting like any bank official he had ever dealt with. In fact it was treating him like he was opening a secret numbered account in Switzerland or something.

"I am giving you your freedom, sir," it said. "You are free to have whatever name you like and present yourself as anyone you like. But you must be known to me for your account to work. I must be able to identify you from among almost 400 million people. I must know you regardless of your name or your appearance. I must be able to positively identify you or you won't be able to use the account. Also, once you begin using the account, you won't be able to adopt a different identity with a different account. You get only the one account."

"Who are you, really?" Niall said beginning to feel like the victim in some candid camera stunt.

"I am the computer that keeps track of the money accounts and other things."

"Other things?"

"Certainly. I keep track of where you are and what you own as well as everything connected with the money you earn."

"Wait," Niall said. "What kind of account is this? Is it a savings account, a checking account, a certificate of deposit?"

"It's just an account, sir. There's only one kind of account. It's the record of all the money you have and how you earned it," the still blank screen said.

"But what about this currency I have," he asked.

"That's not money to me, sir. That's just paper and metal disks. Money exists only in these accounts sir, though you may be able to trade that currency for money if you like. Once we set up your account I can ask someone from the traders to accept your paper and coins."

He could almost hear the italics when it said the word "currency."

"Wait a minute," he protested. "What if I don't want to convert these Euros into your money?"

"That's your choice, sir. They are your property. You can always say 'I won't'," it said.
"Damn right I can. I can say a lot more than that."

"If you wish, sir. Now if you will just look through the eyepiece for a few seconds, sir."

"What the hell for?" He almost shouted. He was really beginning to get mad. He could feel the all too familiar reactions to his anxiety and paranoia kicking in.

"Sir, I already know your voice, your face and body shape, and your manner of movement. Now I need to get your retina patterns, your hand prints, and your smell."

"My smell! What kind of crazy setup is this anyway? Are you insane?" He must have been a little crazy himself to say that to a computer but he wasn't at his best what with the jet lag and the changes he'd been through in the last two months.

"Sir, you don't want to limit yourself to only one form of identification, do you? Besides, this will make any large purchases you make much easier and quicker. It will be exceedingly difficult for anyone to present themselves as you with all these forms of identification."

It was trying to sound persuasive and comforting. He had to admit that the technicians who programmed that thing were damn good.

"It also means that no matter where I go you can pick me out of a crowd. Everywhere you have a sensor or a camera you'll be able to know it's me. You'll know everything I do."

"That is quite true, sir. But then, that's true whether you have an account or not."

Niall felt a chill and the hairs on the back of his neck began to stand up. He'd read too much science fiction as a kid not to recognize a technological big brother when he came face to face with one. And not to mention, thank you very much, that he had just ended over a decade of having his every move watched. Jeez.

What could he do now? His daughter and his grandchildren were in this hellish situation. Perhaps he could get them out. He didn't really want to take them back to Europe because the depression there was getting pretty bad. And he could hardly expect them to live in a Muslim country as outsiders. He really didn't know of any place else. Maybe they could escape to Canada.

"Sir? Sir?" it said somewhat worriedly. "Are you all right, sir?"

He came part way out of his near panic and looked reflexively around, as if he had been caught in a communion line with his fly open.

"Yeah, yeah" he said. "I'm just peachy. I think I'll just convert half of my Euros."

"Oh that's none of my business," the computer said. "You can take that up with the trader. Now if you'll just place each hand on this plate."

He felt a sudden draft of air over each hand as it rested for a moment on the "hotplate."

There was a knock at the door and Arden opened the door a crack and said, "Should I bring the trader in now?"

"I'm done," the TV said.
"Yeah, that's OK." Niall said.

She opened the door the rest of the way, beckoned, and two guys came into the room. One was dressed in a really sharp suit. He had a gold colored band on his left wrist and, of all things, a flower in his lapel. The other guy was older and dressed in a plain off white suit with no tie, plain black shoes, and a thin turtleneck sweater under the coat.

The sharp-dressed guy introduced himself, "I'm Norman Salvatore and I have over $120,000" then he turned to the computer and said "Please verify."

The computer said, "He is Norman Salvatore and he does have over $120,000 in his account."

Niall about dropped his teeth on the floor. That stupid computer had told him how much money Norman had.

Norman didn't turn a hair. He just asked Niall how many Euros he had to convert.

"Did you know that the computer was going to tell me how much money you had in your account?" Niall asked as he counted out about half his roll of bills.

"Sure," Norman said. "How else could you be sure you could trust me? You just arrived in the country and probably don't know whom to trust yet. This way you know I'll get you all the money possible for your currency."

When Niall stopped counting out bills and started to put the rest away Norman said "Is that all? What about the rest? Those Euros are really going to drop in value if the government over there goes ahead with its stimulus plans. You'll really do better to convert it all. If you go back to Europe you can always buy more Euros."

"No, I'll just convert this. I think I can get by with that much in my account."

"Hell, you can get by with nothing in your account. But who wants to live like a payer when you don't have to?" Then he glanced at the other man and said "Nothin' personal."

The other guy gave a little wave and said, "It's OK. I don't mind."

Norman, having counted the money for himself and riffled the bills in front of the TV screen said, "I have accepted from N. D. Campbell 4200 Euros."

Then he looked at Niall and said, "How soon do you want to start getting paid."

"Getting paid?" Niall said.

"Getting paid for giving him the Euros," the other man, presumably a payer, said. "What else?"

"I want it right now! When the hell did you think I wanted it?"

"Cool down," Norman said. "Some people want to get more for their currency and are willing to wait. It doesn't matter to him which way you want it."
Then looking at Niall he said into his carnation, "Jeb, I got 4200 Euros, do we have an outbound that can use it."

Then after a pause, he said, "OK, I'll be there in a minute."

"OK, fellow, if Herbie here is on the ball you should have your pay in about 10 minutes."

"What 'pay'? I'm converting those Euros to dollars." he said.

Herbie, the payer guy, said, "I pay you for providing the Euros that Norman will sell to someone who wants Euros. That benefits whoever that is and therefore I pay you."

"You will pay me now?"

"I'll pay you in a few minutes if what Jeb said is true," Herbie said turning away and starting for the door following Norman.

"Well somebody had better pay me and damn soon. I'm coming with you. You aren't getting out of my sight until I'm paid," and Niall hustled to catch up with Herbie.

Neither guy looked like much of an athlete. Herbie especially looked like he was about 65 and Norman was rather thin as the slick suit made clear and only about five foot six. So Niall figured if they tried something he could always just take his money back.

But they only went about 50 feet and turned into another office where there was a woman dithering at the counter while the man behind the counter made soothing noises.

"The Euros are right here, Jeb," Norman said and the woman turned with an expression of vast relief.

"Oh, thank goodness," she sighed.

Norman counted them out on the counter on a built-in scanner and said "What's your name ma'am?" to the woman.

"Millicent Marie Schwartz," she said firmly.

"Millicent Marie Schwartz, I have here four thousand, two hundred Euros in currency. Do you wish to buy this currency at a price of three thousand six hundred twenty-three dollars and forty cents?" recited Norman.

"Yes I do," said Millicent.

"Millicent, you now own the currency which has been scanned in the amount of 4200 Euros. I have deducted $3,623.40 from your account," said the computer in the same voice he had heard in the other room.

"Do you really think only 9500 Euros will be enough?" Millicent asked Jeb.

"Ma'am, they should be plenty and you can always buy more at the airport or any American Embassy."

"But I can't trust those people. They might steal my money."
Ma'am, you can deposit it in a bank right there at the airport and carry a card that will let you pay for things from that bank account very much like you do here."

"But they might steal the card."

"Ma'am, they require identification before they accept the card. You'll be just fine. If all our tourists were robbed when they got to London you'd have heard of it on the news. That would be a very valuable thing to know, wouldn't it?"

Norman contributed, "You just watch what the other tourists and business travelers do. Most of them are old hands at this. They wouldn't keep going back if there were anything to worry about, now would they?"

Reassured, Millicent went on her way.

While this exchange had been going on, the payer had been talking to a small box about the size of a cigarette package in a quiet voice. He motioned Niall over.

"Are you N. D. Campbell who gave 4200 Euros to Norman Salvatore?" he said in a formal tone of voice holding the box between himself and Niall.

"Well who the hell do you think I am? I haven't left your side since I gave Norman that money."

"Sir, this is for the computer. It likes to verify everything to be sure that the right person is getting credit. I'd have to testify that I knew you to credit your account without your affirmation on the record."

"Oh. OK. I'm N. D. Campbell and I gave 4200 Euros to Norman Salvatore."

The computer spoke up, "Mr. Campbell you now have $84,503.28 in your account."

"I have what?" It just sort of burst out of him.

"You have $84,503.28 in your account," the machine obligingly repeated.

"Where did that come from?" he said.

"Some of your assets were in stocks and bank accounts at the transition and you had some insurance policies. Also, since the divorce took place after the transition, you were credited with half the pay for the equity you had in your house when your wife turned it in. You've been getting about $150 per month since then." The computer seemed to be enjoying itself. How did they program personality into a computer?

"You mean that I'm getting rent on a house I don't own any more. I thought that went to my wife in the settlement," Niall said.

"The settlement which you signed, if you don't remember it now, was just a statement of what was to be done with the assets you owned jointly."

Actually he had never read the thing. He was so bummed out that he didn't care any more. That was part of why he hadn't tried harder to come home before he'd been kidnapped. So he had just signed the papers on the lines with the little "X" and sent them back.
"So if I already had all that money, why did you say I didn't have an account?"

"Sir, you didn't have an account until you requested an account. No one is required to have an account. You don't have to use money unless you want to. It's your choice. But just because you don't have an account doesn't mean that we forget what you've done for others. Once I confirmed your identity I was able to use the records of payments to your credit to calculate how much you had been paid over the years."

"What if I had never come back?" he asked.

"Then the records would eventually have been archived and no one could have spent the money." the machine said.

"What if someone else had claimed to be N. D. Campbell and asked for an account?"

"First I would have checked their personal characteristics as I did with you. Then I would have searched the records for someone else with those characteristics. Since each person is unique, I could have rejected the claim if I found another account for a person with those characteristics."

The last part seemed to be parenthetical, scripted, Niall thought, before he was able to catch it. "The whole damn thing is scripted", he reflected, "or at least a huge part. Must be."

The still blank TV was continuing, no indication that it was even on except the voice that issued from it. Niall found it creepy and disconcerting. "Then I would have tried to get other indications of identity. In your case there are DNA records for your wife and daughter and with those I could have demonstrated conclusively that the imposter could not be you. In an extreme case I would have asked for the cooperation of people who knew the real N. D. Campbell before you left the country. I would have requested that they assist me to identify you. Their memories of you with confirmation from records about your activities would make it quite difficult for an imposter. There are some other ways which I can use but I'd rather not go into them now."

"Another thing," Niall said with just an edge in the tone of aggressiveness, "what are you doing telling everyone how much money I have in my account?"

"Oh, they couldn't understand that part of what I said. It was sort of a mumble to them. Like this."

Niall heard a mumble of what sounded like speech but it refused to resolve into understandable words. But Herbie laughed aloud.

"I just told Mr. Severbock a new joke that's going around. But I focused the sounds so that only he could understand the words. That way I can talk to you without others being able to understand. It's quite a useful facility."

Niall had also been warned during Re-acculturation that the society had taken leaps of great magnitude toward a computer control of essential factors, the economic charting and bookkeeping not excluded. As they flew over Newfoundland, he had begun to get that feeling he had always had around computers for as long as he could remember: wonderful adding machines and fast organizers, but a threat if we're not careful. He was only a casual reader of science fiction, but of those he had read so long ago, the ones with dark, gloomy prophecies stuck with him the most. Sort of a cyber-Frankenstein type of thing. The best example came from near the middle of the last century, in the movie 2001: A Space Odyssey, where the computer controlling the space ship actually
has a personality, goes nuts, and becomes a rogue operative, willing to do anything to avoid its personal destruction. Just like a human being.

Sort of. Niall thought for a moment and couldn't remember if the computer in the movie - Hal?- had a real personality, but that hardly mattered now, 50 years later. This invisible wonder speaking through the TV probably has more personality than Arden's co-worker, he thought with less charity than he would have liked, but what were its motives? He just had to watch it. His overly fertile imagination along with the paranoia he had acquired over the last 15 years and his predilection to think the worst of computers if he thought of them at all - was a dangerous combination in what this country apparently had become. He might start thinking a computer was out to get him. He reflected with some hope that he actually had not even left the airport yet, so this might be just a weird exception, but even as he formed the thought in his mind, he was doubting it.

It was in this fog of uncertainty that Niall said goodbye to Norman, Herbie, and Jeb and went to retrieve his luggage. It was waiting for him in the baggage claim area in a small pile under a sign with his name flashing on it.

As he bent to pick it up a boy of about 10 ran up and said peremptorily, "What's your name, sir?"

Caught a bit off guard by the hedged, less than friendly greeting, Niall shot back "What's it to you, kid?"

"These bags belong to N. D. Camp Bell," he said separating Niall's last name into two words "and if you are not N. D. Camp Bell you can't have them."

"Well, good for you" Niall said, reaching for the larger bag, a leather job that had seen its best days many years previous. He got his second surprise in as many minutes as the kid leaned in and sort of thrust himself between Niall and the bag, not assaulting him or grabbing the bag, just making the three of them look like a bizarre pieta, or two contestants interrupted in the middle of "Twister", a drinking game from Niall's college days.

"Well, are you Camp Bell or not?" the kid persisted; his head turned almost 90 degrees. Niall could see that he had a trace of something brown at the far corner of his mouth. Peanut butter? He was not the waif that would run up to carry your bags for baksheesh; he was dressed modestly in clean blue jeans (Niall knew before he had even left the country way back when that he marked himself as an archaic by continuing the modifier 'blue' before jeans). He had a thin sort of zip jacket, an off-red deal with a small hood, underneath which he had on a yellow shirt with a button down collar. Niall noticed that more quickly than he would have otherwise had he not been in England and noticed their sartorial preference for widespread "English" collars, no buttons of course. For a kid who was nearly five feet tall and all of 100 pounds, he was one hell of an obstacle to the current mission.

"It's pronounced 'Cambull', kid, "he said."You don't pronounce the 'p' because it's silent.

"Well, are you Campbell or not?" the youth persisted.

"I am Campbell and these are my bags," he said. "If it's any business of yours."

Wordlessly the kid pointed at the sign where his name had been flashing and it was saying "identity confirmed."
Relaxing against the counter the kid said, "They are your bags, sir and you're not taking someone else's bags by mistake. If you'd been picking up the wrong bags I could've gotten paid for preventing the error. So you see sir, it is a business of mine."

Damn smart mouth kid Niall thought. "I just hate it when they show me up that way... It takes all the fun out of being a grouchy old man."

But Niall noted that the jacket, though in good shape, might have been a hand-me-down, as it hung a bit loosely on the kid's shoulders when he stood straight upright. Almost like a second wave the sense of the kid's response washed over him. Maybe the kid really needed the money.

Niall started to pick up his bags before moving toward the exit and the kid pipes up again.

"May I help you carry your bags, sir?"

Now that he had his bags he relaxed. He surprised himself at how clingy and possessive he had been about "things" since his return to the real world. But that, too, was supposed to mitigate as he re-entered his old world. Or what's left of it, he mused, thinking of the computer. "You really do this as a business?"

"Sure. Lots of people are strangers here and don't know their way around. I get paid to help them."

"Then you can help me. What do you think you can carry?"

"Oh, I can carry that big bag sir, I think."

So Niall handed him the big bag and the boy struggled a little but managed to carry the bag all the way out to the line of taxicabs waiting at the curb.

"OK kid I guess you earned your tip. Do you take Euros?"

"Euros, sir? What would I want with Euros?" he said.

"Well I'm sorry," Niall began, trying not to sound as defensive as he felt. "But that's the only money I have on me just now." Damn, he reflected, is everything complicated now? "You know, baksheesh," he said.

"You're going to give me something?" he said, rather surprised. "What for?"

"For carrying my bag. Why did you think?" Niall looked more closely at the kid. He had looked normal before, but maybe there was something in his eyes or something. No, he had nice brown eyes, didn't walk like he was wired on anything, no shudders, twitches or twinges. Still an odd damn question, Niall thought.

"Well there's a payer right over there. I was expecting him to pay me," the boy said pointing.

There was another of those old guys in a white outfit wearing a cool weather jacket sitting on a bench watching them with a grin on his face.

"He pays you? What for?"
"Because I helped you, of course. Don't you know anything?" Then he clapped his hand over his mouth and blushed and said "I'm sorry sir, I didn't mean to insult you. It's just that everybody knows that Payers will pay you if you do something good for someone else. You kind of startled me, sir."

Niall laughed for the first time in several days and said, "Well kid I guess I really don't know as much as I should so I guess you only told the truth. Can you also get paid for helping me get a cab?"

"I guess so sir but it's really very easy. All you do is get in and tell the driver where you want to go."

"What if I don't know where it is I want to go?"

"If you just got here perhaps you'd like to go to a hotel?" the boy said after a minute. "There are lots of hotels. You can see a listing of them over there." he said pointing to a kiosk with several display screens. When they had passed it before, Niall had assumed that they were ARR/DEP monitors. Second time for that mistake, but damn it, they had to have those things somewhere!

"I really want to go to my daughter's house. Can you help me find where that is?"

"Sure. Just tell the computer who you are and who your daughter is and it will tell you where she is," he said confidently.

"Don't you mean it will tell me where she lives?"

"No, sir. It can tell me where my mother is whenever I ask because it knows where her phone is. Since she always has the phone it knows where she is."

"I guess I should phone my daughter to tell her I arrived safely. Can I do that somewhere around here?"

"Don't you have a phone, sir?" he asked, surprised.

"No, son. I just got here from a long way away where almost nobody has a phone."

"How do they talk to their friends when they want to?"

"Well usually they just holler and their friends are close enough to hear them. But anyway let's go try that kiosk phone."

So the boy escorted Niall over to the kiosk. There were several of those TV screens separated by short partitions. The boy gestured for Niall to stand in front of one of the screens and said "tell the computer your name and who you want to talk to."

"I'm N. D. Campbell and I want to talk to Brianna P. Miller."

The machine came right back with, "Which Brianna P. Miller, sir."

The kid stuck in "She's his daughter."

The computer said, "One moment please."

In about 10 seconds Brianna's image, or at least it looked like Niall remembered her looking from when he had last phoned her, was looking back at him from the screen. Her face was narrow, hair
shoulder length and dark brown with sun bleached streaks, her brown eyes framed by nicely arched brows and the nose looked a little sunburned as well. His daughter had grown up quite nicely he thought.

"Hello?"

"Hello, Brianna."

"Who is this?" she asked. The computer answered for Niall, "He's your father."

"Dad! Why didn't you tell me you were coming in today? We would have met you at the airport."

"Well Brianna, I didn't want to put you to all that trouble.

"Oh, poo. It would've been a wonderful excursion for the kids. They've never been to the airport. They'd love to see the planes take off and land."

"Anyway, I'm here now and about to take a cab. What address should I give the driver?"

"Just tell him you want to go to your daughter's house. He'll find it."

"He doesn't know me or you. How in the world will he be able to find your house?"

"Well you have to pay for a cab and the computer will know who you are and who your daughter is and it'll tell him." And then, with her voice dropping an octave, she added with the slightest concern, "Goodness dad, isn't it obvious? I mean, you're kidding, right?"

Hardly in the country for an hour and already two smart mouth kids were giving him a hard time. But at least this time it was Brianna so it was easy to take. As if reminded, Niall looked down and sure enough, the five-foot gadfly was still there, looking up and no doubt listening.

"Okay, honey. Yeah, I guess I'm kidding. Just the flight and all; I'm kind of all in. Look, I'll see you as soon as I can get there, okay?"

"Sure, Dad," she responded. "And Dad?"

"Yes honey?"

"It's really great to hear your voice. I can't wait to see you."

Some weird lump appeared in Niall's throat as Brianna said this, and he could barely get out, "I can't either. Love you, sweetpea," he said, his childhood nickname for her springing out of nowhere.

"Me, too. Bye." And she rang off.

Niall shook hands with the boy, said goodbye and thanks. The boy was all smiles. Niall thought he must have been thinking about how much money he would get for helping that poor old man who didn't know the most obvious things. The boy was running toward the payer even before Niall got the bags into the taxi. He suddenly wondered why it never occurred to him to ask the boy what he was doing all alone at the airport. Then Niall thought "He probably would have asked me what I was doing all alone at the airport since I was the one who didn't know how to do anything. Smart mouth kid."
The cabby seemed to think Niall knew what to do so Niall tried to maintain the illusion. "I'm N. D. Campbell and I want to go to my daughter's house," Niall said. After a brief pause the cabby said "that will be $14.22." Niall said "OK". Since he was getting used to the computer screens being everywhere it was no surprise to see a screen on the dash of the cab with a route laid out and the price at the top of the screen.

The cab pulled away from the curb and into traffic. They'd gone almost halfway to Brianna's house when he realized that there were no potholes. It isn't something that he would have normally paid attention to when he lived here but he had just returned from a place where paving, even with potholes, is considered a modern wonder. Once he noticed how smooth the ride was he remembered how there had always seemed to be potholes every now and then. By the time he was almost there he couldn't stifle his curiosity any further.

"Say friend, last time I was here there were potholes. How come I don't see any on this trip? Do they keep them all in some other part of town now?" he said using his best comedic delivery.

"Potholes? Man it's been years since we have had many potholes. If they made the roads so they got potholes easily it'd cut their pay quite a bit. Every time somebody fixed a pothole in a road they'd made, that other person would start getting some of the pay that would otherwise have gone to the original builder. And that's not even counting the penalty for loss of use while the potholes were fixed. You wouldn't believe how careful they are now."

Well at least something was better. Of course they said the trains ran on time for Hitler so it didn't mean much to Niall. His thoughts were rather grim as he got out of the cab and reached futilely for the tip that the cabby didn't wait for and he couldn't give anyway. "Why did they have to mess up the money?" he growled to himself.
Chapter Two: Clark’s Joke

In which we meet Clark Minton and see the origins of his practical joke. Some joke. We also join a floundering political campaign and see it take a desperate gamble.

--------South Florida, Tuesday, August 3, 2010--------

Since the election was only three months away, and since all the other salaried campaign staff were busy tying up the phones arranging job interviews and calling friends of friends, Clark Halsop Minton spent most hours of most days surfing the Internet. One of his most enjoyable things was to think up a word and type it into EyeKnow, the powerful search engine that looked at over 5 billion websites, according to a sign on their site that reminded Clark of the McDonald’s™ “Over 23 billion served” on all of the lighted message boards under the arches. His increasing solitude in the office, largely self-imposed, was in large part a result of his four years at Vanderbilt, where, miracle of miracles, he found that it was not a mortal sin to be smart, or interested in becoming that way. Growing up in the shadow of that graduate of the school of hard knocks, Buddy Minton himself, Clark had found little paternal support for his consuming interest in reading, “Hell’s bells, son,” his daddy was fond of saying, “ain’t nobody paid to read books and damn few are paid squat to write them. So what you need, son, is to get out in the real world. Do you think I got all this,” he would say, melodramatically sweeping his hand in a proprietary arc, regardless of whether he was in their palatial house or the Dairy Queen ice cream shop, “from reading books? You bet your sweet Aunt Bessie I didn’t!” Clark, then, grew up with only his mother’s support for his basic independence, including the practice of reading in relative safety. Over the years, it was safe to say, that while she enjoyed and appreciated the bounty that soy brought the Minton clan, she grew to resent constantly languishing in the shadow of the Big Buddy, and being treated lovingly but firmly as good for just three things, only two of which could be mentioned in polite society. So, as far as she was able, she encouraged Clark to arm himself with the wits and other tools he would need come the day when he no longer could “stay with the program,” as Buddy was fond of saying.

So, despite despairing and disparaging comments from his father, and the winking of his rural macho classmates, Clark gradually dropped even the pretext of interest in chugging Colt 45 "40's" (the 40-ounce bottle of the popular malt liquor) and then engaging in such hayseed Olympic activities as drag racing, whoring, and other worthwhile shenanigans of a Saturday night.

When the time came to apply to colleges, Clark was pleasantly surprised to learn that he had actually made it into Vanderbilt on his own merit, even as Buddy stood by, checkbook in hand, to endow, if necessary, his son’s place in the class of 2010. The ugly duckling of Smoot County, Georgia soon turned into a swan as Clark warmed instantly to the intellectual atmosphere and ambience of the Nashville campus. With his visits home increasingly rare (Buddy always trying to talk him out of his honors Humanities major and into something worthwhile, like anything to help make money) Clark Minton grew into quite an interesting, well-educated, gentleman, which is to say someone so opposite his dad that people could be excused for thinking Clark was adopted.

In the few months he had been back in the family home, largely at the request of his mother, who missed his conversation and geniality, Clark had been considering whether or not graduate school might be the thing after all. His problem actually was not so much one of identifying his interests as discovering an outlet for them that wouldn’t send Buddy around the bend. It wasn’t a case of worrying about his inheritance (there was already a sizable trust fund awaiting his 25th birthday) but rather, thinking of his mother, who would bear the brunt of Buddy’s dissatisfaction if Clark were to do “some damn fool thing” with his life. And of all things he didn’t want, it was to be the source of his mom’s
unhappiness. Which is why, a couple of weeks after graduation he dutifully accepted the job with the Frobisher for Congress re-election campaign that Buddy so kindly volunteered him for.

So one day Clark types in “money,” since he was thinking of calling Buddy in a few minutes, and the list of “first 100 of 167,579,034” had one site called “Physical Object MONEY: Why Things Go Wrong.” Thinking he might get some ammunition to use in his next grilling from Buddy about “making somethin’ with your damn life,” Clark decided to kill a few minutes and clicked through to the website.

Meanwhile, at about the time Clark was visiting the website, his father was sitting down to lunch, generally a happy time of the day for him. But today he couldn’t seem to dive in as he usually did, and the reason was simple enough - he was worrying about his son again, for about the four millionth time. Buddy always got steamed thinking about Clark, and how if he, Buddy Minton, had worked his way through Valdosta State and owned 10,000 acres by his 30th birthday, well hell, it just can’t be that the boy was his. But they looked as much alike as two peas in a pod except that Clark’s paunch was smaller. So he had to secretly blame Lozelle, his wife and Clark’s mama, for whatever it was that made Clark Clark and not like him, Buddy. “God!” he thought. What if they had named him Buddy Jr.?

But Lozelle loved her son, every highfalutin’ pound of his lazy ass, and Buddy had to grin and bear it, being satisfied to growl to himself between forks of barbeque washed down with sweet tea, a sort of grunt with each recollection of Clark’s latest damn fool stuffandsuch. And now that Frobisher seemed certain to lose (can’t the son of a bitch do anything right?), that meant that the kid would be back in his life, mooning around the house reading poetry with that stupid expression on his face, asking for money to spend on God knows what, but it sure wasn’t a ticket out of daddy’s life, you can damn sure bet on that. At this last thought, Buddy made a half-growl, half-snort that caught the attention of diners at the trestle table to his left. He quietly picked the pieces of barbeque and coleslaw from his sleeve and the front of his shirt, sloshed some sweet tea, and pulled his bowl of vanilla pudding in front of him, muttering under his breath.

-------- South Florida Friday, August 6, 2005 --------

“Look folks, I mean Gol-dangit folks, we’ve got to come up with something!” yelled Hughy Ormond, Congressman Frobisher’s trusted right-hand man and campaign manager. He was desperate and as serious as a man can be who is looking unemployment and the end of the gravy train straight in the eye. He was begging, pleading for his staff to come up with something, anything that would turn the tide for their candidate. ‘I don’t have to remind you,” he said, intoning as only a boy raised on tent revivals can, “that we are getting a serious butt-kicking courtesy of a woman D.A. of all things. All she’s been doing the last ten years is putting people in prison. So now everybody says, ‘Oh, Erin Constable is the way to go. She’s tough on crime.’ Here the economy’s falling apart, people can’t afford the gas to come down to vacation here any more, and we’re letting her get away with a ‘tough on crime’ campaign? You should be ashamed of yourselves. You been eating our food, using our phones, and trying to get dates with the local talent. Now go eat fish, stand on your heads, rub a banana, or do whatever it is that makes you smart and come up with something to turn this thing around!” As Hughy finished this speech, he punctuated his sincerity with a well-timed THUMP of his fist on the desk he had been leaning on during his pep talk. And with equally exquisite timing, the ketchup from the packet he had just smashed with his hand displayed a gentle ruby arc before landing on the front of Don Suggs’ poly-cotton short sleeve dress shirt, just missing the large “Vote for FRO” button pinned at his heart.

That impression seemed to sum up the sense of what Hughy expected from the staff.

It is a fairly undisputed observation that precious few individuals have multiple good ideas, concepts that change our lives - often for the better. On the other hand, quite a few individuals have but one
good idea, and it takes them through life, and sometimes into history. For every Leonardo you have twenty one-hit wonders. But for Clark, his great idea came as a practical joke. As Hughy had juxtaposed the economic troubles of the people of South Florida with the anti-crime campaign of their opponents, Clark suddenly had a flash-back to the website that had blamed everything on the physical object money that everybody and every economy used. It was then that his great idea struck, the idea which, in days to come, he wished he had never had, but at the moment he was overwhelmed with the temptation to play a joke on these incompetent people who were treating him like an illiterate office boy.

“Mr. Ormund, I was reading something on the Internet the other day which might help us. It might really turn this thing around in a big way.” Clark tried to sound enthusiastic about the idea even though he thought the whole thing was silly.

“Well speak up, boy, let’s have it.” Hughy was planning to use the boy’s idea, whatever it was, to get the rest of the staff to get off their lazy mental backsides and do some creative work.

“There’s this guy on the Internet that says there’s a way to run the country without taxes and with nobody having to pay for food or a place to live and such. Why don’t we use his ideas as a way to get the people’s minds on the economy and away from Erin’s anti-crime issues? We could promise an end to taxes, not just cutting them like all the other candidates. We could say we would stop unemployment forever and have stable prices without government controls.”

Clark’s ideas were getting rather mixed up but one of the other staffers, a speech writer, jumped in with his eyes aglow, “He has a way to do away with taxes and end unemployment? Boy what a stump speech I could write with those issues.”

Clark was encouraged to continue so he searched his memory and came up with a few more points. “He says that nobody should have to pay for food or clothes or a place to live or medicine and that prices shouldn’t change at all. He says that unemployment is completely unnecessary.”

“That’s silly. You can’t do that. Who would pay for all that stuff without taxes? You have to have taxes.” Suggs was in no mood to accept any new ideas today, particularly one that was as off the wall, pie in the sky as this one.

“This guy says all we have to do is change our money and all these things will happen without the government being involved at all. You can look it up.” Clark was beginning to sweat because Suggs was saying what he himself was thinking about the idea.

But Hughy was not about to let the others off the hook that easily. “Wait a minute, guys, it doesn’t have to really work, it just has to win this election. Who’s going to remember a year from now what we promised in the campaign? All we need is what you might call ‘plausible deniability’ that will last for about three months and then who cares whether this guy knows what he’s talking about or not? So unless you can come up with something better by the end of the day, we’ll go with this money stuff starting tomorrow.” ‘Now,’ Hughy thought, ‘to make these other bozos get their brains in gear I’ll make it look like I am serious about using this cockamamie idea by putting our writers on it.’

“Clark, I want you and Ed and Doris to look at this website and get some more specifics for issues we can hammer them with. Here is how I see it developing. First we say we have a new idea that will get rid of all our economic, no make that ‘home security’ problems. ‘Home security’ like in groceries and mortgages, get it? It’s a play on ‘homeland security’ but it hits them in their pocketbooks and you know the voters will vote their wallets every time… Well, never mind, I’m sure you can come up with something good. We’ll hold back on what our solution is until the opposition starts saying it’s
impossible and then hit them with the changing money thing. By then I want a campaign to make it sound plausible, complete with references and website citations so the people can go see it for themselves. We can create some of the websites ourselves. Clark, you still got some contacts from back in college? We need some authorities that we can quote to back us up on this stuff. Oh, and see what else you can find out about this on the Internet. Doris, I want you to see what you can do with the little old lady and soccer mom angles on this. I want something that will pull those blue-hairs out of the bingo parlors and into the voting booths. Ed, we're going to need something that appeals to the business community, get some ideas from Clark here and then knock out about a 10 minute speech that makes it sound like the solution to every businessman's problems."

Hughy paused, he felt like Jimmy Cagney in the classic old movie “One, Two, Three,” snapping out decisive orders and making people jump. He thought perhaps he should see if he couldn’t rent that movie tonight and pick up some pointers. After this campaign he would probably be looking for work and it might be good if he could sound more like Cagney than like Burt Lancaster in “Elmer Gantry.”

“I'll have more for you tomorrow if the rest of these bozos don’t come up with something better.”
Hughy growled “Now get out of here and get to work.”

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Ed was like a puppy with a fresh bone. “This is the way I see it. If we hit them with everything at once they won’t get any of it. So what we do is take just one or two issues for each crowd selected for that specific audience. Get them to understand those issues and let's put the website in the TV spots. Now the TV spots are also single-issue. We'll use the demographics to see which ads we put on which stations and at what times of day. I don't think we should use more than three points in any one market area so we will need to pick and choose carefully.”

“Now we can turn out about two ads per day so we need to wait on the TV ads for about three days to get a full set ready, then while those are running we can see which points seem to have the most impact and make more careful ads based on those.”

“Here, this is the speech for tomorrow’s county fair. I figure we’re going to get a lot of young middle-class families, so we’ll go with the full employment and stable prices points. Then for the older audiences that afternoon we have the free housing and free medical care. For the business groups first thing in the morning we use no taxes and no government regulation. I knocked out about three other talks just for the poor neighborhoods. The free food and housing is the main emphasis there. For the college kids the free education, of course, along with the free room and board.”

“Slow down, Ed. Take it easy,” Hughy said patting Ed on the back.” It sounds like you really got excited about this angle.”

“Hughy, if I can’t sell stuff like this I don’t deserve to be called an ad man. I mean, free stuff and no taxes? You’ve got to be kidding. It’s a slam dunk even for a guy as short as I am.”

“Okay, does anyone have any better ideas than the ones Ed is rolling with?...Come on, guys, you gonna let some spoiled kid who never did an honest day’s work in his life beat you out? Sorry, kid.”

Suddenly Clark no longer felt ashamed of his idea. He wasn’t afraid to talk in the meeting. He wanted so badly to show up these men that he wasn’t even self-conscious about being slightly pear-shaped and round-faced. He felt a burning desire to embarrass them, to humble them, to make them dance to his tune. If his father had been there, he would have said it was the making of the boy.
“But this is crazy,” Don Suggs fumed. “You can’t promise everybody all this free stuff. For one thing they’ll never believe it. For another, the other candidate will laugh you out of the campaign. You’ll never get work in politics again. It’ll be a debacle.”

“So where’s your better idea, Don?” Clark said, his back straight, his shoulders back, his chin out-thrust. “Your ideas have been top dog up until now and look at where they’ve gotten us, 30 points behind in the last poll. If anybody’s going to be blamed for Frobisher finishing a poor second to Constable it won’t be me, it’ll be you.”

Clark’s eyes were flashing. Don just looked at him, his mouth open in shock. Even Hughy, without consciously realizing it, began to respect Clark just a little.

“Enough of that,” Hughy barked. “If you don’t have a better idea to offer, get on board or get off the track because we are coming through with you or over you.”

There was a long silence finally broken by Doris saying, “I have to get these ads to the producers if we’re going to have any TV spots ready by the weekend.”

Hughy felt trapped by his own psychological trick. He had been so sure that the other, older pols would have been able to come up with something, especially when they were competing against a glorified office boy, for crying out loud! But somehow, the new Clark that had jumped up and savaged Don right before their eyes made it feel just a little dangerous to throw any other ideas out on the table just then. So they sat quietly and the longer the silence grew, the more difficult it was to break it.

Don, of course, was so angry that he wouldn’t have made a suggestion even if it was the best idea he had ever had. If they were going to take this kid’s ideas over his, then they could just lose by a record margin. He still had some contacts who might be able to get him a position with the Constable campaign. Of course it wouldn’t be quite what he had with Frobisher, but after the way Hughy had spattered him with ketchup yesterday and hadn’t backed him up when the kid went crazy, Don was willing to take a cut in pay and status to get some payback. Besides, he could let the Constable campaign know what a crazy thing the Frobisher camp was going to try. That ought to be good for something.

“Well it looks like we go with the freebies campaign.” Hughy said with a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach. “Ed you seem to have a lot of ideas for how to present this stuff. I want a base speech that Frobisher can use and then plug the particular issues into that speech. That way he won’t have to learn so much as he switches from one kind of crowd to another. You can farm out the particular issues to Tom and Neil for making the five minute or so issue segments.”

“Clark I want as much academic support for this idea as you can come up with, college professors of economics and such. We also want websites we can send the public to so they’ll see that we aren’t just making up fairy tales about all this free stuff.”

“Doris, when we see which groups this plays with best, we want to have more speeches in front of those groups for the backgrounds of the TV spots. We want lots of enthusiasm on the faces of the audience.”

“Oh and one more thing Clark, we have the first of the debates we agreed to back last month when this was a close race coming up in about three weeks. You have to figure out what the other side is going to try to attack us on and have defenses ready. You know they are going to say this is a crazy idea. We need something that stops them cold.”
“All right everybody, get to work.”

Hughy turned on his heel and left the room for his office. He had to talk to Frobisher.

“Prescott, you know we got trouble in this campaign,” Hughy said almost pleadingly into the phone. “I mean we are the incumbent and the economy is in the tank and the old folks that voted for you last time to save their Social Security aren’t exactly happy over the inflation and the price of gas.”

“I know, I know, Hughy,” said the tired voice in reply. “The incumbent always gets blamed for whatever’s going wrong even if it ain’t his fault. But I’ve done lots of good things for this district the last six years. We’ve got to keep reminding them of that. Like those defense contracts I got last term. They’ve meant millions to the local economy.”

“Yes, Pres,” Hughy said soothingly, “but the people’s pockets are empty now. There’s all this unemployment and the prices are going through the roof. The voters don’t care squat about what you did for them last year. They want something right now and I think we have something to offer them.”

“What do you mean, Hughy? What haven’t we offered them already?”

“We came up with a new plan yesterday and the staff is really enthusiastic about it,” Hughy said trying to feel a little enthusiasm about it himself and not succeeding. “You should have heard Ed. He was saying he could sell this stuff in his sleep. I mean we can top anything Constable is talking about. She’s saying she’ll cut taxes more than you have and she’s saying she’ll get more jobs and so on. Well, we can do a lot better than that.”

“What’s better than more jobs, Hughy? What’s better than lower taxes? How are we gonna top that?”

“Prescott, Mr. Congressman, we really can but I’m gonna need to explain a lot more than I can do over the phone. I want you to come in to headquarters this afternoon. We’ll get someone else to take your speeches. This is top priority. This can save this campaign. It’s that important.”

Hughy heard deafening silence on the other end of the wire as he nervously ran his nails down the front of his “Prescott for Congress” pocket protector. Finally came Congressman’s familiar throat-clearing, as though he was a preacher tuning to say grace, and then, “Joe-Boy, how long you been with me, now, how long?”

“About, I’d say, eight years, sir.”

“Eight years.”

“Yes sir, eight years,” repeated Hughy, realizing his boss’ dilatory exercise. He sometimes believed that he could tell to the second when the hamster wheel would start turning.

“Okay, son. If you think I should. I’ll come in right after lunch in Bonita Springs…You really think we have a chance with this new idea of yours?”

“Sir, I really do,” Ormond said with his most sincere voice and with his fingers crossed.

“I’ll be there. Got to run now. Bye.”

“Goodbye, sir.” Hughy sat down behind his desk and thought as hard as he had in years. Prescott has got to buy into this or he’ll never be able to sell it to the voters. He’s gonna have to be a born
again politician with the fervor of the newly converted. How am I ever going to convince him that this silly idea is the real thing? Can I trust Clark to… nah. How about Ed? No, he only cares about what great copy it makes. I don’t think he has any idea how it works nor cares. Don is out of the question. He wouldn’t sell this idea if his life depended on it. None of the other guys know that much about it. I guess I’ll have to do it myself. Lord, if I ever needed your help I need it now. Please let me see the way and understand your plan and hand in all this. I’m an old man now and have already lived most of my life. I been broke before and got through it. But Lord, the whole country is in trouble now and if Prescott doesn’t win I won’t be able to seek your path in Washington ever again. Please Lord if it be your will let me be a light unto others in these terrible times. Amen.

Feeling oddly refreshed and a little surprised at the prayer that he had fallen into in his thoughts, Hughy Ormond left his office to find Clark and get some instruction on this crazy… no mustn’t think it’s crazy, this innovative money idea.
Chapter Three: Meeting Brianna

In which we discover Niall's relationship with Brianna is not what it might be.

Brianna ended the call and glanced momentarily at the screen as if there was something else she meant to say to her father. With a slight sniff, she turned away from the screen calling, “Johnny, Lora, granddad’s at the airport. He’ll be here in a few minutes. Please get your room cleaned up and put away your toys. We want granddad to see the apartment at its best, now.”

“Yes, mommy,” came from another room, bringing a brief and somewhat skeptical smile to her lips as she visualized how their room would look when her father arrived. Then she got a worried look again and she pensively walked rather slowly through her neat-for-the-moment, somewhat Spartan living room toward her own bedroom. Once there, she crossed to the dresser, opened her jewelry box and removed from the bottom several folded sheets of paper. Then she sat on the bed and unfolded the pages. They were letters her father had written to her over the years when she was a little girl. The last of them had come some 16 years before and they had been her solace and her torment for the years of her father’s captivity. There had been a time when she could not read them without tears both for her father’s situation and for what they said about their relationship. She chose to read the last.

How many times had she read that letter telling her that Daddy wasn’t coming home for Christmas after all, she reflected. Once again a bittersweet blend of emotions swept over her as she remembered the circumstances surrounding that letter, how she and her mom had missed him so much. In the blink of a tear-filled eye, the apartment had gone from warm and close, with two presents already on Daddy’s chair, to an odd and distant place.

Standing at her bureau, staring blankly now at the end of the letter and the creases it had from endless folding and unfolding, Brianna remembered how scared she had been when, several months after that Christmas, a very serious strange man in a black suit came and wanted to talk to mom alone. Brianna remembered straining as hard as she could to hear from her bedroom what the strange man was saying, but she couldn’t get a word. Then, after only a few minutes, he left, and suddenly, for no reason she could think of, she felt chills.

And then the roof simply fell in when the official came by to tell her mother that her recently divorced ex-husband had been kidnapped and they had no idea where he was - there was no other expression for it. In the several months following that horrible news, Brianna must have changed her mind a dozen times at least about whether to hate her father for abandoning her or forgive him for something beyond his power to prevent. Of course in the letter he had blamed his job and circumstances which prevented his homecoming. He had professed his undying love for her. Sometimes she could believe it but most of the time she could not.

She sighed again and returned the letters to their place under her costume jewelry, nestled in the warm wooden box, the Christmas letter on top, as it always managed to be. She still didn’t know what to feel about her father. She was proud of what he had done and of the good that existed in the world because of him. She was angry that he thought more of those other children than he did of her. She felt abandoned yet she could sometimes, just a little, feel his love in his letters. But then at other times she cynically thought that it was easy to talk of love when you didn’t really mean it at all.

But the one thing she knew was that her own children would never live with the uncertainty and self-doubt that her father’s life had unintentionally inflicted upon her mother and her. No, the kids of the world would never hear of her, let alone benefit by her efforts in any way she could envision. But she
could provide a steady, reliable home for her own children. And now, she thought to herself as she
turned to go out to the kids’ room, from the sublime to the truly ridiculous, as it was getting harder and
harder for her to “check” the kids’ cleaning efforts without bursting into laughter. They did try, bless
them, but it just seemed as though…

“Mooommm!” swept through the short hallway like a whirlwind. “MOOOMMM! Come SEE!”

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Niall looked at the apartment building. “Victoria Close – Dickens House” was the title emblazoned on
the brass plaque to the right of the entryway. The style did remind him very much of some of the
buildings he had seen in London but the number of stories seemed too great to be practical in 1890s
London. The streetlights could have been actual gaslights for all he could tell. There was iron
grillwork and decorations around the windows and what he assumed were false chimneys showing
above the edge of the roof. To the right and left of the main building which took up most of a long
block were the ends of other buildings of the same style and size. On the other side of the street
behind Niall as he stared up at the apartment complex, there were three-story commercial buildings
holding a variety of consumer stores and shops.

‘At least the streets are clean and all the windows are intact,’ Niall muttered to himself.

There was nothing ominous showing, but of course that meant nothing.

There was the entry with several wide doors opening into some sort of lobby that he could see
flashes of as a few people came and went. It seemed well-lit and clean, yet for some reason Niall’s
feet seemed reluctant to walk the few steps that would put him in the building.

A flood of memories of his time with Brianna were washing over him. He was becoming frightened
now of seeing her again. Would she accept him? Would she merely tolerate him? Would he like his
grandchildren? He could remember a score of events in the life of Brianna the baby and Brianna the
toddler and Brianna the child. But he only had a couple of brief conversations with her as Brianna the
adult. He really couldn’t say he knew her. All the eagerness to see her that had gripped him on the plane and at
the airport had drained away and left him with a hollow feeling, perhaps of dread or shame or guilt.
There was no longer the buffer of time and distance between them, those variables that can fashion a
happy ending from almost anything and smooth the rough edges of reality.

Knowing it would be even worse if he were caught just standing on the curb, unmoving, and fixing a
cheerful expression on his face, he went up the steps and through the door. There was a listing of
tenants and their room numbers just inside the entry. He found that his daughter had an apartment
on the third floor. The elevator was clean and worked quietly and quickly. As he approached the door
with her number on it, his daughter opened the door when he was a few feet away. She was short
and slim with dark brown hair and eyes and was wearing a simple white skirt and blouse outfit with an
apron that appeared colorful because of the paint splotches on it.

“Come in, come in. We’re so happy and excited to see you.” she bubbled. Niall stepped over the
doorsill into a simple living room with a three-seat couch, an easy chair, coffee table, some original
paintings on two of the walls where the light from the North-facing windows could illuminate them and
a large, darkened, flat panel TV screen that dominated the fourth wall.

Two grinning children came running in from the next room.
Niall held out his right hand to his daughter and she moved right past it to give him a big hug. After a pleasant moment Niall thought, ‘How did she know I was about to knock on the door?’ The pleasure dropped away.

“Hello daughter.” he managed. Then releasing her he asked with a big smile, “Who are these two handsome children?”

“They’re your grandchildren, silly. John, Lora, say hello to your grandfather.”

“Hello grandfather.” they chorused. “Did you bring us anything?” and grabbed at his bags.

“Children! He isn’t Santa Claus. Let him sit down and rest. I’m sure he’s had a long tiring flight coming all the way from Europe.” Then she pointed at the suitcases and said “John, take that smaller bag into the guest room and don’t you dare open it.”

The boy (about 8 Niall estimated) reached for the larger bag and said “OK. Will I get paid?”

“When you get back,” Niall said, “perhaps I’ll have something for you.”

He sat at one end of the couch and the girl (about 4 years old) climbed up beside him and sat on her knees staring at him.

“Can I get you something to eat or drink? You look a little tired.”

“Well my body does think it’s about bedtime.”

“Would you like a nap before dinner?”

“No, I’d like to get to know you and my grandchildren better first,” he said and stroked Lora’s cheek and smiling at her. “Food for the soul.”

Just then the boy ran back into the room and said, “I put the suitcase on the floor by the bed. Is that OK?”

“That’s fine,” Niall said. “Now let’s see if I have anything for you.” and reached into his pocket for his wallet. Opening it he took out a 5 euro note. “What do you think of this?”

“What is it?” the girl asked.

“It’s money,” the boy scoffed. “Don’t you know money when you see it?”

“That isn’t money,” the girl shot back. “Money’s in the ‘puter.”

“Not this kind,” said the boy. “This is from…” he looked at the bill apparently trying to read where it came from on the bill “Oh, from Europe!”

“You remember Europe on the globe Lora,” her mother said. “We just looked at it a little while ago when I was showing you how far your granddad was coming to see you.”

“I remember,” the girl said with exasperation. “It’s on the other side of the ocean.”
Then she reached out, grabbed the bill away from her brother, jumped off the couch, and ran for the next room.

“Hey, come back with my pay you thief,” the boy shouted and took off after her.

“Be gentle with her, John. Remember she’s still little,” his mother warned. Then turning to Niall and sitting in the easy chair she said in a quiet voice, “I’ll have Tony make a copy of the bill at the library for Lora. That way they can each have one.”

“They look good, very healthy and happy. Are things going well for all of you?”

“Well, pretty well. Tony is still struggling with his dissertation. Sometimes I think he’ll never finish it. But it’s so important to him that I hate to even ask him about it if it isn’t progressing well. It’s OK for you to ask about it but just don’t mention getting it published. He doesn’t like to let even me read anything he’s written until he thinks it’s just right. He’s at the library doing research for it. The kids don’t bother him there, of course, and he can talk to several of his friends who are also doing research there.”

“But how are you doing, daughter? I came to visit with you more than anyone.” Niall said looking rather intently at her.

“Oh I’m doing fine,” she said with only a hint of doubt in her voice. “I still get to do some work now and then. Tony doesn’t mind taking over the kids when they study history or English or research methods. I can often get a couple of hours in. That picture on your left is one I finished just last week.”

Niall turned his attention to the picture and began noticing details about the apartment. The picture had only a plain wood frame but was a rather nice painting of children playing on a swing. The larger child was pushing the smaller child who was apparently shrieking happily with excitement. From the clothes Niall couldn’t tell the genders of the children.

The apartment, though, was rather plainly furnished with rounded furniture, not a sharp corner on anything. It looked used but sturdy. He could see that the children were used to treating it roughly, but the material of the upholstery wasn’t stained or torn at all. The colors in the room were cheerful, matching those outside in the hall and lobby. It was spring and the windows were open, letting a gentle breeze billow the translucent drapes from time to time. The painting of the children on the swing complemented the other paintings on the walls. From the style of the works they were both apparently done by his daughter as well. The TV screen, alone on its wall, seemed to Niall somewhat ominous. As if the human paintings were trying to stay away from it. “That’s nonsense,” he thought and tried to direct his mind into more hopeful topics.

“This is quite nice. You’ve made it very cheerful. You can tell the children really love one another.” Niall shifted around to face Brianna. “Are you making out all right?”

“It’s true we don’t have much money, dad,” she said soberly. “Most of what we have comes from my pay for caring for our children. I try to save it for paints and canvas and such stuff and you’ll be sleeping in what I use for a studio. That costs something each month. Tony has some income from work he did years ago and he does some lecturing at the Community College, but of course he won’t get paid for that for years. I think he just does that work because he loves lecturing. Anyway, since we don’t go out much I save by using standard clothes most of the time. But I really am happy. I have these wonderful kids and I love Tony and we get by all right.”
“Can I help you out? I seem to have become rich, well, it seems rich to me anyway. The computer tells me that I have over $80,000. Maybe I could give you a few thousand, at least until Tony gets his book published and makes you all really rich.” He felt like he was on dangerous ground since he didn’t want to offend her. But damn it he was her father. A father has a right to pamper and spoil his daughter sometimes. After all he hadn’t even seen her in years.

“Oh, dad,” she said smiling broadly at him. “You can’t give me money. You can take me out to eat and give me some really good paint brushes though. I’ll take you to the store tomorrow if you feel up to it.”

“Would it upset Tony if I gave you some money?” he asked.

“No dad, it would astonish him,” she said with a laugh, “You really, truly can’t give me or anyone else the money in your account. You can spend it to buy things for someone but you can’t give money to them. The only way to get money out of your account is to spend it and when you spend money it’s just gone. The money you spend isn’t anywhere any more just like it wasn’t anywhere before you got paid. Our money isn’t transferable.”

“Then how do you buy things if you can’t trade your money for them? It doesn’t make sense,” Niall frowned.

Brianna took his hand, “You just spend it. You don’t care where it goes. When you want something that’s for sale you tell the computer you want to buy it and the computer deducts the money from your account and transfers ownership of the item to you. Haven’t you spent any money yet?”

“I paid the cabby for bringing me in from the airport.”

“Well, there you go. You had money deducted from your account and for that you bought a cab ride. See, it was easy wasn’t it?”

“Sure it was easy. I gave the cabby some of the money in my account.”

“But you didn’t dad. That cabby didn’t get that money at all. It just stopped being. The numbers in your account got smaller but that didn’t make the numbers in the cabby’s account get any larger.”

“You mean somebody else got that money? Maybe the company?”

“I give up. You just won’t believe me. Never mind, you’ll learn that you can’t give anybody any of your money.”

“We’ll see. I’ll find some way.” Niall smiled at her.

“Dad didn’t they tell you anything about how our money works?”

“Sure, I remember there was something in the news back before my 15-year ‘vacation’ but I was too busy at the time to really pay attention and during my treatment after my release they told me a little and they gave me this brochure to read but I never bothered. I mean, what’s to know? I’ve been using money all my life.”

“Dad you really…”

“Tony’s in the elevator,” the TV announced.
Niall jumped a little and looked at the TV which, like the TV at the airport, didn’t appear to be on.

The kids came out of the other room. “Johnny won’t let me play with the you-row,” Lora announced as if summing up her case before a judge. “I’m going to tell daddy that you aren’t helping me learn about money. He’ll make you give it to me for a while.”

“It’s five Euros and he won’t make me do any such thing,” said the young defendant pleading his case. “The bill is mine. You heard granddad say he was giving it to me as pay. Since it’s mine I don’t have to let you or anyone else touch it, do I momma?”

“Tony is here,” the TV slipped in.

Lora ran to the door and snatched it open. Well, that explained how Brianna had known when he arrived that he was just outside the door.

“Daddy, daddy, Johnny won’t let me play with the you-row. Make him let me play with it,” she demanded.

“What’s all this about a you-row?” asked the middle-aged man wearing whites with a straw hat and carrying a briefcase, as he bent down to pick up Lora.

“It’s mine dad,” put in John, eager to State his case before the judge made a decision, and waving the bill safely out of the reach of his shorter sister. “Granddad gave it to me for taking his suitcase into his room. Didn’t you, granddad?”

“How do you do,” Niall said extending a hand. “I’m Niall Campbell, Brianna’s father. I’m afraid I got you into a mess with my present to John.”

“It wasn’t a present. I earned it. I worked for it. Now you won’t have to carry that bag into the bedroom. That’s a benefit to you isn’t it?” John maintained stoutly.

“Take it easy, Johnny,” his dad smiled down at him.

“Johnny’s ‘posed to share, isn’t he daddy. He’s not ‘posed to keep everything for his self.” Lora put in quickly.

“Lora’s not supposed to just take my things either, is she dad?”

Tony looked at Niall, “Did you give the bill to John for work he did for you?”

“Well, sort of both as a present and for the work,” admitted Niall. “I’ve some euro coins I was going to give Lora as her present.” He reached into his pocket, took out three coins and extended this shiny temptation toward Lora.

Lora reached out her hand and carefully took the three coins, thought a moment, then said. “I got three you-rows and you just got one.”

Tony set his daughter back on the floor with her prize and addressed both children. “John, the bill is yours. You earned it. So Lora, you should not even touch it without Johnny’s permission. Do you understand me, Lora?”
“Yes daddy but isn’t Johnny supposed to share?” her contrition changing quickly to indignation.

“Yes Lora, he is. But if I make him let you use his things, he isn’t sharing at all, is he. That would just be me forcing him to do something against his will. It would be me threatening to hurt him in some way if he didn’t let others control what belongs to him. It would just make him mad at me and mad at you. Since I can’t be with you all the time, he might do something to hurt you when I wasn’t there. So, Lora, by making him let you play with his things I’d be making the two of you enemies. You don’t want Johnny to be your enemy. You want him to be your friend.”

Turning his attention to the boy he continued, “Johnny, if you own something and don’t want to share it, then you have every right to keep it to yourself. Your mother and I won’t punish you for doing that. We will be disappointed, we will be saddened, but we won’t punish you. On the other hand, if you keep everything you own to yourself, why will others want to help you? Why will they care what happens to you? Why will they care whether you have things to play with? You see, Johnny, Lora won’t always be a little girl. Some day she’ll be a young woman. Some day there’ll be things she can do for you that you’ll really want her to do. If you teach her now that you won’t do anything for her, it’ll be very hard for her to change her mind later. And Johnny, she’s too young now to learn this lesson that I want you to learn, but some day I’ll want you to help me teach her the same lesson.”

Both children looked rather solemn for a few seconds. Then John said, "Here, Lora, you can play with my Euros for a while.”

Lora grabbed the bill and ran for the other room before he could change his mind.

“Dad, are you sure this will work?” John asked doubtfully.

His dad gave him a big hug and said, “Son, it always works for me, but sometimes it takes a while. I was nice to your mother for weeks before she was willing to marry me. Just be patient. I’ll even let you stay up 30 minutes late after Lora goes to bed tonight because you made me feel so good by letting her play with your money.”

“Oh boy! Thanks, Dad.”

“OK, fellows,” Brianna said “do I have to cook tonight or can we go out to Good-n-Quick for supper?”

Tony looked a little doubtful. “Mr. Campbell do you feel up to going out or would you rather just relax and eat here? All we have is standard food but your daughter is a good cook when she puts her mind to it.”

“How about if I take you all out for supper? I have lots of money, it turns out, and I’d be happy to spend some of it on you,” Niall said.

Brianna frowned and said, “Dad there aren’t any luxury restaurants for families near here. It’d be a lot of trouble. I’d have to get the kids all dressed up and…”

Niall threw up his hand, shook his head, and said, “Tony, I should’ve known better than to go against a woman’s suggestion for what to do for supper. I guess I really have been away from the country for too long. We go to Good-n-Quick and we like it.”

Tony grinned and said “Well in that case I’m ready to go. How about you? Are you hungry yet?”

“I could use a few minutes to freshen up and shave.”
“Fine, about 20 minutes then? I’ll start organizing the kids.” Tony replied.

Brianna took Niall’s arm and guided him toward the guest room. “Dad, the Good-n-Quick is just down the block and it’s quick and the food is good. I want you to be able to have what you want to eat rather than just taking pot luck with us.”

Niall went into the room she indicated. It had its own bathroom. Things were worse than he’d thought, though. They didn’t even have enough food to feed one extra guest. Well, he was definitely going to pay for the meal tonight and see if they couldn’t go by a grocery store to bring home more food.
Chapter Four: Who's the Joke On?

In which Clark's joke works, too well, or not well enough?

--------- About 5:00 pm Saturday, August 7, 2010 ---------

“So you see, Prescott, it’s like everything you do that helps someone else you get paid for it. And the people who do the paying get the power and respect they deserve for paying as they should. It all balances out. If you do something bad, it costs you money and if you do nothing it costs you money you might have earned. It’s a reward system. You just don’t get rewarded for hurting other people.”

“I get it, Hughy. The Bible says that money is the root of all evil. We’re going to change money so it’s a root of good. We’re going to make it God’s money, not Satan’s money.”

“Yes, sir, I think you’re right on the money. That’s exactly what we’ll do.” Hughy was a little light-headed since he’d skipped lunch to prepare for his talk with Frobisher. And Frobisher hadn’t seemed to understand it at all until Hughy had drawn three circles with arrows going clockwise from circle to circle. He labeled the circle at the top “producers”, the circle on the right “consumers” and the circle on the left “Payers.” It was like a light going off in Prescott’s mind.

“That’s just like the three branches of government,” he said. “Each one controls the next so they stay balanced. That way none of the three can get too powerful and dominate.”

From then on it was like feeding candy to a baby. Frobisher believed everything. He especially liked the idea that the Payers would be mostly old folks like themselves who had retired but who were still important, respected, and even admired for their paying.

Hughy secretly thought that Frobisher didn’t really understand at all but merely wanted to believe so strongly that Hughy could have been offering snake oil and he would still have bought it. But that didn’t matter. The important thing was that Frobisher was sold and very enthusiastic about it. Now all I have to do is get him together with Ed and get him started memorizing those new speeches. The Lord’s will be done.

--------- Saturday August 14, 2010 (a week later) ---------

“Ed, I just got off the phone with Prescott. He said the crowd really ate it up when he gave them that new speech. He said that by the end they were on their feet cheering every line. He wants some punching up on the education one. He said it just didn’t generate the rhythm that the others do.”

“Yeah, I know what he means. That was one I asked Clark to write. He’s pretty good but he isn’t a professional and doesn’t have the experience. I’ll do that one myself now that I have the time. Tell Prescott I’ll have it for him by tonight.”

“Doris,” Hughy said turning her way, “we’ve had three days of these new talks and the crowds are growing. Have we gotten any interest from the local stations on covering one of Frobisher’s presentations?”

“Yes, sir. I got a station from Tampa and one from Miami to send a reporter to this morning’s talk in Ft. Myers. For some reason the Ft. Myers station wasn’t interested. I guess they’ve already written Frobisher off. But I did get the paper there to promise that they would send a reporter.”
“It’s better than nothing. Do what you can to get that local station. Hang in there, Doris.”

Then Hughy went back in his office, closed the door, and got on the phone.

Doris turned to look at Tom, whose desk was beside hers. “Tom, did you hear that? He was nice to me. He actually was trying to make me feel better about not getting the local station. What is it with him? Two weeks ago he would have chewed my head off for not getting them. Since this new campaign started he just isn’t the same guy.”

“Well I for one am all for the change. I’m getting twice the work done now that I don’t have him cussing me out for every little flub. And have you noticed Clark? Now that Hughy isn’t always calling him an office boy he’s started to act like a man. Hughy has even given him some important things to do like preparing the outline for the debate next week.”

“Hallelujah and come to Jesus. Even if we are losing this campaign at least it feels good to come to work now. It must have been that meeting that Frobisher had with him. Maybe he put the fear of God into him.”

“Could be. Whoops, there’s my phone, back to work.”

----------Wednesday, August 25, 2010--------

“Prescott, listen, we just got the latest polls in. We’ve gained Ten Points in just the last week... its now about 58 to 40 or so. You’re really doing the job out there.”

“Thanks Hughy. I feel like a new man, too. You know this new money of yours really seems to be solving so many problems for so many people. I was talking in a poor Hispanic neighborhood last night telling them about the free food and housing when somehow I got off onto who the Payers would be. It struck me that anybody could be a payer and it wouldn’t matter whether they were rich or poor, black, white, brown, or yellow. I started emphasizing that they, themselves could be Payers and do something about the conditions in their neighborhoods, that they could see that the roads were maintained where they live and that the kids got a good education. You know they were even cheering that. They really seemed to like the idea that they could be the ones judging how much pay the rich folks would get. You might mention that to Ed.”

“Yes, sir, I will. But we have to get ready for the debate day after tomorrow. We have momentum now and we can’t risk losing it. We have your schedule cleared for this afternoon and tomorrow with just a couple of speeches to give the media something to show on the evening news. By the way, have you noticed how much more time we’re getting on the local news these days? Doris tells me that there are three local stations that have cameras on you for every speech.”

“Hughy, I don’t need to prepare for that debate. The Lord will tell me what to say. Whenever I’ve gotten off the prepared speech it’s worked out very well. I think the crowds can tell I really mean what I’m saying. I think the Lord is inspiring me. Hughy we’re doing the Lord’s work in this campaign. He won’t let me fail. You just get me people to talk to and the Lord will convince them through me.”

“But Prescott, you need to have answers ready for the questions they might ask. Prescott this is big. If we blow this debate we might as well hang it up.”

“Son, we aren’t bigger than the Lord. If He wants me to win this then we’ll win it. I tell you son, the Lord will tell me what to say. Now I got to eat breakfast to keep my strength up. Bye.”
Hughy put the phone down carefully, almost reverently. What have I done to him? Has he lost his mind? This isn't a revival meeting. This is politics. If he starts spouting that Lord's will stuff on camera he's going to ruin everything. I have to find out what he's saying at those local stump speeches.

“Doris, can you get me some video of one or two of the speeches he's been giving on the stump? I need it fast if you can arrange it.” Hughy said through the open door to the outer office.

“I think I can get some. The local station is showing a lot of Frobisher these days because the crowds are so demonstrative, so they should have plenty of footage.”

Less than an hour later Hughy and his top aides, along with Clark, were gathered around a big screen TV watching their candidate on the stump.

The crowd was cheerful as if expecting a good show. Frobisher got an introduction from a local VIP, then took the microphone. He said a couple of nice things about local institutions and then began to talk about the troubles they were having. You could see people's heads nodding as he mentioned the unemployment and the difficulty in getting day-care for the kids. He talked about the price of gas and how hard it was to make those mortgage payments and you could see the crowd was feeling it. Then he said “Ending unemployment? We can do this. Homes for everyone? We can do this. Day care for all the children? We can do this.” With each “we can do this” the crowd would yell “yes!” or “we can!” Then Frobisher pulled a small black book from his coat and held it up before the crowd. “I am a Christian and this is my Bible. With my hand on the Bible I swear to you that everything I have said to you here tonight is true. We really can do these things and I have found the way. With God's leadership we will change things. These evil times will be behind us and we will have a new life, free of these hardships. This I swear to you upon my immortal soul and with my hand on the Bible.”

The crowd which had been respectfully quiet when Prescott had held up the Bible and had taken his oath burst into wild cheers and almost mobbed the stage, holding out their arms toward him. Prescott stood looking out over the crowd with his Bible still pressed between his two hands. His face had an almost unworldly look, as of a man possessed.

“Ed, did you write that part at the end with the Bible and the oath?” Hughy asked.

“No. I never bring religion into any of the speeches. This is an economic thing, not a religious thing. I had no idea he was putting that on the end. I mean the ‘we can do this’ is mine but the rest is all Prescott. It’s really effective, though. You can see he completely believes what he’s saying.”

“But how is that going to play in the debate? Are any of the questioners going to ask about that taking an oath on the Bible?” Hughy asked Doris.

“I don’t think so. We haven’t put anything like that in the TV ads. We have used the crowd shots, though, like there at the end with them holding out their arms and screaming.” Doris said.

“You’d think he was a rock star the way they were carrying on. But a lot of those people were middle-aged women and men. That was a suburban shopping center. I can’t believe it.” Hughy mused, wonderingly. “I think we are going to win this race. I don’t think there’s a thing that the Constable campaign can do to stop us. We’re not only going to win, we’re going to win easily.”

The others looked at Hughy and then at each other. “What have we done?” Ed said quietly to himself.

---------- Tuesday, September 7, 2010 in the morning ---------
“Hughy, we’re getting national news coverage of Frobisher. It seems that word of his comeback and the crowds he’s drawing is news in and of itself. We’re having a rally at the high school football field in Naples. The locals say we should have over 20,000 people there. We have people coming in from Miami and Tampa and St. Petersburg. They’re beginning to worry about the parking. Three local stations are covering it live at 7:00.”

“Okay Doris, great job. I think it’s time for Clark to show us the ‘bombshell’ he says he’s been working on. This is our best chance to get maximum coverage. Ask him to come in, will you?”

She turned and yelled, “Clark, get your bombshell in here, Hughy says its time.” Then she turned back to Hughy with a grin. “He really does have a bombshell, boss. He told me about it yesterday. It should blow your socks off.”

Clark hurried in from his office (he had his own office now) with a folder that was surprisingly thin to hold a bombshell.

“Son, the whole world will be watching tonight, this is the time to hit ‘em with everything we’ve got. Now what’s this bombshell you want to detonate?”

“Sir, what would you think of a single law that we can write on just a couple of pages that implements this whole new money scheme? The whole shooting match on both sides of a single sheet of paper. We can make passage of that law our platform. That way the people can see exactly what they’re getting. When they vote for us they vote for that law. Frobisher promises to do everything he can to get that law passed exactly as it is with no amendments, no changes.”

“Two pages?” Hughy’s eyebrows went up. “Only two pages?”

“Yes, sir. It really is that simple. Now the transition from the old money to this new money will require some additional legislation, but this law really is the new money. It’s the heart and soul of what makes the new money what it is. If this law is passed it won’t matter how the transition is handled, since everything straightens out after the changeover.”

“Son, I think you were right about this being a bombshell.” Hughy shook his head, “this is not politics as usual. This is the most specific thing I have ever heard of in a political campaign. If there were any doubters as to whether we had a real plan I think this’ll be all the evidence they need. This’ll either lock up this election or blow us all into oblivion. I’ll run this past Prescott and see what he thinks.”

“I’m betting on oblivion,” thought Clark. “If this ‘bill’ doesn’t stop this runaway campaign, nothing will. This makes it obvious what a crackpot idea the whole thing is. They’ve talked their way into a corner and they’re going to get squashed like a roach.”

“Congratulations,” Doris said smiling at Clark. “It looks like you really came through for us again. You’ve really saved this campaign for all of us,” and she gave him a hug. It was a motherly hug, since Doris was a good 20 years older than Clark, but it reflected real affection nonetheless. Clark felt a moment of guilt but then hardened his heart. Don had long ago left the campaign but he still remembered Hughy and the others making fun of him when he first joined the campaign. Clark was certain now that he would have the last laugh.

------- Tuesday, September 7, 2010, afternoon at Hughy’s office ----
“There are Ten Points in this bill; each is an essential part of the whole. None of them can be changed without destroying the idea. They must be passed as a set. Do you understand, Prescott?” Hughy was speaking earnestly and with a bit of pleading in his voice.

“Sure, it’s simple, Ten Points just like the Ten Commandments. I won’t forget. You can’t change the Ten Commandments and you can’t change the Ten Points.”

“But Prescott, these are not chiseled in stone. They have to get through Congress without amendments. You know how the committee system works. Somebody’s going to want to change something to give some of his contributors an advantage and before you know it the Ten Points won’t look anything like this. It’ll have changed into some free lunch program for the powerful interest groups. You’ll have to swear that you won’t allow any amendments at all. Can you do that? Can you really mean that?”

“Hughy, I not only can but I will. Nothing I’ve said in my speeches has contradicted any of these points. Most of them are just mechanical things anyway, like having the money exist only in computer accounts.”

“Okay, Prescott, I just want to be sure you understand because this is what we’d like to do. We want to tell the folks that this is the bill we’ll work to get passed. We want to give copies of this bill to everyone at the meeting tonight and to the news media and put it on our website. We want to make this bill the centerpiece of the remainder of the campaign. You understand what that means don’t you, Prescott?”

“Yes, Hughy, I do understand what it means. But I was and am already committed heart and soul to this new money. Do you understand, Hughy? My soul is committed to this bill because I know this bill is God’s will. If I were to fail… well, it would damn me forever. Hughy, absolutely nothing in this world can make me go back on getting this bill passed. I don’t care if it’s the only thing I ever accomplish in what remains of my life.”

“All right, sir, because if we do this and the bill is not passed or we accept any amendments to this bill, it would be the absolute end of any chance for election to any office ever again. There’ll be hundreds of copies of your pledge and this bill. Any deviation will make wonderful campaign ads for any opponent you might have. We live or die with this bill.”

“Hughy, I’m an old man. I haven’t got long before I go before God to account for my life on this Earth. Do you really think I care about any election when I have that in my immediate future?”

His hand on Hughy’s shoulder pressed with almost painful force and Frobisher’s eyes burned into Hughy’s eyes as if lit from within. Hughy had a moment of almost awe as he looked at Frobisher. He began to understand why the crowds at Frobisher’s speeches were so enthusiastic. The man simply was conviction itself. His personality, which had been nothing in particular a month ago, had become suffused with passionate determination. He was confident and self-assured. There was no hesitation in speech or shifting of eyes as he looked at you.

“I couldn’t stop him now if I wanted to, Ed,” Hughy recounted later. “He could go on that stage at the stadium tonight and blow that audience away without your speech or my pep talk or any of the fanfare.”

“But he does have my speech and you will give an opening warm up pep talk to the crowd and there will be fanfare and fireworks. That crowd and even the television audience will be blown away. Boss,
we are going to be in the big leagues after tonight. That star is going to pull our wagon just as far as we let it.”

“Right, Ed, but stars are really hot and they do burn those who get too close and they do explode when they get old like Frobisher. Stars are dangerous, Ed, and those who commit to stars often suffer for it.”

--- Clark’s room Tuesday night, about 11:00 after the stadium show ----

Clark’s phone rang for the fourth time in ten minutes and Clark finally looked at it. It was from home. “The question is,” he thought, “is that Mama or Buddy? I don’t think I could face Buddy, but I would really like to talk to Mama. Finally he decided to take the risk and answered.

“Hello?”

“Clark, are you all right?” All was well. It was Mama.

“I’m fine, Mama, just tired. It’s been a big night.”

“Yes, we saw it on TV. They broadcast it on CNN. We got to see most of the rally. Oh, Clark, I am so proud of you. They seemed to love your idea.”

“Mama, they just love the idea of free things. We’re just promising them what they want.”

“But Clark, you aren’t lying to them, are you?”

“Well, not really, Mama. You remember that we’re saying ‘We can do this’, referring to everybody in the country. That’s true, isn’t it? We do produce enough food and housing and so forth that everybody could have what they need. It is something that we can do.”

Then Clark’s dad took the phone, “Boy what is this Bull that you’re peddling down there? I got a look at the bill you guys are putting up. That’s a pile of foolishness. It’s crazy. Who do you think is going to pay for all that free stuff? I ain’t going to pay for it, you can bet on that. I didn’t send you down there to go Communist on me. What kind of kooks are in charge down there? I thought Frobisher was right wing. This stuff he’s peddling is pure Socialism. ‘Free to all as needed’ is right out of the Communist Manifesto by Karl Marx. That Communist hooey was shown to be idiocy back when Russia fell apart 20 years ago. And here you go trying to sell the same garbage all over again. I got a mind to go down there and pull you out by the scruff of your neck and paddle your behind all the way back home. You got no more sense than a sack of feathers. Let me alone honey, I know what I’m doing.”

“Dad, there is nothing Communist or Socialist about this bill at all. Read it again. There is nothing in there about government controlling anything. It’s all rewards dad, there is no jail or firing squads or dictatorship in it at all.”

“It’s right out of the Communists manual you dumb kid. Nobody is going to pay to feed those shiftless, no-account lazy good for nuthin’ bums unless somebody is holding a gun on ‘em. That’s all Socialism is, boy, it’s the government holding guns on businessmen to force them to feed people who don’t work. It is stealing from the rich to give it to the lazy. It happened in Rome and it happened in Russia and China and they all went down.”

“It’s not like that…”
“Don’t you tell me what it is and isn’t, boy, I read the bill. Now you get your fat, lazy self on a plane and come home or I’m cutting your allowance off right now.”

“Dad, I’m not coming home. I have a job in this campaign and I’m seeing it through. I’ll live in a box rather than quit now.”

“Then you’ll have to live in a box because you’ve got no home to come back to.”

“Buddy! No, please, you can’t.”

Click.

Clark was trembling with fear, anger, determination, and outrage. He’d gotten a lot of congratulations from Hughy and even Frobisher, in addition to the rest of the staff. Why Frobisher, himself, had taken Clark’s hand in his powerful, practiced grip, looked Clark deeply and sincerely in the eyes, and said, “My boy, you are a Godsend to this campaign and to the American people. I will never forget what you have done for me and, more important, for the people of this State and nation. I am eternally in your debt.”

Clark had felt the power of Frobisher’s newfound charisma and felt that Frobisher had meant what he had said. Doris was as proud of him as a mother could be and he was getting respect from men twice his age. There was no way that he could give this up now and return home like a whipped puppy with his tail between his legs. He would send some letters home to Mama and reassure her that he was all right.

His father was no doubt raging at his mother and there was nothing he could do about that. He had practically been disowned. He needed sleep. But his mind was still racing with what he had experienced at the football stadium.

The night had been successful on a scale that he could hardly believe. The crowd had been “on” from the beginning and Hughy’s warm up had hardly been necessary. Prescott had started with the usual points from the stump speeches but had soon built up the “We can do this” message to a peak, then said, with fireworks exploding overhead, “and this is how.”

It seemed like the air was filled with sheets of paper, each with the bill printed on it. Each of the Ten Points was numbered and Prescott quickly read through them. After each he said, “Just like that, word for word, no changes”. And he said what the point would do for the people. This means no one can steal your money. This means prices will never change. This means no unemployment, ever again. This means no taxes of any kind for anybody, ever. With each point the cheers grew louder, especially the free necessities point. When he finished with the tenth point and said “any of you can have this power” the crowd again cheered lustily raising their arms to Frobisher on the stage.

And Clark was thinking ‘Why can’t people see how silly it is? Tonight’s rally should result in the crowd turning on Frobisher and ridiculing him. They should be laughing at the whole idea.” This was supposed to be Clark’s big moment when Hughy and the others were shown up like the people in the Emperor’s New Clothes fairy tale.

Clark thought, ‘they seem to think those sheets of paper are magic or something. Well maybe they are magic in some way. One of them turned dad into an idiot… and right in front of Mama, too. There isn’t anything Socialist about the new money. It’s just silly, that’s all. I mean the Ten Points don’t even talk about government powers or anything like that. They don’t mention anything about enforcement, even. They don’t say anything about what anybody has to do. Dad’s just an ignorant redneck that’s
all... Of course, Hughy and Frobisher are really rednecks, too and they seemed to understand right off that there's nothing Socialist about this idea.'

On the stage at that point Frobisher reached into his coat and brought out his Bible. The crowd which had been so loud became suddenly quiet. Clark felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up as Frobisher placed his hand upon the Bible and, into the almost total silence intoned, "I swear that I will do everything in my power to get this bill passed, exactly as it is written on the paper in your hands, upon this Bible and my immortal soul." For a moment the silence remained. Then a cheer began to arise from the crowd and here and there people were dropping to their knees in an attitude of prayer. Before long one side of the crowd was chanting "We can" while the other side answered "Do this." Hughy asked Doris, "Did you arrange that?" and Doris shook her head no.

Then Prescott had said to the crowd, “This is how you and I will do this. We will spread the news of this bill to all the States in the nation. The television here tonight will help but the real work will be done by you, the people, you will tell your friends. You will show them this bill. You will explain to them how it works and why the bill must be passed in exactly these words with no changes at all. You will show them the way. Now go forth from this place to your families, to your friends, to your acquaintances. Tell them; show them that this is the way. This is the way and... we... can... do... this!"

The noise of cheering was so loud that Clark literally could hear nothing. The crowd began surging out toward the parking lot with their copies of the bill clutched in hand or folded into pockets. They were missionaries of a new faith.

Waiting for them were campaign workers with booklets containing directions for how to teach others and the reasons why each point had to be exactly as it was. They also had large clip-on buttons with the number 10 in bright colors.

Clark also had helped set up new web pages which told how to organize parties to explain the new money based on the old Tupperware or cosmetics parties. At the time he had thought they were for local people but he now realized that they would work just as well anywhere.

Actually, the success of the campaign was changing things for Clark. He really did feel better about himself moreso than he had at any time since he had entered public school. The people at the office really seemed to depend on him now and respect him. In fact, Clark, in some strange way, was even glad that the crowd had liked the Ten Points Bill. Sure, he’d been expecting it to be the key to his revenge on everyone but now that they all seemed to like him the idea of revenge was losing its attractiveness. Maybe he didn’t really want revenge. Frobisher was really a pretty nice old guy and the gruff, demanding Hughy Ormund had changed somehow, and was treating everybody like they mattered to him rather than being members of a chain gang. Could it be that Clark had misjudged them?

And now his father had demanded that he come home after the triumph as if he were a naughty puppy to be scolded and hit with a rolled up newspaper. Well he wasn’t going to do it. He was going to stay with the campaign. Maybe it was destiny or fate or something like that. Maybe it was just dumb fool's luck. Whatever it was, he’d found self-respect almost despite his own best efforts to bring ruin and contempt on Frobisher and the campaign staff. Despite his efforts to be a Sampson and bring down the temple around his own ears, it appeared he, instead, had been a David, slaying the giant Goliath in the campaign. Some practical joke. But who was the joke on now?

Because if revenge wasn’t what he wanted, what could he do to make up for the mess that he had gotten them all into by his crazy idea? How could they possibly say to the voters, “Oops, I really didn’t
mean all that stuff. You really do have a hopeless situation. Sorry.” Not only would they lose the election, but they might be lynched.

Why did they believe such silly stuff? Why did they think that they could be better off by doing away with money, or with currency anyway? And who would pay for all those things that were to be given to people free?

Maybe I’d better look into this stuff a little more deeply, Clark thought. Since I have a tiger by the tail maybe I’d better learn all I can about the tiger.

Well, yawn, that can wait until tomorrow morning.

------ Wednesday, September 8, 2010, the morning after

“Doris, I want to see Clark as soon as he gets in, Okay?”

“Right, Hughy.”

“Thanks, Doris; I don’t know how I’d get by without you.”

Hughy shut the door to the outer office and sat behind his desk muttering to himself.

“How did Frobisher do that? Last night was like the biggest revival meeting I ever saw. Twenty thousand people who felt the spirit chanting and cheering. When the rockets went off and the audience was showered with copies of the bill you would have thought it was the Super-Bowl. And Prescott was, well, I don’t know, he didn’t seem nervous before going on stage. It was like he knew just what was going to happen. He had them in the palm of his hand the whole time. He was never that good with an audience before. He was always a little stiff and I know he would have been a basket case before a crowd like that last election.”

“You wanted to see me Hughy?”

“Oh, yes Clark. Sit down. You’ve done a really great job for us this election and I want to talk about the future with you.” Hughy had arisen and walked around the desk to close the door behind Clark. On his way back to his seat he gripped Clark’s shoulder firmly as he went by.

“Clark, I don’t think there’s any doubt that your idea last month saved this campaign. We were going into the tank big time before you gave us that money idea. We both know that it’s really your idea and not mine or Frobisher’s. I also realize that we need you just as much now for what’s to come as we did for what’s past.”

“I don’t understand, boss. We pretty much have the election won don’t we? I mean the polls last week showed us Ten Points ahead and gaining fast and that doesn’t include the effects of what we did last night at the stadium. What do you need me for now?”

“Clark, this campaign is just for this year. But what we’ve done has also committed us for the next two years. We won’t have a prayer for the next election unless we succeed in Washington this coming year. If you thought it was tough winning here, you should see what we’ll be up against in Congress. And to win that battle we need support from all over the country. I know we’ll get some because there are already other candidates that are adopting our campaign approach in other races. Yeah, I know, most of them are the candidates that think they have nothing to lose and are going for this money
thing as a last chance to win but the point is that in at least a couple of cases it seems to be working for them, too."

“Look, we need to get this idea into every campaign we can and though I know this sounds like heresy, it really doesn't matter whether the candidate that uses it is from our party or not. In fact, it'll help if we get people from both sides of the aisle to support this issue. We don’t want it to be a party issue. So what we need to have you do is come up with a “campaign kit” so to speak. We need to have some set speeches and debate points and even ads all ready to go when the other campaigns contact us about using our ideas. It’s late in September so we only have a month to get this done. It’s going to mean a lot of work but it'll be worth it to us later.”

“Okay, boss, I expect to work hard. It’s not as bad as trying to get three term papers done in a week.”

“Yes, but that’s just the beginning. When we go to Washington I want you to be with us as part of Frobisher’s staff. He wants you with us, too, Clark. We think very highly of you. We want you and your ideas with us when we fight the far bigger battle that’s coming in Congress. That’s where we'll get the really organized and highly-financed opposition. That’s where, if we do lose this thing, we are most likely to fail. It’s for that fight that we really need the support of the people. We need to continue the campaign after the election in every district we can contact. The big problem is that we won't have much money to do it. It'll have to be a shoestring effort. You’re going to have to keep it alive on the Internet and by personal contacts. We don't even have a good idea of how the opposition, and there's bound to be opposition, how they're going to attack us but they're sure to do so.”

“Well, boss, we'll need volunteers and we'll have to use cells like in the spy novels. Frobisher's call to have the people spread the word last night is really the only way we can do this on a shoestring."

Hughy's face lit up, "So you'll stay with us, you'll come to Washington with us?"

“Well, of course. I couldn't leave with the job half done.” Now what did I mean by that? Clark thought. But he did feel a lot better than he had when he first got up this morning.

-----------Still Wednesday morning, back home in Georgia-----------

“Buddy, please tell me you didn’t mean it last night.” Lozelle pleaded. "Please tell me you thought about it and you don’t feel the way you did. Clark wouldn't do anything bad. He's a good boy, he really is.”

“Lozelle, you don't understand. I got to get him away from them fools down in Florida. They done hypnotized him or something. Don't worry, honey he'll be back today. He won't risk losing the money.”

“I don't know dear. He’s sounding so confident when I talk to him these days. It’s like he really knows what he wants to do now. Are you sure he’s coming back?”

“Of course I’m sure. Don’t be an idiot.”

Buddy picked up the phone and called the Frobisher campaign headquarters. “Let me talk to Hughy… Hughy Ormund… your boss, girl.” Bunch of incompetent nitwits. No wonder they can’t run a campaign.

“Hughy, boy, what’s this I hear about you fellas going Communist on me?”
“Communist, Buddy? What are you talking about?”

“You know damn well what I’m talking about. It’s that damn bill of yours. It’s right out of the Communist Manifesto. It’s pure crap, Hughy. What are you trying to do?”

“Buddy, if this bill is Communist then Henry Ford was a Communist. This bill is the strongest support Capitalism and the free market ever had. It’s going to keep the government off the back of the businessman. It’s going to end taxes, Buddy, permanently.”

“Like hell it will. You got to tax people to get the money to pay for all that free stuff you’re giving away. No other way you can get the money for it and I’m not gonna stand for it. You send my boy home, now, or I am gonna see that your boy, Frobisher loses this election and gets run out of Congress. You do it now, boy. If he ain’t home in his Mama’s lovin’ arms by tonight I’m making one big contribution to whoever Frobisher is running against and starting my own ad campaign against him tomorrow. You got that Hughy? Send him home now!”

And Buddy slammed down the phone and sent shards of plastic all over the desk. “Damn cheap phones. Used to be you could hang up hard and the phone didn’t break!” Buddy fumed.

“What was that? What happened?” Lozelle hurried in looking unkempt and frantic.

“Oh it's just this damn phone broke. It's nothin'. Everything's fine.”

“You weren’t talking to Clark were you? You didn't say anything mean to him did you?”

“No I wasn’t talking to Clark. I was just making sure he’ll arrive home today so you can see he’s just fine. Now quit worryin’ and calm down,” Buddy finished, almost shouting.

Lozelle resumed the sobbing which she had interrupted when she heard the crash and rushed from the room with a wail.
Chapter Five: Fast Food

*In which Niall finds out there is such a thing as a free meal and Tony tells something of his past.*

As they shuffled out of the apartment, the kids pulling Niall between them, he noticed that they didn’t lock the door.

“Are you leaving the apartment unlocked on purpose?”

“What’s the point in locking it?” Tony said, “Nobody’s home.”

Niall was surprised at Tony’s seeming insouciance. “Well, um, well for starters they could rob us blind while we’re away. You may not have anything worth stealing but I have some things I’d rather not lose,” Niall said.

He was aware that he had used the indefinite “they,” a practice he generally avoided. He didn’t know why, exactly, but something bugged him about it, as in, “We were robbed.” Then, almost inevitably, “How much did they get?” He always wondered who “they” were, of course. Perhaps it was his mental image of an amorphous “they” hovering over the community, an ectoplasmic manifestation of all that was frightening and unknown, done up in grey-black smoke for good measure.

Wordlessly, Tony walked back into the apartment. Brianna said, “I hope he can find the key. Normally we never lock up when we go out.” She looked at her father as though he were a stranger (which in a sense he was), still getting used to the idea that here he was. “You see,” she continued, “there haven’t been any thefts in this building in the time we’ve been here, what, four years? The computer would record anyone stealing something.” Niall got the uneasy feeling back in his stomach as he glanced at the opaque rectangle of the TV. “And there really isn’t much here to steal anyway.”

At least I can do something about that with all this money. “Does the computer watch the hallway all the time?” Niall asked, absent-mindedly resisting the bilateral tugging he was enduring from John and Lora.

“Sure,” Brianna explained. “That way if one of the kids goes out without telling me, the computer lets me know and tells me where they’re going,” adding “It’s funny but I don’t think of it as a computer, if you follow me. It’s kind of just there, something you get used to pretty soon. Anyhow, Johnny can go to the playground if he wants to and Lora can go next door to play with her friends. It, the computer, can’t take care of them but it can tell me where they are and what they’re doing.”

The last bit of Brianna’s explanation tailed away from Niall’s notice, as in his mind the apartment building began to resemble a prison. It was, he understood, a flashback of the kind Derrin had said would occur frequently as he became more acculturated, but unpleasant nonetheless. The cheerful decorations were transformed in his mind to camouflage for something sinister. Malevolent forces kept them under observation 24 hours a day. Even the playground was no haven. Thank God his captors had not had this technology, or he’d still be cooling his mouth with wet pebbles.

He had to get his family out of the country.

“Mom, can we go ahead and let Dad come later?” Johnny asked, shattering Niall’s uncomfortable reverie.
“No you can’t, big guy,” said Tony coming through the door, key held up for all to see, as if it were a trophy or some oddity. “Sorry for the delay, Niall, we just don’t use it that much,” he said.

“No problem,” Niall said. “Brianna’s been filling me in. It looks like there’s a lot I need to fill in.” They’d told him that, and he intellectually realized that you just don’t drop out of a society, return 12 or 15 years later, and pick up where you left off. And oh, yes, throw in a bizarre change in the entire concept of money, and there you go. But it was different actually going through it, rather than hearing about it.

“… We became accustomed to being very careful to not touch or otherwise disturb anyone else’s property. Nowadays everybody just sort of assumes that no one would touch their stuff.” Tony finished.

“I understand that the more modern apartment buildings have palm plates and voice recognition,” Brianna added. “It’ll probably be years before it’s in the older housing like this, though.”

“Yeah, not only that,” thought Niall,” but I’ll bet they’ll even have electronic locks on the doors so you can’t get out without permission either.”

The walk was pleasant, the weather moderate, and the sunset had everyone (well, almost everyone) in a relaxed mood. Even Niall had perked up once they’d gained the sidewalk, out of the building and away from his morose thoughts of surveillance. They moved toward the restaurant, a small knot of family with Niall seeming to be swept along, a kid on each side and an adult front and rear, on a tide of nonstop conversation and banter.

“It’s in England, dopey!” Johnny charitably said to his sister as they were crossing the street to the brightly lighted building that was their destination.

“Mom, Dad, tell stupid head that I know where granddad is from,” wailed Lora, who had only the faintest idea where in the world London was but wouldn’t admit it for all the string licorice her brother would ever get.

“Lora, Johnny, how about we just be happy that he’s here with us now, in Virginia. There’s no argument about that, is there?” Tony said, only slightly breaking stride during the sibling sniping.

On the way, Brianna and Tony had the chance to introduce Niall to several of the people they encountered, folks, like themselves, out to enjoy a nice walk on a pleasant evening. Still, it seemed to Niall that there were a good number more people walking around than he could remember, or thought he could remember, he had to remind himself. One of Derrin’s caveats had been about the good old days. Niall could safely count on their being old, but the good is often what Derrin called a nostalgia halo, where the good we remember as better than it had been, and the bad less so.

Most of the acquaintances seemed to be wearing some variation of white outfits but always accessorized with something that looked more expensive than the outfits themselves. Niall had all the fashion sense of a blind chameleon, but this stood out even to him. For instance, one older gentleman Tony had introduced as Sidney carried a cane with what looked to be a sterling silver handle. Several ladies had pins or brooches or bracelets in various sizes. Some seemed to be cloisonné, while others looked like gold and white gold or platinum. Brianna herself was wearing a belt with a perfect turquoise oval dominating the buckle. It took Niall only a moment to recognize it as a gift he had sent her from Texas. Niall’s own clothes, (he was still in his grey suit) while not expensive at all, were clearly not some variation of the whites he saw on many of the other adults.
All the children Niall saw were dressed rather colorfully. Everything seemed to fit without the spill out or dragging jean cuffs Niall remembered. Some of them were playing with toys that looked expensive, elaborate electronic whatsis with remote controllers, dolls that were articulate in speech as well as movement, solidly-built wagons of bright yellows, blues, and of course, red. One woman pushed an elaborate two-seat stroller down the block with two colorfully-dressed babies curiously staring at the world, yet her own clothes were whites.

“What’s with all this white clothing? Is it a fashion thing?” Niall asked.

“Dad, we don’t usually refer to it, but plain white clothing is what we call ‘standard’ clothing.” Brianna had lowered her voice so as to not be overheard by the others they passed on the sidewalk. “That’s clothing one doesn’t have to pay for. Most people use it for outside work or for manual labor. But this is a poor neighborhood so most people save their money for other luxuries like I do and wear mostly standard clothes at home and for just hanging around the neighborhood. It isn’t polite to refer to it and almost everyone but Payers will wear something that isn’t standard just to show that they could be wearing colors if they wanted to.”

“Payers? Why do they wear white clothes?”

“Payers are the people who can credit your account with more money. They can’t have money or things money can buy for themselves so they’re left with only standard or free clothes to wear and they’re all white. If somebody is wearing all white clothes and not seeming to work at anything they’re probably a payer,” Tony answered.

“But what about the children? They’ve got lots of colors. Do the parents all spend their money on luxury clothes for the kids?”

“Standard clothing for children has just always been colorful. I don’t know why. In fact, other than Halloween costumes or suits I can’t remember ever seeing any luxury clothes for children. I guess they make some but... Oh, hi June, this is my dad. He just got back in the country and dropped in to visit for a few days.”

The Good-n-Quick was a familiar sight to Niall, at least in architecture and layout. Much was unchanged, except for there being more booths and fewer individual or two-seater tables than he recalled. He understood why Bree had called this place ‘Family Friendly,’ or whatever she’d said. This one also boasted a large indoor play area with lots of soft plastic toys and things to climb on. The play area was situated at the front of the restaurant, opening to the street and was excellent advertising for the customers they seemed to want to attract.

The lighted picture menu over the counter had fewer hamburgers than he remembered. More salads, baked potatoes, and vegetables took their place, the accompanying pictures looking a bit odd in the company of the MegaBurger and Fearless Fries. The children’s menu seemed as elaborate as the adult menu, again with a surprising emphasis on vegetables and salads. The two inescapable soft drink brand names were predictably present, but several fruit drinks and milk clearly had more space on the menu. Oh, and there were no prices anywhere that he could see. “Again with the money,” he thought.

“Where are the prices?” Niall whispered to Brianna.

“There aren’t any. This is a standard food place,” she whispered back, gently rocking Lora by her shoulders as they waited their turn for service.
They hadn’t long to wait, because the people in front of them ordered with the efficiency and confidence of longtime regulars. Niall noticed that their selections came across the hot table on actual ceramic plates, rather thick and plain, but ceramic or Earthenware nonetheless. And again, not one word about prices.

Niall followed the lead of the others in ordering. Brianna recommended a vegetable plate if he weren’t very hungry. The kids knew the menu without looking. One of the servers, Diane by her name plate, who looked to be in her junior or senior year of high school, noticed the family and asked Lora whether she’d lost that loose tooth yet. Lora opened her mouth wide, then obscured the view by pointing with her finger to the place where the tooth had been, following that by pressing the tip of her tongue in the space, giving her an endearing but slightly goony look.

“Well I think that calls for a special treat tonight,” Diane said. “How about a scoop of ice cream after dinner? Would that be all right with mommy?”

“Yes, oh, yes, mommy that will be all right, won’t it?” Lora excitedly agreed, as if it were one long word she was pronouncing. Bree smiled thankfully at Diane and came out with “If we finish dinner, right, darling?” Niall wondered if that line were somehow from a sleeper gene that was activated when people achieved parenthood.

“If ice cream were that much of a treat, then she obviously didn’t get it very often.” Niall reflected. He’d begun to notice that he was seeing things in their darkest possible light, or negative sense, or something, and he couldn’t understand why. Derrin had told him (caveat #256) that he wouldn’t know how he was going to react to people, events, and things seemingly unrelated to his experience, as he obviously had never been through this type of reentry into his society. “Open mind, open eyes” had been how Derrin summed it up. “Check out everything and don’t be too quick to draw conclusions.” He seemed to be a bit quick on the draw here in the few hours since he’d landed in Washington. That was depressing to Niall who had always taken pride in his mental abilities.

Lora happily led her mother to her favorite booth, bright blue vinyl and Formica right in front of the play area. The rest of the family joined them shortly with John on his best behavior, figuring it was not out of the question for him to get ice cream too, if he played his cards correctly.

Niall was surprised with the quality of the food. He complimented Brianna on her suggesting the place and commented that he had paid dearly in London for food not this good, and not in a chain family restaurant either, for that matter. Brianna explained that there were a lot of other standard food places in the area, since the apartments weren’t luxury ones, and of course that meant that to keep their customers the restaurants had to make the food and service good.

“They can’t compete on prices or location so they have to try to excel in other ways. I especially like the head cook they have here now. The amount of business they do here has at least doubled since they got her, Mary, I don’t remember her last name. Anyway she came here directly from cooking school about 18 months ago,” Brianna said. And added somewhat wistfully, “I don’t know how long they can keep her if some of the luxury places find out about her. She’ll be getting offers from all over town. One thing’s sure,” she half laughed, “we’re careful who we tell - she’s that good.”

The kids asked if they could join some of their friends in the play area. With the usual warnings and subsequent eye rolling, permission was granted and off they ran. One of the women sitting at another table got up and followed them and sat on one of the adult-sized chairs near the door to the play area where she had a good view of the children.

Niall, a little worried by such behavior, asked about her.
“Oh that’s Mrs. Peters,” answered Tony, allowing Bree a few bites of her dinner. “She likes to watch the kids play and this way she can get paid for it, too.”

“What do you pay her?” to Tony. And to himself: “God, does anyone cross the street around here without getting paid for it? And we used to have God’s name on money.”

“We don’t pay her anything. We thank her of course but that’s just common courtesy for her kindness. The Payers pay her, same as they pay everyone else. It isn’t much, but as I say she enjoys doing it anyway. She knows all the kids on the street and never has trouble getting one to run errands for her or make minor repairs around her apartment. So there’s your quid pro quo, I guess.”

“Do you ever use her as a babysitter?”

“Nope. Doesn’t like to be tied down that way. Here she can get up and leave any time she feels like it, whereas if she were babysitting at our apartment, you know, she’d have to stay until we got back.”

“Besides, if we need a sitter we can just take the kids across the street to the baby farm,” Brianna joined in, an expectant look in her eye as she addressed her dad.

“Baby farm?” Niall said, feeling the color drain from his face.

“Whoa. That’s just what we all call it, dad,” said Brianna who got more of a reaction than she’d figured on. “Mr. Jurgens runs it. Half the kids in the neighborhood must have worked there at one time or another,” she noted. “He lives upstairs over the business, so you can get him 24/7 whenever you need someone to look after the kids. When he goes on vacation, he has someone live in his apartment so they can take over.”

“You mean you could leave Lora and John with him and come back and find them with some stranger?” Niall said, his face beginning to recolor. If this kept up he’d look like a schizoid thermometer.

“No, Dad. Not a stranger. People he’s known for years. I guess I really should call him Doctor Jurgens since he was a pediatrician at one time. He said he quit as a doctor because he could prevent more problems than he could cure. You know he even has dentists come in every month or so to look at the kids’ teeth. And all the new mothers go to him for advice.”

Tony said jokingly, “Oh, you just like him because he said you were doing a great job with John and Lora.”

“Jurgens’ Baby Farm,” was all Niall could think as he watched a group of four teens clamor through the door.

“Hey Julian, got anything for us?” asked the one in the lead, about sixteen, skinny, and so far losing the war with acne vulgaris. “Big do at school next month and we need some money, fast,” another yelled to one of the older servers.

“Yeah, I can use a couple of you fellows tomorrow morning. About 4 a.m. Make that 4 a.m. sharp,” he continued, a charitable smile on his face. “You can help with the cleanup and breakfast prep.” The teens groaned. Then they turned to the people who were eating.

“Anyone got any work that needs doing? We’re getting desperate.”
“Give blood!” one of the diners yelled and was rewarded with a respectable laugh.

But no one had anything for them to do.

“They’re paying the price for not thinking ahead,” Tony said, as they watched the teens argue with Julian about tomorrow morning and then leaving. “If they’d started a year ago or even a couple of months ago they could have done lots of things which would’ve generated a significant amount of money by now. But by waiting until the last minute, well, there aren’t that many things one can do that will earn a lot of money that quickly,” he said, adding, “you know, kinda like waiting too long to start those term papers in school.”

“Oh, that reminds me, Tony, could you take John’s euro note to the library tomorrow and make a copy for Lora to have? That way she won’t be so jealous and she won’t be so tempted to steal it.”

“Counterfeiting now, Bree?” Tony laughed down at her.

“Oh, who’s going to care if we make a copy? It isn’t as if we were ever going to go to Europe and try to spend it.”

“I don’t think it would pass anyway because of the paper and the lack of a computer in it,” Niall added. Then he continued, “When I was a kid, way back last century,” in a way he had sworn as a kid that he would never tell stories when he became a grownup, “I could get grunt work; you know, manual labor, for, I don’t know, $200 a week, minimum wage. And since I didn’t make that much per year, the tax bite wasn’t bad,” Niall said with a smile, remembering his own do or die high school crises.

“Yes,” Tony said, “but you got paid by the hour. These days it’s an entirely different standard - you get paid by the net benefit.”

“Benefit?” Niall asked, “Benefit to whom?”

“Benefit to anybody else,” Tony said. “And that’s net benefit. If you help one but harm another the two consequences are compared and you get paid for only the amount the help exceeds the harm.”

“Wait a minute. How could anybody ever measure such a thing? And the consequences of every action continue for eternity. You’ve read about chaos theory and the butterfly effect, haven’t you?” Niall said trying to restrain his contempt for the idea.

“Okay, Niall. Say you work hard for a week and the job isn’t finished. You don’t get anything because the benefit the job will produce hasn’t happened yet. And then, when it is finished, you start to get paid a month or so later, after the Payers have had a chance to notice some consequences,” he continued. “Of course you may keep getting paid for a particular job for years. I still get about $50 a month for when I worked in the boatyard. I guess so long as those ships I helped build are sailing I’ll keep getting paid something.”

“You mean it’s like royalties, except it’s on everything people do?” Niall asked.

“I guess you could put it that way,” Tony mused. “At least in a rough way.”

“But these kids need the money right away,” Niall said. “Can’t they just borrow the money? And do some work later, maybe?”
“Well their parents might pay for some. They might work out something that way. But since you can’t actually borrow money itself you have to get someone to buy something and give it to you. Then later, you can buy something for them that costs about the same. It’s inconvenient to do and you can only do it with close friends or relatives who won’t tell anyone. It isn’t easy.”

“But why the secrecy? Is it illegal?” Niall asked, his danger meter fluttering again in his imagination.

“Oh it’s quite legal. Almost nothing you do with your own property is illegal so long as it hurts no one,” Tony said. “But borrowing that way -- to get luxuries -- shows a lack of planning and a lack of the ability to defer gratification. People aren’t likely to trust you with capital or work with you if they don’t think you’re reliable. Your reputation for dependability is more important now than it used to be.”

“What do you mean, more important than it used to be?” Niall said, warming to the challenge of a good old “in my time” argument. “We valued our reputations plenty in those days.”

“Yes, some people did,” Tony replied. “But if you moved to another town or lived in a big city, most all the people you dealt with didn’t know you, or at least that’s the way I imagine it,” he said. “If you came in some store with a wad of money, no one really cared what kind of person you were. They’d sell you almost anything and you could buy almost anything, wouldn’t you agree?” he asked Niall, who nodded slowly, with the wariness of the unconverted.

“All right then,” the lecture continued, “today, you can only buy luxuries. For capital goods you have to persuade people to give them to you. They get paid based on what you do with those goods. You’d better believe that they want to know as much as they can about you before they’ll let you have much.” Here Tony looked at Niall, as much in interest at his expression as in a normal conversational pause. The latter looked confused, as if he had walked into the wrong house by mistake.

“In your day,” Tony continued, unconsciously rubbing Niall’s nose in the fact that he was getting old, “if you wanted to start a business you’d have to borrow money to buy the capital goods like the lumber and pipes and nails and hammers and such, right?”

“Sure.”

“Well, these days, you don’t borrow money to buy tools or raw materials. You go directly to the folks who own them and ask them to give them to you.”

“Why in the world would they give them away?”

“Why would someone loan you money?” Tony countered.

“Because I’ll pay it back with interest. Now why would somebody just up and give me tools?”

“Because they think they’ll get paid for doing so.”

“Ha! Brianna was just telling me that I can’t give anybody money. So how am I going to pay them for their tools?”

“That’s what the Payers do. If you use those tools to benefit others, then the Payers credit the folks who gave you the tools. The more benefit you produce using them, the more they get paid. In a lot of ways, it’s just like that bank loaning you money. The more money you make using the capital you borrowed from the bank, the easier it will be for you to pay them back with interest and the more likely
you are to want to borrow even more money to expand your business. In both cases, the bank in your
day and the Capitalists in our day, they want to know what you’re going to do with what they give
you.”

“Would you guys just shut up with the economics? I want to hear what dad’s been doing the last 15
years.” Brianna sighed.

“Sorry, hon, I just got carried away there. I know you warned me.” Tony said holding up his hands in
mock surrender and with a grin.

“Okay, Brianna, what would you like to know?” Niall asked with some reluctance. There were many
things he had experienced while abroad and especially in captivity that he never wanted her to know
about.

“Well, you know, what have you been doing?”

“Mostly waiting. I spent a lot of time trying to find food and keep clean. You have no idea how difficult
it is to get clean when there’s hardly any water beyond drinking water and cooking water. The first
thing I did when I was released was take a bath that lasted about an hour. I just lay there after I’d
scrubbed and savored the feel of being covered in warm water. And the soap, I must have soaped
the wash cloth five or six times and just kept washing and washing. It was heaven.”

“How did you keep from going crazy?” Tony asked with a look of sympathy.

“I’m not so sure I didn’t go crazy for quite a while there. At first I was just scared, then depressed, and
finally resigned. I started thinking I would never be released, that they would end up shooting me or
that I’d die of disease or starvation. So I went over what I could remember of my life. I tried to
remember everything I did as a child and as an adult. I looked for meaning for anything I could think
of that would show my life had some value. I looked for things I could feel proud of. I even looked for
things I’d done wrong that would mean that I deserved what was happening to me. Some days I
thought it was a good thing that it was me it had happened to because I was strong enough to stand
up to it. Other times my attitude was pure ‘Why me?’ and I was upset that a person as good as I was,
who had just tried to help other people, had to suffer as I was suffering.”

“Oh, Dad. It must have been awful,” Brianna was almost at the point of tears. Conversations at the
tables near them were getting quiet.

Niall glanced around and spoke in a lower voice and tried to grin as he said, “Well it all worked out all
right. I’m here. I’m reasonably healthy. I can carry on a somewhat civilized conversation. And the
computer tells me I have lots of money.”

“I hope those people who did this to you died horrible deaths,” Brianna said fiercely.

“Darling, they didn’t treat me any worse than most of the other people who were living in that village.
They were all hungry most of the time and none of them had as much water as they would have
liked. It’s just that I was lucky enough to have plenty of food and plenty of clean water before I was
taken. I was only suffering because I’d been spoiled by being so much richer all my previous life.”

Tony nodded his head and asked, “And how long was it before you felt that way?”

“Oh, only about ten years,” Niall grinned.
“Do you still have any problems, you know, like medical problems or whatever?”

“I know what you’re asking, Tony. You want to know if I’m crazy or contagious.” Niall’s continuing grin took away much of the sting but Tony still flushed a little. “They tell me that I’m completely dewormed and deloused. They shaved all my hair off, first thing when I went into the hospital and put stuff on my sores. See, they’re virtually gone now,” Niall said pulling up the sleeve of his suit coat. There were some splotches of pink but the skin was intact and appeared healthy.

“As far as my mental health is concerned, they said that I would never completely get over the trauma but that lots of people live with much worse than what I went through. And I guess they’re right. At least I was an adult when I went through it.”

Brianna couldn’t help looking at her children as she realized what Niall meant. They were happily careening from one side of the play room to another, healthy and active.

“But they said that given how well I stood up to my captivity that I was probably saner than the average person on the street. I don’t know whether to find that reassuring or not,” Niall chuckled.

“You seem fine to me, too, sir,” Tony said, punching Niall gently on the shoulder.

“Do you still have any problems from it?” Brianna asked.

“Let’s see. I still dream I’m in captivity but at least that doesn’t itch. I have an impulse to eat some of the weeds I see but I no longer hoard food so that’s not really a problem. Sometimes I have these little flashbacks as if my emotions were still responding to my being in captivity. It’s like the soldiers returning from war suddenly diving on the floor at a sudden loud sound or crouching because a bird’s shadow flashes past. My subconscious still sometimes thinks I’m in Pakghanistan.”

“Well I think you’re pretty wonderful to come through something like that as well as you have. I’d have been a basket case,” Brianna asserted. “And speaking of getting enough to eat, I’m getting us some dessert.” She rose and headed toward the sweets section.

“At least,” Tony said, “you shouldn’t have any trouble getting work. Your record and strength of character makes a good reputation. I doubt there are many who would be unhappy to have you work with them.”

“But I just came to town,” Niall pointed out. “How am I supposed to have a reputation, good or bad? How could I get a job? How could I get started in a business?” he continued, now on a definite roll. “I have all this money and you say it wouldn’t do me any good since it won’t buy a store or merchandise or hire employees or do God only knows what else.”

“Dad,” Brianna said, having returned with a slice of cake for each of them. “Having that money is a great start to getting a good reputation. You aren’t likely to get a lot of money without having been successful at something in the past. I mean, because you get paid to generate benefits, and you have money, then you must’ve generated some benefit somewhere, right?” she asked patting his knee. “Besides, you’re part of our family and we have a pretty good reputation in some circles,” she added smiling.

“How will some employer know me from Adam’s house cat?” Niall asked.

“Your reputation and references,” Tony said. “Oh, incidentally, we don’t call people ‘employers’ any more. It’s not as if some owner were paying you to work with him. You don’t need his permission to
do something that benefits someone else. If he owns the capital you use, then he’s one of your suppliers,” he said looking closely at the large slice of cake on his plate. “Take when I worked in the shipyard, for example.”

“Oh no: Here comes the ‘I worked with my hands’ bit again,” Brianna rolled her eyes but the mischievous grin took away the insult.

“Ahem, as I was saying,” Tony resumed, blatantly looking down his nose at his wife, “I drove a fork lift. I didn’t own it when I first came to work there, of course. What happened was: they ran three shifts and the three of us who operated that machine would each give it to the guy on the next shift when our shift was done, and so on, 24 hours a day. The guy I replaced spent a week teaching me how to use it before he left. If I hadn’t been pretty good at it by the time he finished that week of training me, then they wouldn’t have given it to me. They would have tried to find someone else who could do it better, because if I messed up it hurt their pay, too. Anyway, I never got real good with it but I was careful and kept it clean and maintained and all of that got me through. I also trained my replacement when the time came for me to move along.”

Brianna made a grab for what was left of Tony’s cake, which was almost untouched since he had been talking. He fended her off and she stuck her tongue out at him.

Niall was incredulous. It was like Communism or Socialism or one of those horrible isms of his youth. “You mean you actually owned the fork lift for just eight hours each work day? That’s crazy.”

“Not crazy at all, if you don’t mind my contradicting you,” said Tony with a grin. “When I’m in the driver’s seat on that fork lift, what that machine does is up to me and me alone. I controlled that machine. I gassed it up and kept it clean. It was, as far as I was concerned, my fork lift.” Tony paused to slide his dessert plate back closer to himself, casually bringing it to the side away from Bree. “Now if you’re talking about who has title to that fork lift, then I guess that would be somebody at the company that made it. You know, that’s interesting, I never thought about it before, but I have no idea who had title to that fork lift.”

“You’re lecturing and if I catch you at it again I’m going to dump whatever is left of your dessert in your lap even if Julian does get mad at me for it.” Brianna announced in her best parent-to-child admonition voice.

“But Brianna, I need to know about this reputation thing if I ever hope to get a job again,” Niall said. Tony promptly stuck his tongue out at Brianna, who slapped his arm. “Who keeps those records and how do you find out about someone else’s reputation?”

“I can’t tell you because my wife forbids it. She’ll have to tell,” and Tony placed his arm on the table around his plate of cake and began wielding his fork with the other hand.

“They’re all in the computer, so wherever you go, you just ask,” Brianna said.

“So all you have to do is ask the computer?” Niall said with a twisted smile. “Aha!” he thought to himself.

“Well, not quite,” Brianna said. “You have to get the person’s permission for the computer to tell you the information it has about them and even then the permission only applies to their past and is only the part related to their past work. The other stuff the computer knows about you, as they say, ‘isn’t for public consumption.’”
“But what’s in this reputation? Is it only job stuff?”

“No, I guess it includes about everything.” Niall’s cold chills were coming back. Funny how you could be scared even in a bright, cheery place among happy people, with the smell of good food in the air. “I mean the computer must have all sorts of information about everybody in its records. But it only tells other people what’s appropriate. You know?”

Niall didn’t know. He didn’t know at all.

“What about your personal history? What about the people who know you? Do they get gossip about you?” Niall was thinking in particular about Mrs. Smithers, the harridan living next door to Katherine and him when they first married and were in their paper-walled row house. He swore the old bat did nothing but wait to put the ear to the wall when they were home, and then give them the moon-eye whenever they saw her, sitting there poured into her rickety chair on the tiny porch from which she monitored the street.

“Well, the computer does hear some gossip from time to time, of course,” Brianna said looking over Niall’s shoulder. “The kids are getting a little tired, honey. We might think about going home,” she said to Tony. And then again to Niall she added, “I’ve been asked about a few of my friends. I always tried to give an accurate picture of what they were like. But you know, gossip is just that, and any coordinator worth her salt isn’t going to give much weight to really weird stuff. I mean, it would be documented somewhere if it were true, right?”

“Well, yeah, okay, good point,” Niall answered. ‘Coordinator?’ he wondered. ‘That’s another new one, like payer.’

“Ice cream, is it time for ice cream yet, Mommy?” Lora had come running from her play, having remembered the promised treat.

“Yes, it’s time but get your ice cream in a cone instead of in a bowl this time so you can eat it while we walk home.” And after a brief pause, having seen John’s face with its eyebrows raised and its big smile, “All right, John, you, too.” John was almost able to beat his sister to the counter where the nice lady took their orders with a big smile and handed each a cone.

“Brianna?” Niall said, “How can I find out what the computer has on me?”

“Just ask it. If you don’t want anyone else to hear be sure you’re alone. I mean, the computer is pretty good about keeping its voice hard to understand when you’re in a public place but if you’re in a group and everyone is obviously paying attention, the computer will usually just talk in a normal voice since it assumes you don’t mind. Of course there are some things, like medical information, that it won’t talk about with others there unless you say it’s okay to tell them.”

“So if my work history is okay all I have to do is tell the computer to let my prospective employer see it and I can get a job?”

“May I, dear?” Tony asked with a grin. Brianna nodded, but punched him in the ribs to make sure he realized who was really boss.

“It’s really more that if you don’t let them see your reputation, they won’t be willing to work with you.”

Brianna forestalled another lecture by saying, “Let’s go. The kids have got their ice cream. Tony, will you watch Lora to be sure she doesn’t drop it like last time. You remember what a fuss we had over
that one.” Then with Tony diplomatically quieted, she linked her arm with her father’s arm and followed her husband and children out the door to the street.

“Do you want to get a job already, Dad?” she asked.

“I’ll go crazy if I don’t have something to do. I can’t just sit around all day and do nothing. I might as well be back in Pakghanistan.”

“But you’re here now. You can do whatever you want to do here.”

‘I wish,’ thought Niall. ‘I can do whatever the computer lets me. That’s really subtle to control who can get what job by slanting the victim’s work history so he can get only the job the computer wants him to have. I bet most people don’t even realize what’s being done to them. The more I see of this the more frightening it is. Most of these white sheep I see on the street here probably don’t even realize they’re being manipulated. But somebody’s doing the shearing, you can count on that.’

All in all it had been a good meal, for all the price weirdness and Tony had laid down quite a bit for Niall to consider. The credentials he had when he left the country wouldn’t be worth as much now, he realized, unless he threw his life into the hopper of this computer, a prospect he didn’t relish and distrusted even more. What had he come home to, anyway?
Chapter Six: Passage

In which Clark goes to Washington, twice, things come to a head, and Lozelle leads the Granny Brigade.

-------- Thursday, November 4, 2010 --------

Dear Mama,

Frobisher did it. He won the election. Somehow, despite the polls saying we were 20 points ahead, I never really believed he would do it. But the people really like him now. They really think he can get the country out of the mess we’re in.

You know, they are saying that it’s all because of me. That’s right Mama, Frobisher, Mr. Ormund, Doris, Ed; all of them are saying that it was my idea that did it. All I did really was tell them about this new money thing I found on the Internet. Of course I did have to do some research on it, so I guess I understood it better than the rest of the guys... but still, it really wasn’t my idea to begin with.

Wasn’t Buddy mean to do all those ads for Constable? I mean they were just lies about Frobisher and our bill. There isn’t any truth to him saying that the bill is just a Communist front.

We also won lots of seats in Congress for candidates who support the new money idea. There are at least 75 Congressmen who made the campaign pledge to support this bill exactly as it is. Hughy says we may need to convert enough other votes to be able to overcome a Presidential veto. He says the only way we can do that is to get a huge grass roots movement that forces their representatives in Congress to go along with us. So they gave me the job of teaching people on the website how to convince their neighbors and friends that this is the way to go.

Anyway Mama, they are going to keep me on Frobisher’s staff. They are paying me real well, too. They want me to work on getting people to support our bill when Congress comes into session. They say I am really important. I don’t really think it’s true. I mean, Ed writes ever so much better than I do and Doris seems to know just what to do to get media coverage that says what we want it to say. Hughy seems to know everybody in Washington. Mostly I just put things on the Ten Points web page. Whenever there is anything in the news or on the Internet that spreads lies about the Ten Points, I put up a page which exposes it and shows the truth.

You know Mama; I am beginning to think this new money stuff can really work. I mean it’s just like when I was little, and I would do something nice or help you in some way, you would give me a treat or give me a big hug and tell me that you were proud of me or let me go to the movies. That’s all this new money really is, it’s just rewarding people for being nice. Why can’t people see that, Mama?

Anyway, we are moving to Washington this week and I am going to have an office right there in the building with all the other Congressmen’s staff. I bet Buddy didn’t think I could do it.

So I am feeling fine and eating better. I’ve even lost a couple of pounds. Ed says it’s because I am thinking harder than I ever did before. Doris thinks it’s because I walk to work and to lunch these days. Well, I do have a car but gas is so expensive that I would rather save the money for other things... so ever since Buddy cut off my allowance I’ve been doing a lot more walking. Doris says all the girls in Washington will want to date me but Doris says she will protect me so you don’t need to worry. (Joke)
Mama, I am so excited and happy. I know things are going to be tough and I am going to have to work hard and be careful to be smart in everything I do. Hughy warned us that if anybody with Frobisher gets even so much as a parking ticket they will use that to attack the bill. So we all have to be really careful to be above suspicion. You don’t need to worry about me at all. I’ll be very careful.

Your best boy,

Clark

PS: Do you like the Frobisher campaign stationary? I dictated this letter into the new word processor and it did all the typing and stuff for me. We can’t use the stationary any more since the campaign is over so I’m not stealing anything from anybody. It’s just going to be thrown away if I don’t use it.

Lozelle held the letter close to her heart. Clark is doing so well she thought. I have to help him. I’m going to find out about this new money myself.

Buddy had bought Lozelle her own computer for email with friends and use of the Internet. She had no trouble finding her son’s campaign website. It wasn’t long before she was reading the sections which encouraged readers to spread the word and build support. There were directions for holding new money parties and for finding others who had seen the light. There were instructions for how to introduce the idea to someone who had never heard of it and there were arguments given to use to refute the lies they could expect to be told about it.

By the end of the day Lozelle was planning parties and practicing the new greeting sign, which was a raised right hand with index finger extended while the thumb and other three fingers made an O, thus representing the number ten. The ten referred to the Ten Points of the bill that was to be passed unchanged.

When Lozelle went shopping next morning, she mustered up her courage and flashed the 10 at a few people. Most seemed to not notice, but a few gave her a big smile and flashed it back at her. Thus encouraged, Lozelle bought party favors and other supplies and invited half a dozen of her friends to tea on Thursday. Then she plunged into the website to find out how she was to convince the others of what they had to do.

“Know your audience.” it said. “Different people are suffering from different problems. If you understand their problems then you are halfway home.”

What problems did her friends have? April had a teen-aged son who was a drug addict and was somewhere on the streets only heaven knew where. Melissa had parents who were in failing health and their medical bills were crushing. Marge hated her husband but was afraid to leave him, since she had never worked and had no idea how to take care of herself. So she was miserable most of the time and suffered from depression and had even tried suicide a couple of times.

Okay, but what does that have to do with the new money? She pressed on. It seems that the drug addict depended on buying drugs from others. With the new money there would be no way for the boy to pay for the drugs. No pay meant no drugs.

For Melissa’s parents there would be no medical bills since the new money was only used for buying luxuries. Money that could only buy luxuries? Fancy that! Maybe I’d better read that bill Clark wrote. Well, that can wait until later.
Marge could afford to leave her husband and even take the kids if all their needs would be met without her having to pay for them. Maybe there was something to this.

------------------ Thursday, November 11, 2010 ----------------------

That was a disaster. They all made fun of me. Nobody believed that I knew what I was talking about. April even called me a Communist. I just can’t do this. How can anyone do this? Oh, Clark, I’ve failed you.

The phone rang playing “Rock of Ages” (because Buddy said it was the only rock music he liked) and with a lump in her throat Lozelle managed to get out a passable “Hello?” before she lost the power to speak at all.

“Oh Lozelle, I just had to call.” It was Melissa’s voice. “I felt so bad for you with the way the others jumped on you. It really isn’t a bad idea and I just had to call and tell you that I thought so. I was scared to say anything with the others all being against it. I’m not a brave person, Lozelle, and I just couldn’t face having them treat me the way they were treating you.”

By the time Melissa’s voice had tapered off into an embarrassed silence, Lozelle found the lump in her throat was gone. In fact things weren’t so bad after all.

“Melissa, thank you so much for calling. That was the act of a true friend. I’ll always think fondly of you for being so kind to me. Calling me took courage, too, Melissa. I think you are a lot braver than most people.”

“Oh, no, I really am a scaredy cat. I don’t know how I mustered up the courage to pick up the phone. If I didn’t have you on speed dial I don’t think I could have.”

“You know, Melissa, I think where I went wrong was in having so many people come who didn’t really understand what I was trying to say and they were too embarrassed to admit it so they just attacked the thing that seemed strange to them. I think that next time I’ll just invite you and one other person. Maybe lunch instead of dinner and make it more informal. Then when I say something about the new money you can jump in quickly and say how you agree and so on. That way they’ll be the one alone and will have more trouble disagreeing. We’ll have to be careful to not seem to browbeat them or get angry at them if they disagree. Remember we’re trying to get them to understand and join us.”

“Yes, I know just what you mean. I can say something like, ‘you know, I thought that, too, at first, but then I found out... or I realized that... whatever.’ That way we can seem sympathetic and make it easy for them to change their minds. I mean, most people don’t really understand what they believe anyway.”

“Yes, well, I was thinking that we might invite Patricia. She’s been angling for an invitation anyway and we can try out our technique on her.”

It wasn’t really that easy but after a couple of weeks Lozelle had made contact with quite a few others who were also trying to spread the word. When they could, they brought in speakers with more formal credentials and invited friends to meetings of 20-30 people, some of whom were already convinced and others whom they thought might become convinced.

Buddy, of course, knew nothing about Lozelle’s activities. So long as she was present when he wanted her there and was a gracious hostess when he needed one, he really didn’t pay much attention to her. Besides, Buddy had his own problems. He was one of the leaders of what was still a
rather disorganized opposition to the new money concept and his own business was suffering. The price of oil was substantially depressing soybean activities all across Buddy’s empire. His other investments were suffering as well. He had not yet reached the point of blaming everything on this new money idea but he was afraid that a recovery would be delayed by it.

As a result Buddy’s temper was short and he was apt to authorize steps which, in more normal times, he would never have considered. The campaign, so far as Buddy was concerned, was about to get dirty.

Buddy wasn’t the only person who found the new money concept unpalatable. There were certain, shall we say, ungodly persons whose income depended upon the contributions of the faithful and devout. The spectre of those contributions coming to an end was not one which left them unmoved. There were thundering orations from several pulpits which portrayed the new money as the work of Satan. Congregations were informed in no uncertain terms that to support such evil was to doom one to everlasting torment.

Also on the other side of the moral divide were those who made a living from cash transactions: untraceable, under-the-table, cash on the barrelhead transactions. At first the organized crime bosses paid no attention to what was a laughable idea at best. But as the movement began to flourish and elections were being decided by support for the idea, a few looked into it enough to realize that, at least until the silly idea was dropped as unworkable, their illegal activities would be brought to a halt. If one can’t give money to someone else, how would extortion and prostitution and illegal drug sales be conducted? You can’t run a big business on the barter system. All the big money-making activities of organized crime would become virtually impossible. Sure a group of guys could get together on Friday night to play poker. But the losers would have to buy things for the winners rather than giving them currency. That’s no way to run a casino.

Bankers, stock brokers, and insurance executives were likewise aghast at the prospect of a bill that would appear to put them out of business at a stroke. Lawyers were getting nervous. How would a suit for damages be possible if the respondent couldn’t pay damages to the plaintiff? Worse, how could the lawyer get his cut?

No, Buddy was not alone in his opposition to the new money bill. But despite the wealth and power of his allies in the struggle to suppress the new money idea, it was difficult to find logical arguments against such emotional issues as no taxes and full employment and an end to the welfare system. How did you convince a divorced mother with three small children that being paid for taking care of her own kids was a bad thing? How did you tell a retired minister and his wife that their retirement money would have to be used for medical care instead of those pleasure trips which they had never had time for before retirement? How would a poor graduate student in the humanities receive the word that she should spend 40 hours a week working in the food service industry so she could stay alive while trying to carry a full course load instead of getting all those necessities without paying for them?

It was hard not to come across as a greedy S.O.B. to oppose child care for all needy children. So the opposition was forced to say that, though it sounded nice, it was too good to be true. They had to make the case that somehow, though how was not obvious, somebody would be losing money to pay for all these things. The ancient truth, “There is no such thing as a free lunch” got frequent mention. Somebody has to pay for it. This Ten Points Bill is just a confidence game, a trick, a scam. It’s based on lies, lies, and more lies. Don’t be taken in. Only a fool believes that such things are possible. This was the theme. Somehow, though, they couldn’t specify any particular person who would pay.
Now if you are going to make the case that the idea is just a trick; then you need to show that those who are behind it are bad people, that they are just doing this to steal from others, somehow. So, of course, those who were out front in the campaign to get the Ten Points Bill passed came under close scrutiny. Congressman Frobisher was portrayed as a mere pawn in the control of moneyed interests. His past supported this charge since, among others; Buddy had received no few favors from Congressman and had, by coincidence, made substantial contributions to Congressman’s re-election. And Frobisher’s reputation in Congress as little more than a fool didn’t support Frobisher as the brains behind the movement. The search for the guiding force continued.

Congressional supporters of the bill began to ask, rhetorically, how they were to benefit from the bill since the bill allocated no money. It was hard to see how Frobisher or any of the others who had been elected on the Ten Points Pledge could benefit financially from the passage of the bill. And if the bill passed and proved the disaster that it was predicted to be, surely they would be thrown out of office at the next election.

Rumors started, no one knows how, that it was all a scheme of the Jewish bankers to somehow, gain control of the financial resources of Wall Street. At the same time another rumor maintained that it was an Islamic plot to destroy the Western World’s economy. Both rumors suffered from the facts of economic life for the vast majority of Americans. There didn’t seem to be any point in trying to take over a failing economy and it didn’t seem that there was any need for an Islamic conspiracy when things were going to Hell anyway.

The price of gas continued to increase and the supply of heating oil was once again becoming a major concern all across the Northern States. Inflation was over 10% a year and interest rates were over 20% for all but the most highly favored of borrowers. Unemployment was officially over 15% and growing each month. Bankruptcies and business failures were becoming so common as to be considered routine. A walk through almost any mall would show many empty store fronts.

Depression was the emotional mood of the day for most people. It seemed that the other dominant emotions were inspirational hope by the Ten Points advocates and the anger of deep fear on the part of its opponents. Inspirational hope proved to be by far the stronger lure. “We can do this” became almost a national saying.

It was with this explosive mixture of emotions in the air that Christmas arrived. It was a strange Christmas in many ways. There was not much to celebrate in most homes. The usual stresses of the holidays were often magnified by the loss of jobs and worry about where the next meal was coming from. Churches in Northern cities were having meetings to find warm places for families of their congregations whose own homes could not be heated. Even in large cities the smell of wood smoke was common. The visiting of the elderly became a serious affair since many had already succumbed to hypothermia.

The President was on the television promising better times just ahead. “It’s a Wonderful Life” was being shown far more than usual. And Clark decided to risk a visit home.

------- Thursday, December 23, 2010 back home in Macon -------

“Oh, Clark, it’s so good to see you again.” Lozelle threw her arms around Clark and almost cried from relief.

Clark hugged her and grinned down at her happy face. “It’s good to see you too, Mama.” He put his motorcycle helmet down on the small table in the hallway and took off the leather jacket he was wearing. “It’s good to get out of the cold. I had no idea that riding a cycle in the winter was so cold.”
‘A motorcycle, dear? Why are you doing riding a motorcycle? Did something happen to your car?’

‘No, Mama. But I work for Congressman Frobisher and I can’t be seen as wasting gasoline by driving a car these days. That’s why I took the train to Atlanta and rented the bike. I parked it out by the back door. I hope it’s not in the way there.’

‘That’ll be fine dearest. My, don’t you look handsome and grown up. Somehow I don’t remember you looking this way before you left last summer. What have you been doing with yourself?’

‘I’ve been working at a computer a lot and walking everywhere the rest of the time. I have a three-mile jog to my office each morning and I walk around doing errands and such so it’s about five miles of walking going home. If I jog in, it’s warmer that way.’

‘I suppose that explains why you look so fit. Are you getting enough to eat, dearest?’

‘Mama, I’m fine. Tell me how you are. I’ve hardly heard from you the last five or six weeks. What are you doing these days?’

‘Mostly I’m campaigning for the Ten Points whenever I can,’ Lozelle said flashing Clark the hand gesture of the ten with a grin.

‘Mama! You haven’t! What does Dad say about your doing that?’ he said gripping her upper arms.

‘I don’t think he knows. I’ve been trying to keep him from finding out and he hasn’t said anything about it so I’m sure he doesn’t know yet. I guess it’s only a matter of time before he discovers it, though,’ Lozelle’s head drooped and her face lost its smile.

‘Where is he? Is it okay to talk about it here? Do the servants know?’

‘We had to let most of the servants go. Buddy says it’s just until the economy gets better. We closed off most of the house to keep from heating it and so we really don’t need that many. Anyway, LaShanda knows but she would never betray me.’

‘Is Dad home now or at work?’

‘I guess he’s at work, I haven’t seen him for three days. He works such long hours these days. Lots of days he doesn’t get home until after I’ve gone to bed and he’s up again before I am. The only time we get to talk sometimes is over breakfast. I guess he’s away somewhere on business. I tried calling him at the office but they just say he is out. I think he is hiding from me and I don’t even know why. But tell me how things are going in Washington. Are you doing well?’

‘We’re doing a lot better than I’d expected. We were going to try to coordinate a national movement but it’s sort of gotten away from us. I don’t think we have hardly any control anymore. It seems like each of the other Congressmen and the few Senators who were elected on this platform each have their own campaign back home in support of the idea. We tried to give them some direction but they each seemed to think they should be in charge. It’s mostly just one big babble.’

‘We, here, are rather well organized, I think,’ Lozelle said proudly. ‘We bring in speakers and we have discussion groups. We’re using a lot of the selling techniques for this idea that worked to sell cosmetics and dishware. We have little parties and church groups that meet and discuss the Ten Points. Some of the churches, though, call us bad names. We had one group parading last Sunday in
front of our church with signs saying we were Satan’s church for supporting new money. We went out front with signs saying, well, quoting the Bible, you know, ‘Suffer the little children’ and ‘Even as you have done it unto the least of these’ and ‘Loaves and fishes.’ They got mad but they went away.”

“Good work, Mama. We can’t tell very well how we’re doing but we have picked up several Congressmen due to pressure from their home districts so we figure we must be doing some good. Have you looked at our website? I’m responsible for most of that.”

“I’ve been reading it almost every day. We based a lot of what we’re doing on what you put in there. We especially like the question and answer part where you answer questions that people are likely to have. I’ve been able to stop several hecklers in their tracks with answers you put there.”

“That was Doris’ idea. The hard part was getting the questions. Some of them seem rather odd but they’re all questions that real people have asked Frobisher or…”

There was a crash in the entry way. Clark led Lozelle from the sitting room back to the hall and found Buddy half in and half out of the house lying over the door sill. He was a mess. His clothes were rumpled, his hair was disheveled, and his face bruised. As they bent over him, they heard a car engine rev and a dark shape accelerated down the curving driveway to the street.

“Buddy, Buddy, what’s happened? Are you all right? Oh, Buddy dearest,” by the end of her exclamation Lozelle was almost crooning as she went to her knees and held Buddy’s head and shoulders on her lap.

“I’m home, dear,” Buddy got out with a crooked grin before he closed his eyes with a grimace.

“Dad, what happened? Who did this to you?” Clark said having returned from running down the driveway trying to get a better look at the car.

“Let’s get him inside. We can ask all these questions later, Clark.”

“Right, Mama, I’ll get his head and shoulders and you get his feet after I pick him up some.” Clark took Lozelle’s end of Buddy and with his arms around Buddy’s chest got him into a sitting position and then, with a grunt, was able to get him almost to his feet when Buddy roused enough to help some. Between Lozelle and Clark they managed to lift and steer and half carry him into the sitting room and lay him in one of his lazy boy chairs. Lozelle called for the maid.

“LaShanda, Mr. Minton is home and we’ll need some food. Make something light but nutritious because he’s not feeling well. Oh, and make some hot coffee, too.”

“Dad, can you hear me? Are you injured? Do you hurt anywhere?”

As if by magic, Buddy roused. “What kind of a damn fool question is that? I hurt all over. If I was injured, your moving me like a sack of potatoes would have done me in, you dang fool. And if I couldn’t hear you, what are you asking questions for? What do you have for brains, boy, grits?”

Lozelle looked relieved, “Buddy, he was just worried about you. He’s trying to help you. Do you need a doctor?”

“No I don’t need a doctor. I just need a week in bed. I haven’t slept in three days and I’ve been beaten up several times so I feel like I been playing football on a bad team.”
“Who did this to you, Dad?”

“You should know. It’s your fault I was kidnapped. You and that damned money idea of yours. They thought I was the brains behind the whole thing. If I hadn’t been able to prove I’ve been fighting this thing right from the beginning, they’d probably have killed me.”

“But do you know who they were. The police…”

“They were hired thugs. They never let me see their faces. The police won’t be able to do anything. Besides, they said they’d get Lozelle next time if I went to the police. We’ll leave the police out of this.”

“Well, who hired them then? Do you have any clues as to who’s behind it?”

“They could have been hired by almost anybody. Son, do you have any idea how many toes you’re stepping on with this crazy idea of yours? You got some very powerful people really mad at you.”

“I have some ideas. Organized crime, banking, insurance, even lots of preachers see the end of the gravy train. I guess everybody who thinks that the job they do is worthless or harmful doesn’t like the idea.”

“You think what I do is worthless, boy? You think your Daddy is some kind of monster?”

“Oh no, Dad! I didn’t mean that. I just meant that people who feel like the way they make money is worthless would be opposed to it since they won’t get money for it any more. Soybeans aren’t worthless. They’re good food.”

“Well there’s lots of good people who think this trash you are spreading is dangerous and I’m one of them.”

“I’m sorry to hear that Dad but I can’t help but point out that the men who kidnapped you were hired. They were paid money for what they did. With the Ten Points money that couldn’t have happened. There would have been no way to pay them except to give them goods. Those goods could have been traced right back to the people who gave them.”

“Boy, will you shut up about that crap. I don’t want to hear about it from you.”

“Yes, Clark, let him rest now,” Lozelle said soothingly, hoping to calm Buddy.

“Okay, Mama. I’ll see if I can’t give LaShanda a hand in the kitchen.”

Clark left and Buddy settled down in the chair again with a pained look. Lozelle kneeled beside him with her arm across his chest and her head on his shoulder. She began to cry softly and told Buddy how afraid she had been while he had been gone and how glad she was that he was home to take care of her again.

----------------- Christmas Eve, 2010 ------------------

The next day Clark visited his father in his office where Buddy was trying to find out what had happened to his business while he had been “indisposed.” Buddy’s taste was for dark, massive wood furniture that looked like it had been handed down from the ancestors for several generations and the most modern in desk accessories. Clark was a little hesitant, since he had always been forbidden the
privilege of coming in while Buddy was busy, ever since his father had learned of his intended college major.

“Dad? May I talk to you for a few minutes?”

“Sure, son, what is it?”

“I spent most of the night thinking about our situation. It seems to me that you're just as vulnerable today as you were yesterday when you were in their hands. There's also Mama. They could hurt her or kidnap her next time. Do you have any plans for what to do to protect Mama and yourself?”

“Yes, I do. We're going into hiding.”

“Where?”

“I haven't decided yet. I been thinking about someplace in the mountains but obviously we can't very well use our cabin 'cause they'll know about it. I don't have enough money to just head up there and look for somethin' when we get there.”

“Dad, why don't you come back to DC with me? It's easier to hide in the city than in the country anyway. I can get you an apartment and we can pay cash. It'll be like you just dropped off the face of the Earth. In a month or two the bill will have passed or failed and none of the POM people... uh, that's Physical Object Money people. You know, people against the Ten Points Bill? Anyway, none of them will care about us any more then.”

It took several hours of argument in which Lozelle and LaShanda took a hand, but it was finally decided that they would go to the DC area rather than hide out in the woods. Buddy was still reluctant but the fact that he gave in at all showed that he was really shaken by his experience.

The problem of how to leave without being traced was solved by Lozelle. Much to the surprise of both Buddy and Clark, Lozelle said that the move to DC would be no problem since the “We Can Do This” organization often had to move people without their being traced. Clark, who supposedly was in the inner circle of the movement to pass the Ten Points Law, had no idea that such things were going on. Lozelle let him know that there had been efforts in several cities to stop the support for the law that extended to beatings, arrests on trumped up charges, and, it was rumored, there had even been a couple of killings. The local organizations had come up with various means of moving people about the country without use of common carriers. Buddy and Lozelle left the house lying on the floor in the back of LaShanda's car while Clark went back to Atlanta by motorcycle (following a different route than when he had come) and by train back to DC from there.

Buddy and Lozelle went by 18-wheeler riding in the sleeper cabs of three different rigs. They finally found themselves taking a cab to Clark’s neighborhood, getting out at a seedy hotel just a few blocks from his apartment about 10:00 on a cold but sunny Tuesday morning. They waited in the coffee shop which gave a good view of the street until they saw Clark walk past the window. Then they paid their bill and left by a side door at which Clark, now driving his car, picked them up.

“How are you doing, Mom? You look tired.” Clark asked.

“I want a bath and a nap but I think I’ll be fine after that. It’s all very exciting, you know.”

“Have you got us a place to live yet son?” Buddy asked.
“Well, I have a place for you to spend the night, at least. That'll give us some time.”

The place turned out to be the apartment of Rose Miller, one of the top organizers of local support for the Ten Points Bill. Rose’s husband was adamantly opposed to the new money in part because his job within the government (the Federal Trade Commission) would become meaningless with the new money. In an effort to keep peace in the family, Rose chose to hide her activities in support of the Ten Points Bill. Thus she had leased an apartment in the District from which to conduct her campaign.

Rose and Lozelle hit it off right from the beginning. It wasn’t long before Buddy felt like the odd man out as Lozelle and Rose got deep into a discussion of strategies. But at least it meant that there would be no question whether Buddy and Lozelle would have a place to live while hiding in DC.

--------------- Wednesday, March 9, 2011 ---------------

The Ten Points Bill was being brought before the House for a vote. Interest in the bill meant that the events were being followed closely by all the networks that carried news. Cameras were everywhere, both inside the Capital building and outside, where the crowds were huge. Both sides had tried to rally the troops, so to speak, but the numbers favoring the bill were far larger than those opposed. Police lines surrounded the Houses of Congress but there were no police between the POMists and the New Money supporters.

There were insults traded and things were threatening to get out of hand when what would later be known as the Granny Brigade formed up, facing the POMists most aggressive section, mostly young toughs hired to start trouble hoping to show that the New Money faction were really violent revolutionaries.

The police had been alerted that the New Money people would probably try to storm the Capital and that they should be repulsed even if it meant shooting into the crowd. The grandmothers, dressed in skirts and with silver (and sometimes blue) hair blowing in the breeze, advanced upon the toughs at a slow walk. At first the toughs gave a little ground. Then one lost his head and pushed one of the ladies. She fell and the others began screaming and waving their arms. A few canes lashed out and more than one can of mace was discharged. Almost before one could think, the toughs were attacking the grandmothers.

Naturally, this was being shown on TV and the police guarding the Capital were front line spectators. But not for long. They broke ranks and charged the mob. The police being armed with shields and clubs, the toughs had little chance. But some toughs were more heavily armed than others and some had guns. Shots were fired and several people went down from bullets.

Meanwhile, the crowd of New Money supporters seized their opportunity and surged to the very doors of the Capital building and through. The quiet halls of Congress, where only lobbyists and power brokers disturbed the stillness, were invaded by a horde of middle aged women and their mothers. They began chanting “Ten Points” and “We can do this!”

The bill never reached a vote that day but it was the turning point of the campaign. The video of young toughs attacking grandmothers on the street and then shooting at the police was played again and again on the nation’s TV screens. When the news broke that the toughs had been hired by organized crime elements to oppose the bill's passage, it only added fuel to the groundswell of support.

-------- Thursday, March 10, 2011 --------
Clark visited his mother in the hospital where she was recovering from a broken arm and a concussion. Her recently acquired friend, Rose, was already there.

“Come on in, Clark. Your mother’s awake now.”

Clark approached the bed on which his mother lay resting, her head bandaged and left arm in a cast over the elbow.

“Mama, why did you do it?”

“Son, I couldn’t ask other women to do what I was unwilling to do myself. Someone had to be willing to get out front. At least I’m better off than some of the others. Three of us died. Others will never fully recover from their injuries. I came out of this OK except for a headache and this funny arm. I’ll be fine. You just do your part.”

“Clark,” Rose put in, “this putting the grandmothers in the front lines was your mother’s idea. She did the networking and organizing that got them assembled and to the crucial part of the crowd. She kept their courage up and led by example. You should be terribly proud of her.”

“Rose I am proud of her but it still hurts me to see her like this. I would never have let her do it if I had known.”

“Why do you think I didn’t tell you before, Clark?”

“You didn’t tell Dad either, did you, Mama? Dad was in the POMists part of the crowd. He’s OK but he’s pretty shaken. Would you like to see him? He’s just outside.”

“Of course I would. Why didn’t he come in with you?”

“He’s got some crazy idea that you’ll be angry with him.”

“You’d better let me see him alone. Come back, if you can, in about half an hour.”

“OK, Mama,” Clark said as he kissed her cheek.

He and Rose left the room and in a couple of minutes Buddy’s head appeared around the corner of the door. “Honey, is it OK for me to come in?”

“It’s always all right for you to come and see me, dearest” Lozelle said holding out her good arm to welcome him. “Come give me a kiss and sit with me for a while.” She had no idea how the arm lifted in welcome emphasized the other arm’s injury. She also had no idea how her smile, meant to lift his spirits, looked coming from under the bandages that covered most of her forehead and one side of her face.

Buddy was sorely aware of her condition. He had not been in the POMist part of the crowd that attacked the Granny Brigade but he had been able to see it from about a hundred yards away. He had known that Lozelle was with that part of the Ten Points activists over his strong objections. He had seen the conflict start but had not been able to tell which grey-haired woman was Lozelle.

Buddy had been intending, at times, to give Lozelle an angry lecture. At other times all he could think about was how he could have lost her. He didn’t know whether he wanted to cry or yell or curl up into
a ball and pull his jacket over his head. He was embarrassed and proud and scared and several other things all at once. For a time after he kissed the visible part of Lozelle’s forehead Buddy just sat and looked at her. His heart ached and he wanted to enfold her in his arms but he was afraid he would hurt her. Finally, he leaned forward and cupped her right cheek with his left hand and then felt a tear running down his own cheek. Lozelle’s face blurred and he felt rather than saw her hand go to the back of his head and pull him close.

Finally Buddy lifted his head and gave Lozelle a small, watery smile and said,” Well, old girl, we really made a mess of things that time, didn’t we?"

“Dearest, the mess was already there, we just fell into it, that’s all,” she smiled back at him.

“You do know, don’t you, that I had nothing to do with that goon squad that attacked you?”

“Yes, Buddy, I can’t believe that you would have anything to do with people like that. But some of the POMists are running scared and they’ll stoop to anything. We just gave them the opportunity to show that there are no limits to what they’ll do to protect their interests. Organized criminals in particular, know there’s no way to continue their illegal activities without currency. They have to have a physical object money if they’re to run their nasty businesses."

“I know, I know. You don’t have to be on your soapbox with me,” Buddy said a little defensively.

“Soapbox or not, you know it’s true. Lots of the opposition to the Ten Points comes from people who are afraid they can’t keep cheating if we win.”

“OK. But let’s not talk about it any more.”

“If you want, darling. But I warn you that everyone else is going to be talking about it so you’d better think of what you want to say when they bring it up. I can’t leave the movement now. Not after we’re so close to success. Not after three women who trusted me are now dead because of what I asked them to do. I can’t let their sacrifice be in vain.”

“Is this movement of yours worth the three lives it’s taken? Is it worth the suffering you and I have been put through?” Buddy’s bitter questions revealed a revival of spirit with Lozelle’s obvious forgiveness.

“Oh my darling, it’s worth my life and yours and even Clark’s life. Don’t think me an unnatural wife and mother because I feel this way. I know wives and mothers are supposed to be willing to have any number of other people suffer and die for the comfort of their loved ones. But we’re talking millions of deaths and billions suffering. Even a wife and mother has second thoughts when faced with those numbers of people."

Lozelle’s vehemence, even as she cupped his cheek with her free hand, warned Buddy that perhaps he didn’t really want to argue the point just now.

His own confidence shattered, he realized in that moment that Lozelle really meant what she said. The emotion in her voice, though quiet, seemed unshakable to Buddy. For someone who had been through what she had suffered to be ready to do it again without hesitation was almost frightening to Buddy, especially in someone whom he had always considered weak and useless except in bed and as an ornament.
As Buddy thought back to the time leading up to the clash outside Congress, he recalled that Lozelle had seemed to be often in meetings which Buddy had considered purely social but which in retrospect must have been organizational. True, the women had often brought food and the men had dressed informally, but perhaps that was just cover. Buddy had avoided the meetings or parties as he had called them. But in what little he had seen of them Lozelle had at first been on the periphery but by the end it seemed that almost everyone's comments had been directed toward her or at least she had been glanced at for approval. Buddy also remembered that Lozelle's voice, which had always before seemed to end every statement with an upward inflection as if she were asking if talking were all right... and if the listener agreed with what she had to say, had lost that affectation and now seemed confident and even, at times, authoritative.

This was not the woman he had married some 25 years ago but it was certainly someone he had to respect. He wondered if she would continue to defer to him. Certainly she had not deferred on the Ten Points Bill and this whole new money thing. He had made his own position abundantly clear. She must have known it. Yet she went on quietly working to bring about that which he opposed. In fact, if he could believe the news broadcasts, the bill was as good as passed and the only question remaining was if it would gain the President's signature. According to those broadcasts one of the key factors, when the issue hung in the balance, was Lozelle's Granny Brigade.

Buddy had decided to go back to his business and ignore politics. If he could, he would bring Lozelle with him. If not, he would have to go alone. In these times there would be nothing left of his business if he wasn't there to hold it together and he couldn't see someone as strong as Lozelle staying with him if he were not also successful.
Chapter Seven: Home Life

_In which Niall has a nightmare, wakes up, and has a nightmare and breakfast._

So warm and soft. “How can women be so good to touch?” Niall wondered stroking her side then bringing his hand up to caress her face.

“No, Niall. Not now. I’m sure she’s listening.”

“Come on Kathy, Bree’s fast asleep.”

“Not Brianna, our nosy neighbor.”

“She won’t hear us.”

“But I just know she’s listening for us. Please Niall. Besides we have to get up. It’s a school day for Brianna.”

Niall’s passion hated taking no for an answer but Katherine was already out of the bed. Niall was awakening Brianna “Get up, get up, you have to go to school.”

“I don’t want to go to school. It’s boring there and teacher doesn’t like me. She won’t let me read what I want and she makes me color inside the lines.”

“You have to go to school. Now get up.” Niall went out the door and found himself on the street. It was a poor neighborhood. Everything looked grimy. Even the dead dog looked like it had been there for days since it had been smashed very flat by the passage of many wheels over the hairy shape. Niall had to get to work. It was somewhere around here or was it over there where the white buildings were? He walked toward the buildings, passing a store with some television monitors in the window. Niall had the feeling that they were looking at him, so he started to cross the street in the middle of the block, there being no cars coming. As he stepped off the curb he heard, “Jaywalking. Stop where you are and get back on the curb,” in a loud, authoritative but impersonal voice. He stopped, feeling a little fear and looked around. The TV sets in the window glared at him and the voice from a speaker he hadn’t noticed said, “Get out of the street now!” in that emotionless voice again. Niall stepped up on the curb again. The TV screens were once again a flat, shiny black.

“This is silly,” Niall thought, turned and started across the street once again.

“Stop now. That is not permitted. Return to the curb.”

“All right, come with me.”

“But officer, I didn’t do anything.”

“You were disobeying the computer. Get in the car.”

“Where are you taking me?”

“I’m just giving you your freedom.”
“But I’m already free.”

“You are free to obey the computer but you were not obeying; therefore, you are not free. I will make you obey the computer, and then you will be free.”

“Get out of the car, now.”

“Where are we?”

“This is where you will be held. Get in the box.”

“I’m hungry and thirsty. Can you give me something to eat and water to drink?”

“Here hold this pebble in your mouth.”

“I don’t want a pebble. I want food. I want water. I want to take a bath.”

Niall’s body began to itch, especially his scalp. He felt his sores hurting. His feet were bare and filthy. His clothes, rags. Worse, he had to go to the bathroom. Where was the can? Had they forgotten to bring it back? Did he have to go in the corner again? “But she’s watching I can’t go in the corner. She’ll see me. Everybody will laugh at me.”

“Stop watching me. Leave me alone! Let me out!”

“May I help you? What’s wrong? Are you all right?”

Niall began to awaken. His body was drenched in sweat and trembling. He really did have to go to the bathroom but he was no longer in the box but the somewhat plain guest bedroom at Brianna’s apartment. The TV on the wall was asking, “Is there anything I can do to help you? Are you in pain?”

“No, no. It was just a nightmare. I’m fine.”

The room was lit by the bright lettering on the TV screen showing the time 5:30 A.M. and in smaller letters the indoor and outdoor temperatures. The brightness began to fade, leaving the room in relative darkness but Niall swung both legs over the side of the bed and the room lights came on to a low level so he could easily see his slippers and the furniture. Niall sat on the edge of the bed and waited for his heart to slow somewhat. Then he went to the bathroom and sat on the toilet to relieve himself (with nobody watching, thank God) and did some thinking about what he’d learned the night before.

It was clear that somebody was in total control of everything that was happening. It was a steel hand in a velvet glove and though the velvet was soft, he knew the steel hand was inexorable. Images flashed in his mind, the constant monitoring of everyone’s activities and the absolute control of work through that coordinator business. He still didn’t know what a coordinator was but it sounded ominous. The obviously secret police aspect of checking up on everybody through their friends, everything was clearly set up to totally control a population in a very efficient way. Some genius was obviously at work here. Probably some secret organization was behind it all. It sounded like paranoid ravings to him even as he thought it, but how else could you explain the sweeping changes. Nothing this big and well-organized could come about by accident. It had to be by design.

But what could he do about it? Both Tony and Brianna seemed to like their life just fine or at least they were tolerating it. He didn’t quite know what to think about Tony. He just didn’t add up right. Here
he was, living mostly on the dole, on handouts, with his wife having to cut corners just to buy paints and yet he seemed happy to go off each day to the library and mess around with the books. But maybe he wasn’t looking at books. Maybe he was doing all his research on the computer. Of course that way the computer knew just where he was and everything he was doing. Tony seemed intelligent enough. Why was he content to have his family living in relative poverty?

Maybe he really wasn’t doing what he told his wife he was doing. Maybe that reluctance to let her read his work was just a cover for almost never writing anything. Maybe he was really working for the State in some secret capacity. But doing what? Undercover work? Maybe he wasn’t at the library at all.

On the other hand his daughter seemed to genuinely love Tony and the kids certainly enjoyed his company.

Damn. There was no certainty about anyone. He couldn’t even communicate with his daughter without that computer overhearing. Sure they said it only told other people what you gave it permission to tell them but he didn’t believe that for a moment. What could he do?

‘First I need more information,’ Niall thought, ‘but what do I need to know? I need to know the goals of this organization that runs things. I need to know whether Brianna’s family is important enough to them that they’ll stop us from leaving the country. I need to know what its weaknesses are. There are so many things I need to know.’

‘No, first I need breakfast,’ he thought as his stomach growled. It was used to Niall’s eating on London time. He finished in the bathroom, returned to the bedroom, consciously not looking at the TV screen, and opened the bedroom window curtains to catch dawn brightening the Eastern sky while he got dressed. At least I don’t have to wear those white things, he groused. Then he went to the kitchen. The refrigerator had a few staples and a rather small freezer. Certainly there wasn’t enough food there for everyone to have breakfast. He decided to go to the Good-n-Quick.

He opened the apartment door and found a man with a hand truck putting a box down next to the door. From the looks of the hall he was putting similar boxes in front of most of the apartments.

“Good morning, Mr. Campbell,” he said. “Up early I see. I didn’t know what you liked for breakfast so I just put in an assortment of things. If you’ll just mark what you want for tomorrow on the order form I’ll see that you get it.”

“Good morning. Ah, who are you?” Niall managed.

“Oh, sorry, I’m Herbert Watkins, just call me Herb,” the man said holding out his hand. “I work for the Ace Milk Company. Of course we do a lot more than milk these days,” and laughed.

Niall shook hands without thinking and asked, “How did you know I was here? How did you know my name?”

“Your daughter told us you were coming, she just didn’t know when. Naturally, when one of the guys saw you at Good-n-Quick last night he told me that you’d arrived. So of course I put some stuff in the box for you.”

“Well, thanks, that’ll save me a trip to Good-n-Quick,” Niall conceded.

“I’ll be back about 10:00 to pick up the empties so please have your order ready by then.”
“Oh yeah, right, no problem,” Niall said and the man went on down the hall.

Niall took the box into the kitchen and unloaded it into the refrigerator and the cabinets. The box was insulated and rather light. On the inside of the hinged lid it had a plastic order form with a variety of items on it that could be marked along with the quantity desired. A small pencil-like instrument was attached next to the form. Niall used it to mark the things he wanted for breakfast the next morning. He’d have to ask Brianna if she were eating in or out tomorrow. There seemed to be plenty of food in the box for the five of them to have lunch or dinner but not both.

By the time he’d put everything away, Brianna came in wearing a bathrobe (very plain, so probably "standard").

“Dad, thanks, but I didn’t want you to have to do all this.”

“It’s OK. Now I know where everything is,” he replied.

“What would you like me to fix you for breakfast?”

“Whatever you’re having. After living with the locals in the Middle East for so long everything looks good.”

Brianna began to move about the small kitchen getting breakfast organized with the occasional small yawn. After a moment Niall asked, “What does it cost you to have the food delivered to the door this way? How can you and your neighbors afford this kind of service?”

“We don’t pay anything for it. It’s all standard food. They want us to use their food, so they make it really convenient. If they didn’t deliver, we’d probably go to one of the fast food places more often instead of the grocery. It’s just a way of competing for our business.”

“But surely it costs a lot more to deliver food to the door every day.”

“No really. This apartment complex has a lot of people living here so the truck can be fully loaded each time it comes here. Plus the people are living rather close together so Mr. Watkins doesn’t have to go far with each hand truck load. And he’s finished in a couple of hours and he and the truck have time for other work. He doesn’t get paid a lot for what he does but he gets paid rather quickly since we get the benefit of what he does within a couple of hours. Of course in the winter they also give us an emergency box. You know, in case we get a bad storm and they can’t make deliveries for several days? Those boxes get stored in the basement until we need them.”

“But the expense to the company has to be more.”

“No dad, it’s actually less. This way they have far less food to put on the shelves and the inventory is easier to keep track of. There’s far less damage to the food from dropped bottles and such. The store is a lot smaller since far less food passes through it. You don’t have to have people manning the checkout lines for all this food since it bypasses the checkout line. Also, you know exactly how much of each kind of food you need to have on hand and when. It makes everything so predictable.

“If their food starts being of low quality, we just go out to eat more and request less food to be delivered. Pretty quickly they get the idea and improve the quality or forgo a lot of pay. It’s basic business practices, dad.”
Yes, Niall thought and it gives them far more control over you. If there’s unrest in the masses it’s so easy to cut off the food. What a trap. You wouldn’t even need to send in the riot police.

“What are your plans today?” Niall asked.

“Oh, we’re flexible. If you want to sit around and rest up from your trip we can just do our regular routine. If you want to take a tour of the city we can do that, too. It’s been quite a while since I took the kids on an outing. There are lots of things we can do.”

“What about the kids’ school? This is a school day isn’t it?”

“Any day we want is a school day. We home-school.” Brianna said proudly.

“You what?”

“Home-school. Teach the kids ourselves at home. It’s great. We go at our own pace and the curriculum is individualized. The kids don’t even realize it’s school half the time. They just follow their interests.”

“But you can’t do that to them. They need a real education in a school. Home-schooling is for religious nuts and defective kids.” Niall had gone through enough worrying and now this. He was near the end of his rope. It seemed like everything had changed while he had been away. There were no more constants.

“Come on, dad. Did those kids look defective to you? Do you think we’re religious nuts?” Brianna said half laughing.

“But how are they going to learn to get along with their peers if they aren’t in school? How are they going to learn to work with others? It’s unnatural to keep them alone with you all day. They’ll never learn to be independent. They’ll always be whining loners.”

“Dad, how do you think kids were reared on the frontier? How was Lincoln educated? What about Benjamin Franklin? They seemed to do all right.”

“Yeah, well they didn’t have any choice, did they? There’s no way you can do as good a job educating these kids as a real teacher in a real school.”

“Oh, really? Who knows them better than I do? Who loves them more than I do? Who knows how they think better than I do? Answer me that.” Brianna, her motherly pride hurt, was getting a little angry herself.

“Well, what about teacher training. Have you had any education courses?”

“No. Did Socrates have any education courses? I’ve been teaching the children since they were born. John is doing just fine with reading and math and geography and so forth. The proof is in the pudding. What makes you think a school teacher could have done better?”

“They not only are taught how to teach, they have textbooks and resources you just can’t afford. And schools have specialists that know more about their subjects than you ever could. It’s just better in school.”
“We can get any textbook I want, dad. They don’t cost us anything. And if there’s something I don’t know we can always find information about it on the aide, uh, the computer.”

“Yeah, the computer. I don’t want my grandchildren educated by any computer. I want them educated right and that means in a school by real human teachers.”

“You can want all you like but they’re my kids and I’ll make the decisions about their education. You can reconcile yourself to that or not, but that’s how it’s going to be.” Brianna was nose to nose with him, her face flushed, her hands making fists at her sides.

“Mommy, mommy, what are you yelling about? Why are you fighting with Granddad?” little Lora came running in and threw her arms around her mother.

“We were just discussing how to help you become the most wonderful woman in the world, weren’t we, dad.”

Niall’s anger was rapidly ebbing and he smiled down at Lora and said, “Honey, we’re just trying to decide what’s best for you.”

“Mommy’s best for me,” Lora said, went over to the table, and climbed up on a chair. “I want French toast, Mommy.”

Niall and Brianna looked at each other and knew the argument would continue later.
“Grandmothers! They let a bunch of stinking grandmothers buffalo them.”

“Yeah, well it’s done now. That damn bill is on my desk and it won’t go away just because we have contempt for Congress. Now what are we going to do about it?”

“Mr. President, I think you can safely veto it in a month or so. That’ll give people time to forget about that debacle and realize that pipe dreams won’t pay the bills.”

There was a general round of confirmatory grunts from most of the dozen or so men seated around the large table.

“Mr. President, if I may make a few points?” the Secretary of Labor said lifting his hand.

“Make away, Sam. Remind me of how much trouble we have.”

“Well, sir, we’ve had over 100,000 people die this winter from lack of heat and most of them were elderly. Our unemployment is over 15% and climbing. Inflation is about 20% since the first of the year. Our imports of oil are down to just 15% of our total used from over 50%. If I’m not mistaken, we haven’t been able to borrow from the World Bank or anywhere else for over a month. If we let things ride without some indication that we have a solution for these problems, you and the party can kiss any chances of re-election goodbye. I say we have no choice but to sign this bill if only to give people hope.”

By the time the Secretary had finished he was sweating even though the room was rather too cool to be comfortable. As part of the White House plan to show the people that the President was sharing their problems, the thermostat was set at only 60 degrees. The grim and even angry faces of some of the other officials around the table reflected their bitterness that Labor had mentioned the elephant in the living room.

“What good does it do to give them hope with this fairy tale 'Ten Points' thing when it won’t work and if we sign they’ll forget that we opposed it and blame us for the failure?” The Secretary of the Treasury was not one to suffer fools gladly.

“Wait, Sam, maybe he has a point here,” the Attorney General said. “This money thing can’t take effect until they’ve trained a bunch of people to run it, right? So that’s going to take at least a couple of years. By then we’ll be reelected as the champions of hope. Whenever someone complains about a bill or some expedient we take to get the economy going again, we can say it’s just a stopgap measure to get us through until the transition to the new money. Then when the new money fails, as it is sure to do, the crisis will be over and we can go back to real money again with some chance to succeed.”

“There’s some merit to that,” the Secretary of State put in. “Look what this 'Ten Points' thing does to the international situation. It won’t make OPEC sell us oil but it pretty much cancels the debts we’ve run up. If the Government doesn’t have money, then it can’t pay money.”

“Why would anybody loan us money if they know we can’t pay them back?” Treasury barked.
“Are they loaning us anything now?” State shot back.

“Gentlemen calm down,” the President admonished. “Sam, I know the German economy almost ceased to exist back after World War I when the government printed more and more money to pay the bills. But couldn’t we do something like that in a more subtle way to pay the bills without the inflation eating us alive?”

Labor snorted and said, “It’s already eating us alive. Our economy is about to crash, gentlemen, unless we do something about it and soon.”

“What about fixing prices?” asked the Secretary of Education.

“We’ll have the black market siphoning off all the goods people have to have and the inflation will still be there,” Treasury said contemptuously.

“We’ll have to go to rationing like they did back during World War II. There’ll be a black market and theft and so on but at least we may be able to keep enough of the necessities under control to prevent chaos,” Labor said.

“You can’t control necessities unless you nationalize almost all the major industries and that’s Socialism at best. How are you going to keep the lid on?” Treasury asked.

“Actually, we can control the major industries relatively easily,” put in the Secretary of Homeland Security. “We have some tools in place that let us watch them pretty closely. I took the initiative to prepare for just such a situation as we have here. I think I can guarantee that there won’t be any problems with nationalizing that we can’t handle.”

“What do you mean, ‘We have some tools in place’?” Labor said.

“It’s simple. We now have the computer capacity to monitor all the airports, bus stations and such so we know who is going where as soon as they book their flights and we watch them board and deplane. We know what they have in their luggage and we know where they sleep and with whom in the hotels. That part was easy. The harder part was to extend this surveillance to their offices. They’re more security conscious there. But as you all know, every computer bought in the last two years has some extra features that their owners probably don’t know about. We have almost total penetration of every significant office in the US and much of the rest of the world. I can let you know what’s being planned in every major company and most minor companies in the U.S. What you don’t know,” Homeland looked briefly at the President and received a small nod in return, “is that we now have the computer resources to actually use all the data that comes in. We can actually follow individuals with the computer, flagging suspicious behavior for human review. If anybody tries to get out of line, we’ll know about it and can take steps to squash them. They won’t know how we do it but it’ll get done.”

Homeland leaned back in his chair with a satisfied expression on his face as he watched the various Secretaries realize that they had computers in their offices which had been bought within the last two years. Some of their faces were quite revealing. ‘That’ll bring them around,’ he thought. ‘What I didn’t tell them was that within six months every television, car, and major appliance will also have those features and the television will be watching you more than you watch it.’ There were even a few things the President didn’t know about that Homeland thought were better kept from him for the time being.
After a few minutes of general consternation and red faces, the meeting came to order.

“Given that we can ration the necessities, I say we can keep things going for at least the two years until the new money kicks in,” Labor said. “Then give it no more than six months to fail and we go back to real money. People will have to accept the stringent measures we’ll have to take to get out of the chaos of the new money. By then the international situation may have calmed down. With the way the world’s economies are staggering I think OPEC will want us as a market again by then. What do you think?”

“I say we have little choice. People would never accept the belt tightening we’ll have to endure without the promise of something better soon. This ‘Ten Points’ thing is really a godsend in disguise,” the Attorney General said calmly.

Discussion continued for over an hour thereafter but in the absence of any better suggestions it was decided to wait a couple of weeks to see if support for the Ten Points died down and, if it did not, then the President would sign the bill.

---------------------- Same day ----------------------

“Clark, you must be feeling pretty smug. Mr. Frobisher was very complimentary about your part in getting the Ten Points Bill passed.”

“I am happy that it passed but it seems like I did hardly anything at all. I mean, you did all the hard work and suffered a broken arm and all to get Congress to pass the bill. And I have no idea why the President signed it when we all knew he was opposed to it from the beginning. All I did was play with the computer a little.”

“Well, as your mother, I say I am very proud of all you did to make it work.”

“We still have to set up a payer organization and train people for that. We have to get the computer programs to keep track of the money and - well, there are just a million things left to do. But what are you going to do now that the bill has passed?”

“I’m going to go help your father get his business back on track. He says he needs me. Can you believe that, Clark? He wants me to help him in his business.” Lozelle still couldn’t get over how Buddy’s attitude toward her had changed. Before he had seemed to take her for granted but now, well she didn’t quite know how he felt about her. He even seemed to be a little afraid of her sometimes, but very appreciative. Well, it was going to be another challenge but then her mother had warned her that life with Buddy would be challenging.
Chapter Nine: Tourist

In which Niall sees some sights and begins to learn about Payers.

After breakfast, Tony left for the “library”, and Brianna organized the kids for a tour of the city to show Niall how things had changed since he’d last been there. The kids were excited and John insisted that he could tell his granddad all about the best things to see. Living near Washington, D.C., they had been to a number of the museums and the monuments on field trips before but such trips never failed to be a treat for them.

As they were going down in the elevator Niall had a thought, “How are we going to get around? Have you got a car?”

“No car. We always take the bus. The bus and a little walking always gets us where we need to go,” Brianna said.

“How about if I rent one?”

“That would cost you a lot, plus the hassle and then we’d have to spend a lot of time looking for parking places. It just isn’t worth it. We go places on the bus all the time. It’s easy.”

So they waited at the bus stop in front of the building. Sure enough, within a couple of minutes a bus pulled up.

“Is this our bus?” Niall asked.

John said, “They all go down town eventually. This is one of the express buses. It’ll take us only about 30 minutes to get to the capital buildings if that’s what you want to see.”

“He’s right. We should take this one.”

They got on the bus and a couple of people moved so they could sit together. There didn’t seem to be any Payers on this bus. Everybody was wearing at least one thing that looked like a luxury. Niall was surprised to notice that it was getting so he could pick a payer out of a group almost without thinking about it. He also noticed that there was no charge to ride the bus.

“Is everything free or is it just my imagination?” he asked no one in particular.

John said, “Lots of things are luxuries or have a luxury form. Most food’s free but some foods are luxury items. But if it’s something that helps you work, like riding the bus to work, that’ll most likely be free. Dad says that it used to be that everybody drove cars to work but that when the transition came, people started riding the bus more so they could save their money for the better luxuries.”

“Don’t forget that there was a huge gas shortage around the time of the transition,” Brianna added. “A lot of people couldn’t get gas for their cars so they had to ride the bus. Now that the shortage is over, people have found that they want to spend their money on other things instead of supporting their cars. They found out how really expensive a car is to run when they discovered that it was their biggest expense every month.”

“I’ll bet the price of gas went through the roof,” Niall commented.
“It got so bad before the transition that the government was rationing the gas; after the transition gas just sort of rationed itself. And, of course the price hasn’t changed since the transition.”

“How does gas ration itself?” Niall asked with disbelief obvious in his expression.

“It was the gas stations and the refineries and the distributors. They realized that if they sold gas to people for whom gas was just a luxury we’d run out of gas sooner so they only gave gas to people who were using it to do things that we really needed done. Bus drivers could get gas, for example, because people needed to get to work. But car owners had the choice of riding the bus instead, so they didn’t get gas. Also, lots of people found that they could do their jobs from home at least some days and didn’t commute every day. Lots of other people moved closer to where they worked at least temporarily. It was like rationing but there was no central authority saying who would get gas and who wouldn’t. It was up to every individual gas station owner. They each made their own decisions. And since the petroleum industry was making all their records public so everybody could see how much gas and oil we had and how it was being distributed and how much we used each day and what we had coming in from abroad, we could all see what a difference our efforts were making. In a lot of ways it was rather exciting.”

Niall thought, ‘No central authority my foot. I’ll bet government rationing was continued, they just called it something else.’

“It seemed like everyone was pulling together,” Brianna continued awash in nostalgia. “People found that by riding the bus or train and staying home more they spent far less on gas. We also found that we could produce all sorts of things without using petroleum. Corn farmers were supplementing their gasoline with alcohol, for example. These days, of course, we convert almost any organic material to natural gas and oil so we use very little petroleum. They say that within a few years we won’t be pumping any oil since we already have plenty of organic material available to just keep recycling it for the oil we need. We also don’t have a garbage problem any more. We just dump everything into the recycling bins and it goes to the TDP plants to be made into oil and fertilizer and such.”

“TDP plants? What are they?” Niall asked.

“I know, I know” Lora piped up. Trips are exciting but it’s more fun when Mommy pays attention to her best girl.”TDP makes gas.”

“I know,” said John with an air of superiority. “TDP is the thermal conversion process, also known as thermal depolymerization. They use heat and pressure to break big molecules into small ones. They keep the process going by burning the gas that comes out.”

“Yes,” said his mother. “Those landfills, garbage dumps and sewage treatment plants turned out to be full of things we could make into oil. For a while there it was as if everybody was going to get rich building those TDP plants. They sprouted up all over the country. They even put biohazard hospital wastes into those things and the result comes out absolutely sterile.”

“And,” John broke in. “We also get a lot of our electricity from burning the gas. And the water that comes out is sterile so we don’t have pollution from our garbage any more.”

‘It’s a family curse,’ Niall thought. ‘They all want to give me lectures.’
By this time, the bus had left the poor neighborhood with its large apartments and one could see the
top of the Washington Monument in the distance. As they approached the bridge, the number of
buses had increased so that almost all the traffic was trucks and buses with the occasional taxi.

“Dad,” Brianna said, “would you rather ride the bus around to sightsee or get out and walk? Lora can’t
walk a long way but if you’d like to walk we can get a stroller for her and push her.”

Niall, remembering Washington as he had known it, didn’t want to ride through some of the bad
neighborhoods and have derelicts and drug addicts get on the bus with them. “Let’s get out and walk
around the capital buildings like the other tourists.”

When the bus pulled into its next stop, they trooped off and John said, “Let’s go to the Smithsonian
first.”

“No, I want to see the dinosaurs,” Lora pleaded.

“This trip is for Granddad,” Brianna pointed out. “Let’s see what he wants to see.”

As they walked past one of the huge office buildings that had been built for Congressional staff, Niall
noticed that it had been converted into a hotel. This surprised him.

“What did they do with the people who worked in those offices?” he asked.

“Most of them moved away when their jobs ended,” Brianna said.

“You mean they got fired?” Niall was incredulous.

“No,” said Brianna. “They just didn’t make enough money at what they were doing and went other
places where they could make more money. Remember that this town was mainly for running the
government. There are a few government agencies left like the Census Bureau. I think they still have
their original offices. DC still has some colleges and a few military bases and a lot of tourists still
come, but for a time there it looked like it would just dry up and blow away.”

“Where did they move the government?”

“Most of it didn’t move at all. It just ceased to exist. They didn’t have to enforce business regulations
any more. There was no more welfare system. Almost the only laws that are left are State laws for
things like marriage and crimes like stealing and assault. We even have a lot fewer things that are
Crimes. Oh, you still get arrested if you hurt someone or do something bad to a child. If you destroy
something that doesn’t belong to you, it’s a crime. But if you want to gamble or take recreational
drugs like alcohol, it isn’t against the law. And you can run your business any way you want. Of
course you won’t make any money if you’re hurting people or making their lives unpleasant.”

‘A lot fewer things that are crimes,’ Niall thought, ‘I’ll bet they just don’t bother with trials and such. Off
to prison or whatever and nobody even knows about it. That’s the way to reduce the crime statistics.’

“The biggest business here now is coordinating international trade.”

“So the government runs international trade?”
“Oh, no. About all they have to do with that is gathering information from our embassies in other countries. They make it available to our traders so they'll have as much information as possible. The traders are given all sorts of things to exchange with other nations and businesses.”

“What?”

“Sorry. Let me start that one over. You see, we want things from other nations and so we have to trade for them. So far, so good?”

“Yeah, that’s obvious.”

“So since we have no money of our own (for all practical purposes) we have to trade by barter,” Brianna explained.

“Barter is too inefficient,” Niall said. “That’s why a good money is necessary to a good economy. Remember how Germany suffered in the 1920s from incredible inflation? They fell back on barter and the economy almost collapsed.”

“But, Dad, when you have the resources of a whole nation and you’re dealing with huge quantities, barter is just as efficient as trade using money. Also, it doesn’t matter how the economy of your trading partner is doing, you can still trade, whether they have money or not and whether it’s suffering from inflation or not. Remember when Brazil had that 1000% per week inflation? It didn’t affect any of our trades with them. We still wanted their products and they still wanted ours. In effect, we were saying to them ‘So long as you produce things we want, we’ll give you things you want, so keep producing.’ This let them continue to work and produce knowing that they’d be getting paid in goods.”

“I wasn’t exactly reading the newspapers during that crisis so I can’t say I remember what happened.” said Niall. “But where do these international traders get the goods to trade?”

“People give them stuff to trade.”

“In exchange for what? Nobody gives something for nothing unless they’re forced to.”

“In exchange for money. The Payers find out what’s done with the stuff we got in exchange for our goods and when we use or consume that stuff, those who supplied the traders get paid.”

“But why in the world would somebody produce something and just give it to one of the traders and hope that he’d make a good trade? It might take months before anything came back so you could get paid.”

“Dad, why did companies in the old days hire salesmen? Didn’t those companies give their products to those salesmen and hope the salesmen would return with money? That’s what the international traders or ITs are, they’re salesmen for all the people who give them things. They’re just salesmen. It would be really hard for every producer to find and develop a foreign market for themselves. So they ask the ITs to do it for them. ITs are really experts in what they do. They’re very good at negotiating and they have all this information, like satellite images and such. And they help each other. You really can make a lot more money by giving your products to an IT than you can by trying to trade them yourself.”

“But how do you know how much you’ll get paid? They might just take the stuff and leave you flat,” Niall pointed out.
“How did any business know how much profit it was going to get in the old days? They didn’t know. They just had to do the best they could and hope for the best.”

“But what if an IT just took the goods and ran off with them?” Niall was determined to show it wouldn’t work. Just why he wasn’t sure, especially given that it was rather obvious that it already was working.

“Reputation, Dad. If they did that no one would give them more stuff. They get a lot of money for being good traders and that money would be cut off. If they just left the country, all the money that they would get for trades they had made previously would be unavailable. They have everything to lose and nothing to gain by running off.

“Look, basically the ITS find out what other people want and let our producers know what they think can be used to make the best deals. They don’t have to force anyone to give them things. If you make something that an IT can trade for something a lot more valuable, then you can make more money by giving it to the IT to trade for you than you can by putting it into a store here. It’s really the same thing as giving your product to a department store or whatever here. The IT just has his ‘store’ overseas. In some cases the big traders work out deals worth millions or billions of dollars to the producers.”

“You’re still evading my question,” Niall said. “How does a manufacturer know how much he’ll be paid for the things he gives to one of the IT guys?”

“No matter what you do you never know for sure whether you’ll get paid. All sorts of things could go wrong. If you’re a farmer, the weather or insects or fire or birds or any number of other things could destroy your crop before you can complete the harvest. If you make a product like luxury furniture, perhaps no one will buy it. Life just isn’t certain and I don’t think it was before the transition. Who can guarantee anybody that they’ll be treated fairly? The only proof I can give you is that it seems to work.”

“Mommy, are you lecturing?” Lora asked to general laughter.

“Yes, darling. Mama’s lecturing. It seems to be the family curse.”

“I don’t lecture. I just talk,” was the rejoinder.

Niall now began to see where the power had gone. He didn’t believe for a moment that those people were giving things to the traders voluntarily. That was just ridiculous. There was probably some ‘deal you can’t refuse’ going on, or Niall didn’t know people. With so much money at stake, there were bound to be power plays. And power plays, in the final analysis, came down to killing. Every nation Niall had worked in abroad had its black market and its secret police. They were bound to be here as well. They were just more secret and better hidden here.

Lunch was served in a standard food place which was quite crowded with tourists and not a few Payers. Two tables had been pushed together and there were six Payers, a little older than average for Payers it seemed to Niall based on the Payers he had noticed. They were eating together and discussing payments in the millions. The other diners were studiously not paying attention to the conversation. But you could tell that everyone at the nearby tables was listening attentively.

After they left the restaurant, Niall asked about the group of Payers.

“They’re one of the committees that helps decide on the pay of the ITS. They have to judge what difference the trades they arranged have made for our economy. I know one of them was an
economics professor before the transition. He was the one talking about demand curves and how what we have been trading for will affect foreign economies. Each of the others has specialties as well. One of them was also a fabulously wealthy IT at one time. He was in the news for a week when he made the decision to become a payer. He must have had thousands of people asking, begging, and demanding to be given his luxuries since he wasn’t going to be able to use them any more. When he made his first payment he still had some 16 billion dollars in his account. That month everybody who earned money got a little more because his money wasn’t ever going to be spent.”

“And he gave up all that luxury? I don’t believe that. I bet he still has plenty of luxuries and you just don’t see them. He probably goes home to a mansion just like before.”

“Dad, he was so famous that after that first payment some people followed him around just to see if he’d be given special treatment. He couldn’t even ride the bus since it would fill with people watching him. He took an apartment very near the offices where he worked and walked everywhere. He’s still pretty well known but at least people gave up following him. I will say this, though; the other Payers respect his opinions on what deserves higher pay and what doesn’t because he actually did the job. Of course he can’t make payment decisions for the people he used to work closely with, so he had to switch fields of trade. But my main point is that he has to live and work among the common folks and they will notice if he has a luxury. He has to be particularly careful to avoid giving any grounds for your suspicion.”

She then turned to John who had been entertaining Lora.

“John, I expect you to write me an essay on reasons why a rich man would consider becoming a payer. It’ll be to help your granddad understand.” Her wicked grin showed that she was killing several birds with one stone and wanted Niall to know it.

Before they took the bus for home, Brianna insisted that they tour some of the old slum neighborhoods. Niall was expecting to see yuppie types in expensive apartment buildings. What he did see was the same old buildings on clean streets. The people living there were mostly wearing at least some whites. There were no visible bums or druggies. The children were well-dressed and seemed well fed. In fact, it looked very much like the street on which Brianna lived.

“What happened to the people who lived here before?” Niall asked.

“Most of them are still here. Some of them worked on redecorating the apartments and other buildings downtown. Lots of them work in the hotels and stores in the area. Once the government offices left, there was a surplus of upscale housing close in to downtown. So the owners didn’t convert them to luxury places.”

“Why did the owners redecorate the apartments?”

“Because some of the tenants are Payers, what did you think?” Brianna said. “The Payers won’t pay much for poorly maintained apartments. Also, in a lot of cases the tenants themselves just went ahead and redecorated. They could get the paint and tools and materials without paying, since those are capital goods and they did some really nice things with these places. I wouldn’t want to live with some of the decor they created but they like it and that’s what counts.”

On the way home the kids became quiet and Niall had time to think about what he had seen, today. The derelicts, the garbage, the run-down houses and idle children on the streets, the terrible poverty which had been obvious in the District when he had been there previously all seemed to have disappeared. But he was still not comfortable with what might have happened to the people. It was all
well and good to say that the people were the same ones who had been there last time he had been in Washington, but he didn’t think that meant much. For all he knew the addicts and bums might have been put in camps and executed. Not that he thought that likely, but forced labor had been used to support a leisure class before and all those people who were eating free and riding the bus free and living in apartments free must be supported by some people who were working their tails off.
Chapter Ten: Farm Life

*In which Lozelle works some deals, oil is produced, and Buddy hears from the Feds.*

“Dear, I’ve been talking to some of your hands,” Lozelle announced as she marched briskly into Buddy’s office with a determined look on her face.

“You’ve been what?” Buddy asked incredulously.

“I’ve been talking to some of your employees that work on our farms. They’re suffering and you aren’t doing anything about it.”

“What do you mean? I have some of the safest farms to work on in the State. I even have special training for new employees on safety procedures.”

“I’m not talking about getting injured on the job. I’m talking about living conditions.”

“They don’t live on our farms. You're out of your mind.” Buddy’s expression looked sour and he turned back to his overflowing desk.

“They’re suffering at home. They don’t have enough to live on.”

“Well I can’t pay them any more than I do, so there’s nothing I can do about it,” Buddy said while looking back at his papers, obviously wishing she would leave. (Ah, how soon they forget.)

“You can pay them in other ways,” Lozelle persisted and perched on the corner of the desk. “They have high expenses now in paying their utilities and in getting to work. They can't even afford enough food in some cases. You could build housing here on the farms and pay them in food. If they lived here on the farms they wouldn’t have the expenses of getting to work. They could even grow a lot of their own food if you let them have gardens.”

“Sounds to me like you want to convert this into a feudal village,” Buddy scowled at Lozelle from under bushy eye brows.

“Dear, our money is failing us. We have to get along using money only when we have to.”

Buddy’s face got an expression of oh, no, here we go again. “What do you think I’m trying to do? Look at these bills. You expect me to pay them with promises?”

Lozelle’s chin came out a little further and her face grew stern.

“A few hundred years ago they got by using money only rarely, since they made most of the things they used and only bought a few things. Until the transition we may have to get along pretty much without money ourselves. You know inflation is going to get a lot worse before the transition. You know that the U.S. supply of oil is down to about 40% of what we consumed two years ago. We have to organize to survive by barter as much as we can. It’ll be a lot easier if we organize and plan it now rather than just have it happen to us.”

“Okay. Okay. I see your point. Why don’t you take care of it however you like? I have too much to do here already.” Buddy was under too much stress to face a long argument with Lozelle. Besides, he
didn't care where the men lived and if he didn't have to pay them as much, well that was all to the good.

Lozelle smiled brightly on Buddy, patted his shoulder, kissed him on the cheek and left the office. Outside she gave a thumbs-up gesture to the three men waiting there, then motioned them out of the reception area. They went down the short hallway to the meeting room and took chairs around a table.

“He accepted it. We’ve got a free hand,” Lozelle grinned. Then she sobered. “Now, I think we need to begin with housing. By moving the hands onto the farms we’re going to solve a lot of problems, but we’re going to create a lot more. Jack, how much lumber can you turn out at the sawmill?”

“Oh, we can turn out plenty of boards but we don’t have all the other stuff you need for housing. We need wiring and plumbing and foundation cement and nails, tools, and other equipment. We just aren’t set up to build houses.”

“Pete what have we got to trade with the local building supply companies?” Lozelle asked turning to the next man.

“We’re a farm, so we have lots of different foods, especially since you had us emphasize growing crops people could eat and would be easy to preserve. So we have lots of peanuts, potatoes, beans, turnips, corn, carrots, and greens.”

“So we can offer food,” Walt said sounding discouraged. “Wait. How are they going to store the food? How about we offer them so much food each week for a year? We can store it here and dole it out. That way they won’t waste it.”

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In 2008 about 60% of the oil consumed in the U.S. was imported. By 2011, the amount of oil consumed was down to only 45% of the 2008 levels because of the tremendous drop in imports. Despite government efforts to control the price of gasoline, it had quickly gone over $10 per gallon and light sweet crude was costing U.S. oil companies over $300 a barrel. Refinery capacity was standing idle. Exploration of old and new possible fields increased almost feverishly. But the change in supply had been too quick for the oil industry to have any chance of producing a domestic solution for the shortage of crude oil. The nation was painfully discovering how vulnerable it was and how dependent an industrial economy is on its sources of energy.

The lack of gasoline was affecting almost everything Buddy’s business did. His farms had already started going to alternate fuels like corn alcohol and natural gas from fermenting wastes. But that still left over 90% of the energy needs of the farm to be met from gasoline or electricity, which was just as expensive. The previous summer most of his farms had planted rather large crops of garden vegetables, potatoes, and peanuts, since the imported vegetables had become too expensive for
most families to buy. For the 2011 growing season, Buddy planned to go heavily into beans as well. He had no difficulty finding willing workers, since he offered a share of the crop in addition to money wages. The privations of winter had made the poorer people of rural Georgia look upon food much the way their ancestors had 150 years before at the end of the Civil War (known in Buddy’s neighborhood as the War of Northern Aggression). The continuing inflation made food a more dependable reward than a fixed wage.

Horses on the farm were back in fashion. Not for plowing but for getting from one task to another on the farm. There were not enough heavy work horses for plowing and such, of course, but there were a surprising number of riding horses. Many were even on the market because lots of people who owned pleasure horses could no longer afford to keep them. Of course, few farm hands knew how to care for horses, let alone how to ride them. But there were lots of teen-aged girls out there who did know these things and who were only too happy to have a chance to continue their love affair with all things equine. They taught the farm hands, cared for their former hoofed possessions, and got paid for it.

Not all businesses were suffering during this period. Those businesses that supplied energy from sources other than petroleum were prospering. In fact, solar energy, wind energy, hydro-electric, and even energy from tides were being utilized as never before. Of course, these sources could make up only a small percentage of the energy deficit from loss of oil from abroad. Old oil fields that had been too expensive to keep in production were now profitable again, with a barrel of oil bringing over $300. Even conservation was being tried as a last resort. The enterprise that was seeing the greatest growth, however, was one that had patented a thermal conversion process. As the name implies, TDP is a process which uses heat and pressure to convert waste containing hydrocarbons such as paper, sewage, tires, tar, plastics, wood, seaweed, and just plain garbage in general into oil, gas, fertilizer, and recoverable metals. The process had been largely ignored for several years but by the time the price for a barrel of oil seemed to have permanently gone above $100 any process that could produce a barrel of diesel oil for about $15 - $25 became too profitable to ignore. But the lag between investment in the TDP and the plants coming online was just too great to prevent the shortage.

Buddy had been one of the first farm owners to recognize the value of such equipment to a large farm organization, mostly for getting rid of polluting wastes at first. When the equipment was first installed, his farms had used it only for their own wastes, but as the price of oil shot up some of Buddy’s employees began offering to dispose of the wastes from surrounding farms. They were paid in cash and disposed of the wastes they collected by secretly adding it to the wastes from Buddy’s land. As a result, Buddy’s farms were unusual in that they were still able to run their heavy equipment fueled by the diesel oil they had produced.

Buddy discovered the covert waste collection and was going to fire those engaged in the activity... at first. But then he realized that they were adding to the farms’ profitability and without Buddy having to pay them since they were doing it after their regular work hours. So rather than firing them, he allowed them to continue so long as they made sure that the wastes from Buddy’s farms were processed first.

Buddy was no fool and he did what he could to increase the production of oil by his plant. He also began construction of a second plant, trading oil and the promise of oil for the materials and labor needed. It was Lozelle, however, who argued for emphasizing the food crops rather than cash crops. At her request, for example, each family who had someone working for Buddy was invited to plant a large garden on Buddy’s land using Buddy’s seed. Weekends, Buddy would bus whole families to their fields to tend the gardens. Buddy also offered space in his barns, silos, and warehouses to store their harvest.
As a consequence, Buddy had no trouble attracting and keeping hands when many farms simply were neither able to afford to pay hands nor buy fuel. People wanted farm jobs and farmers wanted to hire them but they didn’t have the money. People wanted the products of those farms but they didn’t have the money. Buddy was using barter to get around these money problems.

With fertilizer and pesticide becoming too expensive to use, what was called natural means of pest control and fertilization increased substantially. Advice on the Internet for farming by such methods was invaluable. Buddy was producing his own fertilizer from his TDP (thermal conversion process) plants but he, too, encouraged his employees to use the less expensive, natural methods.

By the harvest of 2011 Buddy was feeling rather smug. He felt that he was prepared for the winter and expected to be selling his oil and his harvest for high prices.

“Hello Mr. Minton?” the voice on the line inquired when Buddy flipped on his phone.

“Yes, Buddy Minton here. What can I do for you?”

“Mr. Minton, I represent the National Food Bank, Atlanta office. I see that you have a rather large agricultural operation with most of your farms in the area of Macon.”

“Yeah, I have some properties other places but mostly we’re South-east of Macon.”

“I see that you’ve been a major supplier of soy beans and other foodstuffs for the last few years.”

“Yes sir, I am proud to say that we’ve been one of the top ten in Georgia for over five years now.”

“Well, sir, we are very pleased that you seem to have been able to make do this year without buying fuels for your farming operations. That is truly commendable.”

“Thanks, mister, but I don’t think I caught your name.”

“Sorry. I’m Stanley Crookshank, Director of the Atlanta Bureau of the National Food Bank.”

“I’m pleased to hear that Stanley, but I’m a busy man just now and I really have to get back to work so if…”

“I’ll get right to the point, then. We here at the Bank would like you to sell your crops to us exclusively this year and we also have some suggestions as to what we would like you to grow next year.”

“Stanley, I have a variety of companies that I sell to and I couldn’t think of not letting them bid for my produce. You understand, I’m sure.”

“Oh I understand, Mr. Minton, but I am not sure you quite understand the current situation. As you know we’ve had a considerable drop in agricultural production with the price of oil being what it is. And the federal government is responding to this crisis by its Food Bank program. We would like all the major producers in the nation to come into the Bank to show that they support our nation in this time of national crisis. We’re sure that you will see it as your patriotic duty to join us in this noble cause.”

“Nobody is more patriotic than I am, mister, but I wasn’t born yesterday either. What prices are you offering?”
“Mr. Minton, you realize that government revenues have dropped during this depression and with interest rates being what they are on foreign markets we just can’t pay the prices we would like to for your crops. But we’re confident that as a patriotic American you will be glad to sell to us at our top offering price of 40% of the international market price.”

“The hell I will. I can get 90% without even trying. You can take that offer and…” Buddy yelled into the phone.

“Please understand, Mr. Minton that most of the other large agricultural producers have already joined us in this crusade for food. We even have agreements from the other bulk buyers of agricultural produce to limit their prices to what we offer. I don’t think you can get a better offer than the one we’re making you. The nation is rallying around this effort to see that there’s food for all Americans.”

“We’ll just see about that,” Buddy growled and snapped the phone shut. He had learned that smashing the phone shut by clapping his hands together not only was expensive but painful as well.

Buddy quickly entered a number, that of the operator of a local grain elevator.

“Jake, Buddy. What prices are you offering for soybeans? That’s all? That’s less than last year. Who’s selling to you at those prices? So what business are you doing? You’ve caved in to the Food Bank, that’s what you’ve done… Oh, I see. Well what about the other elevators? Yeah, I heard about Wally. That was tough. So Wally is still offering market prices? He gave in too? I told you, Jake, they’re going to put us all out of business. How are we going to pay for our loans with no profit margin? Are they going to talk to the bank for you? Yeah, but that’s just two years. One year at these prices could bankrupt us all… Okay, Jake. Hang in there. We’ll get through this somehow. Bye.”

His phone rang almost immediately.

“Hello?”

“Mr. Minton? Stanley again. I hope you’ve had a chance to think over your situation in more detail. I might also remind you that your son, who is living in D.C. these days, has come to the attention of the authorities there as a possible trouble maker. Now we wouldn’t want to have to report to them that his father may be putting him up to anything now, would we?’

“What’s my son got to do with any of this?”

“Why, nothing, Mr. Minton. But you know what they say; the apple never drops far from the tree. If the father is not really a patriot then probably the son is somewhat lacking in those same areas. I believe that your son has a somewhat sensitive relationship with a Florida Congressman who has taken some controversial positions; some would even say radical positions. Now far be it from me to make too much of the follies and enthusiasms of youth, but there are those who say your son had a lot to do with that congressman taking those positions. They also say that those positions may bring down our economy.”

“Bull, Stanley. What you’re doing in forcing me to accept your low prices for my crops. That’s what threatens our economy.”

“Mr. Minton, we’re only making sure that everyone gets to eat this winter. Such an endeavor could never be bad for the economy. But resistance to the National Will in a time of desperate crisis is
tantamount to treason. It undermines the loyal citizens in their time of need. We’re sure that we won’t be required to consider you as disloyal. We won’t have to resort to asking the bank to foreclose on your farms nor seize your assets. But we feel that we must have your cooperation, one way or another and we must and will do what we have to do to get that cooperation, Mr. Minton.”

“Are you threatening me, Stanley?”

“Why no, Mr. Minton. Government agents never threaten. We just point out your situation and indicate the course of action we will be required to follow based on your choices. That isn’t a threat, that’s just good advice given with your best interests at heart.”

After some more verbal sparring, Buddy disconnected and stood thinking. His meditations were interrupted by another call. Buddy began to view the phone as a poisonous viper ready to bite him if he got to close. Reluctantly he reached for the phone.

“Hello?”

“Mr. Minton, I’m glad I caught you in. I’m Mary Steed with the National Energy Commission.”

“What do you want?” Buddy was already angry and was beginning to feel like everyone was out to get him.

“Why, only your cooperation. We understand that your TDP plant is producing a surplus of oil for your farm’s needs. In fact, we understand that you are producing more than 100 barrels a day above your consumption.”

“How do you come to understand that?” Buddy was somewhat taken aback by her knowledge.

“We have our ways, Mr. Minton, we have our ways. The fact is, Mr. Minton, that you have no real need to keep those extra barrels of oil and the nation has real needs that you can help meet.”

“Let me guess, you want me to sell all my ‘surplus’ oil to some sort of oil bank at a price way below market value.”

“We were hoping to strike a patriotic chord in your heart, yes, Mr. Minton. Those hundreds of barrels of oil can do so much good; provide heat and vital transportation and electricity to keep our nation’s economy moving. We were sure that you’d see it as your duty to join us in keeping our enemies at bay.”

“And if I don’t feel like doing as you suggest, I might find it difficult to sell the oil elsewhere and might find that the bank no longer sees my farm as a good risk?”

“Goodness, Mr. Minton, you have such an imagination. I shouldn’t think that your patriotic friends would go that far, do you? I mean, I can understand why a loyal American would be most displeased to think they were doing business with someone who could help their nation and refused. I could understand how they might not want to do business with someone who was trafficking with an enemy but I don’t think they would go that far. Of course, patriotic feelings in a time of crisis do sometimes get the better of us. I know my own heart just fills with anger when I see suffering which could have been prevented if only… But there I go letting my feelings get the better of me. I’m sure your business associates are more calm and level-headed than I. But of course, you would never have that problem, would you? I’m sure we’ll find you to be most cooperative because you are a loyal
patriot yourself despite those things people are saying about your son, which I’m sure are exaggerated.”

“I’m sure they are. Perhaps they are even total lies. Perhaps they were lies made up by someone jealous of his success. People are sometimes jealous of the success of others. Why, take me for example. Some people say that I don’t deserve to own these farms of mine. Some people say that I was just lucky to get where I am. Some think that I must have cheated to go from a poor boy of a poor family to one of the wealthiest men in Georgia. They’ve said some very unflattering lies about me. But I don’t pay them any mind and I’m sure you don’t either.”

“Of course I don’t, Mr. Minton. But in my job I have to investigate even the most obvious of lies. That’s the way it is in government. We have our rules and ordinances which we must follow. We must obey Congress and the Administration because that’s our job. That’s the law of the land. All patriotic Americans do their duty even when it requires a great sacrifice on their part. I just know that you will see your duty and do it even as I’m doing now. So, Mr. Minton, I’ll have the truck come by your TDP plant on a regular schedule, shall I?”

“Of course you will. Goodbye Mary.” The frown on Buddy’s face grew deeper. How did they know how much oil he was producing and how much he was using on the farm? Did it matter how they knew? They seemed to have him trapped.
Chapter Eleven: Rose Says

In which Niall scoffs at homeschooling, looks for allies, and meets Rose, a mover and shaker, sort of.

Upon arriving at the apartment, Lora was put to bed for a nap after a long, tiring day of activities. John went to his room to start writing the paper which would explain why a rich trader would want to become a payer. It wasn’t long before Tony arrived from his day at the library and joined Niall and Brianna, who were in the kitchen preparing supper.

Niall hadn’t been able to leave the topic of home-schooling alone and was pointing out that children became far too dependent on their mother if they weren’t exposed to the rough and tumble of childish play in school. After greeting Tony upon his arrival, Niall immediately sought him as an ally in support of his argument.

“You agree with me, don’t you Tony, that education in school is better than education at home?”

“Well, as to that,” Tony said, “I don’t think you can count on me for much support. I admit that at first I was a little leery of the whole idea but Brianna wanted it so much that I finally gave in and let her try it. It’s worked great so far. John goes to the testing center every month or two and gets certified for what he’s learned. They say he’s about two years ahead of where he would be in school.”

“Sure, if you force feed him the stuff they test on you can get even a parrot to pass those tests,” Niall gruffly asserted. “He’s just memorizing stuff for the tests and forgetting it right after.”

“Actually, Dad,” Brianna said,” I don’t even know what they’re going to ask him about each time. I just teach, if you could call it that, whatever he’s interested in.”

“Yes, see, what did I tell you?” Niall pounced. “You aren’t giving him a coherent structure. You aren’t giving him things in the proper order. You aren’t directing his education. You’re just letting him play. You probably have him way ahead in some areas and way behind in others. It’s unbalanced and like any unbalanced structure it could collapse at any time. He’ll probably have to spend years overcoming the problems you’re making for him with your home grown, so-called education.”

“Hold on there, old man. Brianna’s been doing a fine job. If there were any problems with the way John was learning or what he was learning the testers would have told us right away. That’s what they get paid for.”

“Thank you, sweetie,” Brianna grinned at Tony and offered him a tempting morsel from the pot she was stirring as a reward.

“Sure, government testers,” Niall said scornfully. “I suppose if you don’t teach him the right things they take him away from you.” Niall was so upset by now that he completely forgot about not saying anything incriminating in front of the computer.

“Fat chance, I’d just like to see them try,” Brianna bristled.

Tony held up both hands to her so she turned back to the pot, stirring more briskly than was really necessary, and let Tony shoulder the load. “Nobody could do that unless we were abusing him. If he were getting an inferior education, what would probably happen is that somebody else would try to teach him what we weren’t teaching him,” Tony said trying to calm things a bit.
“Besides,” Brianna put in, unable to resist the temptation, “nobody has to go to the testers. They’re just available if you want them. They’re just people who evaluate and certify knowledge. You’d go to the same people to qualify for admission to college. They’re just people who have a reputation for evaluating one’s education.”

“Probably just a bunch of standardized tests is all they have.”

“No Dad, from what John tells me they just played with him at first and after he could read some they played games that involved reading and math, you know, like monopoly and cribbage. Sometimes they wandered around in the park talking about what they saw.”

“Sounds to me like they’re a bunch of swindlers,” Niall interrupted. “They aren’t competent to judge how well educated someone is.”

“Well now, Mr. Campbell since they won’t get paid for years unless they detect a real problem, how are they going to swindle us?”

“Tony, just because you don’t know how they are doing it doesn’t mean they aren’t doing it. They’re just slick or have some deal going with someone.” Niall’s patronizing tone sent Brianna’s anger up another notch.

“Look here, Tony is a very well educated man. He lives with Johnny. If Johnny were badly educated, Tony would know it right away.”

“Well if home-schooling is such a good idea, why are you the only one doing it?” Niall countered.

“The only one?” Brianna began laughing.

“There are more home-schooled kids than kids in schools these days,” Tony said with a smile. “Since the transition far more mothers and even a lot of fathers have decided that being home with and educating their kids is more rewarding than working for more luxuries. Now they have the choice. Women often felt trapped into having to work even if they wanted to be a stay at home mother. It used to be that single mothers, you know, those who were divorced or never married, would have to have a job or go on welfare. Now they can do what’s best for their children, whether that means staying home or day care. And to sweeten the deal they get paid for educating their own children.”

“Amateur teachers will never do the job that professional teachers can,” Niall said, sticking to his guns.

“Dad, you aren’t going to convince us and we aren’t going to change what’s been so successful, so you might as well just relax and let it go.”

Niall was still somewhat upset, but dinner was almost ready and the kids would be coming in soon so Niall went to his bedroom to wash up for supper.

After he left the room, Brianna turned to Tony almost in tears. “Why does he attack the way I’m teaching Johnny and Lora? I’m doing a good job with them. Everybody says so.”

“Darling, from what you’ve told me about his career, it was to get families in underdeveloped nations to send their children to the schools he helped to organize. Now here you are, his own daughter, keeping your kids out of school. Is it any wonder he feels somewhat betrayed? Don’t you worry,
darling. You’re doing great with the kids. Just be as tolerant as you can of your dad. Remember that he’s been under a lot of stress and he’s likely to have a short temper because of it.”

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After dinner, they went out to the playground behind the apartments, and sat on some benches under the shade trees to enjoy the cool breezes of dusk. The benches gave a good view of the area where Lora was playing in a sand box with some other children near her age, and a basketball backboard where John had joined several boys playing a half-court game.

There were other parents there who knew Tony and Brianna and they all fell into a general conversation. Brianna told them that her father had been out of the country for 15 years and was learning a lot of new things. She mentioned the trip to D.C. and how it had changed since the transition. One of the women, named Rose, had been a government worker in those days and described how she experienced the transition.

“Oh honey, you should have been here. It was a hoot. We had all these VIPs in D.C. and suddenly, they were just people like the rest of us. I remember how my boss reacted when we told him we were quitting. He kept telling us, ‘Hang in there for just a few more weeks. This new money thing will have blown over by then. No government can last without taxing.’ And so forth. But we just waved goodbye. I wonder how long he kept coming to work. It can’t have been too long because the building I used to work in was soon being used as a hotel.”

“What did you do without work?” Niall asked.

“At first I was kind of at loose ends, you know? I was used to going to work every day. I guess I mostly missed my friends from work. They just scattered to the four winds. I still talk to a couple of them but we’ve drifted apart now.”

“Tell him about your husband, Rose,” Brianna suggested.

“That doofus, he was as bad as the rest of them. You know he had a position with the Federal Trade Commission back then and after about six months people began to realize that no one was enforcing the regulations and laws having to do with trade any more. Reggie was a lawyer in those days but there was just nothing for him to do. And of course he wasn’t being paid by the government any more so there didn’t seem to be any reason to go to the office for him either.”

“Is that why you had to come here to live?” Niall asked.

“Honey, I didn’t have to come here, I wanted to come here. After Reggie left me I sat at home alone for several days feeling miserable. I guess there was a lot of that going around in my circle of friends. Anyway, they called me from time to time to cry on my shoulder and pretty soon I noticed that when I was helping them I wasn’t miserable about myself. I had plenty of money what with our investments and retirement plans and all.”

Rose’s situation was far from unique in those days, especially in Washington. Many couples, whose marriages had already been under considerable stress due to the economic and social dislocations of the time, found the loss of status of the main bread winner too much to bear.

It was during a time in which the divorce rate had risen sharply in the months after the transition. The courts were flooded with cases. Many of the plaintiffs were women who had felt trapped in abusive marriages by the need to support their children. After the transition they no longer needed a
husband’s income. Some were men who had wanted to leave their wives but had feared the alimony or child support payments. Some had seen in the sharp increase in divorces the signs of a disintegration of the American family. But within two years the divorce rate had fallen to levels well below the decades before the transition. It turned out that money problems had been one of the main causes of divorce. Especially among the poor, men no longer left their wives so their families could collect welfare and women no longer married any man who appeared able to provide an income. There were very few arguments over how the family money was spent, since each person’s money was their own. If a husband or wife chose to take some time away from work, it didn’t endanger their spouse or children. Also, the pressures of work became dramatically less and with less stress families could be more loving.

“Did you get alimony or a good divorce settlement?” Niall had interrupted the narrative to ask. Brianna frowned at him but what can a daughter say when her visiting father puts his foot in his mouth?

“Alimony? Honey, there’s no alimony any more. All that happens in a divorce settlement is each person keeps what they own. Now Reggie and I were joint owners of our house and the cars so we had to decide who got which car. Reggie was man enough to give me his half of the house, I gotta give him that.

Our kids had already been living on their own for several years. In fact, when Maureen left for college is when I went back to work. So anyway I had plenty of money.”

Since money could no longer be transferred there was no way alimony could be paid even if a judge were willing to grant it. Child support was no longer necessary because all the necessities were covered already and giving food or shelter or clothes to a child was a quick source of money for anyone who had them to give. Those things that had joint ownership could be given to others or sold to others in the case of luxuries and the pay for those actions was split between the parties. Thus with the money aspects of divorce simplified, the other aspects of divorce, mainly child custody, could be emphasized.

“And you came here because…” Tony said making little circles with his hand to get her back to her previous point.

“I came because, well, I thought I could be useful here. I just got on the bus one day and started riding all over looking for a neighborhood that was friendly and comfortable. I wanted one where the people went outdoors and talked to each other. When I came down the street over there, there were a lot of kids playing in a playground over on the other side of Dickens there. Of course it was just a vacant lot in those days. And there were lots of people sitting on the stoops of the apartments and there just seemed to be a buzz of people talking friendly with each other.”

“So you came here because people were outside and talking?”

“Yes, but I didn’t realize that there were so many people outside and so many windows open because they were redecorating their apartments and they didn’t like the paint fumes.” Rose laughed and swayed at how she had fooled herself.

The others chuckled in appreciation and grinned encouragement to go on.

“So I got right off that bus and went to see the apartment manager about getting an apartment. Well, they didn’t really have an apartment manager so I sort of got the job by accident. That’s my apartment just to the left as you come in the main foyer of Dickens, there.”
“You seem to like it here even if you were fooled,” Tony added.

“Honey, I’m having a blast.”

Brianna reached across to squeeze Rose’s arm and said, “And we love you here, too. You’re such a good person. Like that poor girl that came in last January with three young ones, just babies, really, and you had her all tucked in and comfortable within a few hours. It’s no wonder that for a week or so she almost cried every time she saw you.”

“Well who wouldn’t help her, the poor baby? Her husband had been beating her and she’d been hiding the injuries and lying to the doctor about how she got them. Then when he threatened to kill her and the kids, she just got on the bus with them, no clothes or anything and rode until she realized that the bus was going back to her own neighborhood. Then she got off right over there and just stood there holding a baby in her arms and two little ones hanging onto her skirts. I mean it was enough to make anyone cry. How could I refuse to help her?”

“How could anyone else get the chance to help her?” Tony laughed. “From what I’ve heard, you were out there like a flash and brought her in and had half the people in the building scurrying around to get things for her and her children before she could blink.”

“And you were so brave,” Brianna added, “when her husband came to drag her back home. You practically chased him out of the building, threatening to have him arrested.” Brianna couldn’t help laughing, remembering Rose, who couldn’t have been more than five feet two, confronting a man over six feet tall and winning easily.

“Why wasn’t he arrested for hurting her before she left home?” Niall asked. “Not that it’s any of my business, of course.”

“She never pressed charges. She just let him do it,” an indignant Rose said. Then, more thoughtfully, she continued, “I guess her self-confidence was just so low and she thought so little of herself that she felt she deserved it. But we’re working on that. You just wait. In a few more months, well, she’s still a little clingy, you know? She doesn’t like to go out without me right there. I think she’s still afraid her husband will be there. But I told Buster that I wanted to know if that husband of hers was anywhere in the neighborhood and he hasn’t said boo about it, so I think he must have given up on her by now.”

“Who’s Buster?” Niall asked.

“Oh that’s just what I call the computer,” Rose laughed. “You know, like Buster Keaton in the old silent movies? When I first started using him years ago he was rather stiff faced and somber all the time, which reminded me of Buster Keaton, so I started calling him that.”

“Nowadays,” Tony said, seizing a chance to contribute to the conversation, “the computer is much better at simulating real people. That’s why they tell you in the movies which characters are people and which are just the simulations.”

“You mean you can’t tell otherwise?” Niall wasn’t so much shocked, since he was used to advances in computer technology being almost faster than one could keep up with, it was more worry that the images he would see on the phone might not be real. He could picture talking to Brianna, or thinking it was Brianna, and having it really be just the computer.
“Some people think they can tell,” Rose said, "but I don’t think they can. I mean, they don’t even put makeup on the real actors any more, they do all of that during the editing process.

The conversation continued on in a general way, skipping from one topic to another and Niall’s mind had drifted back to its chronic worries.

Almost without realizing it, Niall’s view of the current situation had begun to change. If the government had dissolved 15 years ago, then the current threat couldn’t be the plot of an old-style totalitarian regime as in the novel 1984 with its “Big Brother.” It had to be some more subtle scheme in which powerful forces were seeking total control, mind control if you will, of the general population. The conspiracy obviously had found ways to keep the general population passive, calm, and unresisting while their heritage of freedom was deftly stolen from them as if by a pickpocket with invisible hands. One day the people of America might wake up and realize they were in chains, but by then it would be too late to do anything about it.

Surely, he thought, there were others who shared his concern. Surely he was not the only one to see the scope of the problem. Before he had left the country, there had been political movements and groups which had been sensitive to every infringement of freedom. Of course, what had seemed an infringement to one group had been accepted by other groups and the various groups couldn’t agree on who was responsible for the loss of freedoms. But all these groups couldn’t have simply disappeared. Unless, of course, they had been suppressed.

A computer system that permeated daily life as this new computer system seemed to do would make it possible to identify every person who had participated in such groups, no matter where they went. He had heard Rose casually mentioning following the cruel husband’s movements using her computer. It would be possible by using such a computer system even to fake such groups as they faked real actors in the movies just to lure from hiding those who did love freedom. Could it be that love of freedom had been eradicated already? Could all the patriots already be in prison or dead? How could Niall even look for others who shared his beliefs without becoming a suspect?

Tony might be the answer. Tony was doing historical research on the time of the transition and before. Perhaps Tony would be able to tell him what he now needed to know. But could he trust Tony? Would he be able to get Tony to talk about the right topics and would Tony tell the truth? Was it even safe to ask questions about politics? The way to go might be to use Rose. She seemed to talk about everything else. Perhaps she could be brought to talk about politics and those small political parties. ‘Let’s see, Niall thought. ‘Freedom of the press, there’s lots of reasons for asking about newspapers. That can lead to issues of the day and editorials and politics. That’s the way to get it started.’

“Rose, I’ve been thinking of getting a job,” Niall began, hardly noticing that he had interrupted the others’ conversational thread. “Are there any good jobs in the want ads?”

“Honey, there’s work to be done everywhere, you just have to decide what’s good for you, personally. If you want to work, examine what you like to do and go with that.”

Rose wasn’t helping. “But wouldn’t the want ads give me more of an idea of what kinds of things people are doing these days? I mean, for example, if I liked being a paper shuffling bureaucrat I’d be out of luck, wouldn’t I?”

“We don’t use paper much any more. Why, even when I was with the IRS in the old days, we were almost paperless by time of the transition.”
‘Rose, talk about the newspapers.’ Niall was grinding his mental teeth in frustration. “Do we even still have newspapers? I mean, if everything is paperless did they cease to exist, too?” That’ll get her.

“Oh, sure. People still like to read from paper and newspapers are handy for other things too, sometimes. The want ads are a little different, though,” said Rose, finally talking about something Niall wanted.

“How so?” asked Niall, willing her to elaborate.

“Well, they don’t talk about skills so much as what needs to be accomplished. They’re more in the nature of project announcements than individual work descriptions. Also, it’s sometimes hard to distinguish them from the news. If people have specific skills they want to use, they go to an employment office since it doesn’t cost anything and you get personal service. It’s much quicker and more efficient than the want ads.”

“How about if I wanted to place an ad asking for work? How would I go about that?”

“You’d go to an employment office. You wouldn’t put an ad in the paper.” Rose was sure stubborn.

“But if I did want to put an ad in the paper, how would I do it?” Niall was stubborn, too.

“Why, just call them up and tell them what you want the ad to say. If you have a particular picture or something you want in the ad, you could send that to them as well.”

“Will they print that ad no questions asked?” Niall asked skeptically.

“They print what they think will provide the most benefit,” Tony said.” If you want them to use space in their paper for something silly or worthless, you’d be out of luck. For that you have to try a vanity press. That aspect of the printing business hasn’t changed much. It’d be a lot easier just to put it on the Internet. That’s a lot quicker and no one cares much what you say there. Of course it’ll be part of your reputation, so most folks are careful what they present.” Tony had been following the conversation and had joined in on this point since it was not something he thought Rose would be interested in.

“What about political ads?” Niall said, being a little careless due to the frustration.

“Political ads?” Rose said. “Oh, you mean those commercials and things we had on TV before the transition. Oh, we don’t have those any more.”

No political ads? Was it censorship? Was freedom of the press gone just like that?

“Why not?” Niall said before he could censor himself.

Tony, seeing another lecture opportunity, took this one. “First, most of those ads were lies in one way or another, so none of the media today would present them to the public, since it would reduce their pay. Second, since a political party can’t own money, the parties couldn’t pay for their presentation in any vanity press way. Third, and probably most important, when governments stopped spending money and stopped regulating business, only a few people cared about political parties any more. There are other reasons as well but those are the main ones.”

‘I’ll just bet there are other reasons,’ Niall thought.
Brianna said, “Tony, why don’t you go see how the kids are doing?” trying to head off the lecture that seemed sure to come otherwise.

“Oh, they’re fine, dear. They’re right over there,” Tony said giving a vague gesture toward the playground swings.

“How do people campaign for office without ads?” Niall asked next.

Tony said, “They appear on television before the election and state the case for why they should be elected. They write position papers which are posted on their websites. The newspapers print biographies and excerpts from their position papers. The candidates appear at public debates held in various parts of the State.”

“What about the political parties?” Niall asked. “How are they involved?”

“The parties still exist,” Tony continued, “but they’ve changed quite a bit. The people who were most important and influential in the old parties moved on to other areas of work. The new parties’ organizations are mostly composed of what you might call ‘true believers’ for some social issue or other. It’s fragmented most of the old parties. The Republicans’ main split was between those who were Christian fundamentalists and the economic conservatives. The Democrats splintered into ethnic parties and what you might call Socialists, though the latter only lasted a couple of years. The ethnic parties also lost a lot of attractiveness when they found their members really could become Payers. Most of the economic discrimination they’d faced just melted away, so the emotion behind their political involvement also melted away.”

“You’re lecturing again, Tony,” said Brianna. “He sounds just like a professor when he gets off on one of his subjects.”

“My ignorance could benefit from a few lectures,” Niall put in, not wanting a valuable source of information scared off. “So there aren’t just two dominant parties any more?”

“No. There must be half a dozen important parties but even then they’re important to so few people that they influence only a tiny part of the electorate.”

“Don’t people care who gets elected any more?” Niall said, fearing the worst.

“Most people’s lives aren’t really affected by the elections, since the government controls so very little and the Payers only pay for good behavior. If some nut gets elected to a high office and tries to mess up, all the people below them in the bureaucracy just ignore the stupid orders and go on doing their best.”

“What about judges and the police? Don’t the politicians have a lot to do with who the judges are and how the police enforce the laws?” Niall said.

Tony’s reply was hardly comforting. “There’s very little crime these days. It’s almost impossible to make money from committing a crime, so few people steal, for example. Most of the crimes the police deal with are crimes of violence. Since preventing or stopping violence is so obviously beneficial, any elected official who told the police to allow violence would probably not just be ignored as an office holder but would be considered insane.”

“As for the judges, their case loads are way down. There aren’t any more lawsuits for money, for example. There are far fewer money crimes. There’s no organized crime. There are only a few
crimes for drugs or over drugs, since the black-market supply has almost disappeared. The judges who send a lot of people to jail for long sentences aren’t paid as much as the judges who arrange for the guilty to change their ways. Sentencing has become far more creative than it was. State laws which used to prescribe long sentences have also been changing since keeping people in prison for long periods is very expensive and does the victims little good. Restitution has come to be very important.”

“So,” Niall said, “some radical gets elected by a tiny portion of the population and puts into office a bunch of judges with an agenda. Looks like everybody gets ‘hung out to dry’ on that one.”

Tony, in full lecture mode, responded, “Judges serve long terms, so no one office holder gets to appoint a very large proportion of them. Also, judges get paid, too. If they’re doing off the wall things they won’t get as much pay. For criminal cases, if the District Attorneys think a judge is making judgments that are inappropriate, they won’t take cases to that court. Finally, in most States, the accused has the right to a change in venue if he doesn’t like the judge. If you aren’t in one of those States, then you’d have to depend on the appeal process. The system isn’t perfect but it wasn’t perfect before the transition either.”

“Enough already, Tony. Maybe Dad doesn’t mind hearing your lectures but I’ve heard enough for one night. Besides it’s getting late and we need to get the kids in.” Brianna was on her feet and motioning to the children.

Niall thanked Rose for educating him and told Tony that he’d heard far worse lectures when he was in college.

Lying in bed waiting for sleep to come, Niall reviewed what he’d learned. It looks like finding a freedom-loving underground will be difficult or impossible. If the political parties and voting are fading away, then the powers that be have already eliminated the most obvious threat to their staying in power. When the old government sort of evaporated, that left an enormous power vacuum and somebody must have filled it. But who are they? They’re not the administration. That’s obviously just a facade. There doesn’t seem to be any mention of a dominant church, so it’s probably not a religious group as it would be back in the Middle East.

I’ve noticed that these Payers keep coming up whenever anyone mentions control and limitations. They’re paying for the free food and housing. They pay the International Traders. They pay even the judges, for crying out loud. I can just guess how fair the judges would be if their paymasters were accused of anything. This business of living in poverty is probably just a front. Like in the Middle Ages when there were a lot of priests who lived in poverty but the Cardinals and Abbots and such lived in luxury. Perhaps that’s what’s happening here. If they control the computer, too, in addition to doing all that paying, then I can be certain that if anyone is pulling all the strings from behind the scenes, it’s a group of the Payers.

But how can I find out which Payers are the ones in control? Tomorrow I’m going to find a newspaper and see what that has to offer. You can tell a lot about what’s going on by what’s allowed to be printed and what isn’t. Also, I need to find a job. I don’t think Brianna likes hearing the truth about her educating the kids and if she’s as stubborn as her mother, I’ll never get her to let the kids go to school.
Chapter Twelve: The Screws Tighten

In which even Presidential power has its limits, Buddy hangs in there, and Clark gets his ID.

“Okay. What did you want to see me about this time?” the President said resignedly.

His face was care-worn, almost grey. The eyes that had sparkled and glowed with intensity during the early days of his campaign for office were becoming dull. The body sagged with fatigue. The small tremor in the left hand was becoming noticeable enough that the President was in the habit of keeping it in his lap or pocket.

“There’s good news and bad news, as usual, Mr. President. As you know, in my capacity as Secretary of Homeland Security, I’ve been coordinating the collection of information for internal security. We’ve been able to make ‘suggestions’ to many of the leaders of industry that they go along with our plans for getting through this oil shortage crisis. We’ve put in place tracking mechanisms for following production of all the major capital goods and the bulk consumer goods. We can tell you where every truckload of gasoline and oil has been sent. We know where wheat and cotton and other consumer goods are and where they’re going in real time. The problem is down at the lowest level. When we do an inventory, somehow, there’s always a lot of missing merchandise. It doesn’t matter about the consumer goods in most cases, but the gasoline and oil and such, they’re too important to let slide. We think that they’re stealing gas and selling it on the black market. They take out a few gallons here and there and replace them with water or whatever to make the total right and then sell the gas for all the market will bear.”

“What did you expect? That’s what always happens when something’s in short supply. That’s what happened with prohibition. It happened with illegal drugs. What do you think we can do about it?”

“That’s the good news. We’ve been able to create a single distributed database using all the data we’ve been getting from all the businesses and government agencies and also our covert data collection points.”

“What do you mean, ‘covert data collection points’?”

“You remember that we’ve been using the computer monitoring chips in all the U.S. built computers, and we’ve been including those chips in TVs and other major appliances for home use and, well, just about anywhere you have a computer chip of any power, it’s collecting data for us. It’s getting so that in the cities you can be monitored almost anywhere you go. Well, we’ve been working really hard to make all that available in one distributed database with centralized control. I think we have it now. You can take an individual, almost any individual, and I can tell you where they are and what they’re doing.”

“You’re kidding.”

“No. Really. Just give me the name of someone and I’ll show you.”

“Okay. How about Senator Frobisher? What’s that old S.O.B doing?”

“Hang on a minute, ‘Johnny on the spot, Senator Prescott Frobisher, live feed, sound and image’” Homeland said into his personal digital assistant and then held it out for the President to see.
The sound of a gentle snore filled the room and the image of Frobisher, his body slumped in his chair behind his desk, appeared on the screen.

"Don't know as what I don't envy that old fart. Look at him sleep. Not a care in the world. After what he did to us I'd like to see him roasting in hell… Well, he's unimportant now. Having his guts for garters wouldn't do us a bit of good. You say this image is from his computer?"

"From the angle of this shot I would say it was, but it could be from his TV or even his refrigerator if he has one in his office. I can ask the computer if you really want to know."

"No, it doesn't matter. So how are we going to use this to save gas?"

"Well the biggest problem we had was that we knew that lots of people were stealing a little gas here and there to sell on the black market. And we could catch any of them we wanted to just by putting a man on to watch them like we're watching Frobisher but we'd have to watch all day every day until they did something illegal. The problem was that there are millions of these petty thieves out there and we just don't have the personnel to watch what each person is doing all the time. Sure, if there's someone important like the head of a corporation, we can watch him because he's important enough to devote the manpower to him. But these little nickel-and-dime operations are so numerous and so small scale that we just can't do it that way."

"So we aren't much better off than we were before except at the top." The President sighed.

"No sir. We're much better off now. That's the good news I wanted to bring to you. We now have the computing power and, even more important, the software, to let the computer monitor people for us. We don't need the human staff. I can ask the computer to monitor everyone who sells gas and we can have a listing of everyone who has stolen gas and sold it during the last week. We can have the computer do it for us, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week every day of the year."

"How can the computer tell if the person's stealing? That seems like a pretty human judgment to me."

"Well I don't know for sure. I know they pay attention to whether the person is putting something into a gas tank or taking something out of it. I know they keep a total of how much gasoline should be in each tank. I'm not sure how they tell exactly but they tell me it's right over 90% of the time."

"So what are you going to do, arrest 3 million people for stealing gas?"

"No, of course not, sir. What I propose is this. First we notify each of the people who steals the gas that we know about it. We tell them the date and time of the theft and how much they took and who they sold it to. We fine them say 10 times the money they got for the stolen gas. We tell them that if they do it again we'll shut down their access to gas altogether. They won't have any idea how we know, so they'll have to figure that the people they sold it to ratted on them. Naturally, we can come down hard on the organized crime guys who are stealing by the tanker load."

"You think that'll solve the stolen gas problem? How much gas will that save?"

"We think it will save about 10% of the supply of gas that's being wasted now."

"Well, that'll certainly help. Go ahead with that plan, then. Have you got any good news about unemployment or heating oil or the food supply?"
“No sir. But we’ve got the bigger farms in line and the smaller farms are turning more to truck farming. They want to barter rather than sell their crops for money, what with the inflation and all. Also, I think we’ll produce enough food, so we’ll be OK in that line anyway. It’s the heating that we’re having trouble with. We’re increasing our coal production for electricity, but those coal-fired power plants turn out a lot of air pollution and the people down wind are going to have a lot of acid rain and such until we can replace the old power plant technology.

“I’m going to leave all that up to you. Do the best you can to get us ready for the transition. We have to have all the monitoring and surveillance equipment in place and the computer monitoring functioning smoothly by then or we’ll never keep the lid on when this crazy money thing falls flat on its face. I have my hands full now with the international situation. Practically every nation in the world where we owe money, and that’s most of the world, is having a fit over our going to this new money system. They claim it’s just a fancy way to renege on our debts. I keep trying to tell them that after a few months at most we will go back to the old system and we’ll be able to pay our debts then, but they don’t seem to believe me.

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“What’s wrong honey? You look like you’ve been sucking a lemon. Come go for a walk with me and tell me your troubles.”

Lozelle took Buddy by the arm and gently pulled him toward the door.

“You’ve been cooped up in that office all day. You need the exercise. Trust me. You’ll feel much better for a little exercise. Besides, your brain will work better if you get rid of some of that stress.”

“Oh, all right. Are you sure you want to go walking with a grouch, though?”

“But you’re my favorite grouch in all the world. I love you just as much whether you’re grouchy or not.”

Lozelle got him outside, linked her arm through his, and rested her head on his shoulder.

“Remember how we used to walk like this when we were in college together? Remember how sweet it was to stroll through campus arm in arm thinking about our future together?”

Buddy had a moment of guilt as he remembered what he had been thinking about during those walks, but like any good husband he kept such information to himself.

“Yes, darling. But I had no idea our future would be like this. You know what those federal… ah… rascals have done now? They sent me a quota for this year: so much soybeans, so much pork, so much chicken and so on. It’s like they want to tell me what to plant, how to plant it and every little thing. It’s like they owned these acres instead of me. I told them I didn’t have the gas to do all that and they said they’d let me keep more of the diesel oil we make but only if I grew what they wanted. They also had a few threats in case I decided to go it alone. Oh, they tried to dress it up as good, fatherly advice but it was clear they think they can run us out of business if we don’t go along.”

“What are we going to do? Are we going along with what they want like last fall? Are we going to fight them?”

“I don’t know how we can fight them, dear. I have over 300 men working for me on the farms and in the mills and such. If we fight, I don’t know how many of them would stick with us and how many would run. If even a third quit, that would leave us in bad shape. You can’t run a mill for long with a
third of your people missing. On the farms it would be even worse. All those hogs and chickens would be starving and we couldn’t even get the feed to them. If they take all our gas, we can’t do hardly anything. What I’d have to do is break up the big farms into little farms, each with one of two men running them with just what they had right there. They’d have to have some way to feed the stock from their local farm with no outside help. With a couple of years to prepare we might be able to feed half our present stock but if we start right now and tried it, we’d have to slaughter about three fourths of our animals and the rest would be on short rations. I just don’t see any way we can do this.”

“Can’t you just buy gas from people without using the rationing system?”

“Well, we might have last year but that market has dried up. From what I hear, you can’t get gas at all without having that ration. It’s like suddenly everyone is law-abiding, at least, when it comes to gas. Rumor has it that the feds have some new system that let’s them find out about every single violation of the ration laws. I would have thought that impossible. But it seems to be happening. Last week Jerome was complaining to me about how the feds were telling him what to grow. He said they threatened to expose certain facts from his past if he didn’t go along. You know, like they did with that movie star who was objecting to the identity checks. I mean, it’s like they know everything that’s happening all the time. I can’t even go to the bathroom without the feeling that someone’s watching.”

“But they can’t do that can they? I mean, don’t we have a constitutional right to privacy? And anyway, I haven’t seen anything on the news about it or in the paper. Surely there’d be something, someone who’d complain about it.”

“Honey, the papers are printed by people who have secrets they’d rather keep, too. And the news broadcasts are censored as well. You remember that the National Freedom Act they passed last year gave the FCC and Homeland Security the right to stop the publication of any story that would be against the national interest and a comfort to terrorists? Well, that means that if the Administration doesn’t like a story, it doesn’t let it be broadcast. We don’t have a free press any more. I’m not sure what freedoms we do have left that the government can’t take away and call it legal.”

“Dear, remember that Clark’s money will take effect next year. Then everything will be all right. We just have to hold on until then.”

Buddy gave her a big hug and said, “You’re right dear. We just have to hang on until next year. If we can just make it until 2013 we’ll be just fine.”

But behind Buddy’s big smile and confident voice he wasn’t thinking that way at all. In his heart he felt they were all doomed to a life of complete government controls. He had never heard of any illegal substance, whether it was drugs or sex or gambling, that wasn’t available on the black market. If the government could stop the owners of gas stations from selling a few gallons on the side and could also stop organized crime from doing the same thing on a large scale, then they had a grip on the people that was stronger than anything Buddy had ever heard of. Buddy was scared, scared right down to his socks.

“Are you going to do it, Clark?”

“What choice do we have? How are we going to live if we don’t?”

“We don’t have to work in Washington, you know. We could go outside the city to some of the small towns around here, in Virginia for example.”
“How’s that going to help? You really think they don’t have computers and rations and police out in the suburbs? You want to go live in the hills catching rabbits and deer and making clothes out of hides? Unless you want to completely give up civilization altogether, I don’t see how you can escape it. You either let them identify you to the computer or they arrest you and force it on you or they just don’t let anyone sell you food. I mean they’ve got you no matter what you do.”

“But won’t they be able to know everything you do if you let them make an ID for you?”

“Yes, but they can already do that. They’ve been keeping records on most people for at least 18 months now. How do you think they passed that National Freedom Act so easily? They had the dirt on every member of Congress. They didn’t even have to arrest any of them. They just let them know what they would release to the media if Congress didn’t do what they asked. Enough caved in that the administration didn’t even talk to some like old Frobisher. They let him talk against the bill and all but he doesn’t have an important committee chairmanship or anything. He doesn’t have much influence now that the Ten Points Bill has passed. They let him rant and rave about loss of freedoms and just didn’t let the media report it to the nation.”

“You mean it’s too late to do anything about it?”

“Well, what could we do for goodness sake? We can’t get a conspiracy going, they’d know about it within hours. We can’t go to the streets and form a mob because the citizens of this fair nation are like sheep heading to the slaughter. They have no idea what they are being threatened by. So long as they’re warm and fed and have their electronic toys, they’re happy. They don’t even care that the government’s controlling all their access to information, even the Internet. I tried editing some of the files on the old Ten Points website and it wouldn’t let me. It said I didn’t have the right password.”

“But won’t people realize that…”

“What good will it do when they realize it? There’s nothing they can do. This administration is in office for as long as it likes. Whoever is in control of that computer system is in control of everybody. They’ve got us by the short hairs. I tell you it’s 1984 but thirty years late.”

“Oh, Clark. It can’t be that bad. There are still editorials against the administration. There are still news items that show them failing at things. There is still an opposition.

“Those things don’t matter, really. They’re just for show. Everything the administration wants, it gets. They are even telling industry what to produce now. They have some computer program that divides up what the government wants produced and sends quotas or some such to each company. They try to say it’s part of the rationing program and just for the duration of the emergency, but you wait and see. They’ll keep it up and before long you won’t even be able to choose your own job.”

“But they can’t just control everybody that way. People would never stand for it.”

“They’re already standing for it. Why did all the major industries fall into line with the rationing plan with hardly a murmur of dissent? Why aren’t people taking to the streets about this national ID thing? They’re sheep, I tell you, sheep.”

“But we didn’t have hardly any starvation last winter and anyway, well; I got my ID last week. I haven’t noticed any problems. In fact, now I don’t have to have my credit card, I just talk to the computer at the store and it knows who I am. It’s really convenient. And you know how I used to have to write
down my passwords for using the computer? Well now I just turn it on and talk to it and it knows who I am. I don’t need that password, whatever it was."

“What about all your personal information that the businesses have been collecting about you over the years? You know those cards you let them scan when you wanted to get the discount? Well, I understand that all those databases have been taken over by the rationing system. They not only can identify you, they know what you eat for breakfast, they know what medicines you take, and they know how much you drink. They know more about you than we know about Lincoln. Your medical records are now in that damn computer. If you need medication like, say insulin, you can’t get it without their permission. So if you’re a diabetic, are you going to be able to stand up against the government? If your business depends on getting goods from some other business, the government will know and be able to shut you down by denying you access to those goods. There probably are no more than half a million people in the U.S. who are in any kind of position to object to anything this administration does.”

“But it will be all right when the Ten Points takes effect, won’t it?”

“Dream on, girl. Dream on.” Clark snorted.

Clark’s phone rang. Clark flipped it open and said, "Hello?"

“Your appointment for getting your ID has been changed to 4:00 this afternoon in room 336 Freedom Hall. Please be on time.”

“Who is this?” Clark demanded.

There was no answer.

At 4:00 pm Clark reported to room 336 of Freedom Hall. The building was quite modern with insulated glass which could be set to allow the heat in during cold weather and reflect it in hot weather. The décor was warm and cheerful with amusing art and soothing colors. The receptionist was cheerful and friendly, directing Clark to a small room with a chair and some impressive equipment. Clark was reluctant to go in, but a grey-haired woman old enough to be his grandmother entered first and invited Clark to sit before the instruments.

“What is this? It looks like some futuristic gadget for fitting glasses or something.”

“This will get the retinal image from your eyes. It’s painless. Just put your chin on the supports and look through the eyepieces. There, that was easy wasn’t it?”

Clark had hardly had time to blink. Please place your hand on this pad. Thank you. Now your other hand.”

Before Clark had time to think, let alone object, the woman turned on what appeared to be a small vacuum cleaner and brushed it over his hair a couple of times.

She smiled at Clark and said, “That should do it darling, now if you will just walk out the other way down this hall you will find an easy exit.”

“But wait, what did you do?”
“We got your retinal images as I told you. We took your finger prints on both hands. We got your odor and a sample of your DNA from your hair. We got images of your face from those cameras there in the corners of the room and the chair measured your weight. As you walk down the hallway here, the computer will note your way of moving. We’ll be able to match these features up with your dental records in case your body is found and is difficult to identify. I think that it’s so comforting to your family to know for sure whether the body found is really yours or not, don’t you?”

Clark was almost shaking as he walked down the hallway. His body? What was she talking about, his body? At the end of the hallway on the left was another door marked EXIT in red letters. He pushed but nothing happened. The door behind him, however, did open and a young man who looked nineteen or twenty beckoned him to follow him. Clark felt like running but when he looked back down the hallway, the grey-haired lady was smiling at him and nodding. He went where the young man indicated.

“Mr. Minton, please have a seat.” The youngster gestured to a soft looking chair that looked like it would probably recline if asked.

Clark tried to sit on just the front edge of the chair but the chair almost imperceptibly demanded that he lean back to savor the comfort of the welcoming cushions. Within a few seconds Clark was leaned back and relaxed.

“I understand that you’re somewhat nervous about the National ID system. I’m hoping I can allay your fears. You see, there really is nothing to be afraid of. Just think back a couple of hundred years. Almost everyone lived on a farm or in a village where everybody knew them by sight. Everywhere you went and everyone you met was familiar. So if a dangerous stranger came into the village, everyone would know at once to be suspicious. Everyone would keep an eye on the stranger. This meant that the community could defend itself against an outside threat.”

“Today, we’re surrounded by strangers. There are terrorists who will even sacrifice their own lives to damage us. We can’t keep everyone out. But we can know our own. We can separate those who are part of our community from those who are outsiders. Naturally, we welcome tourists who only want to enjoy our resorts and many attractions. But we must be able to defend ourselves against that terrorist threat. Surely you can see that, Mr. Minton.”

Clark found himself nodding.

“Our computer system, which is the most sophisticated in the world, I’m proud to say, can keep watch for us. It can provide that watchful eye on the stranger which ordinary people can no longer provide. It can detect the dangerous act almost before it happens. It is our most certain defense against terrorism.”

“Sadly, some people don’t recognize this strong defense as being good. They fear that it’ll be used against loyal Americans in an attempt to control their lives. But let me assure you there is no such intent on the part of this administration. This system is purely defensive. If that were not the case, surely it would be used in cases in which young men such as ourselves make injudicious remarks in unguarded moments. Surely such young men would be brought to account. There’s no doubt that they would be arrested as traitors to America even if they had connections in high places. They wouldn’t be allowed to spread sedition and false rumors about the intentions of the administration. They might find their rations cancelled or find themselves one of those unfortunates who have no job.”
“But you know, Mr. Minton, such things are not happening. I mean, you are yourself a young man and I am sure that you, like me, have said some things which we agree were injudicious and even silly. Perhaps we were trying to impress some young woman with our daring or perhaps we wanted to see how gullible they were. Maybe we even believed to a small degree what we were saying. But, just between us, Mr. Minton, what we said was really not quite the thing in these perilous times. Our nation really is under serious threats both internal and external. It’s at these times that we must keep our heads and show the leadership which persons of our background and education know is within us. We must help the others, those who are less well-educated and less knowledgeable about the world, to accept what is being done for them and the decisions being made on their behalf.”

“You and I both know that this national ID is a necessary part of the defense of America and that it will greatly cut down on crimes of all sorts. It will make life easier and safer for everyone, everyone, that is, who is not working against the best interests of the American people. For those who would harm America, it will make life very difficult indeed.”

“Well, Mr. Minton, I’m glad we could have this little talk. I’m sure that you feel much better now about your situation, much more secure knowing that by getting your ID you are helping to defend America against the terrorist threat and making life easier and safer for all those around you.”

Clark automatically accepted the hand extended toward him by the smiling youth, who thereby assisted Clark to get out of the ever-so-comfortable chair.

Clark found himself nodding once again and, almost in a trance, left the room. This time the EXIT sign spoke the truth and the door opened easily on another part of the main lobby. The décor was the same. The colors were still soothing. But somehow Clark found himself trembling slightly, his hands clammy, his back covered with cold sweat.

He felt like he had just been threatened. He felt like he had just been told to stay in line or he'd have a serious struggle to survive. He wanted to run but had no idea in what direction. He felt like a rat in a maze with no cheese at the end. He left Freedom Hall and went out onto the streets of the capital. The weather was delightful, still warm from late summer but with the first coolness of the coming autumn. The trees were still green and many of the cars had their windows open. The occasional convertible went by, some with handsome men or beautiful women in them, but Clark was in no mood to appreciate the scenery.

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“Why can't we bring these charges? With the evidence we've got we could have an indictment in no time.”

“Look, the Attorney General says we're to leave them alone. You want to argue with him, be my guest.”

“But these are the big boys. These are some of the top heads of organized crime. We have audio and video of them ordering killings and directing prostitution and drugs and smuggling. You name the crime. We have them cold on it.”

“You just don't get it, do you? These guys are helping us out with our oil problems. They have contacts all over the world. They can come and go where our officials can't even think of going. They're responsible for getting millions of barrels of oil from Russia and the Middle East. They get tankers from South America despite their embargo on oil to the U.S.”
“Are you telling me they get a free hand here to run their crimes so long as they can bring in the oil?”

“That’s about the size of it, yes. They scratch our itch and we leave them alone. How many lives do you think that oil they bring in saves? How many jobs would be gone now if that oil didn’t reach our ports? Sure we could put these guys in jail, but what good would that do? Somebody else would just take their places. You think organized crime happens just because a few people are mean enough and powerful enough to be thugs? No, son, it’s because they can make big money doing it. How much money do you think they get for one tanker of oil? If the oil companies could get it legally or illegally on their own, don’t you think they’d have done it by now? Well, these organized crime guys can apply pressure even on governments and those they can’t force they can trick or bribe.”

“So what am I to do with all this evidence, throw it away?”

“Don’t be silly. Keep it safe. In fact, keep more than one copy and hide them in different places. That evidence could come in handy later.”

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“Boy, look at that! She’s really hot. Look what she’s doing!”

“God, what I wouldn’t give to have her in the sack.”

“Are you recording this?”

“Every second of it. Luckily we came in before she started to undress so we got the whole thing. With a little editing this can make us some big bucks on the international market. We might want to change her face a little, maybe make her look more like somebody famous and we can always put in different backgrounds so it’ll be hard to identify where she is.”

“Look, she’s climaxing. It just keeps going and going. No wonder she works so hard at it. How much of the afterglow do you think we should get?”

“All of it. Just as long as she keeps moving or making sounds. They can always edit it out at their end if they don’t want it.”

“This ought to get us 15 to 20 don’t you think?”

“More, I should think because she’s so natural and so young. This is prime cut stuff. There just aren’t any professionals that look like that. I mean it’s obvious she thinks she’s alone because of the way she ignores the camera. She has no idea she’s being watched and taped. Of course, we’ll have to crop the picture a little because she isn’t centered in the frame and such. But that’s easy.”

“Are you sure we can get away with this? I mean this is a government installation and government equipment we’re using here. I don’t think those cameras and microphones in the computers are supposed to be even known about by the public. What if my boss catches us?”

“Then you get the shaft. What do you think? But he ain’t catching you, because you set up a monitoring program on him. If he gets even suspicious, you’ll know and we can change our operation. Now have you got any more of these, maybe some oriental or black girls?”

“Shoot, yes. I set up the filter to find people taking off their clothes and I must have gotten 10,000 hits the first day and that was even restricting it to women between 15 and 30. The problem is that you
have to go through lots of not so good stuff to find the really good ones and it all takes time. The computer isn’t very good yet at knowing who’s pretty and who’s not. Also, I don’t dare have it record all of them since that would be noticeable. So I find some pretty ones and watch them until I find one that does some interesting stuff, then I revisit her at times she’s likely to be performing until I catch her right.”

“Swell, but have you got them on tape already?”

“Well no. It may be days before I catch another one like this.”

“Okay, here’s what we’ll do. I’ll bring in some recording gear and you have the computer feed as many streams as the gear can handle to my recorder. Then we’ll look over the streams we got to see what’s best. We should be able to speed up your operation quite a lot that way without it showing up on your records. When we get it smoothed out we should be able to get 10-20 of these sessions a day.”

“But they’re just women masturbating. Don’t we want more variety than that?”

“Of course, especially if there’s some perversions. But I thought your filter was set for just young women.”

“Well it is, but I don’t like to see other guys getting what I can’t have, so I didn’t follow up on those. There’s lots of them with couples making out, too.”

“We have a gold mine here, my boy.”

“I don’t know about this. If we do too much of this, we’re likely to get caught.”

“We have a once in a lifetime opportunity here and you turn chicken on me.”

“I ain’t chicken. I’m the one who set it up in the first place ain’t I? I’m the one who told you about it, wasn’t I? But this that I’m doing is small scale. It’s easy to miss what I’m doing. What you want to do is big scale. That’s going to make waves. If we put out lots of these things, there’s some of them going to get back to the U.S. and anybody who’s in on the monitoring program is going to know they must have been made using our secret gear. Then they’ll start checking on everybody who does monitoring and the chances of being discovered go way up.”

“Okay, we’ll be discreet and make sure we cover up as much as we can about how these things were recorded. I’ve got the software that can replace everything but the actors with whatever background we like. We can even make the camera angle appear to move so it seems like there’s a live cameraman doing the filming. Trust me on this. I know what I’m doing.”

“Yeah. Right. You probably have a good lawyer, too, but I don’t. I’m just a computer geek. You’re the operative with all the field experience and all the contacts. You’re the guy who’s got all the underworld friends. You’re the guy who says he can make us rich with this.”

“Calm down. We’ll be very careful. We’ll sell to the most select markets, only.”

“And they’ll sell to everybody and his brother. Once you sell one of these, it’s out of your control. There’s no telling where it’ll go. And it’s all digital. Making copies won’t degrade the picture to the point that nothing is recognizable. That hundredth copy is just as sharp and clear as the original.
Every hint and clue as to how we’re getting this stuff is right there, clear and sharp in all the copies. I’m telling you this is only going to work if we keep it small scale and control all the copies."

“Listen boy, you think you’re the only one who’s making these films? There must be 50 guys and probably some women, too, who’re making pirate copies of what they can see with this stuff. You think the market isn’t going to be flooded with these things in a year or two? We’ve got to get our stuff out there while there’s still a good market for it, before the flood of this stuff drives the price down.”

“I never thought of that.”

“You don’t think you’re the only monitor who has computer skills, do you? You don’t think the guys who put this thing together were ignorant of what it could do? Why probably half the people who applied for these monitoring jobs are secret voyeurs. If they weren’t, this job would bore the pants off them. And you just know most of them are going to realize they can make copies of this stuff and sell them. They’re bound to. Look how popular reality television was a few years ago. This is reality television on steroids. There’s big money in this, but it’s only going to last a short time and then the market will be saturated and the price will go down because there’ll be so many suppliers. We have to strike while the iron’s hot, boy. We have to go for it now full throttle."

“But what if we get caught?”

“Then we lose our gamble. There’s risks in everything, especially the things that pay off big time like this will. Besides, you already took the biggest risk when you told me what you had access to. But that risk is paying off for you because you could never have carried this off on your own and you really can trust me. I’ll take good care of you, really good care.”

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“Damn potholes! That one almost took out my suspension system. I’ll probably have to get the tire rebalanced. Why the hell can’t they fix these streets right, for God’s sake?”

“Dear, you always told me it was because they used the low bidder on all the road projects.”

“That’s no excuse. Can’t they oversee those guys and make sure they use decent materials and good workmanship? All it would take would be one or two honest guys going round to visit the repair crews.”

“But weren’t you complaining about the council being hand in glove with the developers? Weren’t you saying that they scratch each others’ backs with contracts and campaign contributions? Why would the inspectors not be on the take, too? I remember hearing about Chicago back in last century having building inspectors and whatnot who would take payoffs from the crime bosses to let them get away with all sorts of overcharges and inferior materials in their work. How can you expect anything else here?”

“I don’t know but I’ll tell you this. I’ll vote for anyone who’ll get the streets fixed so they’ll stay fixed without raising taxes.”

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“Okay, Strather, how do you explain this? Your salary is only $178,000 a year with the bureau, yet you’ve spent over $200,000 on your vacations to Atlantic City and Vegas in the last year and you somehow managed to pay off your $600,000 mortgage 22 years ahead of time.”
“Investments. I’ve made some good investments. I play the market and I’ve done very well at it.”

“You do indeed play the market, don’t you? You have done very well. How much would you say you profited over the last year playing the market, Strather? One million? Two million? Five million?”

“Well, more like 20 million, actually.”

“And what was your starting investment, if I may be so bold as to ask?”

“$5,000.”

“Five thousand dollars? And when did you begin investing?”

“Well, it was back in 2010. August, I think.”

“And how did you do for the first six months that you invested? The market wasn’t doing too well in those days if I remember correctly.”

“Not so good. I lost about half my money.”

“So to what would you attribute this startling turnaround in your investment fortunes, Strather? Did you find a four leaf clover? Did you invest in rabbits’ feet? Did you marry a witch?”

“Well I learned to do better. I learned more how to tell the good companies from the bad.”

“Your first very successful investment seems to have been selling short on what had been a high flyer stock. You sold short right before the news broke that some of the officers in the corporation were looting the company and moving to South America. Just how did your new insight let you know that company’s top officers were a bunch of swindlers?”

“Well, I don’t know. It just seemed to me to be a company that had reached its peak in its price and would decline soon.”

“So it was just a coincidence, then?”

“I guess you could say that, yes.”

“So next you sold short several other companies and in each case they shortly failed and the price of their stock plummeted. You increased your profit quite a bit in the rest of 2011, I believe.”

“Well, I was learning how to spot those companies which were unsound. I did have some good luck there as well.”

“But we don’t only find you selling short on failing companies, Strather, we also begin to find investments in companies shortly before they announce new products or that some other company is making an offer for their stock. In fact, every single time you bought the stock of a company, it shortly thereafter has a surge in its market value. What magic process, what brilliant inspiration, helped you to make these astounding selections in the stock market?”

“I don’t know.”
“Then let me make a suggestion to you Strather. Perhaps it was what one might call insider information. Perhaps it was information you acquired while monitoring the boardroom conversations of these corporations. Perhaps you had information which only the officials of those corporations had. Don’t you think that might explain a lot of your success?”

“But I didn’t. I only monitored what I was supposed to monitor. Sure I was on a monitoring team but I didn’t use any of that knowledge to guide my investments, really.”

“I’m afraid the evidence goes quite against you Strather, especially the evidence of your own computer. You see, it was watching you while you were watching those executives. It was keeping track of what you were doing and what you were seeing and hearing. Did you really think your own computer wouldn’t have a modern chip, Strather?”

“I guess I never really thought about it.”

“You mean you didn’t know how those images were being collected from those boardrooms and offices? You didn’t know about the special features those chips had? Could it be that you were so greedy you just didn’t think any further than how much money you could make on the market with your insider knowledge?”

“Yes… What are you going to do with me?”

“That depends on whether you choose to be cooperative, Strather.”

“I don’t understand. What do you want of me?”

“Like I said, I just want your cooperation.”

“But what do you want me to do? I don’t know what you want me to do.” Strather was almost crying from stress and fear.

“It won’t be difficult. I merely want you to share your inside information with me and invest only when I tell you it’s safe.”

“That’s all?”

“Well, not quite all but it will be all for now. I won’t even ask you for a contribution to my favorite charity. You know, Strather, you really have been unforgivably greedy. Didn’t you know that such success as you’ve had would attract attention? Did you really think that increasing your wealth so precipitously would go unnoticed? It’s lucky for you that I was the one who detected these events rather than someone else. Others might not be so tolerant of your activities. They might not be so understanding or forgiving. They might seek promotion by revealing your activities to the authorities. Yes, Strather, you have been very lucky all around. But you mustn’t press your luck any more. You must never think you can deceive me because just as you watch those business leaders, I will be watching you. I will know if you lie to me or try to hide from me your real activities.”

“Yes, what are you going to do with me?”

“Now, Strather, we’ll both do very well in this if you do exactly as I tell you. But you’ll be most unhappy if you fail me.”

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"Oh, Clark, you’re no fun any more. You never want to snuggle like you used to. What’s the matter with you?"

"Nothing. I’m just fine. I just, well, feel funny that’s all. Let’s go walk in the park."

"Again? It seems like all you want to do is walk in the park these days. Look, it’s almost winter. There are no leaves on the trees. There’re no flowers or birds or anything to see there. Why do you want to walk in the park?"

"Come on. I’ll tell you when we get there. Besides maybe we can get something to eat. Have you got any ration left? Well, I’ll get something and you can have half of it."

Clark swept the young lady out of the apartment and soon they were across the street wandering through the park. The park was rather dark because the city no longer bothered to try to light such areas at night. Street lights used too much power. So they had only the glow of twilight and the light from some of the buildings nearby. The moon was only a quarter full, so it was not much help. After they were away from the street, Clark stopped and put his hand to Mindy’s cheek.

"Darling, I’m sorry about how I’ve been treating you these last few months. I really do love our snuggle times but since I got my ID done a couple of months ago I have the feeling I’m being watched all the time. It’s like there was somebody in the room with us. I can’t explain but I get self-conscious. I hate that feeling. You’re still so desirable that I could just eat you up and I want you like crazy. I have dreams about loving you all the time. I can hardly work sometimes for thinking of you."

Mindy smiled at the compliment and snuggled close to Clark, looking up at his silhouette in the deep gloom. Clark hugged her close, enjoying the contact even though they were wearing coats.

"We could go to a hotel," Mindy suggested.

"No! That would be a thousand times worse. All those mirrors attached to the walls and the light fixtures. Any of them could be bugs."

"Clark," she drew a little away, "are you getting paranoid? Why would anyone want to spy on us?"

"I don’t know. It’s not as if I were somebody particularly important. Sure I work for a Congressman. But he’s not an important man in government any more. He isn’t a key voter on any of the bills. Usually he’s one of only a handful of people voting against the bills that get passed. People still come to his office but he isn’t in on the really important meetings of the powerful people any more. I don’t think he knows any secrets that anyone would want to know. I can’t explain it."

"What about your father? Is he important enough that they might want some information on him?"

"Buddy? Buddy doesn’t tell me anything about the business. I get more from Mama than I do from him. And she mostly tells me about the farm hands and the schools she started for the hands’ kids. I mean, there isn’t anything that’s secret about anything they’re doing as far as I can tell."

"Then what makes you think they’d be watching you?"

"I tell you, I don’t know. It’s just a feeling. It’s like, I don’t know, maybe like when you were a kid and your parents told you that God was watching all the time. No, that isn’t it. God isn’t a dirty old man drooling over watching some young couple make love. It’s more like in a horror movie when the
music tells you that the couple making out in the convertible are about to be attacked by the monster. It’s that feeling that something you can’t see is watching you with evil intent.”

“Clark, that’s awful. How can you stand it?”

“I don’t stand it. I go walk in the park when it gets too bad. That’s why I keep dragging you out here wearing your coat when I would rather have you inside wrapping me around you to keep warm.” With that, Clark enfolded Mindy in his arms and kissed her thoroughly.

“Here, here. What are you two up to?” the gruff voice of authority barked at them from behind the blinding light of a powerful flashlight.

“Nothing. We were just taking a walk in the park.”

“Are you all right, Miss?”

“Of course, officer. I’m fine. He was just trying to keep me warm.”

“Well, it would be best if you went home to get warm. There’ve been too many robberies in the parks now that it gets dark early. You’d better move along now. Get on home where you’ll be safe.”

“All right. We’re going.” Clark said linking arms with Mindy and directing their steps toward the park exit.

“Home is supposed to be safe,” Clark thought. “It isn’t supposed to feel like a trap or a prison cell. It isn’t supposed to be this way.”
Chapter Thirteen: Real Estate

In which Niall meets Jeeves, goes to market, meets Sam, and is turned down.

Next morning Niall was more adjusted to the time zone and didn’t awaken quite so early. But he still felt that no one else was up yet so he stayed in bed for a while, musing on what he had learned.

The more he thought about it, the more certain he became that the key to the whole matter was in the Payers. They were the only new element in society since he’d left that seemed to have any great power. The Payers were everywhere, it appeared. They also seemed to have an in with the computer. ‘I wonder who does the programming of the accounts computers? They’d have to know if they were being controlled. Maybe I can get a job related to those payer computers. Of course my computer knowledge is about 15 years out of date but there must be something I can do.’

With at least some vague plan for how to proceed, Niall got up and fetched in the day’s rations and put them away as yesterday. Being a little later, he missed the guy who delivered them this time. He went over to the TV and looked for controls. Failing to find any and being frustrated he muttered to himself, “How do you turn this stupid TV on anyway?”

The TV came on and a quiet voice said, “Just ask for the program you want, sir.”

Niall was a little startled. Damn computer. He asked for the morning news and there it was. The news anchor was telling about some tornadoes in the South and that local businesses felt that they had adequate supplies and labor for the moment. Then he went to a description of Chesapeake Bay and its recovery from pollution, saying that use of the bay for fishing was still inappropriate and would be for about three more years. The oysters were making a comeback but would need that long to increase their numbers and get the waters moderately clean again. For some reason, that struck the newsman as important. Oh, well. The third item was international news about the whaling industry. That was enough for Niall.

“Where’s all the good news?” Niall said quietly.

Once again the computer’s calm voice said, “What kind of news would you like to see, sir? We have the following general categories.” The screen showed about 30 different topics with the expected such as “weather”, “sports” (broken down into several categories), “local” (several categories) and “business” (categories) but also home-schooling tips, cooking suggestions, “health” (categories), “science” (categories). “But if you would like to give a specific topic I could, perhaps, find some items of interest?”

Wodehouse’s character Jeeves! That’s who they modeled this computer on. Those sneaky… His level of respect for and fear of the people who had programmed these computers went up another notch. Jeeves the butler/valet always sounded subservient and always seemed obedient but also always managed to control Bertie Wooster, his so-called master. Jeeves also had a way of seeming to materialize in a room rather than walking in like other people, just like this cursed computer. And Jeeves never cracked a smile or showed any expression other than respectful attention any more than the computer did.

“How about some national news and do you have a name?” Niall said.

“A name, sir? What name would you like me to have, sir?”
“What do the children call you?”

“Lora still calls me ‘puter. John calls me a variety of things depending on his mood, sir.”

“Well I am going to call you Jeeves.”

“Very good, sir. Your national news, sir.”

Niall could swear that the computer was laughing at him, but that was probably just his imagination.

The national news seemed to be largely concerned with progress reports on several large projects (such as cleaning up the Chesapeake Bay) and reports on how much money was being allocated for various general areas such as public health and transportation. There was also an essay segment in which the essayist presented a case for making all bus travel a necessity rather than distinguishing local from long distance. Normally Niall would have been bored with such matters since he wasn’t directly involved in any of them. He thought they sounded too much like PBS in the old days. But that line about the allocation of money was riveting to him. Whoever was allocating the money was obviously in charge. “He who pays the piper calls the tune,” Niall thought to himself. I need more on that. Since it’s in the news, there could only be a little suspicion if I ask for more news about that.

“How about more news on money allocated for projects and things, Jeeves?”

“Very good, sir.”

This time the items were more systematically presented, going from the largest allocations and working their way downward. For some reason Niall got the idea that the computer was doing a civics lesson just for him since the dates on some of the items were over a month old. From time to time he asked for more detail on some item and it was quickly provided. The items presented were in a variety of formats and had different people doing the voice-over. Most were professional but a couple seemed almost amateurish.

Niall decided to ask about allocations for necessities for the local apartment building but the closest he could come was for the neighborhood. By then, the rest of the family began to make noises like they were getting up, so Niall said, “That will be all, Jeeves.”

“Very good, sir.”

The computer is getting even worse. Now it’s even beginning to sound like it has an English accent.

So someone was setting a budget of considerable proportions for the entire country. Whoever was setting that budget was in charge. Such a budget implied, no positively shouted, a controlled economy. It was centralized planning and no doubt about it. Childhood memories of the fall of Russian Communism and the cold war were brought to mind. It was all of a piece with computers taking the place of neighborhood spies, monitoring everyone’s behavior to a degree that even the most ardent Stalinist would have envied. They weren’t even trying to hide it. Niall could almost feel the walls closing in on him. Even looking at the TV screen made him want to shudder.

He looked out the window and saw other apartment buildings. More of the masses trapped in mindless dependence. He had to get out of here. Brianna would never come with him under the circumstances. She and Tony were completely unaware of their cage. Well, perhaps Tony was aware but it was clear that Brianna was not. Tony might be part of the problem but Niall no longer thought
that he was likely part of the controlling organization. No, that organization was too big and too much in power to need to hide subversives among the residents of lower-class apartments, especially when the computer could do the spying for them so much more easily and thoroughly.

“Brianna, I was thinking that I’d imposed on you enough for one visit. I was thinking of getting an apartment of my own so I can start getting settled in somewhere rather than making your place my hotel.”

“Dad, so soon?” Brianna sounded as if she were actually surprised and disappointed. He would have thought his condemnation of her home-schooling would have made her want him out of the apartment. It was certainly making him uncomfortable. It would, for example, be very hard to sit quietly and watch her conducting classes for her children. Niall was sure he needed to go, and the sooner the better. He could visit her on weekends when the lack of schooling wouldn’t be so blatant.

“Dear, I’ve been without my own place for almost 20 years. I really want some place I can call my own.”

As Tony entered, Brianna turned to him and said, “Dad’s leaving already. He’s only been here for a couple of days and he’s going again.”

“I hope it wasn’t anything we did or said, sir.”

“Oh no, Tony.” Niall quickly responded. “It’s me, not you. I feel a need to have a place of my own. I’ve been without a place I could call my own for over 15 years. It isn’t as if I were going to move across the country or anything. I expect to get something not so far away but just not right here on top of you.”

“Well, sir, I want you to know you’re welcome to come back at any time. You’re family, sir; you don’t even need to warn us you’re coming over. Just drop in on us.”

“Do you have a place in mind, Dad?”

“No, I thought I’d go to the housing office and see what was available.”

“If you tell Rose what kind of place you need and where, she can probably tell you which office to try first. She’s very good at that sort of thing,” Brianna said.

“Yes,” Tony said. “Since they all have the same listings available, it doesn’t really matter which housing office you go to as far as seeing what’s available. You choose a housing office on the basis of how good they are at finding a good match for you personally.”

“Okay, I’ll be happy to talk to Rose again. How do I get in touch with her?”

“She told you yesterday. Don’t you remember? Hers is the apartment just to the left as you enter the foyer. Of course I guess that’s to your right as you get off the elevator. Just tell the computer there that you’d like to see Rose when she has a minute.”

“If you need to see Rose, any TV in the building could tell her if she’s near one. But we think it more polite to only ask to see her in a professional capacity from the lobby TV. If I wanted to visit her as a friend, I could use a TV here in the apartment. We could even chat over the TVs if we wanted. I told our TV that since you were visiting we wouldn’t be entertaining and it’s passed on the word whenever anyone asked to talk. Of course, if it were an emergency or something of that sort it would tell me.”
"Are all the TVs linked to the Web?"

"Of course. Why cut yourself off from the world?" Brianna said.

"Well... there might be reasons," Niall said, feeling he had revealed too much by his question.

"So just shut down the TV. Then it'll ignore everything short of a fire or something until you use the password." Tony said.

Niall didn’t believe for a minute that the computer in the TV would really stop listening and recording everything. If it could hear the password it could hear everything. Brianna and Tony were living in a fool’s paradise.

By this time Niall had finished his breakfast and it sounded like the kids were up, so he went down to see about having a talk with Rose. As it turned out, Rose was already in the lobby talking with the delivery man about a new family that would be moving in. Niall sat in a chair, one that did not face the TV, and waited patiently for Rose’s attention.

"Good morning, Honey. May I help you?" Rose was obviously a morning person.

"I need to get a place of my own to live. Brianna said I should start my search by talking to you."

"What kind of place did you want? Do you want something near Brianna? We do have an opening on the sixth floor."

"I was thinking of getting some place peaceful... more away from the city. Some place I can rest and maybe get some small job."

"What kind of work?"

"I hadn’t really thought much about it. I’ve been out of the job market for almost 20 years so I’ll probably have to start out with something simple."

"I think I know just the person for you then, Sam Witherspoon. He’s a housing agent. His place is, ah; well just tell the bus driver you want to go to Sam Witherspoon’s Employment. He’ll know how to get you there. Take the Westbound bus."

"This is a free service, right?" Niall said.

"Sure. Finding a place to live isn’t a luxury. Why use money for that?"

"Good," Niall said "and many thanks. You’ve been quite helpful."

"My pleasure, I assure you." said Rose with a big smile.

Niall, figuring there was no time like the present, left the apartment building and crossed the street to the westbound bus stop.

Meanwhile, back in the apartment Brianna was clearly distressed.

"I’m sure he’s leaving because he thinks the kids should be in school."
“Darling, I’ve been thinking about this and I believe him when he says he just wants a place of his own. I think he gets upset about our home-schooling because it feels like a rejection of his whole career,” Tony said taking her in his arms. “You have to remember that he had given his life to helping other nations set up school systems. He comes home and finds that you and half the other mothers in the country are keeping their kids home from school. It’s like they were saying that he’d been hurting all those children in those nations he helped. Naturally it made him rather emotional.”

“But we didn’t reject him. There are lots of reasons for kids to attend school; it’s just that home-schooling is better for most families these days,” Brianna said, nestling against Tony’s chest.

“When he visits we’ll just have to reassure him that what he did was really worthwhile and needed. I think that will keep him calm when the kids’ education comes up.”

“I sure hope you’re right because I will not give up teaching them myself.”

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After about ten miles of riding the bus and two transfers (the bus driver had asked his computer about Sam’s place and it told him the route Niall should take) Niall was dropped off on a residential street in what looked, for all the world, like a small town. There was a grain elevator near the railroad station and the single business district was only about four blocks long. The address Niall had been given was for a single family dwelling with a cardboard sign on the porch proudly proclaiming “Sam Witherspoon’s Employment.” Niall didn’t know whether to take the sign as an announcement that Sam had a job or as the advertisement of a business, but the address matched what he’d been given, so he went up on the porch and knocked on the door. A black man of about 70 who looked like he’d been farming for most of those years opened the door.

“Come in, come in. I’m Sam Witherspoon. You must be Niall Campbell. Rose told me to expect you. Have a seat. Just push that cat off the sofa if you’d rather sit there. Can I get you something to drink? Coffee? Tea? Juice?”

One would have thought Niall was a neighbor who had just dropped in for a chat.

“Coffee will be fine.” Niall managed to get in.

Sam stepped into the next room, which appeared to be a small kitchen with a short refrigerator, small stove, and a single sink. “Cream or sugar?” Sam asked.

“No, I like it black.”

Sam did something at the counter and came back in a couple of minutes with two steaming mugs and offered Niall one.

“Just put it anywhere there on that table. It cleans up real easy.”

Sam sat in an easy chair, sighed, and put his feet up on a hassock.

“You in any kind of a hurry, friend?” Sam said as he leaned his head back on the chair and almost closed his eyes.
“No particular hurry but I would like to have something to move into today if possible. You see, I feel a little awkward imposing on my daughter. She says I’m not a burden but you know how women are. They say that but they don’t really mean it.”

“So what kind of life do you lead, friend? Are you one who likes to be up and doing first thing or do you let life come at you a little slower than that? You got something that is pushing you or are you content to let the world drift by?

“Neither, actually. I just want some place comfortable that I can call my own for a while. I also need to get a job of some kind. I’m kind of at loose ends on that. Maybe something involving computers.”

Sam’s eyebrows went up at that but his voice continued to be calm and his question seemed to ignore it. “You like neighbors close by or down the road a piece?”

“I guess I like a few close by but not very many. Does that make sense?”

“Friend, I think what you want is what we got plenty of. There are several small houses vacant in the area and some duplexes. Is a duplex a little too close for you?” Sam was working his way lower and lower into his chair and his eyes were definitely closed now.

“I think a small house would be best. What would it cost me?”

“Let’s see, just the one person, might use a room for work, no car. I think I should be able to put you on to something for about 15 to 20 dollars a month. Of course that’s assuming you want to rent rather than buy.”

Niall didn’t even need to think about that one. He was pretty sure he wouldn’t be here more than a couple of months.

“Renting will be just fine. These houses very far from the bus line?”

“Well, some are and some aren’t. I’ll show you the ones closer to the bus line first. If none of those suit we can try some further out.”

“Sounds good to me,” Niall said.

The cat jumped into Sam’s lap, causing Sam to jerk and almost spill what little was left of his coffee.

“Cat says it’s time for us to get goin’ and leave him alone to sleep,” Sam said, pulling himself up out of the chair with apparent reluctance. The cat, having displaced Sam, converted itself into a furry doughnut and closed its eyes.

“Car’s out this way,” Sam said and took Niall out the back to a detached garage. The car was at least 20 years old but was obviously something Sam took some pride in. It was clean and shiny and looked in perfect condition. As they got in, Sam said, “Car belongs to my grandson, actually, but he lets me drive it some when I got a client.”

The car started readily and ran quietly. They went through much of what there was of the town and stopped at a small, neat house with several well-kept flower beds and well-tended shrubs.
Sam said, “Don’t know if we can get you this one. The widow Larkin expects whoever lives here to tend the plants. The place sometimes is vacant for several months at a time. But it’s the best-looking place on the list so I like to show it first.”

Niall didn’t even get out of the car. “I wouldn’t want to be responsible for those flowers. I think I have a brown thumb. If they were to die, I’d feel terrible and the widow would just get mad at me.”

“Yeah, I know how you feel. The next one is just a couple of blocks over.”

Sam maneuvered the car easily on the nearly traffic-free streets. The next house needed some yard work but looked to be in good repair. Sam showed Niall over the house and Niall thought it would do just fine. He didn’t mind wielding a lawn mower from time to time. The furnishings must be what people call “standard”, because they all had that sturdy look with rounded corners. But he never had paid much attention to furniture so long as it was comfortable and the chairs sat pretty good.

Niall said that this one would do fine, so Sam took him several blocks over to the home of the owner. In the yard was a small, slender man with a sharp face and jogging shoes that didn’t go with his suit at all.

Sam and Niall approached and Sam said “Morning, Will.”

“Morning, Sam.”

“Got a gentleman here who kinda likes your house over on Putnam Street. That’s a $25 house for a single, ain’t it?”

“Depends on how he uses the spare room. What you aim to do with it mister?”

Niall said, “Well I don’t quite know just yet. I haven’t settled on a job so I don’t know whether I’d need it for work or not.”

“What kind of work is your line?” Will’s look got a little sharper and his smile had faded almost completely away.

“I haven’t had a chance to really settle on a line. I’ve been out of the country for a few years and my old line doesn’t seem much use any more.”

“How long you been away, mister?” Will asked.

“Going on to about 17 years, I guess.”

“Where you been for 17 years?” The tone of the questions was no longer friendly but was getting definitely suspicious.

“The Middle East, back in the mountains. I was doing some work for the government.”

“Theirs, or ours?”

“Both, actually. Our government wanted me to do some work helping their government.”

Niall was getting rather uncomfortable and a little peeved.
“I don’t really think you’d like my house much, mister. I think you better look elsewhere,” Will said with decision.

“Wait, it’s a really nice house. I think I could like it quite well. How about $40 a month.” Niall said.

“You can make it $1000 a month for all I care. I still won’t let you stay in any house of mine. Sam, get him out of here.” With that, Will turned and walked back into his house.
Chapter Fourteen: Countdown

In which tensions rise as the day of transition nears.

-------- Wednesday, November 7, 2012 --------

“Congratulations, Mr. President. You have won a resounding victory. I think it shows the good sense of the American people in this time of crisis.”

“Thanks. I really don’t think the nation could have survived if we’d lost. I know I owe a lot of the credit to you and your efforts behind the scenes.”

“We just did what was necessary, sir. You might have won even without our pressure on the media. I mean, there were a lot of the news guys and editorialists who would have supported you anyway. And remember that we didn’t even have to use the fake vote counts we had ready. I really think you would have had a good chance. The American people understand that you’re doing what’s best for them. They want a strong leader in this time of crisis.”

“Well I certainly hope that next time there won’t be a need for such steps, but it was very reassuring to know that one way or another we were going to win this election.”

-------- December 27, 2012 near the Mexican border --------

“I tell you they’re coming across the border as soon as we switch over to the new money.”

“And you have this on the authority of your maid?”

“It’s all over the neighborhood. Everybody knows about it. It’s just that lots of people are closing their eyes to it.”

“Look ma’am, we expect some trouble at the transition. We’d be fools not to. This new money isn’t going to be understood by lots of people, especially people who haven’t been reading the newspapers on this side of the border. But that doesn’t mean they’ll come over with guns to steal everything they can get their hands on.”

“Don’t you understand? All those predictions of chaos and lawlessness by the opponents convinced a lot of people. Maybe its just wishful thinking on their part but they believe it nonetheless. When the chaos starts, they want to get theirs and if there’s a rush across the border and if some stores get looted, they’ll just think they have to get in on it before all the good stuff is gone.”

“Ma’am, you’re just hearing rumors about kid’s gangs. We’ll be right on top of it. You just stay home if you’re worried about things and keep your doors locked and you’ll be fine. Believe me.”

“Oh I’ll stay home all right with my guns loaded. If they try to get into my place they’ll wish they hadn’t.”

“Ma’am please be very sure before you shoot. You could kill or wound some innocent person who just happens to be walking by.”

“I’ll be sure and I’ll video tape everything so you’ll be sure, too.”
“Daddy, how long will we be in the mountains?”

“Well we’ll be there for a while, sweetheart. Several weeks at least.”

“Will we have Christmas there?”

“Yes next year we’ll have Santa and a tree and everything. We’ll even have snow. You’ll like that won’t you.”

“Can we build a snowman, Daddy?”

“I think we’ll have time for that. Now, you get together all the toys you want to be sure and bring, and line them up on the couch here in the living room.”

“Fred, are you sure it’s safe to travel with all that kerosene?”

“It’ll be in the trailer, so even if we have a wreck it’ll be quite a ways away from us. Besides, those are plastic containers so they probably won’t break. And anyway I spent too much money on that stuff to leave it here for the looters.”

“Don’t we have enough wood at the cabin to get by?”

“We don’t know how long we’ll have to be there. You know what the Mayor says. It’ll be at least months and maybe years before it’s safe to come back here. And when we do come back everything is likely to be destroyed. I’m afraid this is God’s judgment on America for its sinful ways.”

“Praise the Lord. At least we have a place of refuge to go to. I feel really guilty sometimes about not being able to take the others.”

“Doreen, I’ve gone over this with you time and again. There isn’t going to be enough food in the valley to support everybody in the Church. If we have to stay there for more than six months or so we’ll have to be getting by on what we can grow and hunt. If it takes more that a couple of years, we’ll have to be making our own clothes from skins and fibers we’ve grown ourselves. There just isn’t enough good farm land in the valley to support three-hundred or more people. We’d be forced to expel some people or starve.”

“I know but I still feel terrible about leaving the others behind. Some of them are our friends, like the Olsens.”

“He’d never come with us, Doreen. You know he thinks this new money is great. He thinks it’s actually going to bring about heaven on Earth. Idiot.”

“But I still feel sorry for Rose and the kids. They don’t deserve to be caught up in the chaos and rioting and looting. They don’t deserve that.”

“Darling, that is one of the millions of reasons I’m so glad you’re Mrs. Bascome... you have such a tender heart. Here, let me kiss those tears away. You’ll see. The Lord will protect the righteous. Somehow He’ll take care of them.”
“Daddy, can we take Poochy this time?”

“Sure darling, a dog like Poochy is just what we’ll need in the mountains.”

“I’ll go get him.” And she scampered from the room.

“Dear if we can’t feed ourselves very well, how are we going to feed a dog?”

“We can’t. But I don’t want to leave him here in a kennel to starve to death with no chance at all. I love that little guy. We’ll let him loose out in the country somewhere near a river or a creek anyway so he’ll have a chance to find food. He’ll take care of himself. It’s not like he was some lapdog who’s completely dependent on people. He’s a mutt. They’re good at survival.”

“Here’s Poochy and I have all my toys in the living room.”

“Oh and Fred, I found some more survival books and how to do it books at the bookstore yesterday. They were a little expensive but I didn’t think that would matter with what’s coming.”

“Right you are. That’s my little frontier wife. You’re both tough and smart. Give me a kiss and let’s get finished with the packing.”

----- December 30, 2012, Ft. Hood, Texas ----- 

“Sir we have reports coming in from all along the border about plans to invade.”

“You’re not talking about the Mexican Army are you?”

“On no sir, but people and police departments from Brownsville to Tijuana are reporting rumors of gangs and even just ordinary people expecting to come over the border after the transition to loot and steal and who knows what else.”

“Yes, but we’ve had a week or so to get ready for them. And it’s not as if the Homeland Security folks haven’t given us tools to use. As I see it we should be able to patrol most of the desert border with the drone planes. So long as the threat is out in the desert, we don’t need to do much about it right away. It’s the towns that are on both sides of the border like Tijuana and Juarez and Nuevo-Laredo, especially where the town on the Mexican side is quite a bit larger than the town on the U.S. side. If something gets started in one of those places, we could have some serious problems.”

“We’ve scheduled a mobilization of the Guard for all the major crossing points. But if enough people just start swimming the river in Texas or California or just crossing in the desert they can still just overwhelm us.”

“We can’t move the regular army units to the border without causing an international incident. It wouldn’t look friendly. Especially since Mexico is threatening to stop sending us oil if we go through with the transition.”

“Are we really going to use the Minutemen? That sounds risky to me. Those guys are likely to start shooting at anything that moves.”

“You don’t think they would stay home like good little citizens with the rumors that have been going round, do you? We have a lot better chance of controlling them if we include them and have men with
them to keep an eye on them. Besides, they do give us a lot more bodies to use and if we have them in some kind of uniform we won’t be so likely to shoot them by mistake.”

“Yes, General, but I’m still nervous about it.”

“Son, we’ll be here at headquarters ready to take all the blame if something goes wrong. It’s just my reputation on the line, not yours. You just relax and do your job as well as you can and we’ll do fine.”

“Yes, sir.”

----- December 30, 2012 near a border crossing in Laredo, Texas ------

“We’ve had cameras at these border crossings for years. Why are we putting up more now?”

“I don’t know for sure but it looks to me like these we are putting up are pretty obvious. They’re even on poles, for goodness sake. The regular ones are hidden or at least not right out in the open. You’ll notice that these are the older, bulky kind rather than the fingertip size cameras.”

“Yeah, now that you mention it. I guess these are for the mobs to see and destroy and think they’re not being filmed any more while the hidden ones keep on recording. Okay, I feel better about this job now.”

“Weren’t you feeling okay about it before?”

“I just figured this was another of those make-work details to keep us busy. I hate wasting my time when trouble’s coming and you can almost smell it in the air.”

“Oh, that’s just lunch being cooked at the cantina across the border.”

“Idiot.”

-------- December 30, 2012, El Paso, Texas--------

“Okay, your honor, here is how we have things set up. The National Guard and the Border Patrol will concentrate their efforts along the border itself to minimize the number of people who cross in the event that there are crowds. This way we can concentrate our efforts at what we expect to be the flash points.”

“And what do you expect to be the flash points?”

“For general crowds we expect the Malls and shopping centers. But more specifically, food stores and places like Wal-Mart where there’s lots of cheap merchandise that people expect to be free. We figure that the local citizens are likely to be a problem at some of those places even without any border crossers.”

“I take it you have some other places in mind as well.”

“Yes, sir. We think places like jewelry stores and the oil storage depot and the banks. If the crowds are bad at the consumer goods places, we figure the hardened-criminal types are likely to try for a big score in all the chaos. Therefore, we have some swat teams ready to go. We also have asked the State Police for help with covering some of these places. And we have asked the National Guard to cover the oil depot and the warehouse district in the industrial park.”
“So what’s left that could be a problem?”

“That depends on the terrorists, your honor.”

“The terrorists?”

“Yes, sir. We think this would be an ideal time for the terrorists to hit. They’ve been accusing us of going to the new money to avoid paying the Islamic States what we owe them for oil and reparations for war damage. It would be easy for them to come in with a flood of rioters and pick some target that would cause a lot of damage. Worse, they might try to get a fire fight started in a crowd of unarmed civilians and kill scores of them. That would be a major political black eye for the U.S. in the rest of the world, especially in Latin America.”

“What can we do about it?”

“That’s where the Homeland Security guys come in, sir. We’ve asked for their help and they’re bringing in some resources. I’m not sure what all, but they asked for some office space, so we got them two floors of the Hotchkiss building. Lord knows they don’t have enough renters anyway and the HS guys don’t need luxury accommodations. Anyway, they say they’ll be on top of the terrorist threat. I’ve warned our boys of what to look out for and have been emphasizing self-control. Beyond that we just have to keep our fingers crossed.”

“Is there any threat to the residential neighborhoods?”

“Only the poor ones near downtown. I don’t think any large gangs will get through and they are the only ones with cars who would go after the wealthy houses when there are stores nearby, with lots of merchandise a mob would want.”

-------- 8:30 am, Monday, December, 31, 2012, Washington D.C. --------

“Are you absolutely sure you have everything in place for the transition?”

“Yes, sir, I think we do.”

“I’m not asking what you think; I’m asking what you know. This change is even bigger and more important than that old Y2K thing back at the turn of the century. We have to do it right the first time. Do you have everything in place and are you certain?”

“Yes, sir, we have everything in place and we’re as certain as we can be. We’ve run tests on everything we could think of, but this is programming, sir. There’s no way we can tell if we got everything. It's just too complicated. That’s why we’re going to have to watch things and have emergency code to use to back out the changes and install patches for the bugs we find and so forth.”

“But you’re all set, right?”

“As set as it’s humanly possible to be. We’ll be able to monitor everything from here in this center and we should be undetectable to all the local centers. We can make changes to their code and cover our tracks. We have backdoors into their systems that let us become root in case we need to. In other words, we can control exactly what’s happening on every computer and what is put in every database.
in the whole system. They can’t even twitch without us knowing. And if we don’t like something we can just change it so we do like it.”

“Excellent. Now, you also have backups of the situation at the moment of transition so we can go back to that quickly?”

“Yes, sir, we do. We’ll be taking a complete database snapshot on every system and making multiple copies at several sites. We should be able to return to the situation as of December 31, 2012 within a day of your giving the word. We have all the bank data and market data and it’ll be copied into backups on New Years Day, when all the markets and banks are closed anyway.”

“I’ll be here Tuesday and I expect things to go smoothly. If it doesn’t, I’ll have your hide and the hide of everybody who works for you. Be sure they know that, understand?”

“Yes, sir, we always work under that assumption. I’ll see you in the morning. By the time you get here New Years Day, we should know how things are going. Good night, sir.”

---------- 1:30 pm, Monday, December 31, 2012, New York City----------

“Careful there, you’re spilling it.”

“Well, give me a hand. It’s hard to carry three drinks and two plates at once. Oh, Sally, are you sure you don’t want any of that walnut cake?”

“Yes I’m sure. All the weight I put on goes to the wrong places.”

“They look pretty right to me.”

“Ted! You rascal, you. I never heard you say anything like that before. Sally is liable to pop you one if you talk like that.”

“Now that she doesn’t work for me anymore I don’t have to watch what I say so much.”

“Hey, the day isn’t over yet. She still works for you for… let’s see uuh…”

“Three hours and twenty-two minutes, Johnny. Are you sure you know how to subtract?” Sally laughed at him.

“Well, I’m an accountant, not a secretary. My computer does all my adding and subtracting for me.”

“You were an accountant. What are you going to do next year when there aren’t any jobs for accountants?” Ted asked.

“You know I’ve done a little painting as a hobby? So I thought I’d try doing that for a while, just until this silliness with the Ten Points blows over. It probably won’t last more than a couple of months anyway. By then I’ll probably be sick of painting and it’ll feel good to get back to accounting again. I look on this as a paid vacation.”

Sally cocked an eye at John and said,” What does your wife think about having you home all day, every day?”
"She says she can use some help with the kids. What are you going to do with your time? I can't see the bank needing Ted as a loan officer when there won't be any loans any more, so he certainly won't need a secretary."

"I don't see secretaries as being useless with this new economy. There still needs to be somebody who understands where everything is and how everything works. If I could keep Ted on the ball, I'm sure I could do the same for almost anyone," she laughed.

"So, Ted. You're the only one who hasn't told us his plans. What are you going to do?" John said, turning to Ted.

"First I'm going to finish this cake and then I'll think about it. I really have no idea what I can do. I trained in business and worked hard to get where I am. Now this new money sort of ruins all my plans and ambitions. Everything I learned seems to be worthless now. Maybe I'll just become a bum on the street living off the dole."

Sally, her face showing a mixture of concern and surprise, said, "But Ted, you're a smart guy with a lot on the ball. I've seen you arrange deals that I didn't think were possible. You've made millions for this bank and saved more millions for its investors. Why don't you think you can do as well now?"

"What is there for me to do? Nobody is going to come to me to ask for money because I can't give them any. There isn't any bank any more for all practical purposes. Oh there's the vault where people want to store precious things like papers and jewels and keepsakes. But you don't need the top 18 floors of this building for that. All these offices will just be empty next year and all the folks who were using them will be sitting on their hands doing nothing. Johnny, you think this new money thing will only last a couple of months, and I sure hope you're right, because it's a disaster for me."

"How is it a disaster, Ted?"

"Well, there's my house, for one thing. I have a pretty big mortgage on it and I can't make the payments with no job, now can I? There's my daughter's horse and my son's basketball camps all needing to be paid for. My job as a loan officer gave us comfort and security. Now all we'll have is memories and regrets." Ted's bitterness was almost palpable, his voice angry, and his complexion becoming mottled.

"Tomorrow," Ted continued, "we keep the computers running one last day to let the Fed make sure we haven't been cheating anybody and that's it. I probably won't get paid anything for that since I'm not one of the IT guys. I'm sure they don't mind all this computer money stuff because they can still get paid for keeping their computers running, but for guys like you and me, Johnny, until the new money thing goes away we've got nothing."

"But Ted, what about your wife? Doesn't she have a job at a hospital? Won't she be OK?" Sally asked.

"My wife's job is in the billing department. There won't be any billing department starting tomorrow. She's out on the street as far as they're concerned. The whole thing stinks. I can see that 2013 is going to be real lucky for me." John threw his dirty plate and cup into the trash and said. "I'm going home. This place makes me sick now," and walked out.

------------ 9:00 pm, Monday, December 31, 2012 ------------
“Dear, this is the last night. Tomorrow I go to the drug store to get your prescription filled. You won’t have to put up with the pain any longer.”

“But tomorrow’s a holiday. Will they be open?”

“There’s money to be made if they’re open. I think they will be.”

“Won’t there be a lot of other people there? At your age I don’t think you can wait in line more than half an hour or so.”

“I’ll do what I have to, darling. Don’t you worry.”

--------- 9:45 pm, Monday, December 31, 2012 ---------

“Quiet down now. Please give me your attention. All right, all right, just listen up now. Thank you. Now, tomorrow is the big day. Tomorrow you and millions of others like you begin your first day as the first Payers in the world. You’ll be breaking new ground. You will be leaders. You’ll establish traditions that will live after you. Everything depends on you.”

“There,” she chuckled, “I thought that would sober you up. What I just said is true but so long as you take your duty seriously and do what you think is fair, you can’t go far wrong. We will all be learning. You will learn your job and how to make our new money a success.”

“There are a million ways you can go wrong. But there is only one way you can succeed. That way is to be as fair as you can be. Don’t pay less than a person deserves and don’t pay more than a person deserves. As soon as you appear unfair, you will lose any respect you might otherwise have gotten, even the respect of those you pay too much.”

“Not everybody is going to love you for what you do. Some are going to be quite angry with you. Your only defense is to pay fairly.”

“This is also your last chance to change your mind about becoming a payer. You can quit now with no penalty. You can also quit tomorrow so long as you do so before you pay anyone at all. But after that first payment, that’s it.”

“Okay, you each have your assignments. Remember that you aren’t limited to paying just for your assigned area. If you see someone doing something for someone else, you can pay them even if it’s not your area.”

“You have all been checked out on your contact phones. If you lose your phone, please report it right away. No one but you can use that phone, but we don’t want to have to replace them. Your phone should be able to identify anyone you meet if you ask it, and it has a chance to hear them talk, or they touch the fingerprint pad.”

“Now go to your homes and get a good night’s sleep, those of you who don’t go on duty at midnight. Best of luck to you all. Take good care of us.”
Chapter Fifteen: Reputation

*In which Niall reveals something in order to rent a house, insults Sam, and explores his own guilt.*

Sam turned to Niall and said, "Don't worry, there's several more places. Will is just a little more particular than most."

They walked back to the car.

"Why didn't he want me to rent the house?" Niall asked as they got in.

Sam looked down at his hands on the steering wheel and said quietly, "You don't work, so you might be a slacker. You've been out of the country for a long time, so you might be one of those people who want the POM back. Finally, we came in my car and not yours so he has no evidence that you're likely to earn money. In short, you have no reputation and what he knows about you isn't promising."

Sam kind of looked at Niall out of the corner of his eye as he gave the last these several “defects.”

"First things first," Niall said holding up one finger. "What's a slacker?"

"A slacker is somebody who doesn’t do anything worthwhile, someone who wants to just live on standard without working. They don’t usually keep up the places where they live and they leave when the smell gets too bad for them. Nobody respects a slacker and I’ve known them to be refused food in a lot of places."

"I'm no slacker. I've always worked since I became a man and I intend to keep on working." Niall was letting a little of his anger show.

"I never doubted you, friend. Rose wouldn't send me a slacker."

"OK. So what's this POM business?" Niall asked holding up a second finger.

"POM is short for physical object money. You know. Like currency, bills and coins."

"What does that have to do with renting me his house?"

"That requires a little background. Back at the transition there were some people who were scared half to death at the idea of going over to the accounts. Some of them got pretty violent. Others left the country. But the worst ones were the ones who thought that without currency everything would fall into anarchy and they could just grab what they wanted by force. When the government over in DC started to fall apart, some gangs came out to the suburbs to loot. The police here stopped them cold. Bunch of us got together to help, too. Them as we didn't kill we let the computer identify real good. It took their eye image, finger prints, even their smell. They were given a choice of working off a hefty fine or leaving the country. Most of them left in the end, I guess. Never gave us no more trouble anyway. So then the police and those of us who helped each got a pretty nice payment. That's what I used to buy my house. Those guys were POMers. They were expecting to steal our stuff and sell it for currency."

"Besides, we also get news way out here and we see what's happening in those other countries in Europe. They done let their computers get way out of hand. They can't turn around over there without they get the government's permission. I'll be damned if I could live like that. Those folks up in Canada
wised up and came in with us after a few years but Mexico, they still use POMs. Of course they don’t
have the computers like Europe and Japan but they still use POMs. You can’t trust people who use
POMs. They can’t even trust each other. It’s them POMs that does it to them. POMs will do it to
anybody. So we don’t want nothing to do with those POM folks. Let the ITs deal with them. They
know how to handle them.”

“OK, Sam, I get the picture. POMs are most definitely out.” Niall thought Sam was a little crazy but he
seemed to know his real estate. “Now the last thing,” Niall said holding up the third finger, “is my
reputation. What’s this about me not having a reputation?”

“Well now, friend, I gave you every chance back at the house to let me see your background but you
didn’t say a thing about it. You even seemed to avoid looking at the TV. I ain’t one to pry when a man
doesn’t want things known about him. It don’t seem friendly. But you’re asking a lot of a body when
you ask to live in their house on their property and not let them know your background,” Sam finished
soberly.

“I didn’t know about any of this. How do I let you know my background?” Niall was somewhat taken
aback. He was used to people thinking well of him. He almost took the respect of others for granted.

Sam’s body relaxed a bit and he smiled at Niall saying, “We can use my TV if you like. You just tell
the computer that it’s OK for it to tell me about you and I check a few things, and then I can
recommend you.”

“You mean that I have to let you know everything about me?” Niall wasn’t sure he liked that idea.

“Oh no. Just some of your work history if you have one... and any Declarations about your previous
living places. We call it a housing reputation. Of course, if you have a record with the police, that’ll be
in there and any positive or negative general Declarations from folks who know you.”

“My God! You practically want my life history. You also want the name of all the girls I dated when I
was in high school?” Niall was about ready to just walk away but Sam was still driving the car.

“Mister, calm down. This is ordinary stuff. You do know what a Declaration is, don’t you?”

“I thought I did but it sounds like I maybe don’t. Perhaps you’d better tell me.”

“A Declaration is a statement given to the accounts computer regarding something particularly good
or bad about someone. The guy making the Declaration must identify himself and any facts in the
Declaration must be verified or they’re dropped. You can turn in a Declaration that relates to anything
about anybody. But if you lie or say only bad things in your Declarations, you get a reputation for that,
since the Declarations are a part of your reputation as well as the reputation of the guy you’re saying
things about. Most people don’t do many Declarations. But if, say, you let somebody use your
property and they improve it, or if a slacker leaves your house a mess, then you’re obliged to put in a
Declaration on them. If you don’t, you’re not warning the next owner about the slacker.”

“You mean that it’s against the law to not put in the Declaration in that case?” Niall asked.

“Oh, no. You can ignore it if you want to. But then the guy whom you didn’t warn is likely to put in a
Declaration against you. Silence about a slacker or someone who doesn’t deal honestly is a kind of a
lie, it seems to me. It’s like you become their accomplice. It’s like not warning somebody when the
bridge is out. You can do that sort of thing but when people find out they aren’t going to trust you any
more, either.”
“What if there’s something in my medical history or something about my family I don’t want you to find out about?”

“Your medical history is nobody else’s business unless you’re insane. I’ve never seen anything medical in a background. Your family is not you. A background only tells about you and what you’ve done. Your mother could be a serial killer and that wouldn’t appear in your background.”

“But you do get statements from my old bosses and things.”

“Not unless they put in a Declaration. Your work history is what you’ve been paid for and how much. That gives a guy a real good idea of what kind of person you are. So, really, I guess it’s more recommendations from all your Payers. Why should anyone care whether your bosses liked you or not? You’re being considered for a house, not as somebody to work with.”

By this time, they had gotten back to Sam’s place. Sam took Niall into the living room/office and said “Hal, Niall here wants to have a recommendation.”

The TV came on with a view of the computer from “2001: a Space Odyssey” and said in Hal’s voice from the movie, “Are you Niall Campbell?”

Niall said, “I am Niall D. Campbell.”

“Do you wish to give housing background information to Sam Witherspoon who stands before you?”

“May I see the information you would make available to Sam before I decide?”

“Of course, Mr. Campbell. Sam, if you will leave the room?”

Sam said with a grin, “It’ll be fine, friend. You’ll see.” Then he went into the back of the house and made noises in the kitchen.

As soon as Sam left, the TV screen showed a list of topics. “Work history” and “Account total” of course jumped out at Niall. But there was also a list of places where Niall had lived (one, his daughter’s place), a special needs topic which showed “none,” and under “Declarations” he saw there were three, all from people at the embassy from which he had worked. They were people whose names he didn’t recognize but he assumed they must have been Payers. He asked to see the Declarations and found they referred to specific incidents in his service. Fortunately, they all reflected credit on Niall and did seem to match Niall’s memory of the events concerned. He saw nothing from his private life at all. Everything mentioned concerned things he had done in public except the amount of money he had.

Niall had always thought of himself as being a pretty modern, twenty-first century kind of guy. He’d lived in several cultures that were quite different from that in which he grew up. But telling people how much money he had just felt wrong. He felt exposed. What business was it of anyone else?

“Do you have to show the account total?” Niall asked Hal.

“The total is quite respectable, sir, especially considering that you’ve been out of the country for some time.” The voice was that of Jeeves. “I don’t believe that anyone could take it amiss.”

Niall almost had a heart attack. “Jeeves? Is that you?”
“Why of course, sir. Were you expecting someone else, sir?”

“I was expecting Sam’s computer, Hal.”

“But sir, I am serving you now. It would be unseemly for Hal to serve you without your permission.”

The computer seemed almost smug and he was sure that if it had been a person it would have been aloof and superior in expression.

‘Damn!’ Niall thought. ‘What the hell is this computer doing? It’s like a science fiction horror story.’ Niall had a cold, hollow feeling in the pit of his stomach and his skin prickled quietly ‘like that time… no time for that now. How can I get away from the computer? Is it everywhere?’

“Does everyone let their account total be shown? Don’t they want to keep that private?” Niall asked.

“Well, sir, it’s been my experience that those who want it hidden are ashamed of its being a low total or zero or worse, frozen. For the last ten years or so those with high totals have wanted them known and seek opportunities to have them displayed. I think it would be unseemly for one in your position to hide an impressive total.”

“So you think it would be best for me to…” ‘Damn. Now I am asking the advice of a machine. What’s wrong with me?’

“Let it all hang out, sir? Yes sir.”

Niall took a deep breath and said, “OK, you may tell Sam my background.”

“Very good, sir. I will make available to Sam your background for purposes of housing. Will that be all, sir?”

“Yes, that will be all.” Niall was still a little in shock so he sat down rather abruptly.

“OK, Sam, you can come back now,” Hal said in a rather penetrating voice.

The noise in the kitchen stopped abruptly and Sam sauntered back into the room.

“Niall, it seems to me that maybe I was forgetting that you don’t know our ways. Would you like to watch while I look over your background? You can tell me which things you’d rather I didn’t see.”

“Sam, that’s very kind of you. I believe that would make me feel better.”

“You know, I was probably a lot like you about letting near strangers know things about me back when I was your age before the transition. I remember being mad when I kept getting ads in the mail from people that shouldn’t have known my address. It’s been so long that I forget these days what it was like back then. You had to figure that every stranger was out to get your money however they could. It was a dog-eat-dog world for everybody back then. Oh yeah, Hal, you got the menu ready?”

“Things are in order, Sam. Shall I start with the usual items?”

“Just the headers at first, Hal. Don’t show the contents until I tell you to.”
The first thing up was the housing history. Since Niall had only spent two nights in Brianna’s apartment, Niall figured there would be no problem there so he nodded a “Yes” to Sam’s raised eyebrow.

“Housing, Hal.”

The housing menu showed just the one location and the two day duration. It had a “No defects” under Damages and “Quiet” under Disturbances. Under attitude it had “Friendly.”

“Niall, work history?” Sam raised his eyebrow again.

“OK.”

This time there was a lot more. The history was all for his time in the Middle East. There was nothing before the transition. It seems that there actually had been Payers at the embassy, since there were payments recorded on several occasions, including one during the last week. Each payment was matched by a description of some benefit which was a result of something Niall had done. Most of the payments mentioned information Niall had given about local conditions and local politics and how that information had helped some trade or other or had made things safer for Americans in the area. Each of the three Declarations Niall had seen earlier were matched by three of the larger payments.

Sam seemed to just glance over the material but when he looked at Niall to inquire about seeing the next item he pursed his lips in a whistle. The next item was the three Declarations which Sam spent quite a bit of time over. Finally, Sam looked at Niall and said, “There’s no need for me to see your account total if you’d rather I didn’t know. The rest of what’s in here is plenty.”

“No. If I’m going to live in this country it looks like I’m going to have to get used to everybody knowing what I’m worth,” Niall said with some trepidation.

“OK, Hal, let’s see the total.”

The $84,503.28 total was shown again just as it had been at the airport. Niall felt like he was taking his first trip to a nude beach but Sam was so casual about it that Niall didn’t think he actually blushed.

“OK, Niall, let’s hit the road. I think you’re going to like this next one.” Sam seemed quite cheerful now.

The next house was within sight of a bus stop and Niall could see the downtown business district was only a couple of blocks away. The yard was larger than the others had been and was already mowed. Inside the house were very neat, large closets, a bay window in the living room, and new kitchen appliances. Niall really liked it except that it had a TV in the living room. He really wanted to live without the computer. The thought of Jeeves listening to him sleep gave him the willies.

“Look, Sam, don’t you have a place with no TV. I’d really like to get away from it all a little more.”

“Oh, I can fix that. We just unplug the thing.” Sam lifted the TV off the wall and it came away with no problem. There was no wire connecting it to the wall. So what did that mean? It could have batteries in it which kept it listening and reporting on him whether it was on the wall or not. As Niall considered it, he realized that there was no way he would ever be sure that he was free of observers. There could be computers in almost anything in the house. That would be true of any house unless he built it himself from trees he grew himself. He mentally shrugged his shoulders and gave up.
“So do you want me to put it in the closet or something or take it back to the store?”

“No, Sam, I’ve changed my mind. Just leave it there on the wall. Who knows, maybe I’ll want to see some news of the Middle East one day.”

“Does that mean that you’ll take this house?”

“Yes, I guess it does. Do we see the owner next?”

“You’re seeing him now, friend. This is one of my houses.”

“Sam, you flatter me. That’s one of the nicest things anyone ever did for me.”

“I don’t think I’ll regret it. There’ll be a $25 per month luxury rent unless you find some way to use that extra room and the shed out back for your work.”

“Sounds OK to me. Where do I go to sign the papers?”

“We can use the TV here to do the trick. Hal, Niall wants this house. Still the $25 a month for a single person?”

The TV indicated (in Hal’s voice) that Sam was correct. Then Jeeves addressed Niall asking, “Do you, Niall Campbell choose to purchase the right to live in this house at ________ in Aldie, Virginia beginning now and ending on this date one month from now?”

“Yes,” said Niall.

“If you would be so good, sir, as to repeat the words as I have them on the screen. Your full voluntary consent is required for spending the money.”

“OK, Jeeves. I, Niall Campbell choose to purchase the right to live in this house at ________ in Aldie, Virginia beginning now and ending on this date one month from now. Does that do it, Jeeves?”

“Very good, sir. The purchase is complete. You now have $84,478.28 remaining in your account, sir.”

“So, Sam what are you going to do with that $25 a month?”

“What $25?”

“The $25 I’m paying in rent.”

“That was your money. Once you spent it, it ceased to exist. Your account was decreased in size by $25 but no one else’s account changed at all because of that, certainly not mine. Oh, and by the way, don’t imply to anyone else that you think they received money directly from you. They’d be insulted.”

“Sam, why? What’s insulting about paying you money?”

“First off, it makes you sound like one of those POM people. Second, it implies that I’m one of those POM people. Third, it says that I can’t be trusted. It says that you don’t trust me. Fourth, it says the only reason I rented you my house is that I was getting bribed to do so. If I did accept a bribe to let you live here, then I’d probably be cheating my suppliers out of some money. The guys who built this
house, the people who have repaired it from time to time, the plumber, the electrician, the heating
guy, the guy who brings the fuel oil, they all should be paid for their work and I’m reducing the
chances they’ll be paid and lowering the amount they’ll be paid.” Sam sounded like he would keep
going for a while so Niall was holding up his hand palm out and shaking his head.

“No, Sam. I never said or thought any of those things.”

“It’s what you’re saying by claiming that you’re giving me money for rent. Niall, the Payers pay me for
letting you use my house. The Payers pay the other people who built it and who repaired it and who
maintain it. If I were to allow someone in here who was going to tear it up or who was a slacker or
whatever I’d be costing them money. There isn’t any reason for you to pay me a bribe unless I
wouldn’t let you rent the house. If I had a reason to not let you rent the house then I shouldn’t let a
bribe change my mind.”

“But Sam, if it’s your house why would anyone else get paid for my living here?”

“I don’t actually have title to this house. I think that’s still in the hands of old Mrs. Barker whose land
this house is on. She lives up the street a few houses. The builder got her permission about 8 years
ago to build here and got the materials from the lumber yard over in Gilberts Corner. He has a regular
crew of guys who work with him on his projects and they came in here and put this place up real
quick. Well, I have a pretty good reputation in this area for real estate so he gave it to me to rent out
to anybody I chose. So old Mrs. Barker, the builder, all the guys on his crew, the guys over to the
lumber yard who helped out, the guys who supplied them, the guys who gave the builder the tools he
used, it just goes on and on, they all helped to get this house here for you to benefit from by living in
it. Now, none of them paid any of the others. Not that lumberjack who cut the tree, not the guy who
owned the forest, not the sawmill folks, not the secretaries in the trucking office who scheduled the
delivery of supplies, not the guys who pushed the nails, not the glass makers, the appliance makers,
not one of all us folks paid any of the others anything. Why? Because we knew the Payers would pay
them. None of us had to worry about any of those payments. We didn’t have to pay taxes on what we
have been paid, either. And when you’ve lived here a month, we’ll each get paid a bit more and we
won’t have to pay attention to any of that, either. All of us get paid because we all deserve to be paid
for what we did and what I’m doing. Now do you see?”

“OK. I think I see. You all get paid because what you did is good for me now. The Payers keep track
of all that?”

“They sure do. I don’t know how they do it but they do. You can look in my work record and if you go
down far enough you can see things like $0.42 for telling the handy man that a window was broken
on a house. Of course that’s just a one time payment for me. But the handy man’ll get paid so long as
people use the house and that window is doing its job.”

“So I guess to say you accepted money directly from me would be like saying that you were saying
that none of those other people had anything to do with the house. That you built it all yourself of
materials that you produced for yourself and whose raw materials you owned and using tools that you
made yourself. I guess it would be saying that you weren’t a part of the community of people that you
cooperated with. It’s like you were rejecting all of them and denying their existence.” Niall was not
even noticing Sam now, lost in a reverie. He had never in his life looked at things that way and the
experience was strange indeed.

“I think you understand. We’re all cooperating to make things better for all of us. If you have money in
your account that means that you’re cooperating, too. It means that you can be trusted. Niall, the size
of your account would get almost any ordinary person to cooperate with you. It says all sorts of good things about you.”

So Niall got a house to live in and a new way of looking at buying things. The next day he moved in with his suitcases. He didn’t need the services of a mover whom Sam had suggested. Rose asked him what he thought about Sam and Niall was able to say he was impressed without even trying to be polite.

On the way back to Brianna’s, Niall thought of shopping for some gifts for Brianna, Tony, and the children.

“Driver, I need to do some shopping for gifts for my adult daughter and her family. Is there some place we’ll go by that would be good for that?”

“Yes. We go past a shopping mall in about half a mile. You must have seen it on the way out.”

“Nah, I was kind of distracted on the way out.”

When the bus stopped several blocks later the driver said, “Here we are, Frobisher Mall.”

“That’s it? But it’s so small.”

“It’s got over 150 stores. Besides, it’s bigger than it looks. Wait until you get inside.”

“I’ll show you, mister. I’m doing some shopping myself. Just come along with me.”

Niall turned and was smiled at by a dark-haired woman who looked to be in her forties. She was dressed informally yet attractively, but none of her clothing was white. To Niall this meant that she was probably pretty well-off. But if she was well off, why was she riding a bus?

Niall smiled back at her, “Thanks. My name’s Niall Campbell and I’m rather new here and don’t know my way around very well yet.” Niall slicked his hair back on the left side a little nervously, thinking he must look a mess.

“Right this way, Niall” she said cheerily and stepped lightly off the bus onto the sidewalk. “You can call me ‘Nita’, as in Juanita.”

The vista that greeted Niall as he left the bus reminded him of a small orchard full of parked cars. The leaves on the trees were still relatively new and had a light green cast. Many were in the late stages of flowering, and fallen petals littered the ground and dusted those cars parked under them. Niall and his guide followed a slightly curving path made of stone around and through the trees toward the façade of the mall which Niall had seen from the bus.

As they neared the mall, it was clear that it was larger than Niall had thought because it was only one story tall and most of that was obscured by the trees.

“I heard that you are shopping for your daughter’s family. What did you have in mind to get? Perhaps I can tell you which stores to go to first.”

“That would be very helpful. I hadn’t really thought about what to get yet.”

“What’s she like, your daughter? What are her hobbies and interests?”
“She is an artist.”

“What kind? Painting, sculpture, quilts?”

“Oh, she paints and stuff.”

“Well, that’s out, then. She gets all her painting gear for free unless she is just doing it as a hobby and you wouldn’t want to get the wrong thing. I gather that you aren’t a painter yourself.”

“No. I hardly know one end of a paint brush from another and once you get past canvas, easel, and paint I don’t know what an artist even needs.”

As they approached the building, Niall saw quite a few other people entering and leaving through the dozen or so automatic doors. A few of those leaving were being followed by what looked like small all-terrain vehicles which, rather than handlebars and seats, had large baskets on top, which held nondescript boxes and sacks. The wheels were large and appeared to be quite soft. Some of the vehicles had children riding on them as well on what appeared to be merry-go-round horses or other animals. Each vehicle was following a particular individual. There were other such vehicles, empty, which were returning to the mall on their own. It appeared that they were intelligent.

The building itself was faced with brick and had no windows and no store names or signs other than a large metal (brass?) plate to the right of the doors which proclaimed this to be Frobisher Mall. Passing through the second set of doors that comprised the inner side of the airlock, Niall could see that there were a few of the vehicles outside most of the larger stores. He could also see that there were escalators going down to lower levels of the mall. There seemed to be several of the below-ground levels. The mall really was quite a bit larger than it appeared from outside.

“What else does she do for fun?”

“She used to like to go hiking and camping out. I don’t know if she still does that or not.”

“You don’t seem to know her very well.”

Niall brushed the hair back on the left again and confessed that he had been out of the country for over 15 years and hadn’t seen her in all that time.

“Looks like you’re going to have a real job on your hands picking a gift for her, Niall. Well, this is where I’m going. I’d try to help you think of something but my appointment was for 5 minutes ago and Andre hates to be kept waiting. It was nice meeting you. Best of luck on your gift hunt.”

“Thanks. You’ve been a big help already,” Niall said and waved goodbye to her as she turned to enter a hair styling salon. Looks like I’m on my own. Okay, let’s see what we have here.

The shoppers came and went, some carrying packages. Occasionally one would walk by followed by one of the self-directed baskets with one or more items aboard. The stores had samples of their wares displayed in brightly-lighted windows. The lighting seemed to simulate sunlight which Niall appreciated. Most of the stores were specialty shops. The diversity was remarkable to Niall, especially after the life he had been living in captivity.

The first store he tried was a jewelry store. The glass counters and their sparkling display looked just as he would have expected. Each item had its own price tag. But what should he get for Brianna?
She already had a wedding ring and he had no idea what kind of ring she would like. Perhaps a brooch or pin or earrings would be best. Wait, does Bree wear earrings? Does she have any clothes that would go well with a brooch? Perhaps a necklace? No. On second thought that would be just a symbolic present. It wouldn’t really improve her life. Jewelry looks good but how would that make her life better?

Niall turned and went back into the concourse. Clothing? How can I pick something for her to wear? I don’t even know her sizes. Some kind of hat or gloves or… How about boots, hiking boots? Surely she still likes nature and the outdoors.

But what size boots would she wear? If you’re going to walk all day in a pair of shoes they’d better fit really well. No, boots are out.

“Where’s a gift shop when you need one?” Niall said in frustration.

“Almost any store that sells luxuries can be a gift shop, sir,” Jeeves said. “You can buy a luxury and give it to whomever you like so long as that person is not a payer, of course.”

“Jeeves! Is that you? Where are you?”

“I am speaking to you from the speaker to your left. It’s built into the decorations on the wall.”

“Okay, as long as you’re up, what should I get Brianna as a gift?” Niall asked, his voice dripping sarcasm.

“I’m afraid I’m not at liberty to say, sir. That would violate Brianna’s privacy.”

“You mean you know what she needs and you won’t tell me what it is?”

“Oh, no, sir. If she needed something, of course I could tell others that she had that need. It’s just that I cannot tell you what she would like to receive as a present. A present is a luxury and therefore she doesn’t really need it.”

“Well I need to pick out a present for her and for her husband and children.”

“Then perhaps, sir, you should consult the staff of one or more of the stores in this shopping mall.”

“They don’t know Brianna. How can they help?”

“I couldn’t say, sir, but their job is to help you find what will please you. Perhaps they have some experience with solving problems like yours.”

Niall sighed. “Perhaps they do.”

Picking a shop almost at random, Niall wandered in and looked around for a sales clerk. A small dark brown woman with a red spot in the center of her forehead and wearing a sari glided smoothly toward him from the back of the dimly-lighted store. She bowed slightly to Niall and asked, with a pleasing, almost liquid accent, if she could serve him in any way. Niall looked around him more closely and saw that the store had what appeared, to his uneducated eye, to be Hindu religious artifacts.

Blushing slightly, Niall stammered out something about having chosen the wrong store, apologized, and hurried out.
“Keep your wits about yourself,” he admonished himself sternly. Then he chose more carefully; a more brightly-lighted little store that appeared, for all the world, to be a bookstore. One of the best things about it was that there was only one person he could see in the store. There were a number of books on a variety of topics in the display window that fronted on the concourse. Niall could see through the open doorway racks and display cases of what looked like books. Upon entry, he was greeted by the store’s lone occupant, a small, quite elderly man in a wheelchair.

“May I help you?” he smiled showing what appeared to be perfect and very white teeth.

Niall glanced around. The number of bookcases was quite limited and seemed to have only one copy of each of the books they displayed, or what looked like books, anyway. They were all thin and they all had plain covers with no titles showing. Some appeared to be leather-bound and some were shiny as if plastic-covered. There were three large glass-topped display cases like one would expect to see in a jewelry store which contained what obviously were real books since they were of varying thicknesses and sizes. Some were obviously old as well.

“Yes, I’m looking for a gift for my adult daughter and I thought you might be able to help me decide what to give her.”

“I think I may be able to do something for you. My name is Stan,” he said, extending his right hand toward Niall.

“I’m Niall,” Niall said figuring Stan would spell it wrong but not really caring as he shook the man’s surprisingly strong hand.

“First, does she collect books?” Stan said shifting his seating slightly in the chair and making a sweeping gesture around the room. The large mirrors on every wall all gestured as well.

“Ah, not that I know of,” Niall said brushing his hair back with his left hand and the Nialls around the room likewise straightened their hair, some using their right hand and some their left.

“That’s OK. If she has an interest in almost any subject there’ll probably be quite a number of books that will deal with it in a variety of ways.”

“I wasn’t actually… that is…” Niall thought, ‘what a mess. Here I am in a bookstore and I almost told him I didn’t intend to buy her a book.’ Despite the pleasant temperature of the room Niall began to sweat a little. “Well, I know she is interested in Art. She paints. She’s even shown a few paintings, I think. But, the problem there is that I know practically nothing about art. I don’t think I could judge what kind of art book she’d like. You see I’ve been out of the country for over 15 years and I’ve kind of lost touch with her and I just got back in the country a few days ago and, well, I’d like to get her something but…”

“It won’t really help, you know.”

“What won’t help?” Niall’s eyebrows went up in surprise.

“Buying her a gift won’t make up at all for your being away from her for such a long time. Nothing can make up for that.” Niall started to interrupt but the old man held up his palm toward Niall and continued, “It doesn’t matter why you weren’t with her. Her feelings are quite irrational. Even if you were kidnapped and held captive for those 15 years she’d still feel hurt that you weren’t with her and there’s nothing you can do about that at all.” He paused for dramatic effect. “But you can show her
that you love her now,” he said pointing and jabbing his finger into the palm of his other hand, “and now you are with her again.”

Niall felt a prickle down his spine at the mention of being kidnapped. ‘Surely the old man couldn’t have known… The computer could have told him. No, Jeeves wouldn’t tell me about Brianna and I’m her father… unless it’s a plot. Maybe this is all some kind of setup. Maybe…’

“Niall? Hello?” the old man was peering intently at Niall’s face as Niall appeared to him to be in a trance.

“Oh. Sorry. I sort of zoned out there. Probably the medicine I’m taking. I’m all right.”

‘I really am taking those damn pills they gave me in London,’ Niall thought in justification for his lie. ‘Of course I can’t really blame them for my getting spooked.’

“I understand what you’re saying, Stan, about not being able to make up for my time away. I’m not really trying to erase past sins. I just want to do something nice for her, to make her life more pleasant. And I’m having an awful time thinking of what to get her.”

“Then let’s start with the books. We can always use them as a springboard to some other item if a book doesn’t seem like the thing. We have everything here from comic books to rare Bibles. We have books for reading and books for investment. We have books of pictures and books of equations. Let’s explore.” He grinned up at Niall in appreciation of his own joke about exploring the small shop.

He turned his chair with a practiced movement of his arms, spinning it as if it were almost friction free and directed Niall toward the nearest display case.

“You’re really good with that chair, but I would have expected something electric.” Niall commented, trying to delay the inevitable need to make a decision.

“I’ve had lots of practice with chairs like this. They tried to get me to use one of those motorized numbers but I need the exercise and I don’t want to get stuck with all that weight if something goes wrong or it runs out of juice.”

“Couldn’t you have the hand rails on the chair even if it was electric?”

“Sure. But it’s so damn heavy from the batteries and electric motor and all that it’s like driving a truck. No, I’ll stick with my primitive apparatus here. Let the youngsters have those new spiders and centipedes.”

“Insects?”

“That’s what I call the new devices, Niall. Here, I’ll show you. Minerva! Put some of those new mobility devices on the screen.”

Niall jumped when the mirror in front of him ceased being a mirror and revealed itself to be a display screen. He felt, once again, the prickling of the hair on his neck and the sick uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach. Clearly, he wasn’t alone with the old man despite the lack of other customers in the store and clearly the computer was very much watching and listening.

The “mirror” showed a man in a chair-like device that had six flexible appendages radiating out from the central seat. They supported the seat and moved the man up stairs and over, under, and around
other obstacles. When the going was narrow they scrunched up under the seat and when turning a corner at a running speed they spread wide and tilted the seat so that the rider, (Niall could hardly think of him as merely sitting in a chair), did not have to shift his weight at all. The seat also was able to open doors using a doorknob or other handle and even opened a barbed wire fence gate and closed it without getting entangled in the wire. When it approached a water hazard, it probed for the depth and footing before moving forward each step and lifted both the seat and the occupant’s legs and feet above the level of the water.

“That’s for folks who still have use of their arms,” the elderly man said, glancing at Niall out of the corner of his eye. He must have seen Niall’s reaction to the mirror. “For those who are even less able,” and the view-screen now showed a device with what must have been ten appendages, “they have this monstrosity. Doesn’t that look like a centipede to you?”

The passenger was prone in this model but otherwise the device behaved in a fashion quite similar to the six legged seat. However, it was able to keep the occupant level when going up stairs and also able to tilt the occupant to the side for tight corners so the person could be bent at the waist. It was even able to hold the person upright with supports that wrapped around the occupant and supported the head. In that posture, the four appendages near the feet were the only ones in contact with the floor or ground. A parade scene was shown with the person being held vertically high enough to see over the members of the crowd.

“It does look rather like a big bug,” Niall said.” That’s amazing! I had no idea they could do such things.”

“You’ve been out of the country. It must have been pretty primitive for you not to have heard of things like these.”

“Yeah. Dirt floors and all that. But about that gift…” Niall didn’t feel comfortable talking with a stranger about his captivity. He felt almost ashamed of it now. So deciding about the gift became the lesser conversational evil.

“Does she like antiques, or was there some children’s book that she was very fond of when growing up?”

“There were lots of books she liked but I can’t remember any one book that was dominant, nothing that she carried around with her all the time or anything like that.”

“Then we should probably skip the rare books and old books gifts,” he said with a sigh.

“What’s wrong with just a regular book that isn’t rare or old?”

“I’ll show you what’s wrong. Grab any of those books off that rack over there. Your choice.”

Niall obediently selected a book with a dark blue simulation of leather for its cover and turned back to the clerk. He looked at the binding but there was no title. He opened the book but though there were about 150 pages there was nothing printed on any of them.

“It’s blank.”

“Yeah, they’re all like that.”

“But what good are they? You can’t read blank pages.”
“Minerva, make it Tom Sawyer,” the clerk said.

Niall glanced down at the book again; and now it had a picture on the front of a boy standing before a partially white-washed fence, wearing a straw hat and gesturing with a paint brush toward the work in progress and smiling at another boy, somewhat better dressed, who was holding an apple. Niall opened the book and it was filled with print. He riffled through the pages and saw that some even had pictures.

“Would you like a different font or type size? You can have more or less pictures. You can have an index. You can have definitions of any of the words or phrases you don’t understand. You can have what the critics said about the book at the time or in later periods. You can get descriptions of parallels between Samuel Clemens’ actual life and what is depicted in the book. They can even change the texture of the so called paper that makes up the pages.”

“My God. How do they do that?”

“It’s all in the computer and you’re really holding a kind of display screen. The computer just tells the book’s chip what to display. The chip even controls the plastic of the pages to show the text or pictures in color or not. There are some that come with speakers but those require more power so they’re heavier. These can work off the normal light in the room like a solar powered wrist watch so they don’t need batteries.”

“So I can have whatever book I want displayed here?”

“Sure. What do you want to read?”

“How about War and Peace?”

“Look at the book.”

The book was still only about 150 pages and the first few pages showed the first chapter. He riffled through the pages to the end and the last pages read like he remembered the ending of the book. He opened the book to the middle and it seemed to be from the middle of the work.

“How does it do that?” Niall asked feeling like he was in Alice’s Wonderland.

“It’s just adjusting to how you are looking at the book. When you go directly to the end it figures you want to see the end of the story. When you open in the middle it figures you want the middle. If you read straight through, whenever you close the book it readjusts to put where you were at the bookmark there in the middle of the book, unless you were near enough to the beginning or end to make that adjustment unnecessary. That way it can put a thousand page novel on only about 150 pages just by shifting around which pages are being shown.”

“So if I buy this book I’m really buying a display terminal that can display any book at all?”

“Probably not any book at all but durn near it. Of course you have to be where the computer can communicate with the terminal but that’s most places these days.”

“But why are you unhappy with this? It seems like… well, like a miracle.”

“Smell it.”
Niall held it to his nose but there was no discernable odor.

“Nothing.”

“Now look at the dust on it. See any?”

“No. There’s no dust on it at all. You’ve kept it quite clean.”

“I didn’t do that. They repel dust. You could leave it on a shelf for years and it would never have any dust on it. Now fold the corner of one of the pages down and close the book on it.”

Niall dog-eared one of the pages and closed the book.

“Now open it to that page again.”

Niall did so and the page flipped back flat just as if he had never folded it at all.

“Now use this pencil and write in the margin of one of the pages.”

Niall tried but the pencil wouldn’t leave a mark no matter how hard he pressed.

“You also can’t tear out the pages or burn them with a match flame. If you drop jelly on a page is rinses right off without leaving a mark. That book will look just like it does now for hundreds of years. It won’t take on any of the character of its readers. It’s just about immune to people. It has no soul. It can be a book of pornography one minute and the Holy Bible or the Qur’an the next. It isn’t something people would put their hand on to swear they were telling the truth. It isn’t something one would illuminate or decorate or have reverence for. It isn’t something a child would have affection for any more than they have affection for a TV screen.”

“You used to be able to tell a learned man by his library. Now all the libraries are just one book. You learn nothing about a person by seeing that they have a book because it could be anything or nothing. You can’t tell whether they have read it or not. There are no notes in the margin to tell you whether they have thought about what they read.”

“I think I see what you mean,” Niall said. The book had lost some of its wonder for him. It was still a technological triumph but it was no longer a work of art. It was just a chunk of smart plastic. He replaced the book in the rack.

“So why do people buy a book like that?”

“These books are luxuries. Anyone can get a plain book that does just about everything this book can do, but it won’t have the cover graphics and texture changing features of these. Any ordinary standard book will provide the text and pictures but the pages won’t feel like paper of any quality you like and the cover won’t look and feel like leather or whatever. People buy these to show off. They just want to impress their friends.”

“I really don’t think my daughter or her husband care about such things.”

“And unless she likes antiques or wants to invest in rare books she wouldn’t appreciate any of the paper books I have to sell.”
“I guess you’re right. Sorry I bothered you.”

“Hold on. I didn’t say you bothered me. It was nice to meet someone who could understand why I don’t really like these new books. You’re old-fashioned enough that I rather enjoyed your company. It gets lonely in here sometimes. There aren’t that many who collect books these days.”

“You think people don’t read as much any more?”

“No. From what I see in the news, people are reading more than ever. It’s just books, real paper books that are in decline. They don’t even make the newspapers in paper any more. I don’t know what people use to wrap fish these days,” he chuckled.

“With your attitude I don’t see how you sell many books at all.”

“When I sell a book it’s because the person I sell it to really wants a book. Nobody walks out of here unsure of whether they bought the right thing. How else do you think I would rate such a prime location in such an expensive new mall?”

“I guess I hadn’t thought about it. I didn’t know the mall was new.”

“How many malls have you seen that are mostly underground, Niall?”

“Now that you mention it, this is the only one. Why is most of it buried?”

“There are lots of reasons. Probably the main one is it’s just about immune to storms. What with the global warming and all, the hurricanes we have are getting stronger and the number of tornados is increasing it seems like almost every year. They had a class four tornado up in Baltimore that went right through a shopping mall about ten years ago. It killed over 300 people when the building collapsed on them. The above ground part of this place is built like a bunker. I guess that was the first reason they wanted to go down rather than up. Then they started figuring costs of maintenance and discovered they could heat and cool this place for very little and they never have to paint the part below ground. They put a TDP plant in the basement so the trash gets recycled without leaving the building and that provides the energy we need for lighting, heating, and cooling. The place in many ways is like a space ship embedded in the ground. It’s almost self sufficient.”

“What about ground water and Earthquakes and stuff like that and what about the cost of digging the hole?”

“They say the longer life of the building will more than make up for the resources used in construction. I know they used the material from the hole to expand the airport downtown in D.C. You can ask the computer.”

“Has the computer hurt your sales?”

“Niall, you do understand, don’t you, that I help people buy things but I don’t sell them things? I have these books,” Stan said with a sweep of his arm toward the cases, “and, in a sense, I own them. But really, they kind of belong to everybody and nobody until someone buys them.”

“Stan, that doesn’t make any sense at all to me.”

“Well, look at it this way, then. These old books were given by their owners to be sold as luxuries. They were placed in my possession and the owners told the computer that the books were to be
made available for sale. When the books get sold, the former owners will get some money from the Payers. I will probably get some money too if I’m helpful in bringing the right books to the attention of the right buyers. But I can do whatever I want with the books. I could even destroy them. But of course I wouldn’t get paid anything for doing that and I doubt anyone would ever again trust me with any of their luxuries."

“Wouldn’t you go to jail?”

“No. Why should I? That wouldn’t bring the books back. The former owners have already given up their ownership of the books and I have possession of them. I come as near to owning them as anyone does. So I wouldn’t have harmed anyone else."

“But their former owners are expecting to get some money from your selling them.”

“You mean from my helping find people who want to buy them?”

“Okay, Stan, word it however you like.”

“Sure they’ll be pissed off at me. But they made what we would have called a business decision in the old days. They decided that I would be the best person to find buyers for their books. They trusted me. If I go crazy and destroy their investment, that’s just their tough luck. If they have another luxury to sell next time they’ll have to be more careful.”

“Sounds to me like that’s being pretty hard on the former owners.”

“No more so than buying stock in a corporation in the old days. You gave them your money and if they wasted it you were just out of luck when the stock went down.”

“Why would they give their books to you rather than to some organization that would compensate them for the loss of their property?”

“First off, if they gave their books to an organization, the organization couldn’t pay them for the books regardless of what happened to the books. Second, who would be responsible for the books in the organization?”

“The whole organization would be responsible.”

“Come on, Niall, you know better than that. Each person in that organization would blame somebody else if something happened. If they give their books to me they know exactly who to blame if the books are damaged. You don’t get that kind of responsibility in an organization.”

“True. You got me there. But why would people buy books that you help them with rather than from some other book dealer?”

“Because they trust me to know the book and to tell the truth about it. They trust my judgment and knowledge of the book as to whether it’s authentic or a cheap copy. I sure can’t sell it to them for less money.”

“Now that you’re pointing it out, I wasn’t aware of it before... but there aren’t any sale signs or money off or discounts being advertised. The mall is more like a park than a store.”

“When you can’t compete on price you have to compete on service and quality.”
“It’s getting late and I still don’t know what to give my daughter. But thanks for your time anyway.”

“Give her what she wants. Give her yourself. Give her the loving father she’s wanted all these years.”

“It would be a lot cheaper to buy her a rare book.”

“What would you pay for a daughter’s love?”

“I just hope I have that much.” Niall said.

“Niall, if you deserve her love you’ll have more than enough. If you don’t deserve her love you’ll never have enough. Now let’s see if we can think of some way to show her that she has her father’s love. That’s what you want to gain from a gift, isn’t it?”

“I guess it is. You look pretty deep into a fellow. Did you get that from reading books?”

“No, unfortunately, I got it from making a lot of mistakes in my life.”

“In that case she’s in her late twenties, married, two young children, she home-schools, and she likes art and camping.”

“Now tell me the important part. Tell me why you think she might doubt your love.”

Niall knew exactly what Stan meant. He wouldn’t be concerned so much about showing he loved her if he was sure she knew that he loved her.

“You made some pretty serious mistakes, didn’t you Stan?” Niall nodded with a somber expression on his face.

“I’m not in this chair for nuthin’, mister. I got all the guilt I can rightly handle. This chair only makes up for a little of it. My daughters know I’m in this chair and I figure that helps them just a little to tolerate my being alive. Yes, one of the reasons I use this chair instead of one of those spider things is because of my guilt. I’ll never be able to regain the love of my daughters but I’ve spent years trying to imagine what I could do to deserve their love. So maybe I can help you out a little along those lines.”

“Well I sure don’t want to live in a wheelchair,” Niall said trying to brighten the tone of what had become a rather depressing conversation.

“It wouldn’t help if you did. What you need to do is show your daughter that you love her. Show her in some way that is unmistakable. But it has to say love to her. What will do that for one person won’t necessarily do it for someone else. Do you know your daughter well enough to know what you could do that will mean love to her?”

“Of course I do… Sure… Okay, how does anybody know that about someone else?”

“Get to know them really well. That means you have to actually pay attention to them. You have to notice their body language, the overtones in their voices, the times they look you in the eyes and the times they evade your eyes. You must be quite sensitive to them and accept the truth about them even when it hurts. In your case, since you’ve been so long away from your daughter, I doubt you can do it. Do you think her mother…?” Stan raised questioning eyebrows up at Niall.
“I don’t think her mother will help me in this matter. She would be more likely to say ‘I told you so’ than give me such intimate information about our daughter.”

“Then you can’t know what to do, you can only guess. But I can tell you this much, if you really love her you won’t be able to hide it. It will be there for her to see if only she can let herself see it. On the other hand... if you only tell yourself you love, and you really don’t; then that, too, will be obvious to her. I guess what I’m telling you is don’t worry about it. Relax. Do what feels right to you at the moment. Trust your instincts. Don’t be ashamed to let your feelings show. Eventually, if she can forgive you she will.”

“Has that worked for you?”

“No. But it’s only been twenty years. I still have hope. And in case I don’t live much longer, I’m keeping a diary. It’s in proper paper books with good leather bindings. I think at least one of them may read from them and learn something of how I feel. It isn’t much but it seems right somehow.”

“You know Stan, I’m really glad it was your shop I wandered into. I didn’t realize what I was feeling until I saw it in you. But one thing still puzzles me. Why didn’t you try to sell me a book?”

“You didn’t really want a book. It wouldn’t have made you happy. You’d have been wasting your money. That would have done you no good. I get paid for helping people, not talking them into wasting their money on things they don’t really want.”

“I’ll see if I can’t find some way to give her myself.”

“You might try taking her out to eat. Most mothers really like not having to cook and clean up.”

“I’ll think about it.”

They shook hands again and Niall turned and left the little shop.

“What do you think, Minerva? Do you think he loves his daughter?”

“We go through this every time, Stan,” the young woman’s voice said. “You know that isn’t something I can give you information about.”

Stan sat alone in his shop of books and things that looked like books and stared painfully at his hands in his lap.
Chapter Sixteen: Invasion

_In which the U.S. is invaded from Mexico. (Illegal immigration, sort of.)_

- - - - -6:00 pm, Monday, December 31, 2012- - - - -

“Anybody who hasn’t made food arrangements for supper yet? Last chance before we get to work. Everybody got drinks and whatever supplies they’re going to need? We’re expecting a long night. Okay Pearl, that’s the whole order.”

“Sheesh! You’d think we were going to be under siege or something. This isn’t the Alamo.”

“No but the Alamo is just a few miles from here. Just make sure your gear is functioning right and hope you’re bored all night long.”

“Yes, Mommy. Anything you say, Mommy.”

“Shut up back there, Barney. Now we’ve done dry runs, and we think we’re on top of things, but in every major operation like this things always go wrong. Be sure you go over what you’ll do if one or more crucial pieces of equipment fail... or if you or somebody in your group messes up big time.”

“Why is he looking at you, Barney?”

“Shut up, you little creep.”

The dim light in the windowless room was complemented by a complete lack of decoration on the walls and only a minimum of decoration on the desks and cubicles arranged around most of the wall space of the former hotel ballroom. It all looked thrown together because in many ways it was. On the other hand, the wiring was orderly which spoke volumes for the efficiency of the organization. The several desks in the center of the large, high-ceilinged room were arranged back-to-back so that the several people seated at them were facing each other. Each desk had at least three 20-inch flat panel monitors.

The occupants of the room were casually dressed, though none would have been said to be badly dressed. Each was wearing a headset and microphone. Those who were typing at their keyboards typed quickly, almost as if they were unaware of what their hands were doing. Most of the monitors were showing either street scenes from fixed cameras or overhead shots from cameras mounted in pilotless aircraft.

“Barbara, do you have plenty of reserve staff for tonight?”

“Yes, sir. I have 20 at the home office ready to go and about 300 on one-hour call at their homes. With three-hour notice I can have about 6200 in hardened sites with full satellite and cable access. Do you think I might need them, Ray?”

“No. I really expect that there’ll be some extra people coming across expecting free food and stuff but the local people can deal with them. No, I expect tonight to be very dull. But if something goes wrong and we’re not ready for it, you know we’ll be blamed.”

“Carlos, do we have confirmation from all the local police?”
“Yes, Ray. They’ve all said they’d keep us informed of any problems they have, even if they seem innocuous.”

“Ivan, have your spotter programs got the latest listings of suspected terrorists?”

“Yes, sir. I have it set to update in real time. If someone is added, it won’t wait until the morning to add it to the database. In fact, if we see somebody suspicious tonight and we can get a close-up, I can put them on the list within about three seconds and track them.”

“Excellent.”

“Sir, we’re not getting confirmation from the National Guard units yet. In some cases they don’t even have their phones turned on. Should I not contact them until they turn the phones on or go ahead and break cover?”

“No. Keep the security. I haven’t been authorized to let them know the phones are live even when off.”

Time passed slowly, with only the occasional reveler adding interest to a few of the screens. From time to time the personnel would go on break, but as the hours passed there were more and more casual comments... and chatting at the desks.

“What have you got for me?” Ray said, staring over Barbara’s shoulder. He listened intently for a few minutes. Then he said, “Thanks. We’ll take care of it.”

“Carlos, alert the police in El Paso that there’s a large convoy of cars and trucks leaving Chihuahua headed north on highway 45. There are at least several hundred people. No word on who they are.”

Carlos tapped his keyboard and after a few seconds was talking to the Chief of Police in El Paso.

“Who’s got the spotter planes around El Paso?”

“Andrea, here.”

“Jackson, here.”

“We’re expecting a large convoy of vehicles coming from Chihuahua on highway 45. Pass me the best feed when you get something but don’t go to sleep on everything else. This could be a feint or an opportunity for a terrorist.”

The casual chatting ceased for a time and there was little to be heard other than the hum of the air conditioning and the clicking of keyboards.

“Ivan, how are things at the crossing points?”

“Not too bad. I got a camera down at a bridge in Laredo but other than that we’re well within our limits.”

Time passed. “Got ‘em, sir. Headed straight for El Paso, all right.”

“Jackson, where’s this spotter plane? It looks like it’s at least a couple of miles over the border.”
“Yes, sir. Just a couple of miles. I don’t think they’ll be able to spot it at this altitude.”

“Get it back to our side.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Jackson, how can you tell the convoy from regular traffic?”

“It’s easy, sir. The cars aren’t gaining on the trucks and nobody’s trying to pass. They are staying with the trucks. Also, there are several motorcycles traveling at the head of the parade and a big gap between them and the car ahead of them.”

“Jackson, keep your eye on them.”

“Sir, they’re turning. They took Highway 2. They’re headed out into the desert.”

“Andrea, stay on the route to El Paso. Jackson, move along the border with them. Cross if you find it necessary to keep them in view. Try to stay high enough to make it hard for the radars to pick you up.”

“Carlos, what’s out that way on our side of the border?”

“Practically nothing, sir. There’s one little town in New Mexico and nothing else until they get to Arizona and not much even there. The only big town out that way is Tucson and that’s hours away.”

“What’s the town in New Mexico?”

“Ah… looks like Columbus, sir. Barely more than a spot in the road. Just a couple thousand people. Not much of anything.”

“See if they have police there and let them know they may have visitors in a little while. Then contact the New Mexico State police and see what they can do for us.

“Barbara, tell your people to get ready to call the residents of Columbus, New Mexico. You’ll probably need to have Spanish speakers for a lot of them. Problem?”

“No sir. My staff all have at least English and Spanish fluency and third languages are desirable.” She typed for a second or two, then spoke quietly. “Mabel, wake them up. We’re calling in the one-hour folks. Warn the section heads on the six-hour people that we may need them and to check the equipment. Give me Jack… Jack, we need all the phone numbers for people living in Columbus, New Mexico right now. Get them on speed dial and conference options for our ready reserve. We’ll probably have to cover about 750 to 1000 homes, so get what information you can, to group people who live close together and who speak the same language. We can use broadcast with Dopey if we have to but it’ll go better if we can have live people doing the talking. When you get that set up tap for the next task… Mabel, here’s the situation. We have several hundred vehicles coming up the highway from Mexico, I see that’s highway 11 in New Mexico. We don’t know what their intentions are but it doesn’t look good. I’ll give you feed from here of the situation. You’re going to have to create groups on the fly when we see what we need to do. Use the tactical operations feed and we’ll treat it as a code yellow for now. We need to alert the people of Columbus without scaring them too badly.
“Here’s what we want to get across:
1) May be no problem but could be serious.
2) We’ll keep you informed of just what’s happening.
3) Do nothing without telling us first.
4) Help is on the way.

Finally, if things start to get bad, tell them that we will help them to defend each other.

Questions…? They’re in the middle of nowhere. If they left town they’d be out in the open: in the cold and dark, and defenseless. Evacuation is our last resort. If there’s anyone with a medical emergency now they’ll have to get out really quickly because time is something we don’t have… Okay. Break.”

Time continued to pass but whereas before it dragged, now it seemed to fly.

“Sir, they’re turning North on Mexico 23, that’ll be New Mexico Highway 11, if they cross the border.”

“Andrea, what about the back end of the column?”

“The last of them turned to follow the others. Looks like they all are headed to the same place.”

“Carlos, has the Border Patrol reported anything on Highway 11?”

“Nothing, sir.”

“Carlos, did they believe you when you told them the situation?”

“He said he did but he wasn’t at the border himself.”

“Carlos, can you talk to the guys at the crossing point yourself?”

“Not part of my book, sir. Perhaps Barbara can do something for us.”

“Barbara?”

“Yes, sir… It should be in Carlos' book now.”

“Got it… This is Homeland Security. Have you been notified of the convoy of vehicles headed your way on the Mexican side? Have you been given orders as to what to do? Well, ask for them and be quick. Unless they stop they should get to you in about 30 minutes. I'll call back in 10 minutes. If you're still there, I'll have more word for you.”

“Carlos, listen to his call.”

“Andrea, have you got any resources you can direct to Columbus?”

“No, sir. The Border Patrol has several for that area but I don't know what they have airborne.”

“Ivan, can you help us on this?”

“Yes, sir. I can give you overhead view from as close as 150 yards night vision. The vehicles show up quite nicely on the satellite shot. I can’t do much in the way of identification but I can tell you where their cars and trucks are at least.”
“Ivan, give Andrea and Jackson a feed each. The one to Andrea should be of the area around and South of El Paso. Jack needs the area South of Columbus if you can find it.”

What seemed like just a few seconds later…

“Carlos, the crossing on Highway 11?”

“I’m calling now, Ray… Homeland Security here. The convoy still seems to be headed your way. They’re about 20 minutes out. What are your instructions? You’re to close the border and leave? Sounds like a good idea. Where are you to go? That’s good. You should be safe there. Now move!”

“Carlos, what about the local police in Columbus?”

“There’s only one guy on night duty. I had him wake up the other two officers and the city manager. They’ll be at the office in about 10 minutes.”

“There’s nothing much they can do with the number of people who’ll be dropping in on them so have them close the office and take any guns there home with them. We want the place to look like a ghost town when those guys get there. If they want property we’ll ignore it, but if they seem to want to hurt folks we’ll shoot back.’

“Barbara, get your phone squads organized by neighborhood. Those who have guns should get them, load them, and find firing positions. Remind them to open windows a little so they won’t have to shoot through the glass. Have those homes with no guns on separate controllers. Keep the lights out. We want the whole town dark and seemingly deserted when they arrive.”

“Already done, Ray.”

“Ivan, any word on who these people are and what they want?”

“No sir. I’m contacting other agencies now with inquiries. Our database search shows nothing relevant.”

“Barbara, tell us about Columbus.”

“Isolated town in Southwest New Mexico. Mountains in the area but town is in the plain. There are about 1700 people and about 750 residences. The population is young and working-class. The town has one bank and one service station. The Pancho Villa State park is right downtown. There are two highways, 11 going North-South and 9 going East-West. Nearest town is Deming North on Highway 11 with about 10,000 people.”

“Barbara, I want you to get your reserves into their sites and begin to contact the good people of Deming. I suspect that’s their real destination, but there’s a good chance at least some will stop in Columbus.

“Carlos, see if the State police can set up a roadblock a few miles South of Deming. We want it at a good ambush spot if they can find one. Also, see if they have a National Guard unit there. If so, we want that equipment manned. We either will want to use it ourselves or keep it out of these raiders’ hands. Has the Army got any resources in the area that could help us out?”
“None that can move before about noon. They’re concentrating on the larger towns like El Paso, Laredo, and Tucson. If this is just a feint they have to be ready. Looks like we’re on our own for a time.”

“Everybody, the raiders are approaching the border. Carlos, are the border guards clear?”

“Yes, sir. They got out about ten minutes ago. They’ve cleared Columbus heading for Deming.”

“Barbara, warn the people of Columbus. We want a total blackout from the houses. Streetlights are okay but we want it to look like nobody’s awake in the whole town, especially the police department.”

“Lights out and expect the raiders in about ten minutes. Sir, we’ve had four families leave their homes. They say they’re leaving town. We’ve warned the others in their neighborhoods to not shoot at them. I think they’ll be clear before the raiders arrive.”

Time passes.

“Looks like they’re entering town. They seem to be grouping in the park. The trucks are lining up and parking there. Cars going down several streets. Looks like they’re headed for the bank.”

“Ivan, do we have any live feeds from the bank there?”

“Barney, what have we got in the businesses of Deming? They may be going there next.”

“We’ve got the First Bank of New Mexico with any of six full power taps. We should be able to see and hear everything that happens inside. We also have several other businesses.

“Looks like they also want to get gas, several of them are parking at the gas station.”

“Okay, I’ve got one tap there but it’s on battery power so we only get about an hour full sound and picture. Anybody want that?”

“I’ll take it.”

“You got it.”

“Barney, give me the bank feed.”

“It’s yours. You want control, too?”

“No just the slave visual, no sound.”

“Roger.”

“Looks like they’re trying to break into the bank. They seem to have some sort of ram or something. There it goes. Door’s open. Boy, look at them come in. You’d think it was a candy store. That place is going to be a mess when they get through. What do you think they’re looking for?”

“Money, I’ll bet.”

“What for. It’s no good any more. As of about three hours ago it was just so much paper.”
“I still think they’re after money.”

“What are they doing?”

“Looks like they’re going to try to open the safe. Ivan, do we have anybody who knows safe cracking available to us?”

“Yes, sir. You want him online?”

“If he’s not busy. It isn’t important.”

“Anderson, what are these guys doing. Are they good or amateurs? Anderson says they must be working from a textbook. They have a drill but they don’t know where to drill and they handle it like it was new to them… They’re putting in way too much explosive… He doesn’t think it’s going to work for them.”

“Well they’re running out of the bank.”

“Sir, we’ve got a group of cars pulling up in a neighborhood. Looks like they’re heading for the best house in town. Action?”

“If they approach a house, shoot. Otherwise, if they’re just looking, let ‘em.”

“Shoot if they step on a porch or look like they’re surrounding a house.”

“Got shooters for this block?… How many guns?… They’re getting out of the cars… They’re spreading out to surround the house… Aim… Fire. Get the driver. Anybody moving? No let them lie there. If they aren’t dead the cold will make them numb in a few minutes. It’s only about…

“They blew the safe! All our taps are gone.”

“Jackson, where are they going now? Any toward the house where the shooting was?”

“No sir. They’re all heading for the bank or the gas station.”

“Barbara, any citizens wounded?”

“No sir, we had some broken glass but only a few minor cuts. We had to remind them to keep the lights off, though.”

“Any of the group at the house still up and about?”

“No sir. They’re all down.”

“Barbara, how did they do that?”

“Well, sir there are lots of hunters in New Mexico and during the food shortages they’ve been hunting deer and rabbit quite a lot in the mountains around the town. We had eight guns on that block and put down seven of the raiders on the first volley. The other three got off a couple of shots but the second rounds had them quiet in about 5 seconds. Those hollow point bullets pack quite a wallop.”
“My compliments to your staff. Looks like good work on that one. Remind the others that we may have the same kind of thing in other blocks. Tell them all what happened so they’ll get more confidence.”

“Jackson, what’s happening at the bank?”

“Still lots of guys going in and out. They’re carrying in several boxes. My guess is more explosives.”

“Barbara, do any of the citizens who have homes near the bank have a picture phone that can give us a view of the bank?”

“I’ll ask. Mabel, ask the blocks near the bank if anybody has a picture phone that can show us what’s happening at the bank… Only two sir and they’ve got bad angles.”

“They’re running out of the bank again… Christ! There went all the windows. That must have shaken the whole town. Barbara, reassure the citizens that everything’s okay. It’s just a building. No one is hurt. Keep their lights off.”

“They’re going back into the bank.”

“Carlos, any word from the State Police on a reception committee for these guys if they head for Deming next?”

“Yes, sir. They’re setting up a roadblock near Waterloo about 15 miles North of Columbus. They’ve got some heavy equipment to use to block the road and some good cover on both sides of the road for a couple of miles south from there. They have some automatic weapons for their S.W.A.T. team and they’ve contacted some people with hunting groups in the area to recruit more shooters. They say the highway is higher than the ground on both sides so shooters on opposite sides of the road would not be able to shoot each other. They’re using cell phones to keep track of everybody.”

“Barbara, are your reserves ready?”

“We’ve got about 1000 in sites. It seems lots of them were up and dressed for New Year’s parties, so they could get on-site pretty quickly. I think we’ll have over 3000 by dawn. Should I offer our services to the State Police?”

“Yes. Do for Deming what we’ve done for Columbus. It’s about ten times bigger but we’ll try to keep the raiders away from town so you shouldn’t have to talk to everybody.”

“Andrea, anything else big on the horizon?”

“No sir but the general traffic is beginning to pick up. It’s only a little lighter than usual for this time in the morning. About what we would expect for a holiday.”

“Okay, people, we wait to see what the raiders want to do. Think of various things they might do and how you’d deal with each.”

Time passed slowly again as the adrenalin left their systems. A couple of the operators grabbed snacks to replenish blood sugar. Hot coffee was popular among others.

“The trucks are lighting up. I think they’re getting ready to move. Yes, they’re starting up. The gas station is still busy. Looks like they got a hand pump and are pumping as much gas as they can from
the underground storage tank. The motorcycles are heading north. Looks like they’re heading for Deming… Yes the trucks and cars are headed north, all right. Carlos, tell the State Police they should have business in about 10 minutes. Jackson, go North with the main body. Carlos, offer feeds from Jackson so they see what the raiders are doing. Then ask if they’re in position yet.”

“Sir they’ve got about half the men they wanted but the roadblock is just off the highway ready to be moved into place as the raiders get close. They’re waiting until they’re within a quarter mile or so to create the block, so they can get the main body in the ambush. The guys on the sides are still scrambling to get into position.”

“Carlos, tell them the motorcycles are getting too far ahead of the main body. Let them through and close the door when the main body gets close.”

Time passed.

“Sir.”

“Yes Barbara.”

“There are several cars of raiders still in Columbus. What should we do with them?”

“Watch, wait. If they approach a house, kill them. If they stay on the streets, just watch. Let’s see how the Deming affair works out. Keep in close touch with the local police. We may want to set up a roadblock to catch the remains of the raiders running from the ambush if there aren’t too many. If there are too many, we want Columbus still dark and empty-looking so they’ll just go right on through.”

Time passed.

“They’ve closed the roadblock behind the motorcycles. It looks like the cars have stopped about 300 yards short of the roadblock. The rest of the column is closing up behind the leaders… They seem to be conferring… They’ve turned one of the trucks around and are backing it toward the roadblock with several of the cars flanking it on both sides driving in the ditches on both sides. 200 yards, 100 yards, 50 shooting! Looks like automatic weapons from the back of the truck. Shooting from both sides of the road. What the hell? The truck just blew up. Carlos, find out what that was.”

“They’re busy, sir. I will later.”

“Looked like a rocket propelled grenade to me sir.”

“What do you know about it, Barney? You were never in the military.”

“Quiet back there! Some of the cars are trying to turn around. The ones that do are taking more fire. There goes one in reverse. Some are getting away. Looks like only two cars are leaving.”

“Barbara, any word from your Deming people?”

“Yes, sir. No casualties again. The firing has died down. They’re going to wait for dawn to move in.”

“Jackson, how many cars headed back toward Columbus?”
“You have two headed south but they’re getting beyond my range. I can’t monitor the main body and keep up with them also.”

“Barbara, have we got contact with the police officers of Columbus?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Do they think they could set up a roadblock at the park in five minutes?”

“They say they could.”

“What about the handful that stayed in Columbus?”

“They’re headed north. They should run into the guys coming back South at any minute.”

“Ask them to get the roadblock set up just south of the park so they’ll have to stop with the park on one side and houses on the other.”

“Done, sir.”

“Have some good shooters join the people in the houses across from the park.”

“They’re on the way, sir.”

‘Barbara, is there enough light from the streetlights to shoot well?”

“It’s a clear night, sir. There should be plenty of light with the moon and the street lights.”

“Oh yes, have the police keep the roadblock dark, then turn on their headlights facing the park as a signal to fire.”

“Done sir.”

“I wish we could see where they are. Tell me when the roadblock is set.”

Time passes.

“Roadblock set, sir. And the raiders at the Deming block seem to be surrendering.”

“Nice feed. I can see the roadblock quite clearly. Whose cameras?”

“Those are cell phones, sir. We were able to move several to good vantage points. Notice how the shadows will be pretty close to the road on the park side. The police have set the roadblock cars to point toward those shadows. We’ve asked the shooters to fire when those lights come on. The local police will turn on those headlights on our signal.”

“There they are, just coming into town… Wait for them. They’re slowing. Just be calm. Barbara, do we have enough shooters if they stop a block or two before the barrier?”

“Yes, sir, we have secondary roadblocks on highway 9 out of sight until they get to the park. If they stop at the crossroads we have about 20 guns that bear on the cars. Shoot if they turn, sir?”
“Yes.”

“Sir, they are waving something out the windows of the cars. It looks like shirts or something. Could they be surrendering?”

“Could be. Tell everyone to hold their fire but stay under cover. Leave the lights on the roadblock dark.”

“They’re stopping. They’re getting out with their hands raised. Looks like surrender.”

“Have them lie down in front of the lead car, in full view of its headlights. Have the officers move forward well-spread, and search and handcuff them to each other in a long daisy-chain. How many bandits do we have here? I count eight, no nine. One looks injured. He’s not walking too well. Okay, keep the shooters behind cover until these guys are all secure.”

------Later, about 30 minutes past dawn------

“Shift change. All you new folks up to speed on what’s happened? Okay, first shift go get sleep. I’m proud of you. Yes I’m looking at you, too, Barney.”
Chapter Seventeen: Neighbors

In which Niall goes to the emergency room, sets up housekeeping, and Jeeves gives advice.

Niall had spent the day with Brianna and the children. John had presented his paper on why a wealthy man might give up that wealth to become a payer. He had done some research on the Internet and had quotes from several Payers who had given up sizable fortunes (or given them away before joining the Payers). The arguments were simple and clear. The sentences were in paragraphs with topic sentences and everything. Spelling and grammar had no errors but Niall credited the computer software for that. Otherwise, he was favorably impressed and was able to enjoy his evening out with Tony and Brianna without a final dispute over the home-schooling issue.

Niall had allowed Brianna and Tony to select the restaurant since he obviously didn’t know the local dining out scene. The restaurant, located on a bluff overlooking the Potomac, offered a splendid view of the late afternoon sun glinting on the tops of the buildings in the District. They were shown to their table by the head waiter and were attended most solicitously by a series of gracious attendants. This time the menu had prices prominently displayed. Niall was asked if he wished to purchase each of the items ordered and after the main courses were eaten he was asked if they were satisfactory. Upon his assent, the small TV at the table told him that the amount of his purchases had been deducted from his account. It was during the dessert that things changed.

The TV addressed Brianna without being asked, telling her that a friend of hers, one Annette Jenkins, had been injured in a fall and was asking for her. The TV asked if she would go to Annette.

“Of course I’ll go,” Brianna said rising to her feet, delicious dessert forgotten, half-eaten.

“Seeking transportation. Please use the front entrance,” from the TV.

Tony and Niall were on their feet as well and followed Brianna toward the exit.

“Who do I pay for the dessert?” Niall asked Tony.

“There’ll be no charge. We didn’t get to finish it.”

No one tried to stop them as they approached the front of the dining room and passed into the small lobby. Brianna burst through the doors, which did not have time to get themselves out of her way, and started looking around the parking lot frantically. A large sedan pulled into the parking lot faster than one would have expected and approached them stopping abruptly nearby. The driver looked at Brianna and asked, “Are you Brianna?”

“Yes. Are you to take us?”

“Get in.”

“Who are you?” Niall asked.

“Daniel Horne. Now are you folks in a hurry or not?”

“Just get in, Dad. The computer system has arranged this.”
Niall, with a forceful push from Tony supplementing Brianna’s tugging on his arm, somewhat gracelessly plopped into the back seat with Tony and Brianna.

The car started away almost before the doors were closed.

“Who are you and where are you taking us?”

“Dad, he has offered to help us now be quiet and let him drive.”

The car was moving very fast now on the streets. All the lights were green, it seemed, and other traffic was moving out of the way well before the sedan approached. The driver hardly seemed to slow at all, even at blind corners. This scared Niall greatly. Later there were a couple of times the car braked abruptly at blind corners and each time while making the turn they went past pedestrians who looked at them curiously. Each group of pedestrians had at least one child. It was as if the driver had known what would be there even though Niall could see no indication before the car went round the corners.

Finally, after going seven or eight miles in a little over five minutes, the car pulled into the parking lot of a hospital and drove quickly to the front entrance. Brianna was out the door and headed into the building before Tony could get out more than a couple of sentences indicating immense gratitude to the driver.

Inside Brianna was met by a nurse and directed to the emergency room. She was practically running by the time they got there and another nurse directed her into a room to one side where several of the staff were working over a very pregnant woman who was lying quietly and appeared to be unconscious.

Brianna stopped and stared, her eyes huge with fear for her friend. Tony looked around for someone who could answer some questions and found an older woman whom Niall would have said was a payer, had he seen her on the streets.

Tony asked her, “Is she going to be all right?”

“I think so. They said her vital signs were good and the baby is old enough to survive outside the mother if it has to be delivered now.”

“Do you know what happened?”

“They said it was a fall but I don’t know. She was conscious when they brought her in but she wasn’t very coherent. She kept calling for someone named Brianna.”

“Oh yes, that’s me,” Brianna burst out. “She’s my dearest friend. I was going to help her with the baby. She was so looking forward to being a mother.”

The old woman had been looking at the medical team the whole time and when one of the staff looked up at her and shook his head she motioned for the others to follow her. Brianna came very slowly and reluctantly looking back almost the whole way.

They were shown into a waiting room which had several combinations of seating. Some combinations were clearly for individuals who did not want contact in that they were somewhat surrounded with plants. Others were clearly for small groups of people because they had several seats, close together, around a small, low table. There were several pairs of chairs, of course. The
lighting was dim, though with some pools of brightness where reading lamps cast their sun-spectrum light on the reading material of the person using the lamp. The walls and furniture were of soothing colors and in one corner was a rather impressive collection of toys and a three-partitioned, toddler-confining, raised play area enclosed in netting. The two toddlers using it were able to play with the toys in their sections but could not get to each other.

The older woman led them to a cluster of chairs that was unoccupied and they were seated, Brianna using only the front couple of inches on her comfortable chair.

“I think they were about to take her to the operating room so they asked me to take care of you folks. From the looks of the doctor, I don’t think this one is life threatening.”

“How can you tell? She looked unconscious to me.” Brianna was squeezing her hands together and the skin of her hands was white and red from the pressures.

Tony put his arm around her and told her that Annette would be fine. “They got her to the hospital quickly and you could see that they weren’t giving her blood or anything. She must have been conscious when she arrived or they wouldn’t have known to call you. So try to relax a little. She’s going to need you to be calm and confident.”

Brianna seemed to come awake from a nightmare and turned into Tony’s arms for a long, lingering hug with lots of small pats on the back and gentle rubbing of her shoulders.

“I’m so glad you’re here for me, darling.” Brianna said quietly into his shoulder. The tears she had been too frightened to let out began to come and she sobbed a little, quietly, but she was beginning to get over the shock.

After about an hour, during which Niall was there and attentive but felt he shouldn’t say much, the older woman returned and asked Brianna to come with her to attend Annette as she would be coming out of the anesthetic soon.

Brianna was much more in control of herself now and hurried out without even looking back.

Tony used one of the screens to contact the babysitter, who was willing to keep the children late, especially since she also was a friend of Annette’s.

“Do you feel up to answering some questions now?” Niall asked Tony.

“Oh, yes. It’ll take my mind off what’s happened to Annette,” Tony smiled rather grimly.

“Well first, why did they call us to come when we are only friends? I could understand it if we were family, maybe, but merely friends?”

“People do not deal with injury or illness well when they are under stress. Hospitals are very stressful places. You don’t know anybody there. There are lots of suffering people whose misery you don’t want to share. The surroundings are unfamiliar, which is stressful despite the attempts to make them soothing,” Tony gestured at the décor with a sour expression. “So when people are sick or injured they need the presence of someone or better yet several people who are familiar and reassuring.”

“Sure, but why the bother? Couldn’t they have just told Brianna to come in some time in the next couple of hours? Did they have to put her through all that traumatic hurrying?”
“When they called they didn’t know how bad the situation was nor when Annette would need Brianna to help her. It is better to hurry when you don’t need to than be too late to help when needed.”

“Okay, I guess I can accept that. But where did they get that nutcase who drove us here? I thought he was going to kill us all.”

“He was just someone in the area who had a fast car with enough room for our party. He was asked if he would and was willing. Naturally he’ll be paid for his trouble. Second, he was only doing a little of the driving. The computer was controlling most of it. That’s why the car braked sometimes at those blind corners and went around almost on two wheels at others. The computer knew what was around the corner. It was also overriding the car’s and the city’s speed controls so we could go that fast. It was clearing traffic and making sure we had only green lights. The people along our route were warned that we were coming and even told what lanes we would be driving in. You were probably about as safe in that car as you are in this waiting room.”

“My God!”

“Exactly. The computer is able to do some amazing things for us. It’s a marvelous tool.”

Niall thought, “Marvelous but dangerous. It sounds like it can take control of just about everything whenever.”

Just then a man came by pushing a rubber-wheeled cart which held canned and bottled drinks and a variety of packaged snack foods. He approached each of the waiting people in the room and offered them refreshment. He also had a couple of those generic books that Sam had shown Niall.

Niall and Tony weren’t hungry but they accepted beverages.

“How much do I owe you?” Niall asked.

“Nothing,” replied the surprised young man. “These are all standard.”

“Well many thanks anyway. You are very kind,” Niall said and smiled gratefully at him. As he moved away he said to Tony, “I can’t get over how many things are free. In my day it would have cost you an arm and a leg to get almost anything in a hospital. Which reminds me, can Annette afford to pay for this? I got the impression that she’s a single mother.”

“Medical care is all free or standard as we say. It shouldn’t cost her a thing.”

“How can they do that? It costs a fortune to keep a place like this in operation.”

“The Payers don’t seem to have any problem with paying for all the medical care. Of course, since they are mostly old, they do have a vested interest in seeing to it that medical care is paid well to keep up the supply of doctors and nurses and so on.”

“How do they decide who to treat?”

“That’s up to the individual doctor or nurse. Providing good treatment will get them paid well, no matter who they treat, so long as the patient actually has a problem. But they can pick and choose how they will. Naturally the more benefit they generate the more they get paid. So if a child needs treatment the pay is likely to be high and last many years. If it’s an old person in a hostel the pay is quite a bit less. If the patient is rich and productive the pay is likely to be higher than if the patient is
poor and a slacker. But it’s completely up to the nurse, doctor, or hospital. They aren’t forced to treat anybody.”

“You mean rich people get better treatment than poor people?”

“If the staff has to make a choice as to whom to treat then probably, yes, the money would make a difference, all other things being equal. Of course, that has always been true.”

“Is there a shortage of medical treatment? I mean, there’re lots more of us old people these days than there used to be. We need more medical care than you young sprouts. Back when I went abroad they were afraid there wouldn’t be enough money to pay for all the medical care that would be needed.”

“The average age of the Payers is somewhere around 67 years old. Do you really think they’d let there be a shortage of medicine or treatment for themselves? Hardly. I’ve only heard of shortages in the event of disasters and those get straightened out rather quickly.”

“What about drugs?”

“They’re part of the treatment. Do you take any prescription drugs?”

“Yes I do. I’m not running short or anything but I will need to get some more of an anxiety drug I’m taking and I have malaria, though it’s under control with drugs.”

“Well, you’ll need to visit a doctor to get those prescriptions confirmed, I guess. I don’t know if the local pharmacists will trust a foreign prescription or not.”

“You mean I could be turned down just because the druggist didn’t know my doctor?”

“Of course. He’s responsible for what happens to the people he gives drugs to. If you shouldn’t be taking the drug and he got fooled into giving it to you he could lose a lot of money if you were harmed by it.”

“But he could just refuse me medicine I need?”

“Well he could, but if you need the medicine, then he’d be losing money by doing so. He’d probably tell you to go to a doctor he knew to confirm the prescription. Doctors and druggists do work closely together.”

“What if Annette needs a brace or something?”

“That’s covered, too.”

“I talked to a man who was confined to a wheel chair and he showed me some really fancy insect-like things that could help injured people get around. He preferred the chair but could he have gotten one of those spider things free?”

“Sure. Those things really improve the lives of people whose legs don’t work any more. That’s a lot of benefit. There’s lots of Payers who use them, too, so they can keep working. I saw this feature about a payer who pays miners and he had this thing like a centipede that would take him down in the mines through all those narrow tunnels and such. It was amazing.”
Their conversation drifted off into technological marvels. Tony supplemented the conversation with information and video from the nearby monitor screen.

After an hour or so, Brianna reappeared with Annette and her new baby. Annette was using one of the spider things and looked radiantly happy holding her baby close. Brianna was walking beside her with a huge grin. “We can take her home now. They gave her a pack that will monitor her condition but they say that she should be fine. The operation went well. It was a combination of a cesarean first to keep the baby safe, and…”

“Isn’t he just the most precious thing you ever saw?” Annette interrupted.

“Yes, darling,” Brianna said grinning down at her. “And they also fixed the broken vertebra and they say the nerves will be regenerated in a few days so Annette will be able to walk again. They say it will take some practice at first but she’ll be good as new.”

“That’s wonderful,” Tony said. Then he won Annette’s heart by asking, somewhat boyishly if he could hold the baby for a minute. As a veteran dad he had no trouble demonstrating the proper technique and never even hinted at not supporting the head, nor did he rouse the sleeping baby.

So what had, at first, appeared to be a major tragedy in the making for Annette came out about as well as could have been hoped.

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Niall departed after breakfast. He had gone upstairs to Annette’s apartment where Brianna had spent the night. He intended to part quickly, but was required to admire the sleeping baby for at least half an hour. He asked Jeeves (in Annette’s apartment) when the next bus would come and, by that device, was able to beat a retreat from the thrill of new motherhood and the several other friends of Brianna and Annette’s who were in attendance.

The bus ride didn’t seem very long at all and he promised himself that he would not let himself become a stranger to his grandchildren. When he arrived in Aldie, he got off the bus and walked quickly the two short blocks to his new home. It was then he remembered that he hadn’t been given a key. He was on the point of going back to find Sam when he noticed that there was a key in the lock. The door opened easily after he unlocked it. But first he locked it, thinking it was locked already and that he was unlocking it. After struggling with that for a moment he realized what he had done and set things right.

Nothing seemed to have been disturbed in his absence, even though anyone could have come in. He checked the back door and that was unlocked, too. The front door key also fit the back door. He dumped his suitcases in the bedroom and thought of John earning his Euros. Then he thought of lunch and went to the kitchen to see what was in the refrigerator. It was completely empty, though cold. He looked in the cabinets. They had the same kind of sturdy, serviceable dishes and glasses that had been in use at Brianna’s place. But there was no food. If they delivered in the morning, he was going to have a long wait for his next meal unless he could find a cafe down town.

Leaving the doors locked and pocketing the key, he strolled the two blocks to the center of town and looked both ways. There were three places to eat. He chose the one that looked least like a chain establishment and walked in. The smell of food cooking was enough to make him hungry if he wasn’t before. He sat at the counter a couple of seats from the nearest other patron and looked at the menu. This was made of stiff paper laminated in plastic. A couple of items had been crossed off with a
grease pencil and a couple of other items had been written in. It was all simple country food: meat, potatoes, a few vegetables, and salad.

A waitress who appeared to be in her 20s put a glass of water down in front of him and said, “What can I get for you?”

“I’ll have the fried chicken and a tossed salad with thousand island dressing.”

“Vegetables with that? The menu is right about that for once. Any two or three from that list there.”

“Green beans, mashed potatoes, and fried okra.”

“You want white or dark meat on that chicken?”

“Dark I think this time.”

“Did you get all that, Darla?” the waitress hollered to the back.

“Sure did. It’ll be in the window by the time you get him his black coffee.”

The waitress poured a cup of coffee, left it black, and brought it back to Niall. Before she could turn away, Niall asked quickly, “How did she know I wanted coffee and black coffee at that?” He was expecting to hear about the computer again.

“Oh, Sam was in here for dinner last night and told us you might be coming by.”

‘I guess people and gossip were invented before computers,’ Niall thought wryly to himself.

The waitress returned immediately with a plate of food still gently steaming and placed it in front of him with an extra napkin, presumably so he could eat the fried chicken with his fingers.

Niall thanked her and asked if everybody got their food this quickly. She said that when the orders weren’t coming too fast or the place too noisy they did, while she and Darla were working. She couldn’t speak for the others who worked there.

Since the waitress stayed relatively close to where Niall was eating, he felt bold enough to ask a delicate question in a quiet voice.

“Did Sam happen to tell you anything about me besides how I like my coffee?”

“Well he did let drop a few things. Sam never was one of those tight-lipped fellows.”

“Did he say that I was out of the country for a long time and I still don’t really know my way around much?”

“I’ll allow as how that was the impression we got, yes.”

“Well if I had been served like this twenty years ago I would have left a pretty good tip. But now I don’t quite know what to do to show how much I appreciate your prompt and helpful service.”

“Mister, if that’s a pickup line you came to the wrong place,” her face showing a little color and with a frown.
“No, really, I just want to do the right thing. I’m not trying to be insulting or anything. Please help a poor old fool who’s new to all this to find his way.”

She still looked a little suspicious but relented enough to say, “You just tell that payer over there (she pointed at an elderly woman in whites sitting in a booth reading a book) what you said about the service.”

“Yes ma’am, I’ll certainly do that.” Boy, money matters were dangerous. A person could be insulting without even trying.

Thinking he was shifting to a safer topic he asked, “Who do I tell what food I want delivered to the house?”

“Delivered to the house? What are you talking about?” She was becoming suspicious again.

“When I was staying with my daughter in her apartment, this guy brought an insulated box full of food and various necessaries to the apartment door each morning. Don’t they do something like that around here?”

“No. Why should they? You need some food to take home; you go over to the grocery and see what they’ll give you. From what Sam says about you I guess they’d trust you with a week’s worth. If you turn out to be dependable, they might even go two weeks next winter.”

So things were definitely different in this small town. There had been no prices on the menu so Niall figured it was standard fare. The food was good and filling but not exciting. It didn’t match the food that he had in the Good-n-Quick.

Having finished his meal, Niall went over to the payer and expressed his appreciation for the service Darla and the waitress had provided. Next he went out to the street to locate the grocery. Nobody followed him hollering about paying for his meal so he guessed that it was standard as he had thought. The grocery was about a block and a half down the street to his right.

He sauntered toward the grocery, looking at the stores as he passed. None of them had any signs about sales. There was really nothing remarkable about them so far as he could see. A couple of them had their doors open since the spring air was only cool rather than cold.

The grocery store parking lot had a number of pickups as one would expect in a semi-rural area but it also had several cars that looked altogether out of place in a farm town. The splash marks on most of them indicated that they were being driven on country roads or perhaps even off-road.

He walked in the front door and right away noticed that the layout was wrong, or at least different than any grocery he had ever seen. For one thing the dairy case was near the cash register as was the bread and disposable diapers. It was as if it was intended to be convenient to pick up a few things without having to go to the back of the store. There was also a clear separation between what Niall thought of at first as specialty foods and regular foods. The specialty area had a separate meat case which also showed fish. There was a deli and a bakery as well. The smell of ground coffee and the bakery were making his mouth water even though he’d just eaten.

There were shopping carts near the door and Niall picked one out and started going around the store. It was only a few minutes before he realized that all the specialty items had prices marked and the standard food did not. Since Niall was no gourmet, he confined himself to the standard goods until
the coffee smell drew him over to the specialty side. He found several bags of coffee beans next to
the grinder and a woman wearing an apron came over to ask if she could help him. He asked if she
could recommend a good coffee, since all he knew was that it sure smelled good. She asked several
questions about what kind of flavors he liked and what kind of food he intended to eat it with and then
specified a particular coffee. He asked for one pound of the type she had suggested and she
measured out the pound of beans and poured them into the grinder. It did its job, with a resulting
slightly different but still delicious aroma bursting out around Niall. He closed his eyes and took a
deep breath, letting it out slowly.

“That will be $4.75,” the woman said handing him the bag.

He thanked her and pushed his cart to the front of the store where two men were putting items from
their carts into paper bags and chatting. Niall waited behind one of them for his chance at the bags.
When they’d finished, he pushed the cart forward and took a bag off the shelf below the counter. He
was just starting to put his things in the bag when an older man wearing an apron came up to him
and inquired politely if his name might happen to be Mr. Campbell.

“Yes I am. I’m the new guy in town. I live about two blocks due North of here,” Niall smiled at him.

“I am Mr. Seawright, Jonas Seawright, the owner of this grocery. Mr. Campbell, I don’t want to seem
picky but it looks to me as if you have a bit more than a week’s worth of food there.”

“Well the house didn’t have a bit of food in it when I was just there so I thought I had better stock up.”

“Mr. Witherspoon mentioned that you might drop in on us. He said he thought well of you. So I’ll let
you have a week’s worth of food this time. You can just leave about a third of this stuff on the counter
and I’ll see that it’s put away. When you get that sacked up, you can come over to the computer there
and buy the coffee.”

“Yes sir, I’ll be right there.” This was more complicated than he’d expected. The other two guys did
have only a single sack of food each. Soon he’d made his decisions about what meals he’d have and
how often he’d eat out and packed the food into two sacks. He carried it all over to the computer
screen he saw at the counter near the specialty, no that should be luxury foods. He put the coffee on
the counter and Mr. Seawright ran a scanner over it and said “One pound of ____ Coffee, store
ground at the price of $4.75 per pound.”

“I, Niall Campbell, agree to purchase one pound of ____ Coffee for $4.75,” and raised his eyebrows
in a questioning look at Mr. Seawright who nodded. The computer, in Jeeves’ voice, repeated, “Mr.
Niall Campbell has purchased one pound of ____ Coffee, store ground at the store of Mr. Jonas
Seawright. Would you like to hear your remaining account balance?”

“Yes, Jeeves, I believe I would.” ‘When in Rome,’ Niall thought.

“Your remaining balance is $84,473.53.”

Mr. Seawright’s eyebrows went up and his face subtly adjusted itself to a look of respect. “We are
most happy to serve you, Mr. Campbell. Since I see you didn’t arrive in a car, may I suggest that you
let one of the boys carry the bags for you?” He gestured to several boys of varying ages who were
attempting to repair, or perhaps just take apart, a bicycle that had seen better days.

Niall nodded with a smile and said, “I guess I forgot that I was going to have to carry everything I got.
I wouldn’t have picked up so much in the first place if I’d remembered.”
“Front!” Mr. Seawright said in a loud voice. The boys looked up and one said, “That’s me. What have you got for me, Mr. Seawright?”

“Carry this gentleman’s bags to his house. It’s a couple of blocks north.”

“Thanks, Mr. Seawright.” The boy ran forward, and picked up one of the bags and scooted out the door. Niall picked up the other and started for the door but had hardly gotten that far when the boy was back, empty-handed, took the second bag out of his arms, and whisked out the door.

Niall thanked Mr. Seawright and headed for the door to catch the boy. When he got outside he saw that the boy had made a wagon out of scrap wood and four old bicycle wheels. He had the groceries strapped in under a sheet of plastic.

“Did you build that wagon yourself?”

“Yes, sir. It wasn’t hard. They have plenty of stuff down at the recycling plant. That where we got the parts for that bicycle we’re building.”

“Do you have a regular job at the store?”

“It’s no job.” The boy said scornfully. “Mr. Seawright tells us when there are things we can do to help. I made over $10 last week. It really helps to have this wagon ‘cause I can carry lots more stuff.” The boy seemed to enjoy talking and Niall figured that maybe he could take advantage of it.

“Why wouldn’t Mr. Seawright let me take more food?”

“‘Cause he doesn’t want you wasting any. See, he gets the food mostly from the farmers ‘round here. What they don’t give to him they take to the shippers or the elevator. They get paid more, usually, for the food folks eat here ‘cause they don’t have to share the pay with the shippers. But if Mr. Seawright just gives it to people who waste it, then they don’t get paid much. So Mr. Seawright has to be sure the people he gives food to actually eat it. Most folks can only get a couple days’ food when they first come by. Mr. Seawright must think you’re pretty good.”

“I’m surprised that the farmers around here produce so much ready to eat food. I mean, what I remember about farming from 20 years ago, most farms were specializing in cash crops. They’d grow cotton or corn or raise hogs. But they wouldn’t have all these vegetables. Some of these sure don’t look like they’re in season. Are you sure they come from around here?”

“Most of the farmers have greenhouses. Sometimes when the weather’s nice I go to some of the farms and work on cleaning the windows. They grow all sorts of stuff out there.”

“How come they don’t just bring the food in from a warmer part of the country like California or Florida?”

“It’s ‘cause of that gas shortage after the transition. Farmers figured that they couldn’t use their heavy equipment in the fields without gas so they started growing crops that only took a little gas. Greenhouses were cheap to build and you don’t have to use insecticides so much and you do your farming in a much smaller area. Besides, that way they could sell here and in DC and save the cost of shipping. It took several years for the TDP plants to end the gas shortage and by then the farmers were making enough money doing it this way so they didn’t bother to change back in most cases.”
“How do you know so much about farming and the transition? When I was your age I wouldn’t have been able to tell half so much about the farms around where I lived.”

“My dad made me write papers on it. He said if I was going to run our farm when I grew up, I was going to have to understand the economics of farming.”

“Write papers on it. You wouldn’t be home-schooled would you?” Niall had a sinking feeling.

“Sure. Most of us farm kids are. That way we can work on the farm and still get educated. Dad said he wasted half his life riding the bus when he was a kid. When they stopped enforcing the law that made you go to school, Dad and Mom decided that they’d keep us kids home. My brother plays baseball for the high school, though.”

They were approaching Niall’s front door now so Niall figured he’d better let the boy get back to work. But he couldn’t resist asking one more question.

“Does anybody lock their doors around here? I found my door unlocked when I got here this morning.”

“What would you lock the door on a house like this for? It’s standard and there’s nothing in it worth stealing. Anything in there you can get free elsewhere, so why bother stealing it?”

“What about vandals? What if someone came in and wrecked the place?” Niall persisted.

“If they were going to do that they could easily break in first. The lock wouldn’t keep them out. Besides, how could they get away with it? They’d be almost sure to be recognized.”

“So there isn’t any stealing and vandalism?” Niall said with a wry smile.

“Not much. I can’t remember anything being stolen around here. One of the high school kids got so mad at another guy that he smashed the guy’s windshield on his new car. That was big news for a while.”

“I guess I don’t need these keys after all,” Niall said laughing. “At least I won’t have to worry about locking myself out of the house.”

They each were carrying one bag and Niall let them into the house. The boy put the bag down on the counter, and thanked Niall for letting him help.

Interesting. No crime. That bespoke a Police State of considerable proportions. But where were the police? He’d walked over much of downtown and hadn’t seen any police. Could they all be plain-clothes? Could the computer be doing the enforcement all by itself?

No. Nothing fit. The people certainly didn’t look like they were living in a Police State. Children in Police States learn very early to avoid strangers and to guard their tongues. The children he had met, the boy in the airport, John, this kid with the groceries, none of them seemed afraid of strangers. Their parents didn’t seem to mind that they talked to strangers.

Whatever was going on was unlike any tyranny he’d ever seen or read about. But those computers. The information they had on everybody. That had to be part of some controlling system. How could powerful people resist the opportunities for control that those instruments offered? It was like a
beautiful woman. A man couldn’t help but notice. Powerful people had to notice what those computers could do. It was impossible for them not to. They just had to use them.

But so far nobody had told him to do anything. Everything had been presented to him as an option. Of course, in some cases, the alternative to the option was pretty unpalatable but there was never any kind of threat of jail or being shot or whatever. If someone was trying to control him, they were being very subtle about it.

Maybe the control would be more obvious if he got a job. Perhaps it was only those who were working that were under control. It didn’t seem likely but he was beginning to wonder if he had any idea at all what was going on. The more he learned the more confusing it got.

“Jeeves.”

“You rang, sir?” Why had he known he would not have to flip a switch to get the computer?

“I want to look for a job. Where is the nearest employment office?”

“I really couldn’t say, sir.”

“Why can’t you say, Jeeves? I thought you knew everything.”

“Not everything, sir. It is just that it’s hard to say who in this area may be running an employment office.”

“You mean they aren’t official?”

“Official, sir?”

“You know, authorized, assigned, hired to do the job, having the imprimatur of the State. Surely one can’t just set up shop as an employment office without even so much as a 'by your leave'."

“Actually, sir, one can do just that. Why would one need permission to help someone else find work they like?”

“But don’t you have to get listed so you can find out who has jobs to offer?”

“Anyone who wants to have others to work with puts it on the Internet.”

“Want ads. It takes forever to look for a good job in the want ads.”

“Well, sir, the listings are categorized. One can search by quite a number of aspects of the work.”

“Then why do you need an employment office? You can just do the thing for your self.”

“Yes, sir you can. But people seem to prefer going to the employment offices.”

“OK, OK. Far be it from me to go against the way other people do things. Where is an employment office that I can get to without having to take the bus? Something within a mile or two.”

“Yes, sir. There is an office right downtown. Shall I tell them to expect you sir?”
“Yes, I'll walk right over. Show me where it is… OK. That will be all Jeeves.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.”
Chapter Eighteen: Reactions to Change

In which we meet quite a few people coping with the transition and something sinister is found.

-------- Ft. Hood, Texas 09:00 Tuesday, January 1, 2013. -----

“Mr. Secretary, I have the first report on the little invasion of New Mexico. Looks like 182 dead, 47 wounded, three of whom may die, and 53 captured. They appear to have been a loose confederation of gangs from Chihuahua who came north to loot some towns. They had heard from local media that there was going to be all sorts of social unrest and chaos when we made the conversion to the new money. They wanted to get a share of the spoils. They were very disappointed when they finally blew open the safe in Columbus and found no currency and they couldn’t even get into the safety deposit boxes which were still locked because they had used all their explosives on the main door.”

“We had no casualties at all except a sprained ankle or two among the volunteers at the Deming site from walking over rough ground in the dark. The only damage reported so far has been the bank, some gasoline taken from a Fina station in Columbus, some broken glass and a few bullet holes in houses. At the Deming roadblock we had some bullet damage to the trucks we used to make the block and a few bullet holes in a couple of police cars.”

“We came out of this very lucky sir.”

“Yes, we were lucky. But I think we earned most of that luck. Homeland Security really came through for us. It was as if everybody knew exactly what to do. The citizens were suddenly part of the police force and all of our moves were coordinated like a ballet. Of course it didn’t hurt that those small town people in New Mexico know how to shoot and take care of themselves.”

“We haven’t been so lucky everywhere, sir. We’ve had some minor rioting at drug stores and groceries, the stores that one would expect to find open on a holiday. At the border crossings we were well-prepared and though there were crowds at most of them, all the violence was on the Mexican side. We’re monitoring about thirty terrorist suspects who crossed this morning. We have distant tails on each of them and if they leave public transportation we’ll pick them up.”

“Things seem to be settled then, so I’m going to get some sleep. Stay on top of things with Jenkins, then let him take over and you get some sleep. This thing isn’t over yet.”

-------- 7:30 am, Tuesday January 1, 2013 --------

“Good Lord! Where did they all come from? I expected extra business now that people don’t have to pay for their medication, but I didn’t expect this!”

“Looks like we’d better get organized. While you get ready behind the counter, I’ll try to get these people organized.”

As they moved toward the drug store’s front door, some members of the crowd recognized them and started toward them. The babble of voices surged as several people at once attempted to initiate a conversation with the pharmacists.

“Quiet please. Quiet! We’ll get to all of you so just relax. Now let us in and we will open the store on time as usual. Just be patient or we won’t be able to fill any of the prescriptions.”
The small crowd reluctantly parted and allowed them to unlock the door, enter, and with a little pushing back of one over-eager matron, they managed to get the door closed and locked.

As they moved toward the counter at the back of the store (always have your customers see as many products for sale as possible regardless of why they entered your shop) Steven said, “I'm going to call the police. It's half an hour before opening time and we have that many people. I can just imagine what it's going to be like in here when we open. I think they'd better have somebody down here in case there's trouble.”

“You're right. I'll call Doris and Tony and see if they can come in to help. I'll also tell them to come around to the back door to get in.”

“I'll bet that folks are going to want lots of the stuff in here. We're going to need somebody at the front register to approve what they want to take.”

“I think we're going to have trouble on the non-prescription stuff. I can see them wanting to loot the store and take all sorts of stuff they don't really need. Maybe you'd better ask for several police while you're at it. Try to explain the situation to them.”

“Right.”

---------- 10:15 am, Tuesday, January 1, 2013 ----------

“Honey, we have a problem.”

“Hmmm?”

“I said we have a problem. I just got off the phone with Jenny. She won't babysit for us because we can't pay her.”

“Well call somebody else.”

“I already called everybody who's sat for us in the last three months. They all say we can't pay them so they won't sit for us.”

“Give me the phone.”

“What are you going to do? I already tried pleading and begging.”

“I'm going to call old lady Mercer, across the street. She says she's going to be a payer. She's been bragging that she'll be important now. Let's see if she can handle this situation.”

He said in a louder than necessary voice, “Call old lady Mercer, the one who lives across the street.” The phone obediently placed the call. “Hello Mrs. Mercer. How are you doing? That's wonderful. I guess you're happy now that your day has come and you're an official payer... You say you haven't actually paid anyone yet? Oh, then that's just a formality, you can really pay anyone you want? Well we have a problem over here that you might be able to do something about... I was hoping you would. You see we can't pay our baby sitters... That's right; they won't work for us because we can't give them money any more... Well, I don't know, Mrs. Mercer, you're the payer. I thought you would know... Try Jenny Tindall, we like her pretty well... Thanks and goodbye, Mrs. Mercer. We'll be eagerly awaiting your phone call.”
“What’s she going to do?”

“She said she’d call Jenny and try to get her to sit for us.”

“Do you think she can?”

“I don’t know but I do know I’ll never let her live it down if she can’t get somebody to sit for us.”

A few anxious minutes passed and the phone rang.

“Hello?” she said. “Oh, hello, Jenny… Yes we would love to have you sit for us tonight. Can you be here about 6:00? Oh, you can eat whatever you find in the fridge as usual… Great! We’ll expect you at 6:00 then. Bye.”

“I’ll be damned. The old bat did it. I wonder what she told Jenny.”

“I don’t know but I do know one thing.”

“What’s that sweetheart?”

“You had better be awfully nice to Mrs. Mercer or I’ll make your life miserable.”

-------- 11:00 am, Tuesday, January 1, 2013 --------

“I’m home, dear, and I have your medicine.”

“Are you all right? I heard on the radio that there was trouble at most of the drug stores in town. There were even some fights at one of them.”

“I’m just fine, dear. There was a crowd but they handled things okay and they served me pretty quickly. Let me just get you a glass of water and you can take your medicine.”

The elderly gentleman stepped into the tiny kitchen and reappeared moments later with a glass of water and a pair of pliers.

“I’ll have the top off this bottle in just a minute… There.”

He shook out two of the pills into his palm and offered them to the tiny woman in the rather old wheel chair. She looked up at him gratefully and swallowed them with water from the glass she held.

“Now tell me about what happened at the store. I’ve been terrified ever since I heard of the trouble.”

The gentleman tucked the blanket that had come loose in around her legs, and sat on the couch near her chair. He carefully wrapped himself in a rather dingy comforter that was thrown across the back of the couch. The chill in the room was palpable and occasionally one could see some breath condensation as they spoke.

“Well, I got to the drug store about 20 minutes before it was due to open and there was already a crowd of about 30 people there with more arriving even as I approached. The people were crowded around the doors looking into the store where it was lit but the sign on the door still said ‘CLOSED’. I
was scared to try to get to the front of the crowd since some of the people there were arguing about who got there first and who should wait.

About three minutes before the store was to open a police car came into the parking lot and two policemen got out. They walked over to the crowd and asked what was going on. Several people in the crowd started saying they were first in line or that they were just waiting for the store to open. The police said that the store would open in just a few minutes and everyone would be served.

The crowd was still somewhat loud and from time to time a voice was raised but the police would move in that direction and they would quiet. Meanwhile still more people were joining the crowd.

You remember that nice boy, Tony Miller who works in the drug store? Well there’s a hardware store right next to the drug store and Tony came out of the hardware store with a hand truck on which he had several folding chairs, the kind that you put up in your back yard when you cook out.

He said we could use the chairs while we were waiting. The policemen said that was a good idea and helped unfold the chairs and offered several of us a chance to sit in the chairs. I was really glad because I was more tired than I liked from the walk to the store. You know how my knee gets when I have to stand up too long.

Well, Tony said he had lots more chairs and would be back with more in a few minutes. It seems that he had called up the owner of the hardware store and gotten him to agree to let us use his stock of lawn chairs. Anyway then somebody who works in the drug store came out of the store with a hand truck on which he had several folding chairs, the kind that you put up in your back yard when you cook out.

One of the women in the crowd said in a loud voice that she wanted health stuff and she didn’t intend to pay for something that was supposed to be free now. The man at the door said he was sorry, that old habits had caused him to say it wrong. He asked who was there to get prescriptions filled. I raised my hand along with about fifteen others. The man said he would like us to come into the store first and then they could let in the others who didn’t need the pharmacy but just a few at a time to avoid overcrowding.

They let us in then, and one of the other men even carried my chair inside for me. I think he was a payer since he had one of those fancy gadgets and it kept telling him the names of people around us. Anyway, they let me get my prescription after only about 10 minutes.

On my way out I noticed some angry voices from the checkout where the woman who had said she wasn’t going to pay for free things had a shopping cart full of stuff and she was demanding to be allowed to take all of it with her. The clerk said she didn’t need all of that stuff. And she said it was free and she wanted it and to get out of the way. They finally had to ask the policeman to restrain her since she was ramming the clerk with the cart. I left before it was settled but I heard one of the other people who was leaving say that the limit on aspirin was 8 to a customer and they could come back for more tomorrow.

I think they were trying to ration what they had. Anyway, a number of the people were turning away to leave when they heard that. But that’s how I got your medicine. They really didn’t charge me a thing for it. I also got some cans of soup and some other stuff. So we can celebrate in style today.”

He was grinning at her and winked and she smiled back at him and snuggled deeper into her blankets.
"You’re not the boss of me now and you’re not so big."

"Shut up you little fink or I’ll fire your ass."

"Go ahead. See if I care. I don’t need you and your job no more."

"Hey you. Payer. Get over here."

"What is it?" the payer asked as he walked toward the crew chief.

"Tell him to get back to work."

"I’m afraid that wouldn’t do any good," the payer said with raised eyebrows.

"See there smart ass? I told you. You ain’t my boss anymore."

"I’m still crew chief and you’ll do what I say or I’ll have you fired."

"Tell him payer. Tell him he ain’t my boss any more."

"He’s still your crew chief. He still has his job to do, too."

"Damn right I do. My job is to tell you what to do and your job is to do what I tell you."

"You gonna let him talk to me that way? He ain’t got no right to talk to me that way."

"He can talk any way he wants and you don’t have to do what he tells you if you don’t want to. If you guys don’t want to work together, then don’t work together. If you guys don’t want to get this job done then get out of the way and let somebody else do the job."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that I pay whoever does the job and I don’t give a damn who that is. You guys want to stand here arguing instead of working, so somebody else is liable to do the job for you. It’s up to you. I pay whoever gets the job done."

"Oh, really?!" they said in chorus, then looked quickly at each other.

------------- 3:30 pm, Thursday, January 3, 2013 --------------

"I’ll be damned. Chan, come look at this. There’s somebody got root access on all our servers. What the hell is going on here?"

"What have you got there?"

"Look… See I’m running a script to check all the input packets and following the effects of each. When something anomalous comes up, the script flags it. Look at the pattern in those flags. Somebody is doing things that need root access and it ain’t pretty. It looks to me like they’re monitoring what we’re doing here. And look at this. See that? It changed our log files here and here and here. It’s covering its tracks."
“Where is it coming from?”

“Looks to me like it’s coming from all the other sites in the system... See? Here’s half a dozen IP numbers I recognize in the packets but somebody may be spoofing that. Let’s get on the horn to some of these other sites and see whether they’ve noticed anything.”

He reached for the phone and in a few moments had another site on the line.

“Morley, this is Chuck, say, we’ve got some interesting things happening here that look like a root compromise situation. Have you got anything suspicious going on at your site? Some of what we are seeing could be coming from your systems... No, it’s nothing like the usual hacker attack. This looks more like they’re trying for a long term compromise situation, like they wanted to be able to control our servers and never be noticed. It’s modifying the logs and everything... Yeah, I found it by watching the packets coming in off the network and looking for anything I couldn’t account for. I found lots more than I bargained for... Yeah, write a filter that only lets through the simplest transactions and nothing else, and then examine the packets the filter’s rejecting. I can send you the code I’m using if you want to use some if it... OK, it’s on its way and the checksums are...”

------------ 3:30 pm, Friday, January 4, 2013 ------------

“Hello?”

“Ted, this is Sally.”

“Hi, Sally. It’s nice to hear from you. How are you doing?”

“Just fine, Ted. Listen, I came back in to the office today to pick up a few things and the phone rang and I just answered it out of habit, you know? Well it’s one of our old loan customers. He wants to talk to you. It seems he has some questions about a deal he is working on and he wants your advice. Do you want me to give him your number?”

“I don’t know, Sally. I really can’t do anything for him. Did you explain that we are out of the banking business?”

“Yes, sir. He knows that, of course. He just wants your advice. It seems he respects your opinion in these matters. I think you should talk to him, Ted. It might get your mind off your troubles and he may even be able to offer you a job.”

“Yeah, right. How’s he going to pay me? Answer me that” Ted was almost shouting into the phone.

“Ted, don’t be angry with me. I just wanted to see if I could help you.”

“Oh God, I’m sorry. I don’t know what came over me. I shouldn’t take it out on you. Okay. I’ll talk to him. What’s his number?”

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“Janet, is something wrong with our email?”

“Not that I know of. What do you mean?”
“I haven’t read my email in over a week since we’ve been at your mother’s and now I get on and there’s only three or four messages. There’s no spam. Do you think it’s broken or something?”

“What’s wrong with no spam, silly?”

“Nothing, but the spam filter should have been full of the stuff. There isn’t any there either.”

“Maybe it has something to do with the transition. Maybe the email computers are down or something. You remember there was something in the news about computers being down.”

“No, that was the money accounting computers. Somebody tried to hack into them and they shut them down to get rid of the bad code the hackers had put in. No this is something else. I sure hope there’s nothing wrong with our email.”

“Have you tried any of the Web things like eBay or Google?”

“Not yet. Let’s see… Well Google’s still here. Wait. There’s no ads. Let me look at new cars… Well there’s information about cars and here’s some stuff on the new car dealerships in the area. But no ads. That’s weird. Let me try eBay. Boy, look at this, some kind of announcement. It says their whole operation is changed. They still will show things for sale but the prices are fixed, no bidding. It’s first come, first served now except for the shipping, and that’s included in the price. At least that’s the same; they charge more for next day or for long distance. They also say if you have capital goods you can advertise it there. They have an entire section just for capital goods.”

“Now you have to admit that ought to be because of the transition. You can’t tell me eBay would be all that different if we were still using the same money.”

“No, you got me there. This has to be due to the transition. Well if the lack of spam is because of the transition, maybe the idea isn’t so cockeyed after all.”

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“This is Sam Sherman with your Wakeup News.

The disturbances at the Malls across the State seem to have calmed down as people have learned what it means to have free necessities. Those who thought they could take as much of whatever they wanted because it was free have learned otherwise now. In some cases they insisted on learning the hard way. This is film from a grocery store in Rocky Creek Mall. Police got here a little late and had to subdue a crowd fighting over food. The store owner and three customers were taken to the hospital with minor injuries. All were later released. Eight people were arrested for assault and battery, theft by force, and vandalism. Police report that the situation is calm now and expected to remain so as a uniformed officer will be stationed at the store on a full time basis.

Remember people, you may not have to pay for necessities, but it’s up to the owner of the necessities how much, if any, of those necessities they’re willing to give you. It’s their gift, not your right. Got that?

In other local news the rush on the malls and stores was matched by a rush on medical facilities. Nurses were doing triage to determine which patients would be allowed to see the doctors next. Some patients were upset with their place in line. But when they were provided with hot coffee, snacks, and even toys for their children in some cases, tempers were soothed.
Most hospitals say that the rush has eased and the patient load is returning to normal. It appears that free medical treatment also is at the discretion of those who provide it. They don't have to give it to you but if they do they'll be paid for the benefit you get, if any.

Local Department of Transportation official Fred Sparkman has asked all those in the highway construction business locally to meet with him at the auditorium in Town Hall to coordinate work on city streets. Fred says that the freelance efforts to correct problems are very welcome but that things can be arranged more efficiently if everyone is on the same page.

In national news, the Government of Mexico has apologized for not restraining the several border invasions in Texas and California. They have assured the U.S. Ambassador that their military will take over guard duty within a month and have asked that the U.S. Army withdraw its units from Mexico and cease hot pursuit of the bandits.

General Portillo has told reporters that they will begin withdrawal operations within the week as soon as certain adjustments to border defenses are completed. He would not say what those were but civilian construction crews were busy on the U.S. side of the border.

A number of large companies that were instrumental in international trade before the transition are asking U.S. farmers to contribute any surplus to be available for international trade. So, if you're a farmer, consider their offer.

Here's an announcement from the local Heath Department. If you are a drug addict and are entering withdrawal from your addiction, please come immediately to one of the hospitals on this map or one of the clinics shown here for treatment. There will be no questions asked. There will be no police present.

There also seems to be another companion announcement. The police department wishes to announce that they have better things to do than hassle sick people so believe the previous announcement. I bet you wouldn't have heard an announcement like that before the transition.

Jasmine, what have you got for us?"

"Big news for parents of children with reading problems in school, Bob. It seems there's a local woman who has been tutoring children who have not learned to read in school. She has her own technique that works in 99% of the cases who could not learn in school. That's right! In the children who didn't learn to read in school, 99% of them can learn to read using this method. She's offering to teach this method to anyone interested. She's even set up a website where she explains her techniques. Now I have a ten-year-old boy at home whom the school said was suffering from attention deficit disorder and dyslexia and that's why he couldn't learn to read. Well, I was pretty desperate, I tell you. I took him to this tutor and she said she didn't have any open slots but she gave me a slim book and a DVD and said I could teach him myself. If I hadn't been at my wits' end with this boy I would never have tried it. But it worked like a charm. I spent 15 minutes a day on it, right after breakfast before he went off to school. By the end of three months he was reading above grade level, his attention deficit went away and, as if by magic, the school couldn't find any dyslexia any more."

"How many children have trouble learning to read in school, Jasmine?"

"Over 20% in this State, Bob. Just think of all those lives blighted by reading problems and it's so unnecessary. You parents out there. You love your children and you'd do anything to help them succeed in life. This is something you can do. It's easy and fun and best of all everything is free. The
book, the DVD, the instruction, all of it is free. You'll love the joy your children will have because you took a little time out of your day to learn this technique. Here’s that URL again.”

“Thanks Jasmine. I’m sure all those children will thank you in their prayers. Art, what do we have in store for the weather this week?”

------- 10:15 am, EST, Saturday, January 5, 2013 -------

“Those damn bastards! Those scummy no good bastards! Did you see what they did?”

“What who did?”

“Those tobacco companies, that’s who. They raised the price of a pack of cigarettes to over $30. Can you believe that? That’s more than a dollar a cigarette?”

“Willie,” she said shaking her head, “that wasn’t the cigarette companies, that was the Payers. The Payers are the ones setting the prices on luxuries now.”

“The Payers? What do they think they’re doing? That’s just plain stupid. They can’t do that.”

“Willie, it was in the papers. All luxuries have their prices set by the Payers. Cigarettes are a luxury. The paper said they set the prices based on what it cost to produce and consume the products. In the case of cigarettes they must be figuring in the health costs as well as the resources used to manufacture the things.”

“But $32.50 a pack? It can’t be that much.”

“Well, they do say that cigarette smoking kills hundreds of thousands of people in the U.S. every year and smokers miss more work from illness and pregnant women who smoke have sicklier babies and so forth.”

“Do I look like a pregnant woman to you?”

“No, Willie, but you do cough a lot. Also, you keep going out to smoke those things every half hour or so. It does slow down your working.”

“I take a break to think and smoking helps me think. That doesn’t detract from my work at all.”

“Well you’ve been talking and thinking about the price of cigarettes for the last five minutes and haven’t gotten a thing done.”

“If the Payers didn’t see me, it didn’t happen.” Willie stuck out his tongue at her, then grinned.

------- 7:25 am, Tuesday, January 8, 2013 -------

“Hey! I got paid today! I got $756 and it says it was for keeping that crowd quiet last week. Who’d a thought I’d get that much?”

“I think you earned it, Tony. I can tell you I was pretty scared. I think what you did that got you that money was getting all those chairs from the hardware store next door. Once we had them all sitting down, they seemed to lose some of their emotion.”
“Remember that woman who wanted to just take all the aspirin? I thought she’d choke when you said to take two aspirin and call back in the morning.”

“I sure hope they paid those police who backed us up.”

“I’m sure they did. I mean, they need to be on the good side of the police, too, don’t they?”

“I wonder if they paid those two women who helped us out at the register.”

“I don’t know. It was kind of a surprise to me when that first lady just came around the counter and started counting out 8 aspirin into each envelope and such. But they were a help. I hope they get paid something for that.”

---------- 10:20 am, Wednesday, January 9, 2013 ----------

“If you won’t let me in to see what you’re doing, how can I tell whether what you’re doing is worthwhile? If I can’t verify what you do I can’t pay you.”

“Listen, this is a high security installation. If you want in, you’ll have to get clearance whether you’re a payer or not. I wouldn’t let the Pope in here without a pass.”

“Whom do I see about clearance?”

“All I know is you got to have a badge and you ain’t got one so you don’t get in.”

“Your name is Alfred Edward Simmons?” the payer said looking at what looked to the guard like a phone or a personal digital assistant.

“How did you know my middle name was Edward? That ain’t on my badge.”

“I have a link to the main computer system here,” the old man said, gesturing with the electronic device, “It tells me who I’m dealing with. That way I can be sure I am paying the right person, or in your case, not paying the right person. See you later.”

---------- 10:35 am, Friday, January 11, 2013 ----------

“What do you care whether the Payers are allowed in or not? I tell you all of us will be paid, with bonuses even. You’ll get paid in Euros if we have to. Trust me on this.”

“But the other guys are getting restless. Lots of people are already getting paid. My kid’s teacher was saying that she got paid for the three school days last week. My wife even got paid for taking care of Noah at home. Can you believe that? She got paid for taking care of her own kid. Anyway, the guys are seeing other people getting paid and they’re wondering how they can get paid if the Payers can’t get in to watch them work. It’s only natural.”

“Natural or not, tell them not to worry about this payer shit. They’ll get paid in real money if they’ll just be patient.”

“Okay. I’ll tell them. But some of them aren’t going to like it.”

“If they don’t like it they can always quit and get paid nothing at all.”
“Yeah. Right.”

---------- 1:35 am, Saturday, January 12, 2013 ----------

[On the phone] “Clarence, I’ve been talking to some of the guys at the other centers. You know it looks like this thing is happening at all of them. Several of the other sys admins also have detected something fishy going on. It looks like some systematic plot… Yeah, really organized at a high level. The Payers tell me that if we can sort it out and stop it we should get a huge bonus. They say this plot could undermine the whole system and we should do whatever we can to stop it… I know, I know… Well we need to compare the old test software, you know, the software we were running to test whether it would all work, well, compare that with what’s running on our systems now. Let’s get everybody to find the checksums of the code that’s running on their systems now and compare it with the checksums of the backups of the last code that was supposed to be running now. That way we can easily tell if there’ve been any changes in the executables… Right. I’ll talk to those three and you get some others. And have them talk to anybody they can think of who’s a sys admin at any of the other centers. We have got to get organized on this and fast.”

---------- 9:00 am, Monday, January 14, 2013 ----------

“Sir we just got a report of a flurry of phone calls among the computer centers.”

“Yeah? So what? They call each other all the time. They’re like a fan club or something.”

“But sir, the computer says they’re talking about hackers and backdoors and root compromise problems.”

“Don’t those propeller heads talk about that stuff all the time anyway?”

“Sir, I think it has to do with our monitoring and control of their systems. I think they may have detected our programs.”

“What makes you think so? Have they done anything to remove any of them? Have any of them called to complain?”

“Well, no sir. But it is suspicious that we only started using the control software on the 31st and within a week they’re calling each other and talking about hacking.”

“So watch them. These programs of yours are supposed to cover their tracks and monitor what’s going on. So monitor them. If they try to change something, then wait a while and change it back. No problem.”

“Yes sir. But I don’t like the looks of it.”

---------- Tuesday, January 15, 2013 ----------

“So I told him to get to work on the potholes. He just looked at me and said… well I won’t go into what he said, but he wouldn’t do what I told him to do at all.”

“Is it your job to tell him what to do?”

“Well if he wants me to pay him, he’d better do what I tell him.”
“Or else what?”

“Or else I won’t pay him, of course.”

“What if he doesn’t care or does something else that deserves to be paid?”

“I don’t know. I guess I’d have to pay him if he did something else worthwhile.”

“Are you going to pay somebody to beat him up if he doesn’t do what you tell him to do?”

“Are you crazy? Of course not. What if word got back to the people in the neighborhood? My God! What if the other guys I’m supposed to pay heard about it? Nobody would want to work for me again.”

“Does anybody work for you now?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean are these people doing work you want done because you told them to do it or are they doing what they want to do and you pay them if it benefits someone else?”

“Okay, they aren’t working for me, really, they’re working for themselves.”

“Then why are you trying to tell them what to do? Why don’t you just wait and see what they do and pay if it does some good. That way you don’t have to work so hard. Let them do the work. You just watch.”

“But what if they don’t do anything that deserves to be paid?”

“Then don’t pay them. Remember all we’re supposed to do is reward good actions. Nobody has to have our permission to do things and nobody has to do things because we want them done.

“But let’s get back to what would happen if you paid somebody to beat someone who didn’t do what you told them to do. What would happen if you did that?”

“Well, I’d be pretty unpopular, I guess.”

“You’d also be in jail on charges of assault and battery.”

“Oh, yeah. That would be a crime wouldn’t it?”

“And it would be a crime that would be easy to convict you on as well, since you would be on record as having paid for the beating.”

“What if I put down that it was for something else?”

“You have to justify every payment and there would have to be some benefit that justified the payment. Plus, how much could you pay him by yourself?”

“That’s right. I couldn’t pay over $100 without another payer joining me and the two of us couldn’t go over $500 without having a third. Unless the thug would work cheap, I couldn’t pay enough and if we did get together enough Payers to pay him enough, that would be a pretty big conspiracy. Someone would be almost sure to tell.”
“Yes. Even if you tried to pay thugs you wouldn’t be able to hide the crime. So you might as well give up trying to tell people what to do. It’s just not going to work for you.”

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“Look Earl, I need that insulation for my attic. It’s just fifty rolls. I’ll give you $500 for it.”

“Please Ed. Those are earmarked for a builder. I can’t let you have them.”

“Okay, I’ll give you $700. You can just tell the builder that you had to give them to someone else.”

“It’ll delay the other builder for several weeks if he doesn’t get this insulation. It’ll throw off his whole schedule.”

“Earl, you’ve got me over a barrel here. The wife will skin me if I don’t get this done right away. Her mother is coming to live with us for the winter and she’ll complain something fierce if she isn’t warm and cozy.”

“But you already have insulation in your home; you just want to do the guest house. Couldn’t she stay in your guest room?”

“I don’t want that woman in the same house with me. She nags me something terrible. And those little dogs of hers are fiends. I’ll give you $1000. Please, please let me have it.”

“Besides Ed, what good is that currency to me anyway? The transition was last week. We’re supposed to use the new money now.”

“How much is the other builder paying you?”

“He’s not paying me anything. The Payers will do that. Haven’t you been reading the papers?”

“Well I’m offering you $1000 in hard cash. I’ve got it right here. $1000 versus nothing. What’re you going to do?”

“All right. You can have the insulation. Just don’t tell anybody I gave it to you.”

“Mums the word, pal. You can count on me. Can you give me a hand in getting it into my truck?”

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“Earl, old buddy. How’s the world treating you? Say, I’m going to need some lawn fertilizer, about 100 lbs.”

“Some buddy. You cost me a lot of money with that insulation deal.”

“What do you mean? I gave you $1000 American. Can’t do better than that. I mean that insulation was only worth about $300.”

“It cost that builder a lot more than that when we didn’t have the insulation we had promised. It delayed completion of the house he was working on for over two weeks. He didn’t get paid for an extra two weeks and I’m gonna get paid about $2500 less than I would have if I hadn’t given that
insulation to you. I lost a good customer. And as if that weren’t bad enough, I found that money you gave me practically useless.”

“Useless! That’s ridiculous. How could it be useless?”

“Because there’s almost nothing I can trade it for. I don’t need it for groceries because those are free. We get the stock at the store free because our suppliers get paid by the Payers. Most of the luxury places won’t accept it because their suppliers wouldn’t get paid if they traded the luxury for my cash. What the hell good is it?”

“Maybe you could spend it in a foreign country.”

“Ed, I don’t travel in foreign countries. And anyway, why should they want it? They can’t buy anything here with it. It’s just so many pieces of paper. I might as well have been trying to use Confederate bills. At least those would have had some curiosity value.”

“Gee, I’m sorry Earl. I never thought you’d have trouble passing that money.”

“Well, how many people have asked you for cash money since the transition?”

“Not many.”

“How many people offered you cash?”

“But Earl, I’m not in retail. I’m a musician. I don’t play on the street.”

“Well, here’s a five dollar bill. You go try to buy something with it. See how far you get.”

“Does this mean you won’t sell me the fertilizer?”

“Ed, I don’t carry fertilizer for yards any more. I only carry fertilizer for gardens, vegetable gardens. People with vegetable gardens don’t need to pay me because the Payers will do that when their crop comes in and gets eaten. I’ll get lots more money for that than I will for selling it to some rich guy for his pretty lawn.”
Chapter Nineteen: Getting Work

In which Niall meets Enid and discovers maybe he doesn't want a job after all.

Niall changed into a little more formal clothes and wore his good shoes. He figured that he would treat it like a job interview whether it was or not. The employment office, like the housing office, looked for all the world like a private home. It had a large porch on which sat what Niall could only think of as a little old lady. Her thin white hair was held in a hair net and was arranged in a bun at the back of her head. She wore thin rim glasses somewhat low on her nose. She had to be at least 70 years old by Niall’s reckoning.

Niall approached tentatively and asked from the foot of the porch steps, “Is this the employment office?”

“If you’re looking for work it is. Come on up. Mr. Campbell, I believe? I’m Enid Lee and I run this office. Have a seat there.”

“Thank you, ma’am. Please call me Niall. I am a little new at this so I may need a little more help getting a job than the average guy.”

“How do you spell that first name? I think my computer may have gotten it wrong.”

“That’s N I A L L but pronounced like Neil or Nile, I’ve answered to either.”

“Is it Irish?” she asked, looking over her glasses.

“No. I’m a Scot by heritage, actually.”

“Most folks who ask for my help let me see their reputation. Do you know about reputation?”

“I once thought I did. Then I was sure I didn’t. Now I think I know a little but have a lot to learn.”

“Niall,” Enid said pronouncing it ‘Neil’, “I think you may do all right. What’s important for a good work placement are two things, did you make money with what you did before and did you get along well with those you worked with. The first will come easily from your payment records and your work history. The second is usually pretty obvious from me talking with you. But if there are any Declarations in your file they could be relevant. In borderline cases we sometimes want to see your housing record since that’s also revealing. Oh, do you know what a Declaration is?”

“Yes, ma’am. Sam Witherspoon showed me something about them when he checked my housing reputation. They’re statements from people who’ve dealt with me. The statements have been checked for factual accuracy by the computer. Is that right?”

“Well, it’s pretty close. If a Declaration is positive, the computer check is generally enough. If the Declaration is negative, there’s usually a more thorough check made, sometimes by police. Slander in a Declaration is not a jailable offense but it would definitely go in the record of anyone who was found guilty of it and that would do them a lot of harm.”

“Yes, ma’am.”
“May I see your reputation?” she said. “Usually I don’t ask, since if it’s not offered it means they don’t want me to see it. But you’re new here so I assume you just don’t know how we do these things.”

“You may see my job reputation.” Niall said in a formal voice.

“Not yet. There’s no computer out here. We’ll go inside in a few minutes and then you can give me access. First I want to get to know something about you. What should I know about you, what are you like?”

Niall was a little taken aback but due to his experiences over the last few days he had been expecting to be surprised.

“I’m just a regular guy in most ways I suppose. I just got back in the country after being away for over 15 years so everything that’s happened since the transition is news for me. I mean, it wasn’t that I didn’t know there was a transition from one kind of money to another, but I was rather preoccupied with other matters.” ‘Like staying alive and keeping others alive,’ Niall thought. “So I just figured that things would still be the same and they’re not. I mean the people look about the same. There are more people wearing white clothing, of course, but fashions don’t seem all that different. The music I’ve heard is still based on rock. But people have such different attitudes toward things that I always just took for granted. The waitress in the cafe over there almost bit my head off for suggesting that I’d like to leave her a tip.”

“I’m not surprised,” Enid said laughing. “Stephanie never worked as a waitress before the transition. Since the transition there’s no way to give her money directly. If you want her to be paid more you’d have to tell her payer. If you were to give her a luxury item it would likely be far too expensive to be warranted for just good service in a cafe. It would imply that she was your mistress or worse since you were a stranger. So what you did was rather insulting to her. If you had just thanked her with a big smile and been polite she would have taken that as evidence that the quality of her service was appreciated.”

“I guess I was lucky she didn’t belt me one,” Niall smiled.

“Oh, she wouldn’t hit you. You’ll find that the amount of violence is way down since the transition. People really take a dim view of violence any more. It’s not like when I was young and the movies, TV, and even children’s games were full of violence. Assaulting someone is one of the worst crimes one can commit so people are rather careful about it.”

“Then I was safer than I thought. But you can see that I’m just feeling my way along and making mistakes at every opportunity. I guess what I need is some kind of job that’ll let me learn my way around without messing things up too badly.”

Enid smiled thinly and said, “I must say that you seem to have gotten off to a good start. Sam Witherspoon was quite impressed with you. But then Sam is easily impressed by money. He was the same way before the transition.

“Now to get back to you. What do you like to do?”

Niall felt confused, “You mean like hobbies, or what kind of job?”

Enid sighed and shifted in her seat, “Looks like this is something else you need to learn. What do you mean by a ‘job?’ What is a ‘job’ to you?”
“Well I didn’t mean anything special by it. It’s just working for somebody. Like you giving me a job of mowing your lawn.”

“If you have a job, who pays you?” Enid acted like she was closing in for the kill, bending forward in her chair.

Niall, somewhat more confused, said, “Why your boss, ah, no. Some payer pays you.”

“So who gives you the job?”

“Ah… the payer?” by now Niall was just guessing.

A disgusted look from Enid saying, “The payer might not even know what you’re doing until after it’s done. What does the payer give to you?

“Well, money, of course.”

“What else does a payer give you?”

Niall paused, “I don’t know? I can’t think of anything else.”

“Payers,” Enid pounced, “give only money because that’s all they have. They don’t own jobs or tools or luxuries. They have nothing physical to give you. They don’t even like to give advice, as you will no doubt find.”

“OK,” Niall conceded, “so the Payers can’t give me a job.” He was wondering what her point was. This seemed silly, playing with words.

“So if the Payers can’t give you a job, who can give you a job? Think. Twenty years ago who could give you a job?”

Niall thought for a moment and said, “Twenty years ago anybody with money could hire me.” Then he paused again.

Enid prompted him, “Who paid you twenty years ago?”

“The guy with the money.”

“Who told you what to do?”

“The guy with the money. If I did what he said to do, he paid me. If I didn’t do what he said, I didn’t get paid.”

“So when that guy with the money gave you a job, he was really trading with you. He was trading his money for your obedience. The deal was that you would give him control of your behavior in exchange for some of his money.”

“Yes, roughly,” Niall agreed.

“So when he gave you a job he was giving you a chance to obey him in exchange for money.”

“In a way, yes.”
“So if the Payers are the only ones with money to give and they don’t tell you what to do, who gives you a job. Who offers you money in exchange for obedience?”

“Nobody?” Niall was getting a little tired of whatever game the old lady was playing.

“Right you are, Niall. Nobody has a job. We may work. We may even labor. We may do what other people tell us to do. But we don’t have jobs.”

“That’s just semantics. You’re just playing games with words. If I work at something and I get paid for doing that work, that’s a job no matter how you slice it.” That ought to straighten her out, Niall thought.

“But,” Enid said, “you don’t get paid for doing that work.”

“What do you mean? What else would you get paid for? When I work I expect to get paid for it.”

“I mean,” Enid said sternly, “just what I said. You don’t get paid for doing work. You get paid for the consequences of what you do. Just because you take orders and sweat and strain and keep that up day after day doing exactly what someone else tells you to do doesn’t mean you’ll necessarily ever get paid anything at all for all your efforts. That’s because now you’re paid for consequences. If the consequences include a great net benefit, then you get paid a lot of money. If the consequences have only a little net benefit, then you get paid only a little. It will not matter how hard you work or how long it takes you. You don’t get paid by the hour and you don’t get paid by the job. You get paid by the net benefit of the consequences.” By this point Enid was sitting bolt upright pointing her finger right at Niall’s left eye and glowering.

“OK, OK, I get paid for the benefit that will happen.”

“Still not right. You get paid for net benefit, good consequences minus bad consequences. And you only get paid after the consequences are known. A farmer doesn’t get paid for the food he grows and takes to market. He gets paid for the nutrition that people receive from that food. If nobody eats the food, then he doesn’t get paid. If the food isn’t good for them, he doesn’t get paid. Are you getting this?”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m getting it.”

“So,” she continued, “when did you get paid when you had a job 20 years ago?”

“I got paid when the job was done or at the end of the week or whatever.”

“And when will you get paid now?”

“When somebody has benefited from my work.”

“That’s progress. Now if you’re working with someone who has tools for that kind of work and he hands you those tools and tells you what to do with them and you do what he tells you to do, will you get paid?”


Enid slapped her knee and said, a little angry, “Are you listening to me? What do you get paid for?”
Niall, tiredly, "I get paid for net benefit."

"Do you get paid for using that guy's tools?"

"No. I get paid for net benefit."

"Do you get paid for doing what the guy told you to do with those tools?"

"No. I get paid for net benefit."

"So, even if somebody gives you tools and tells you what to do with them, is he giving you a job? Remember that he will not pay you."

"He could give me something else I wanted besides money."

"He certainly could. Then you would have a job. You would be working for him. You would be his employee, his hireling, his subordinate. He would be your boss, your employer, your superior. Would you care about the consequences of the work you did?"

"I probably wouldn't think much about them one way or the other."

"The consequences would not be important to you?"

"Right." This was really getting boring.

"Do you see why folks don't think much of those who have jobs?"

"They don't think much of slackers either, I notice." Niall said, playing a trump.

"Which do you think is worse, a slacker who lives off the work of others or somebody who has a job?" Enid asked, leaning back in her chair.

"A slacker is worse, of course."

"Who built the death camps? Who made the bombs? Who works in the bureaucracies of tyrants? People who have jobs, that's who, people who don't care about the consequences of what they're doing. Who built the cars and factories that made smog and acid rain? Who clear-cut the forests? Who killed the cod? People with jobs. As soon as people get jobs they become totally irresponsible. They no longer admit to any responsibility. 'I was just following orders.' 'I was just doing my job.' 'It's not my fault, he told me to do it.'"

"OK," anything to get her to shut up and get on with getting him a job, "I concede. But slackers are bad, too."

"Who do they hurt?"

"What?"

"Who do slackers hurt?"

"Well, they hurt everybody else. They use resources that other people could use for other things."
“Correction,” Enid said abruptly, “they only use resources that other people choose to give them. Did you force Darla and Stephanie to give you lunch today?”

“No.”

“Did anyone else force them to give you food?”

“Not that I know of.”

“Trust me;” Enid said authoritatively, “nobody has been able to make Stephanie do anything she didn’t want to do since she was about three years old. So how did Darla and Stephanie get the food that they gave you?”

“Somebody gave it to them?”

Enid, “Voluntarily?”

“I guess so.”

“Could Darla or Stephanie force some farmer to give them food?”

Niall laughed, picturing little Stephanie twisting the arm of a burly farmer to make him give her food. “I don’t think so.”

“So people from the farms give things to the stores and cafes, which in their turn give things to the slackers, right? And nobody is made to do it, right? So it looks like those other people have chosen to use those resources in that way doesn’t it?”

“I guess so,” Niall conceded.

“So tell me again, what harm does a slacker do?”

“He sets a bad example for the young.” Let her top that one.

“By not hurting anybody he sets a bad example?” Enid couldn’t help grinning at that one.

“Hey, if nobody works, nobody eats.” She can’t top that one either Niall thought.

“That has always been true. But lots of people seem to want to work. My business is thriving. Why is that?”

“I don’t know. Look, is this all necessary? What does all this have to do with my getting work?”

“Are you tied in that chair? Am I on your porch? Do you want to make money or are you just killing time?”

“OK, OK, go on with the lesson.” Niall said with a sour look and a tone of resignation in his voice.

“Listen to me, smart ass. If you hadn’t favorably impressed Sam I would’ve thrown you off my property a long time ago. I’m doing you a big favor, trying to keep you out of trouble and all I get is
sour looks and dumbass answers. Now change your attitude and get your attention on what’s important or get your sorry ass out of here. I’ve got better things to do than waste my time on you.”

If there were any neighbors listening they would not have had to strain to hear any of that. Niall was shocked, stunned, and more than a little embarrassed. He could feel his face reddening.

“Yes, ma’am. I apologize,” Niall said brushing back his hair with his left hand. “I am in Rome and must learn to do as the Romans. It was most rude of me to react as I did. It was inexcusable.” His head was down and he felt as bad as he had in months.

“Damn straight. Now, once again, and think before you answer. What do you like to do?”

Niall paused, his mind racing. ‘What do I like to do? What do I find satisfying? What makes me feel good about myself?’

“I like to accomplish things.”

Enid sat quietly, waiting.

“I like to see the consequences of what I do when it’s something I can feel proud of.”

She waited.

“I like to make things better than they were before I came along.”

Enid finally spoke, “I think we can work with that. Next, I want to know what you can do well.”

“You mean besides putting my foot in my mouth?” Niall grinned a little, shyly. “I was pretty good with computers 20 years ago but I guess that my skills there are quite out of date by now.”

“You’re trying to get a job again. Change the way you’re thinking. Understand your situation in this economy. Then answer the question.”

By now Niall was beginning to sweat despite the cool air of spring. He had last felt this way when taking his oral exams for his Master’s degree. What could he do that would be useful in this economy? How did his skills fit with future benefits? First one would have to be able to predict the consequences of one’s actions. Could he do that? When you look at it, that’s what he’d been doing helping those tribes in the Middle East. He was telling them if you do this, it will have that effect. They had come to rely on his predictions. Could he do the same kind of thing in this economy?

“I can put together an organization, a group of cooperating people.” He paused again. “I can see patterns in events that most people can’t see.” Another pause, then, “I don’t get bored. I can change my habits. There may be other things as well.”

“Much better.” Praise from Enid! “Now what approach would you take to get a job from a prospective employer 20 years ago?”

“I would try to show that I could do the job, that I would be honest and work hard... and be loyal to the company.”

“Ha. How did you ever get work? You should have figured out what the boss wanted from whoever got the job and offered to give him that. Remember, he gives you the job. You’re trading with that
particular individual. Being good for the company has nothing to do with it. So, thinking about the differences in getting a job then and working now, what approach will you take to the people you might work with?"

“Let’s see,” Niall said. “I think they want me to help them make money.” Enid nodded but pursed her lips at the “make money.” “So I need to show that I know what will produce benefits.”

“Net benefits.”

“Net benefits.” Niall paused again and thought. “They need to be confident that I’ll do the right thing, even if they told me to do something else.”

Enid smiled slowly. “I think you’re beginning to understand. Keep going.”

“I think they want me to be able to think for myself. They want me to understand what I’m doing and how it fits in with what they’re doing. They want someone who is very good at cooperating.”

“Yes. In a job you obey. In working with others you cooperate. The better you do your part, the better they can do their parts. Next, what do you call a person who is not taking orders from those with whom he works?”

Niall thought for a moment. “Independent?”

“Good enough. If all of the people who are working together are independent but cooperating, who’s the boss?”

Niall looked for a trick in the question, but could find none. “There isn’t one.”

“What if they need to closely coordinate their actions like in a choir or on a team of medical people performing an operation?”

“There has to be a boss then, doesn’t there? They have to take orders so that they don’t mess up and do things in the wrong order or something.”

Enid sighed. “The independent people do need to coordinate their actions. They may well agree on someone to give orders and they may agree to follow those orders, but that does not make that one person the boss of any of the others. It’s just that the role of that person in the group is to do the coordinating. Like the quarterback on a football team calls the plays but is not the boss of the center.”

She continued, “In other words you obey a boss because you’ll be punished if you don’t. You obey in a work group because you have chosen to use that way of making your work more effective. Do you appreciate the difference?”

“Yes. I think I do. You cooperate to get something you desire rather than for fear of being hurt in some way.”

“Fine,” Enid said. “If you work with others, you and they will be independent individuals who have chosen to cooperate. Your work group may choose to have a name or it might not. But you should keep in mind that no matter how closely you’re cooperating with the others in some group you are still completely responsible for your own actions and the consequences of those actions. It is never an excuse to say ‘He told me to do it.’ You have no boss. You are free and therefore you are responsible even when at work.”
“I begin to see why you wanted to have this talk. I might have embarrassed you if you’d found work for me and I’d thought of it as a job.”

“If I thought you’d embarrass me, I wouldn’t help you.”

Niall smiled, saying, “I see that you’re an independent worker as well who happens to choose to cooperate with others when you think it best. I also see that you take responsibility for your actions and their consequences. I can furthermore see that I’ll get no help from you in finding work until you think I can do a good job… pardon me, can work well with others.

“You begin to understand, grasshopper.” Enid pressed her palms flat together in front of her and bowed slightly.

“What would happen to me if I just applied to work with some company around here and didn’t come to you first?”

Enid sighed, “Before I answer that, I want to correct you on one point. That is, there are no companies any more. They ended at the transition. You’ll still find work groups with the old company names. You’ll even find a lot of products with company logos and packaging. But the people who work together as IBM, for example, no more constitute a company than I do. Each person is an independent individual cooperating and taking responsibility for his actions.”

“Companies were sort of pretend people. Legally they were able to act in many ways like a person. But companies can’t be paid now since only real people can be paid. Companies can’t have money now since only people have money. Companies can’t pay their employees since only Payers can pay. Therefore, the legal fiction of the corporation just ceased to be relevant to anyone.”

Niall broke in, “What about unions? Who do they bargain with if the company doesn’t exist any more?”

Enid said, “Unions still exist but they’re more like guilds and standards committees now. There’s no one to bargain with, as the Teamsters found when they tried a strike shortly after the transition. They were trying to get the Payers to agree to pay them more for their work. But people stopped giving them food and gas for their trucks and so on and the strike was ended within a week. People recognized rather quickly that the Teamsters were striking against everybody else with their threats. The Teamsters found that lots of other people can drive trucks and that they’re more dependent on the rest of the people than the rest of the people are dependent on them. Now they run driving schools and give tips on where traffic congestion is bad and so on. Their top leaders also quit when their pay stopped due to the damage the strike had brought about.”

“So it’s just every man for himself?”

“And every woman for herself. People associate when they see some way to benefit and don’t when they don’t want to. Some people like to work all by themselves and they do. Some like to work with others and they do. Some people don’t like to work at all and don’t. Most of the slackers live pretty miserable lives it seems to me, but it’s still their choice. But with all this freedom comes responsibility for everything you do and fail to do. Your actions and the consequences of those actions will be to your credit or to your shame. I think this is the secret to the success we’ve had.”

“What do you mean by that ‘responsibility for all that you do and fail to do’ line? If I fail to help somebody, do I get thrown in jail or something?”
Enid laughed, “Nothing of the kind. If you fail to help someone, you’re missing out on the money you might have earned. You’re shooting yourself in the foot. There’s no need for anyone else to punish you because the failure to act punishes itself. You have less money, which means there’s more for the rest of us. Also, if people know that you didn’t help when you could have, they’ll be unlikely to help you when you’re in need.”

“But how does that square with all that talk of independence? If you’re independent, you don’t need anybody.” Niall really did see a conflict here and Enid took him seriously.

“Nobody’s independent in the sense of not needing anyone else. From birth the human animal is dependent on others. Oh, sure, a man like yourself who is fit and healthy might be able to live in the woods or at the seashore for weeks, months, or even a few years.”

“Like Robinson Crusoe?” Niall asked.

“Yes. Very much like Robinson Crusoe. If you remember that story, the ship that wrecked on the deserted island was just full of supplies, which Robinson ferried ashore using a raft. Now did Robinson make all those things he brought ashore? No, he did not. Was he dependent upon them? I think he was. Did he bring anything else ashore with him besides the guns and other supplies? He sure did. He’d learned a lot of things from other people and he brought that knowledge to the island. So when he set up his camp, he built it of things other people had made using techniques that other people invented. Even all alone he was still dependent on those other people who were far away and in many cases, long since dead.”

“So how can people be called independent?”

“When used in the sense of not needing anyone or the products or knowledge of anyone else, people are not independent. But there are other senses of the word. For example, you yourself are using my knowledge to learn how to get by in this society. But are you dependent on me? No, you are not. There are any number of other people from whom you could get the same knowledge. Since there are many sources of this knowledge, you are independent of me and any other single source of this knowledge. While it’s true that everyone needs the society and economy of which they’re a part, in our society nobody is dependent on any single person or group of persons. If one source of the things you need or want is closed to you for whatever reason, you can always avail yourself of some other source or sources of those things. You remember when we were discussing jobs and how you had a boss who told you what to do and you did it for the money?”

Niall nodded.

“Did you feel dependent on that job? Did you feel that you had to have that job?”

“No. I knew I could always get another job.”

“Then you were a lucky one. Many people were terribly afraid of losing their jobs. They weren’t confident that they could get other work. They felt dependent on that particular job. Also, when some people lost their jobs they might be without jobs for years and never get as high-paying a job again their whole lives.”

“What’s different now? Don’t people still feel dependent on the work they do?”
“There are several things different now. First, the consequences of not working now are just that you have fewer new luxuries available. No one’s going to come and repossess the furniture. No one will be forced into the streets. Your family won’t have to go hungry.

“Second, you don’t have to have anyone else’s permission to earn money. It’s as if everyone were self-employed because in a very real sense they are. So there are thousands of things a person can do to earn money.”

“Yes, I’ve met some boys since I’ve been back in this country who did things for me to earn money. They were really helpful, too.”

“I’m not a bit surprised. Children learn early that when they do things for others there’ll be rewards for them. But to go on, people also feel more independent because everybody’s on the same side. That is, if I help you, that helps me. If youfail that hurts me. Therefore, your success is my success and my success is your success. Since we’re all in this together, we don’t need allies against everybody else.”

“I don’t get it. What does that have to do with independence?”

“OK. Think of yourself as a poor child in a poor neighborhood. The police ignore you, as does almost everybody else. There are gangs in your neighborhood. They demand money from you and take what little you have. How can you defend yourself from those gangs? You’re not strong. You have no weapons. Your parents are unavailable. What can you do?”

“Join a gang I suppose.”

Enid actually grinned, “You know your way around in a POM economy, don’t you? Yes, you’d join a gang. Now that you’ve joined, the gang will protect you from other gangs. But now you’re dependent on one particular gang for that protection. You can’t leave the gang and no other gang will protect you. So far, so good?”

“I follow you.”

“Now contrast that with a quiet, middle class suburban neighborhood with mothers watching their children play in their yards or on the playground in the park. There are no gangs of tough kids to even threaten to take your money and beat you up. You’re getting all your needs met. Do you have to join a gang? Do you have to make yourself dependent on that single source of security? No. You can be independent of the other kids.”

“But you’re still dependent on your parents.”

“Yes, you are, but in this analogy they represent the society as a whole. The other children represent the people with and among whom you work. In a POM society, it’s like that poor neighborhood where there were vicious gangs. There, everybody was against everyone else. There, the children formed gangs to exploit whom they could, and for defense against other strong groups. The gangs represent corporations and businesses. Unless you joined one, you wouldn’t have the protection of that group. You felt dependent on that corporation for health insurance, a continuing income with a chance at getting a raise, and even for your retirement income to supplement Social Security. In our society, even though there are groups who cooperate, those groups cannot gain from your loss. Anything that hurts you also reduces at least the potential income for others. Since everyone is on your side, you have no need to join a gang. Therefore you are, though ultimately dependent as everyone is, far more independent of any particular individual or group.”
“Yes, I think I see. Because I can expect everyone to want to help me, I’m not dependent on any individual helper. I could go to another employment office or another cafe or some other house. Anyone who helps me will be paid for helping me. That makes me independent.” Niall was getting comfortable with the ideas.

“Back in the POM days, a person was independent if they had plenty of money. They could trade with whomever they chose. Therefore, they weren’t dependent on any individual store or lawyer or whatever. If they were an independent businessman, they could sell to anyone and buy supplies from anyone. This made them independent. In Socialist countries, this independence became impossible because one had to buy from or sell to specific persons or organizations. Therefore, no one was free and independent. This meant that no one felt responsible. No one took responsibility for things that happened. It was always the fault of the system or they were just obeying orders. Without freedom, everything was doomed to failure.”

Enid started to get up. “But this isn’t getting you closer to working, is it? I’ll consider a few things and make some inquiries and see what I can come up with. I’ll see you tomorrow afternoon right after lunch. Oh, yes. Do you plan to buy a car?”

“I hadn’t given it a thought. Should I?”

“Depends on how close around here you want to work. If you work within a few miles you wouldn’t need a car. If you work on the ‘net you won’t need a car. But if you choose work further out, then you would need a car unless it’s on a bus line.”

“Why don’t we get me a beginner’s job close by while I learn the ropes? Warn them that it might be only temporary, a few weeks perhaps.”

“Of course. All right, I’ll see you here tomorrow about 1:30.”

“Good afternoon, Ms. Lee.”

“Good afternoon, Niall.”

Niall dined that evening at home. He didn’t want to get on the bad side of the grocer by not eating all the food he’d taken this week.
Chapter Twenty: Takeover

_in which control of the computer system is seized._

---------- Saturday, January 19, 2013 ----------

In the twilight of a machine room control center, a computer system administrator is on the phone to one of her colleagues.

“Well, it’s definite. These are not the programs we were supposed to be running. Cindy has found the back door that was used on her system and it looks like the same backdoor exists on my system but they used a different backdoor on my system. There’s no telling how many there are. Have everybody copy this new version as part of their regular backups, and then install it on some other machines not on the network. Then we can feed it some of the traffic that’s been coming in the last few days a little at a time and see what input causes the compromises.”

“If we do that at all the centers, we should be able to find most of the backdoors.”

“Second, we’re going to have to replace this bogus software with the good stuff and do repeated tripwires several times a day to find if anything changes and what changes it. If we go down to replace the software one center at a time, the other centers will refuse to accept the change just like they’re supposed to. They’ll kick that one center out and not accept it back until it is just like the others. So we have to do them all, or almost all, at the same time. Also, to be sure the hackers don’t prevent that, we’ll have to power down at the same time, get off the network, come up with the original software, and then get back on the network at pretty much the same time to reestablish the service.”

“I think all that is going to take most of a day to do. So when do you think we could do it? I’d say not before next week at the earliest… Yeah, me, too. We’ll check with Cindy because she’s probably going to have the most problems with her boss… Well, when is he out? Okay… Fine. Let’s do it that day if we can.”

---------- Tuesday, January 22, 2013----------

“Sir, I definitely think they’re planning something. They’re talking about replacing code and powering down. They’re going to do something big on February second.”

“Groundhog day? You got to be kidding. What’s Groundhog Day got to do with anything?”

“I don’t know. Maybe because it’s a Saturday?”

“What do you think they’re up to?”

“I think they’re going to shut down every center at the same time, replace the software that’s on their systems now with an older version, and then come up all at once without our code in their systems.”

“So what? We just put our changes back after they come back up.”

“But they must know we compromised their systems. They’ll have found at least some of our backdoors and such and removed them. We may not be able to get back into their systems at all.”
“I thought you said our programs removed their tracks.”

“You can’t remove all traces if they’re monitoring everything. They can keep track of everything the CPU does and all input that comes in over the network. You can’t bypass everything.”

“You mean they could lock us out?”

“Well, yes, I guess you could put it that way.”

“Shit! I’ll have to get the boss in on this one.”

---------- Friday, February 1, 2013 ----------

“Did you get paid yet?”

“Sure did. Didn’t you?”

“Sure. But I got some kind of bonus, I guess. It’s a lot more than I was getting before.”

“Didn’t you ask the computer what you were paid for? I asked and it said I got paid for crowd control, mostly, there were a bunch of things... but that was the biggest. They must have liked the fact that nobody got hurt and there wasn’t any riot at the drug store.”

“What are you going to use the money for?”

“I’m saving up for a new boat. If we get paid like this every week, it won’t take long at all.”

“I’m going to pay for private school for Leroy. He’s in third grade now and he still can’t even read at first grade level.”

“You don’t have to pay for that. That’s education. It’s supposed to be free. Have you talked to the private school yet?”

“No. Are you sure it’s free? I mean public school is supposed to be free but I thought private school was supposed to be a luxury.”

“All education is free, even for adults. It’s like anybody can set up their own public school now and accept anybody that wants to enroll. My wife’s going to take some courses at the business college.”

“I sure hope you’re right. I’ll check it out.”

---------- 7:00 pm, Friday, February 1, 2013----------

“What are we supposed to go to the computer center for?”

“They say there is a conspiracy of the operators there. They are trying to take over the computer for some reason.”

“You mean they are going to pay themselves a lot and keep it a secret?”

“I guess so. The boss didn’t say.”
“What are we supposed to do? We aren’t programmers...”

“We’re supposed to arrest the guys that work there.”

“All of them?”

“Yeah. All of them. Anybody we find there. We’re supposed to bring them back here and hold them.”

“Back here?! This isn’t a jail. And who’s going to run the computers?”

“That’s not our problem. Just get your stuff and come on.”

“Just a minute, I gotta go to the bathroom.”

“Okay, but hurry up. We’re supposed to be there in an hour. We’re meeting the other guys downstairs. Remember, you’re just a payer. We don’t have to wait for you. If you can’t keep up, we’ll just leave you behind.”

“Oh I’ll keep up, but it’ll be easier if I can get rid of some of dinner first.”

--------------- 7:10 pm, Friday, February 1, 2013 ------------

“The FBI is coming to arrest us? Why?”

“Rip didn’t say. He just said that they’d get here within an hour or so. What are you going to do?”

“I’m going to get to work early.”

She pressed buttons on her phone, paused and said, “Cindy? It’s hitting the fan. The FBI’s coming for us. And if they’re coming for us, they’re probably hitting all the centers. We’re going to have to do it now, ready or not. You’re probably the most vulnerable, from what you’ve told me about your boss. It’s your choice, of course, whether you risk it. I’ll call the others and spread the word.”

She pressed buttons again, paused and said, “Security? The FBI is going to try to arrest everyone at the center... No, we don’t know why but we think it’s part of a plot to take over the money system. Get all the security you can find and guard the place from anyone you don’t know, especially if they claim to be Federal government. I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

Then she began quickly making calls to other centers.

--------------- 7:20 pm, Friday, February 1, 2013 ------------

“Look at it this way; let’s assume that the order actually is from higher headquarters rather than some bizarre practical joke. We’re talking about the money computers. If one center starts showing different values than some other center, then that one is isolated and ignored by the grid while its problem is found and fixed. So, if a renegade group of programmers tried to take over a single center to make themselves rich, it wouldn’t work, right?”

“Right,” reluctantly.
“So it doesn’t make sense that it would be necessary for the FBI to arrest everyone at the center right away on an emergency basis before warrants can be arranged, does it? After all, what horrible action could just one center take that would justify circumventing the law? Therefore, it must be that all the centers’ personnel are being arrested. If that is the case, then it must be some plot by all the programmers and all the staff of all the centers. But that doesn’t make sense either, does it? No, those folks would be obvious if they suddenly showed up rich. They would convict themselves if they tried such a thing. They would never get away with it. But even if they tried, that would still not be an emergency, right?”

“Okay, I see what you mean.”

“So the crime being committed must be in the issuing of the command to you. If you obey that command, you will be doing more harm than good. There’s no immediate threat that would justify acting without warrants. And, there’s no crime specified in your orders. You’d be a fool to obey those orders.”

“I guess so.”

“You’re going to have to do more than guess. You are going to have to act.”

-------- 8:03 pm, Friday, February 1, 2013 --------

“We are agents of the Federal Government. You have no right to keep us out. Stand aside.”

“You got a warrant? You got any authorization that says I have to let you in here? I don’t even let Payers in here unless I know them and I don’t know you from Adam.”

“What’s your name? Let me see some identification.”

“Look at the badge on my shirt. Look at the name tag. See there? It says Fred Gundersen. Now you know all you need to know about me.”

The standoff had just begun, but already it showed signs of being a long one. The six FBI agents and the two Payers that accompanied them were faced by four uniformed security guards, one payer, and several local police. The head of the FBI party was the upset, well-dressed, dignified-looking man who was about to burst a blood vessel. At his side a payer, dressed in tan pants and a white shirt, was trying to reason with him.

“Jerry, you don’t have warrants, do you? You were just supposed to arrest people you found here with no indication of what crime had been committed or anything. I don’t think that’s legal, Jerry. I can’t pay you for doing something that’s illegal, can I now?”

“Shut up, old man,” Jerry said to the payer then turned to the guard at the gate and said, “We’ll be back with warrants and you’ll let us in if you know what’s good for you.”

-------- 9:30 pm, Friday, February 1, 2013 --------

“The FBI’s trying to do what? Why would they want to take over the money computers?”

“Our sources don’t know but it looks like it’s happening all over the country. Do we print this or let it slide?”
The editor paused then put his head in his hands and slumped over his desk. After a few moments his back straightened and when he dropped his hands his face was rather grim.

"Print it. I'll be out of the office with a terrible headache. I'll be looking for a drug store that's open. My head is hurting so bad that I can't think; so even if I call and say to kill this story, print it anyway and get it on the front page. Have it delivered if at all possible. You understand?"

"Yes. I think I do understand. Sorry about your headache. Wish I knew of a drugstore open in the area, but with your head hurting so bad I don't think you should be driving. Also I think I'll put this item on the wire just in case some of the other papers haven't got it yet. Oh, and I sure hope you don't forget to take your cell phone with you. It would be unfortunate if we couldn't get in touch with you for a couple of hours."

------------ 9:10 am, Saturday, February 2, 2013 ------------

"Daddy, can I have the big one in the green dress?"

"Sure honey. It's your birthday and I told you could have whatever you wanted as long as it didn't cost more than $50. Here, I'll get it down for you and you can carry it to the clerk for yourself."

"She's almost as big as me, isn't she Daddy?"

"Yes dear, she can be your big sister."

"I don't want her to be a big sister Daddy. I'm six now. I want a little sister. She's just five and I'm her big sister."

"You sure are dear. You are a big girl now. Can you put your little sister on the counter all by yourself?"

"Yes Daddy."

"That will be $42, sir... Aren't you the pretty one? Is it a special present just for you?"

"Yes ma'am. It's my birthday. I'm six."

"I want to buy this doll."

There is no response from the terminal.

"What happened? It's supposed to talk back to me isn't it?"

"Yes it is. I don't understand. Computer? Computer? It isn't responding. Let me get this keyboard." The clerk pulls a keyboard up from below the counter and types the keys quickly. Then she pauses, types some more and shakes her head. "This computer's fine but it's not connecting to the central computer. Wait a minute." She types still more. "No, it's gone. I'm sorry. It should be up in a few minutes. Would you like to wait?"

"What's wrong Daddy? Can I have the doll now? Please Daddy, can I?"

"No, dear. There's something wrong with the computer. We'll come back Monday and get the doll. Momma's waiting for us right now."
“But it’s my birthday, Daddy and I want the doll right now. You said I could have it now, Daddy.”

“Tell you what we can do, sir. I’ll just record your voice saying you’ll come in Monday and pay for the doll and then the birthday girl can play with it right away. Would that be all right?”

“Say yes, Daddy.”

“Thanks very much. Yes, that would be fine. What do I say?”

The clerk brings out a device that looks quite like a cell phone, presses a couple of keys and holds it out to Daddy. “Just say you want to buy this item number here.”

“I am Julian Martinez and I want to buy item number ____ and I’ll come back tomorrow to pay for it.”

“That should do it. Please bring this label with you when you come in. I don’t think the birthday girl will miss that.”

“Let’s go show Mommy my new dolly. Come on, Daddy!”

-------- 11:05 am, Saturday, February 2, 2013 --------

“Three out of 60? You mean we only got three centers out of 60? That’s only 5%. What kind of incompetent agents have we got working for us anyway?”

“Well, in some cases the agents wouldn’t even try. In others the word leaked and the centers wouldn’t let them in. Since they didn’t want a gun battle, the agents backed off. In one case there was some gunplay and the agents killed two guards to get in. The programmers hit the emergency power down button and every computer, switch, disk drive and phone in the whole place went dead. The three centers we did get are stone cold.”

“What about the others, can we get the local police to help?”

“I don’t think so. In most places the police are guarding the centers by now. In a few places the police are staying out of it but every center has at least some civilians who are coming in to join the center guards. We’re going to need to use some military force to take these places.”

“Damn. That means authorization from the Secretary. Well what must be done…”

-------- 1:40 pm, Saturday, February 2, 2013 --------

“What do you mean we need to shut down the phone system? Are you out of your mind? We can’t do that. Well we can, but…”

“Sir, we have half the country talking about the attempted takeover of the computer centers. We can’t tell the plotters from the busybodies and the gossipers. Even our military installations are being flooded with calls about it. I’m not sure the troops are going to cooperate on this one. If we don’t shut down the phones, the centers will be able to stay in touch with each other and coordinate their actions. They can rouse support. Even the Payers are telling each other to get people to help the centers.”
“Why didn’t the monitoring software stop them? I thought we were listening to every phone conversation in the country by our computers. I thought we were watching everybody. How could they pull this without us knowing about it?”

“Well, you see, sir, computers are really stupid. I mean they can do some things really fast. But they can’t distinguish plotting from other conversations. The only reason we spotted it at all was that we put some warning thresholds in place for the centers that would set off alarms if certain words were used very often. Then we knew they were talking about security but they do that all the time. It could have been some security problems that had nothing to do with us. By the time we established that they were detecting our programs it was too late. They just kept ahead of us.”

“But why were we detected in the first place? I mean we would have known if some manager put the kind of monitoring that caught us on the work schedule. But none of them did. So why did those programmers do all that extra checking? I mean it must have been quite a lot of work to write all those programs.”

“Yes, sir. But it seems that the Payers told them they’d be paid a lot for preventing hacking and break-ins and such. They were doing it on their own. They weren’t told to do it. Of course, some of them do that sort of thing for fun. They are geeks, you know sir.”

“Well, why did the FBI agents refuse to arrest the center personnel at so many centers? I thought they were highly disciplined.”

“We’ve been looking into that also, sir. It seems that they thought it wasn’t the right thing to do. They thought the Payers wouldn’t like it if they took over the money computers. They didn’t think they’d be paid if they did.”

“It looks like we’ve lost control. If we try to send in the military and they don’t go, then we ourselves will go next. It’s time for spin.”

“Yes, Mr. President.”

“Here’s what we’ll have to do. We’ll say that the programs were just to monitor the money computers and were not intended as a means to cheat or control the payments. We’ll say that some junior administrator panicked when he saw the monitoring programs being detected and tried to stop it by asking the FBI to intervene. We’ll say that for the good of the nation someone has to monitor the functioning of the money computers and we are the people’s elected representatives who are best qualified to do the job.”

“This isn’t a disaster, it’s just a setback. We’re still in charge here.”

“Mr. President, we have more problems than the computers. You remember that I told you that lots of the agencies have been losing personnel? Well it’s been getting worse rather than slowing. We’ve been promising them pay, in Euros in some cases, but they say there isn’t anything for them to do now and they aren’t getting paid at all. When the Payers made deposits on their usual payday, the first of February, they didn’t get paid and lots of their friends did get paid. They’re beginning to quit in very large numbers, sir.”

“Well, I can’t blame them. I’d want to get paid, too.”
“Sir, the worst of it is it’s the secretary types and the lower level people who are quitting the most. We could get along pretty well if it were the department heads or middle managers who were quitting but when all the secretaries in an office quit within a week of each other the office just stops functioning."

“What can we offer them to get them back?”

“That’s just it sir, there isn’t anything we can offer them. We don’t have anywhere near enough currency from other nations to pay with, and we don’t have any mechanism to distribute it if we did have the currency.”

“Well what about the industrialists? Do we still control the company heads and the media types?”

“No, sir. We don’t have the staff to monitor them any more. I mean the computers are still putting the information in the databases and I can still listen in to almost any boardroom in the country but without the staff there won’t be anything I can do. Right now we’re getting by on residual fear and respect. If they ever find out we can’t do anything to them, they’ll be out of control altogether.

---------- 3:15 pm, Saturday, February 2, 2013 ----------

[Conference call of all 60 money computer center directors]

So we are agreed. All the code running on the money servers will be open. Anybody can look at the source. Anybody that finds a bug or vulnerability and lets us know about it, the Payers say will deserve to be paid. We all match code and install at the same time.

Now about detecting the next attack, we need to monitor every byte that comes in and every byte that goes out. It will slow us down some but we have plenty of time. I think every center should do its own testing in its own way. We don’t want to all do exactly the same things because that would be too easy to breach. What worked one place would work everywhere.

Third, for physical security we need to have better defenses. The centers should be on camera in lots of places and be hardened. We can’t do this ourselves but we hope the Payers will agree that we don’t want a few gangs of thugs to be able to take over the centers.

Finally, we call for a national investigation of how such activities could be considered appropriate for this administration.
Chapter Twenty-One: Applying for Work

In which Enid finds something for Niall to do.

Niall was rather looking forward to his next encounter with Enid. She’d taken his mind quite off the threat posed by the computer system. But whenever he went into the living room and saw that TV screen on the wall, the memory of the danger returned. He still needed to think.

Everything that Enid had talked about had some surface plausibility to it but it was just theory and philosophy. In the real world, if you put 10 people to work on the same project together and didn’t organize them, you’d get chaos. That or some natural leader would emerge and dominate the rest. Just look at boys’ neighborhood gangs. There was always a leader, wasn’t there? Sure there was. Some kid would be the boss and woe to any underling who didn’t toe the line. Enid tried to make him think that somehow this new money business changed human nature. But people were still competitive and selfish and territorial regardless of what kind of money they used. There just couldn’t be any way that the folks who controlled the computers wouldn’t use that control to make people toe the line. She could talk independence all she wanted but that didn’t make it true. A job was just a job no matter what kind of fancy talk she used to dress it up. She could go on about how people worked with other people but Niall knew that there had to be a boss and bosses were the same the world over.

If he argued with her, it would just put her back up and she wouldn’t help him find a job. As old as she was, she had to have contacts all over this town. He’d play along and see what she could do for him.

On his way to Enid’s he saw the boy from yesterday pulling his wagon with several sacks in it. Niall shouted hello at the boy and got a wave and a “Hi!” in return. That kid really ought to be in school, he thought. He’s being seduced away from school by this money thing. The Payers would pay anybody even if they were underage. They ought to do something about it. Pass a law or something. Well, it wasn’t his boy and he’d probably not be in town for long anyway. Still and all…

Enid was on the porch again with a dirty plate, glass, and silverware on the small table beside her. Apparently, she even lunched on the porch.

“Good afternoon, Ms. Lee. Ready to go back to work?” Niall used a big smile with that one hoping to start out on her good side.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Campbell. Indeed I am. Shall we go inside this time?”

“Well, I must have come up in the world. An invitation into Ms. Lee’s parlor is not to be sneezed at. May I bring the dishes?”

“You may. Just put them in the sink, I'll get to them later.”

Niall put the dirty dishes in an otherwise immaculate kitchen and returned to the living room that functioned as her office.

“Step over here to the computer and see what I’ve found for you.”

Niall joined Enid in front of the TV, which was displaying several entries.
“Several of these are just farm hand work. You’d get a strong back but you really wouldn’t learn much about your new situation.”

“This next grouping represents work to be done in some of the local stores. I think they would require a bit more knowledge of how we do things than you have at present. So let’s bypass them for the time being.”

“Most of the work providing services is completely beyond you. Of course you could probably offer to teach whatever languages they have in Afghanistan or wherever it is you were working before but I don’t think there’s much market for that here.”

“Your best bet would appear to be as a driver for the TDP plant. That has several advantages. One is that you won’t have to know much about the economy and the other is that if you ask a few innocent questions you can find out quite a lot about the local people. Nothing like getting to know the people you live among.”

“Your best bet would appear to be as a driver for the TDP plant. That has several advantages. One is that you won’t have to know much about the economy and the other is that if you ask a few innocent questions you can find out quite a lot about the local people. Nothing like getting to know the people you live among.”

“Yes. It does seem to fit my needs rather well. Ah, I thought we were going to let you see my work reputation.”

“Very good, Niall. You’re learning. Now see if you can figure out why I gave you this information without seeing your history.”

Back to school. I knew I should have read the assignment. “Well, let’s see. If you asked to see the information first that would indicate a lack of trust on your part.”

“Why do I have to trust you? I don’t need anything from you.”

“You need me to do a good job or it’ll hurt your reputation. I know that much.”

“It’ll hurt my reputation only if I recommend you. Merely letting you see these work opportunities would hardly be held against me, as you could have easily found them for yourself by asking your computer.”

“OK then, how about you gave me the information because it isn’t any good to me unless you recommend me, so you were risking nothing.”

“Much better. At least it reveals some knowledge. But though it was a safe thing for me to do, what gain is there in it for me?” She was peering at him over her spectacles.

Niall took quite a while considering and then said, thoughtfully, as if thinking aloud, “You are trying to teach me about attitude toward work. That attitude is one of cooperation, of independence, of understanding one’s role. I must take responsibility for my actions. I must not wait for others to tell me what to do. I must take initiative for myself. I already knew you needed my work history for a recommendation, so I must take the initiative to offer it rather than waiting for you to demand it. If you were to demand it, you would be acting to force me to give you the information. You would be taking the role of boss rather than being given that role. So you are waiting for me to show that I have learned to take responsibility for myself rather than passively waiting for you to direct me.” Niall finished in something of a triumphant rush, feeling a little proud of himself.

“Mr. Campbell, you do seem to be learning. OK. Let’s see that work history.”
Niall, half expecting it to fail, addressed the TV. “Jeeves, please make available to Ms. Lee my work history.”

“Very good, sir.” It worked! How did Jeeves get to Ms. Lee’s TV? He would have to investigate that later.

The display this time included items for the Declarations from the Middle East. As usual, it included his account total but it also indicated each payment and the rationale given for the payment. There was some description of the nature of the work, though it didn’t go into detail.

“Looks like you had some responsible positions. Indications of honesty in the face of temptation. A certain amount of unexpected ingenuity. You seemed to do better when you were on your own with just general objectives rather than narrow limits and detailed directions. Yes, I think you are qualified to drive a garbage truck.”

Niall almost fell off the couch with that last line. “A garbage truck? What kind of job is this anyway?”

“Niall, it isn’t a job at all. It’s an opportunity to for you to work with some other people. You’ll be meeting a lot of people for whom you’ll be doing favors by taking away things they want to get rid of. You’ll see all kinds of people engaged in all kinds of work. You’ll drive all over this part of the county. You’ll be on your own in a lot of ways, but your contribution will be obvious. You’ll also be able to easily trace the consequences of your actions, so you should be able to show your stuff, if you have the right stuff.”

“A garbage truck. You really want me to start at the bottom, don’t you?”

“Niall, there is no bottom. You’re self-employed. You’re an independent entrepreneur. Nobody is better than you. Nobody is your boss. You’re dependent upon no one on Earth. In other words you’re just like everybody else.”

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Niall caught the bus the next morning to ride the two miles out of town to the TDP plant. The plant covered several acres and there were several trucks of various kinds parked around the main building. Several large storage tanks at one end of the plant appeared to be for oil and natural gas. The office (according to the sign) was in a separate building and Niall reported in at the front desk.

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The person behind the desk was a young woman of about 18 or 19 years, wearing a pony tail and jeans. Niall said, “I am Niall Campbell, that’s N I A L L pronounced Neil or Nile. I was told there was work here I might do.”

“What did you have in mind? Oh, I’m Jessica Fontaine. Pleased to meet you.”

“I was told you could use another truck driver out here.”

“Sure, we can always use another driver. Do you have a truck?”

“Well, no. I assumed that someone here might be able to provide a truck for me to use.”

“Some of the guys should be in shortly. Maybe one of them will have something for you. You can wait over there if you like.”
Niall shrugged and walked over to the two chairs near a coffeemaker by a sink. There was a box with about 10 homemade doughnuts, some packets of fake cream and others of sugar. Between the chairs there was a small table with some magazines on it. Lacking anything else to do, he picked up one of the magazines, which had a football player on the cover. He started to thumb through it. The first thing that struck him was that there were no ads. The photographs showed game action and close-ups of faces but everything on every page was about the sport. According to the date it looked like the magazine had been printed several months ago when the football season had been in full swing. He read some of the articles and learned that neither the college nor the pro game had changed much. They were still playing for championships and most of the teams were the ones he was familiar with as being good teams when he’d left the country, years ago. The editorial was about replacing hard helmets with some that had impact absorbing materials on the outside as well as the inside.

A couple of women came in, also wearing jeans, and approached the desk. They reported that their loads had been discharged into the holding tank and they would be on their way after they got some coffee. Niall stood as they approached and said, “Good morning. I’m Niall Campbell. I was told I might be able to find some work here.”

The short young blonde smiled and said, “You sure can. Have you got a truck?”

“No, just a willingness to work. I was hoping there might be a truck here I could use.”

The stocky, matronly brunette with greying hair said, “Too bad. I think Jerome may be able to help you though. He should be in shortly. He’ll be empty in a few minutes.”

“Thanks, ladies.”

The women got their coffee in large insulated cups and went out the door. Niall sat again and began to look at the next magazine. Before he could get into it, however, a young man in his middle twenties wearing a leather jacket came briskly in.”Hey beautiful, where do I go next? That hopper’s getting low.”

“We got a call from a project near Dulles. They have some trees, brush, and stumps they want to get rid of. They estimate about a dozen loads. Think you can get some of that?”

“Sure. Tell Bart where it is. Did we get any response from our availability notice?”

“We did. That’s him,” she said nodding at Niall, “but he doesn’t have a truck.”

“Hey there. Are you here to help?” the young man said advancing with outstretched hand.

“I sure am. What’s needed?” Niall tried to match the young man’s apparent enthusiasm.

“We need another truck but you can sure help even without it. You ever done TDP work before?”

“All I know about it is that the letters mean Thermal Depolymerization Process and I only know that because it’s on the sign there,” Niall gestured toward the sign on the front of the desk. “But Enid Lee thought I could do the work so I came out to do what I could.”

“Enid recommends you? That’s good enough for me. Come on out to the truck and I’ll show you around,” and he started for the door without even looking back.
Niall caught up with him outside and asked, “Aren’t you going to check with Enid?”

“Jessica will do that. If Enid gives you the thumbs down, Jessica will call me and I’ll dump you out of the truck where ever we happen to be and you can walk home from there.” Jerome was grinning as if there was no way he thought he would need to do such a thing.

Niall shrugged and moved right along to keep up with Jerome’s quick pace.

“OK, here we have the input hoppers. Each kind of waste we get goes into one of the hoppers. The biggest profit is on the rubber and hard plastic but we can take almost anything. That last hopper over there is miscellaneous. If it isn’t right for one of the main hoppers we put it in there. Naturally that’s the low profit one ‘cause you can’t really tune it. Of course sometimes the residual Non-organics we get from that one make up for the lower energy.

“Next we have the grinders where we shred the big pieces like those tree stumps we’re going to get. Then the ground-up material is mixed with water to form a slurry that is heated under considerable pressure. This breaks up the longer organic molecules and kills anything that might possibly be alive in the slurry. That’s why we can take even things like hospital waste that’s contaminated with all kinds of bad stuff. We won’t handle that stuff ourselves; there’s a special truck for that. It wouldn’t do to have that truck in an accident.

“These cylinders here are where the slurry is flash-dried to get the volatiles off. We use the natural gas from that to burn for energy to keep the process going. The excess from that goes to those tanks from which we burn it to make electricity, which we send into the grid.

“From the flash tanks the remaining liquid and solid parts are sent on to the next stage where they are heated even more. This drives off the water and separates the lighter oils from the heavier. Then the various parts of the organics are separated into various weights of oil and some gas. The result we pump into those tanks. We distribute a lot of it locally as heating oil in the winter and ship the rest off to petroleum refining plants. Of course, they don’t do petroleum any more since TDP plants like ours keep them busy enough.”

“So what we’re doing is making oil out of garbage,” Niall summed it up.

“OK, yeah, you could say that. I like to think of it as recycling, myself.” Jerome grinned at him.

“Yes, it does sound better that way,” Niall acknowledged.

“We do get garbage, right enough. The trucks from several towns around here dump their loads in the miscellaneous hopper. But most of our source comes from the farms around here and the town sewage. That’s why most of our trucks pump into tanks. We can clear septic tanks and liquid waste from farm animals with those. We have several trucks with regular routes to the farms. My truck is more a general purpose dry organics truck. We get a lot of tree debris and construction site waste. The problem is usually getting the stuff into the truck. We have a small grabber for light stuff but for something like big tree stumps we have to coordinate with a pickup machine of some sort. Worst case we can use the winch and an a-frame and lift it in that way.”

For the first time Niall began to understand what it meant to be an independent worker. Jerome clearly wasn’t expecting anyone to take care of things for him. He was viewing everything about his work as his own responsibility.

“Ready to roll?” Jerome was already turning toward the trucks, one of which was his, presumably.
Jerome’s truck looked like a dump truck with a long bed. At the front of the truck, just behind the cab, was a small crane-like device with a set of claws on the business end. It appeared to be several years old, but other than some mud splashes, looked quite clean. It was obvious to Niall that this truck belonged to its driver.

Jerome said, “Climb aboard,” and swung quickly up into the driver’s seat.

Niall walked around the truck and did likewise into the passenger seat.

It was quite comfortable. The truck was already running but made very little noise. There was no gearshift that Niall could see.

“Back up, Bart,” Jerome said and pressed the accelerator and the truck backed out of its parking place. “Talley ho, Bart,” and the truck moved forward.

“Don’t you have to shift gears?”

“Bart will do that for you if you tell him. Otherwise you have to use the keyboard but that’s a pain. Haven’t you driven a truck before?”

Niall smiled and said, “Not like this one. I drove some light trucks over the last 15 years or so but most of them required that I use a gear shift. What we used to call a standard transmission.”

“You must have been driving something really old. Nowadays the computer does all the gear shifting. I just tell Bart when I want forward or backward and he does all the rest. If I’m coming to a big hill or if there is something special about the cargo that Bart needs to know, I can tell him extra slow or something like that but mostly Bart does what we need.”

Niall thought, they’re going to replace the driver next just like they did for commercial airplanes.

“Bart, where are we going to get those stumps?” A map appeared on the dash showing where they were and where they were going with the route marked.

“I’m surprised you still have to steer,” Niall commented.

“In an emergency Bart would stop the truck and get it off the road if possible but there’s just too much to take into account on these back roads. Some of those big Interstate rigs go on autopilot for hours, though. Hardly seems worth it to pay those guys. They’re mostly computer hackers anyway, I think. But we really earn our money with what we do.”

“Is it more than just driving, loading, and unloading?”

“Where have you been, man? There’s lots more to it than that. Every load’s different. Some are high profit and some are almost a waste of time. If I get a full load of old tires, really packed in there, that load is worth maybe $100. The plant can process that old rubber really efficiently and we get a lot of value from it. It costs us the gas for me to go get the tires but we get a lot more oil from those tires than they do from a load of hog or chicken waste. Then there’s the time it takes me to get a load. If we have trouble with those stumps, I could spend all day just getting one load. If they have a lifter for us we can do maybe 10 trips in one day. We can build up a backlog for that wood/paper hopper that will take a couple of days to process. It really hurts to have an idle hopper. It reduces the efficiency.
That’s why we need a couple more trucks and drivers. Last week we had to shut down two lines for a couple of days. Makes you sick to think how much money we were losing.”

“So I guess these stumps are just what you need, ah what we need.”

“Only if we can load them quickly.”

“I’ll keep my fingers crossed,” Niall grinned.

When they reached the construction site, it looked more like a destruction site. Bulldozers and other large Earth-moving machines had obviously been at work on what had been a forested area. There was a pileup of branches and tree stumps. It looked like the logs had been removed but all the branches and stumps had been just piled up to get them out of the way.

“Isn’t that beautiful,” Jerome crooned as the pile came into view. Clearly where others saw trash, Jerome saw wealth. “There’s tons and tons of the stuff.”

“Can we just take it?” Niall asked.

“It isn’t ours yet. We have to find the owner. They knew we were coming so they should be somewhere around. Let’s park the truck somewhere prominent and see what Bart can do for us.”

Jerome directed the truck to a spot with some elevation and a good view of the pile of debris.

“OK, Bart, ask Jessica to send the owners to us.”

“Is that all there is to it? That’s easy.”

“No, that’s just the beginning. When the owner gets here the real work starts.”

Bart Simpson’s voice came from the dashboard speaker, “Jessica says she’s given them your location. They should be with you in about 20 minutes.”

“OK, that gives us some time to get our act together. Now what we have to do is convince the owners that the smartest thing they can do with their pile of trash is to give it to us to convert to oil. What we have going for us is that the pay for oil is relatively quick. Within six months almost every bit of the oil and gas and electricity we produce will be consumed and the benefits realized. Also, this eyesore pile of tree parts will be removed. The owner can be almost certain that they’ll be paid for the oil, since it has very little down side. On the pollution side, it’s carbon that’s already in the environment, so it won’t add to the greenhouse. By making oil of it we reduce the amount of oil and other carbon fuels that have to be produced from fossil sources. Since we make lubricating oil, as well as heating oil and electricity, we get almost pure profit with low risk. Of course, if we were exporting this oil or shipping it cross country the risk would be greater since it might be spilled. But we can use just about everything we produce locally.”

“The other side is what can he do with this stuff besides give it to us that’ll make him some money? We know it isn’t good for lumber since they already removed all the logs. They could use it to make dirt but the payoff there is much later. In fact it might be several years before they would get anything for having made the dirt. Anyway, we’ll get quite a bit of fertilizer from the part that doesn’t make oil or gas, and that’s almost as good as dirt. The owner could give it to a different TDP plant but we’re the closest and we have a good return on investment rating.”
“Wait,” Niall held up his hand. “What’s that rating all about?”

“That’s an index of how much net benefit is derived from the resources invested. It takes into account both the material resources like the wood and this truck, and the human resources like you and me. When you compare how much money is paid to the folks contributing to a certain project over a certain time period with the amount of resources it took to generate that pay, you get a pretty good idea of where to invest.”

“I seem to remember from a college economics course that return on investment was the amount of money you got back for the amount of money invested.”

“We can’t invest money now, can we? So we invest tools, materials, and our own time and energy. We just updated the concept of return on investment to make it work for us now. For example, if your project has a real high ROI, and you and some other project both want the same resource, and their ROI is a lot lower, then the resource owner is almost sure to give the resource to you. It’s like you were paying more for the resource back in the old days.”

“Why do we need anything more than that rating?” Niall asked.

“Come on, man. There’s lots more to it than just the averages. They’re all from the past anyway. Circumstances change all the time. Different people may find different things to do with the resources. Somebody might get a great idea for something new to do with tree stumps, or whatever. If you want to make good money you have to stay on top of things. Now this project here obviously has a lot of resources committed to it. That means that the folks who put it together have great reputations for getting the most out of resources. That means that they’re sharp and really on top of things. They may have some new idea for what to do with this stuff that we never thought of.”

“So what you’re saying is that we need to sell ourselves and what we do to the owner, so the owner will trust us with his stuff.”

“That’s the idea. We also need to find out about loading old Bart here. If they can help us load it, their profits go up.”

For the rest of the time before the owner arrived, Jerome showed Niall how to work the crane and claw loader attached to the truck. It turned out to be quite easy. Bart helped by not letting the crane hit the truck itself and otherwise it was just like using your own hand. Niall put his hand in the control glove and watched the crane “hand” mimic the movements of his hand in the glove. He was able to reach down to the ground and pick up a stick no thicker than his thumb and place it in the far corner of the truck bed. He would have enjoyed playing with it longer but a couple of people arrived in a small car.

Everybody got out of their respective vehicles and introduced themselves. The owner was in her middle thirties and wearing jeans. Niall wondered if jeans were the new uniform for business women. It turned out there was no need for a sales pitch from Jerome as the owner had already decided to give them the stumps and brush pile. She and Jerome got in the truck, leaving the doors open; and transferred ownership of the stumps and brush to Jerome, complete with a camera shot of the pile and an estimate of its weight in wood. Bart confirmed the identities of all parties and registered the transfer. There were handshakes all around and the owner got back in her car. Jerome asked if they had any equipment that could help load the stumps on the truck. It seems they did but it wouldn’t be available until they quit work at dusk. Also, they doubted the regular driver would be willing to stay.

Jerome looked at Niall. “You don’t happen to know how to drive that cat of theirs do you?”
Niall allowed as how he had never used any such equipment. Jerome said that was OK, he would do that part. He asked if they could use the loader overnight. It was agreed so long as they gassed it up before they left. With that settled, Jerome and Niall got back in the truck.

“Are you up for some night work?” Jerome asked.

“Well I have nothing else on my agenda so I might as well.”

“Right. Then let’s see if there is anything else in the area nearby we could get and then head back to the plant. Bart, ask Jessica what we could pick up on the way home."

There was a pause then Jessica’s voice said, “We still have some downed trees over in Pleasant Valley - they’re on Grove Street. I’ll tell Bart.”

Jerome sighed, “OK. It’s tedious but it’ll at least pay for the gas.”

Bart popped up a map again and they drove about two miles to another small town. Grove Street proved to have some piles of brush on the street in front of many of the houses.

“There isn’t much weight to these and they’re tedious to pick up but at least they’re something. It should give you a chance to practice with the grabber as well. I’ll steer, you grab. Load in layers and put the bigger stuff in the middle.”
Chapter Twenty-Two: Adjustments

In which we see how various people have adjusted to the change.

-------------- January 18, 2013 ---------------

“Damn potholes! They’re all over the place. What did they make these streets out of anyway, Graham Crackers? They crumble the first time a bus or truck runs over them. People are giving me fits complaining about them. But what can I do. I can’t order anyone to fix them. I have to wait for them to be fixed before I can pay.”

“Sure, you aren’t in charge. But have you made suggestions to anyone? Who’s in charge of the streets? Who’s responsible for seeing to their maintenance?”

“The Department of Transportation, I guess. But they’re off in the State capital. They don’t come down here to our town and drive down Main Street.”

“Who’s paying them? Maybe you could contact… no they’d be paid by a group wouldn’t they? If they’re that high up in State government, it would take a committee to decide their pay and there’s no telling who’s going to be on that committee until it’s chosen each month. Have you been reporting the streets as being inadequate and dangerous?”

“Sure, but it’s like yelling in a thunderstorm. Nobody seems to hear me. At any rate the streets aren’t getting fixed.”

“Are there any local companies that build roads or sell road materials? Maybe they could come out and fix the potholes.”

“Wouldn’t they need the permission of the DOT to close a part of the road and so on?”

“If we pay for improving the streets and don’t pay for police preventing their repair, who’s going to enforce the laws about street repair?”

“Good point. Let’s look in the Yellow Pages and see what we’ve got in the area.”

“Nothing under ‘Streets.’ Try ‘Roads.’ Nope. Maybe ‘Asphalt’. Wait, it says ‘Paving’, let’s try that… Bingo, quite a few of them. All right, now we’re getting somewhere. Let’s call some of them and see what they can do.”

“Hello, this is Angus Lander. I’m a payer responsible for infrastructure in this area. Can I talk to someone who can get some paving done? ‘Infrastructure,’ that’s things like roads, bridges, sewers, you know, the things we need to keep the town going… He’ll do just fine, thanks… Mr. Marcopulos, Angus Lander here. I’m a payer for the streets around here among other things. Could you tell me why there’s so many potholes not getting fixed? I know they can’t pay you but that shouldn’t stop them from asking you to fix the streets, should it? Well it would be silly to ask you to bid on a job when you get paid for how much net benefit the work produces. I mean whoever does the job first is the one who gets paid, right? Sure I’ll pay for whatever improvements you make. If the amount gets over $100 I’ll have to bring in some other Payers, you know, the more money the more Payers have to judge the benefit… I’d say do the most important streets first because that ought to produce the
most benefits, wouldn’t you? Okay, I think that’s a good place to start, I’ll meet you there. What time? Three days from now. What takes so long? Oh. Right. I understand. Okay, Friday it is.”

“Well, that’s one. Let’s call a couple of others and see how that goes.”

“Hi, I’m Angus Lander. Are you Mr. Marcopolos?” Angus reached out to shake the hand of a slender man wearing a hard hat who had just stepped down from a truck that looked like it would be appropriate for street repair.

“Yes, sir, just like the shirt says. Could you show me some identification? Anybody could be dressed up like that.”

“Sure, here’s my computer. Tell him who I am, computer.”

The sophisticated, cultured voice of the actor portraying the computer intoned that this was one Angus Lander whose assignment was infrastructure.

“I’ll be damned. Have you guys all got one of those things?”

“Yes, it’s how we keep in touch with the central accounting computer system. I can use this for paying small amounts of money. I can also use it to identify the people I’m dealing with. Computer, who is this gentleman?” Angus said and pointed the camera lens at the face under the hard hat.

“This gentleman is Alvin Wesley Marcopolos,” the computer responded.

“Okay, I guess you’re a payer. How much are you going to pay me for having my crew fix this pothole?”

“That depends on how long the patch is used and how much traffic uses this street and so on. I can’t tell about the pay until after we find out how much good it does. If it’s a good patch and this street isn’t replaced and it has lots of traffic you could be getting paid for this patch every month for 15 or 20 years.”

“You mean I won’t get paid anything for a month?”

“Well, yes. We pay for these things once a month so you’d get paid within a month. I think your first pay would be at the end of this month. That’s only about a week away.”

“How much would I get paid then?”

“You understand that lots of people would be getting paid if you fix this patch; the folks who provided the asphalt, the folks who provided the truck, the rest of the crew here, of course, the secretary in your office, and so forth. Everybody who helped to get it fixed would be paid something.”

“How the hell are you going to do that?”

“Oh, the computer will take care of it. You’ve had a payer at the office, I’ll bet, and there are Payers who will know about all your suppliers. All that gets put into a complicated equation which shares out the money for the benefits that I observe. Of course, that’s minus any negatives I observe. Like your truck here is blocking traffic so I’ll have to take off a little for that inconvenience to the people who are trying to use this street this morning. And the asphalt could be used other places so that’s a cost as
It's like when you had to pay your suppliers and your crew and secretary and so forth back before the transition, only we Payers take care of all that for you so you don't have to bother with it."

“So how much are you going to pay me for this at the end of the month?”

“Oh, maybe twenty-five cents.”

“Twenty-five cents? Are you out of your mind? I wouldn’t spit on the ground for twenty-five cents.”

“Now wait a minute, Alvin. First off you aren’t having to pay anything for your house or your food or medical treatment. You aren’t paying anything for your kids’ education. So all this money you get for fixing this pothole you can spend on luxuries.”

“Luxuries! How much luxury can you buy for twenty-five cents?”

“Stay with me here, now. It’ll take you, what, about an hour to fix this pothole really well and get to the next pothole down the street there, right? So you should be able to do, say, six potholes a day. That’s a buck fifty for the day’s work. But it’s a buck fifty every week and six dollars a month and seventy-two dollars a year for years for this one day’s work. You won’t have to lift a finger again to get that six dollars a month. Now let’s assume that you work at fixing potholes all year long. That’s an additional six dollars for tomorrow and the day after and by the end of the year you have, let’s see two hundred-fifty work days a year at six dollars a day that’s fifteen-hundred dollars a month or $18,000 a year for as long as those patches last. And you’ve already done the work.”

“$18,000 isn’t much for a year’s work.”

“But that’s money that doesn’t have to go for rent or food or insurance or any of the necessities. You can spend it all on vacations and golf and so on. And if you do a second year of work, you have $36,000 coming in each year. Why after five years, you’d be making $90,000 a year to spend on luxuries. Of course, that’s assuming that the patches you make last that long. If this patch lasts only a month or two, then you’d only get a dollar or two for your work, here. The longer the patch lasts the more you get paid.”

“Hey, guys, we’re going to do things a little different from now on. Come here. Let me explain it to you.”

---------- Saturday, February 25, 2013 ---------------

“Ted! Long time no see. How’re you doing? You’re looking great.”

“If it isn’t John! Good to see you buddy. I’m feeling great, too. What are you involved in? I’ve heard you are getting to be a real mover and shaker.”

“The painting thing fell through. I discovered that as a hobby painting is fun, but all day - every day...it gets old in a hurry. I hooked up with a construction firm doing road work. I’ve adapted some of our old accounting software to keep track of materials and equipment. With my software we can tell who has what equipment and what materials and what they’re going to need. It’s working like clockwork. We get the best materials and get deliveries right away because they know we’ll have money rolling into their accounts within a few days or a couple of weeks at the most. What are you involved in? I’ve heard you are getting to be a real mover and shaker.”

“I have to admit that things have gone rather well for me. You remember how I left the office back on New Years Eve, thinking it was the end of the world? Well a few days later Sally called me. Oh, by
the way, Sally is still my secretary and we still work out of the same office. Of course, we have several floors in the old bank building but I haven’t seen any real need to move to a different office. Anyway, one of the contractors to whom I used to loan money called to ask about who he could trust in setting up new deals. I had always paid attention to whether people were honest in making loans because I figured that if they would cheat the public they would try to cheat the bank, too. I was able to put him in touch with some people I trusted. Then several of them called to ask similar questions and I mentioned a couple of opportunities I thought they might take advantage of and before you know it I was spending all my time in the office finding things for other people to do. And I was getting paid for it. I have three times the effective income now than I did before and almost none of the expenses. It turns out that I had more than enough money to buy my home, and with no taxes and no bills for Edith’s tuition or room and board at college we saved a lot of money. Even my wife started doing some different work at the hospital and her income is up as well.”

“I guess you never know whether a change will be for the better or worse. Look, I’ve got to run now but keep us in mind if you need some roadwork done in any of those deals of yours.”

“See you, John.”

------------- Monday, March 18, 2013 -------------

“Frank, do you remember all that material on the organized crime bosses that we collected last fall?”

“Sure. We had them cold and then we couldn’t do anything with the evidence because they were getting oil for us on the black market.”

“Well, what would you say to bringing it out of cold storage and using it now?”

“I’d love it. But wouldn’t that get us in trouble with the Washington guys?”

“So what do we care what they think? They don’t pay us or our staff and they certainly don’t pay the judges. I have to think that putting these guys away for their crimes might get us paid quite a lot, wouldn’t you say?”

“Let’s ask Rodney. He’s a payer. He should have some idea.”

------------- Monday, April 1, 2013 -------------

“I don’t know why we still come to work here. There isn’t enough left of the bureau to do diddly. We might as well just search for good-looking women taking off their clothes. Besides, I don’t know where they’re going to get any money to pay us. They keep saying that we’ll get paid but I don’t see any.”

“They haven’t paid me either but I’m going to keep coming to work as long as they’ll let me. I have an idea.”

“So let me in on it. I’ve been your buddy for years. I’ve covered your ass any number of times. You owe me.”

“Yeah, yeah. I can’t do it alone anyway and I wouldn’t have brought it up if I wasn’t going to let you in on it.”

“So give. What is it?”
“Well, you know these databases we tap into could be really useful to the Payers, couldn’t they? And
the police could use them to solve a shit-load of crimes. That ought to make the Payers pretty
grateful. And if that isn’t enough, don’t you think people would be pretty grateful if people like us
couldn’t snoop on them any more without a court-ordered search warrant?”

“Yeah. So what?”

“So let’s make this whole operation public. Let’s blow the whistle on the agency and go public.”

“How’s that going to help? It’ll just scare everyone.”

“No, look, that’s the beauty of it. No matter how they react, we get a boatload of money. If they see
how useful this can be for law enforcement and convicting criminals and use it for that, then we get
paid for that. If they want to shut it down right away, then we get paid for warning everyone of what’s
happening so it can be stopped. If they want to use it to make paying easier, and I think that’s where
the really big money is, then we get paid a fortune every month for the rest of our lives. We’ll live like
kings, better than kings.”

“What do you mean, ‘use it to make paying easier’? How would it make paying easier?”

“Don’t you see? This system, with a few extensions, can keep track of what each person is
producing. It’ll end the squabbles about who’s done what. It’s able to follow every part and piece of
every device and record how it’s used. If Joe makes a widget and gives it to Pete and Pete does
something to make money with it, Joe can get a cut because the computer knows that the widget
used was made by Joe. In other words, all the payer will have to do is say how much the benefit was
and the whole host of people who contributed something to help can be identified by the computer
and each paid their share.”

“But it’s not set up to do that. I mean, it collects lots of data about lots of people but there’s lots of
work that would need to be done on the database and on the software that accesses it, not to
mention all the programs that give it input.”

“That’s OK. That’s OK. It’s the idea that counts. There are thousands of programmers who would be
happy to put in those modifications. We just have to sell the idea to the Payers.”

---------- Wednesday, April 3, 2013 -------------

“If we don’t do something about this, other hackers or whoever will try to gain control of the money
servers.”

“Okay. I think we all agree with that. So how do we prevent hacks of the software on our systems?”

“We already have one feature in place, that is, we insist that all the centers have the same software
running. It seems to me that we must keep that and add further procedures.”

“Agreed, but what procedures?”

“I think the open software approach has a lot to offer here. If we publish the code openly to all who
want it and let anyone who wants test it and look for bugs and ways to break in, then we’ll be able to
prevent most potential hacks. I think we gain more than we lose by having everybody know what the
code is.”
“I don’t know. You are making it really easy for some hacker to see just how it all works. They can come up with a technique and test it all sorts of ways.”

“But look at the help we’d have as well. Every person with computer skills would be able to help us find vulnerabilities. Can’t you just imagine all the computer science departments having their students looking for bugs and ways of testing for bugs and ways to detect intrusions? And when we need to change the basic program, we can make the new code available to everyone to be sure that new code does what we think it does before we put it into production.”

“So what you’re proposing is that we make the code we run on the money servers into public domain software. That appeals to me because it makes everyone responsible for the programs we run.”

“You don’t get out of it that easily, Cindy. You’re still responsible for the code you run on your servers. Just because somebody else messes up doesn’t mean that you won’t be blamed for using their buggy code.”

“I know. But this way everybody, at least potentially, can influence how the money is implemented. This keeps everyone involved and makes more people feel responsible for how things work.”

“Well I don’t think open source will be a magic bullet but I do admit that it would have a lot of advantages.”

“But will they let us do it? Do any of us have the source code for the money programs?”

“Well, I see that none of us has a copy. Perhaps someone in the payer organization does. Judy, Mark, Chan, do any of you know whether the source code for the money programs is available?”

“No. We’ll have to get back to you on that. Give us a few minutes.”

“While we’re waiting folks, as long as we’re going to use open source for the accounting programs we run, what about the programs that gather the input data for those programs? What about the database software that keeps track of all the products and so on? Shouldn’t that be open source as well if we’re going in that direction?”

“Damn right! All the software the payer organization uses should be open source. Let us all know what they’re doing with the information they collect on us.”

“Hold on, there. I don’t want everybody able to look at all my personal data.”

“He’s not talking about your personal data. He’s talking about the programs that gather it, store it, and make it available to those authorized to have it.

I agree with him. I want everybody to be able to see the code that makes sure the wrong people don’t get access to our personal information.”

“Guys, as long as you’re asking about the accounting source, ask about the rest of that source code, too.”

“You know, I’ll bet the government has access to all the data the retail stores and credit card companies have collected on us over the years. They probably even have medical records and such. I’ve even heard rumors that they’re using an elaborate spy system here in the U.S.”
“Several of us have heard those rumors, Cindy. It seems to me the more of those programs we get as open source the better we’ll know what they’ve been doing to us. Oh, it looks like our Payers have something for us.”

“It’s going to take some doing but the folks in the home office say that it sounds like a good idea to them. They’re going to ask for a vote on the matter with a full-sized sample. They want you to explain as well as you can what you want to do by making the source available and how that will help. They also say there’s lots of other software that they would like to do the same thing with if you think it is a good idea.”

“Wow! Jackpot!”

“From what they say, they’ve recently gained access to some software, hardware, and databases that the federal government is or was using. They’d like you to recommend some people, computer experts, who could examine the code and determine what it does and how it might be adapted to be used by the payer organization.”

“Good Lord. 1984. We’re in 1984.”

“What do you mean?”

“The government was Big Brother and now the Payers want to become Big Brother. We were lucky to escape from the government and now the Payers are trying to put us right back in the same fix.”

“Wait a minute. Be cool now. I read 1984 when I was a kid. I don’t see how it’s the same thing at all.”

“Sure it is. They can watch everything and they can make us do whatever they want.”

“How can they make us do anything? All they can do is pay.”

“All they can do? Isn’t that more than enough? The government was paying and they had all the big companies under their thumb. They got legislation passed that they wanted and everything. Now the Payers are paying. Don’t you think they can pay for the same oppression and control of everybody that the government was paying for?”

“Actually, no, I don’t. They have to live among us, don’t they? If they give me a hard time, I’ll give them a hard time. It’s not like they were anonymous or able to hide behind the walls of an estate.”

“But they can pay the police to hold their guns on you and make you do whatever they want. They can have the police make Congress their puppet. They can have everything their own way and crush anyone who opposes them.”

“How many Payers are there?”

“I don’t know, several million I guess. What’s that got to do with anything?”

“Just go along with me here now and I’ll show you. Let’s say there are three million Payers now. How many Payers would have to be in on this plot to make it work?”

“I don’t know. Jeeze, where do you come up with these questions?”
“Let’s say they need a million of them, then. Couldn’t the other two million pay to prevent the police from forcing people to work? Couldn’t they pay to defend Congress? Wouldn’t they try to protect everybody from a totalitarian State?”

“What if there were two million in on the plot?”

“Then it’s too many, even a hundred thousand is too many.”

“Wait a minute. You just said that a million wasn’t enough. Now you’re saying that a hundred thousand is too many? That doesn’t make sense.”

“Yes it does. If they tried such a thing they’d have to hide themselves away from the public, wouldn’t they? They’d have to be able to defend themselves from the righteous anger of the public. That’s far too many people for the police to defend. Unless, of course, they all got together in a group like a small city and isolated themselves. But then all we’d have to do is turn off the computers for a while and they’d be powerless.”

“Fellahs,” one of the Payers put in, “there’s a much better reason why the Payers would never try something like that. We’re self-selected for wanting other people’s approval. You don’t get that unless you’re nice to others.”

“If you believe that I have some land in Florida I’d like to sell you.”

“Okay, so maybe they are trying to take over like the Feds did. It’s up to us to stop them by making sure the software won’t let them do it. I doubt they’ll all be computer gurus.”

“We’ll see.”

----------------------------------------------------------------------------

“I have bad news and good news for you, sir.”

“Let me have the bad news, the good news can wait.”

“Yes, sir. The imports of oil have dropped 30% from before the transition. We no longer have the under-the-table help of various organized crime figures. When there were those arrests of scores of prominent figures in organized crime last month, we lost any leverage we might have had with the crime families.”

“I haven’t heard about any surge in deaths due to hypothermia. How are people heating these days?”

“That’s the good news, sir. It seems that we’ve developed quite a high level of conservation since the transition. People are giving other people rides. Service stations are giving gas mostly to trucks and people they know are using it for work. It’s like every service station owner is rationing the gas they have. Also, we’ve had some businesses that were high energy consumers shut down since they were using more resources than their products were worth. The power companies are also rationing energy to homes. Even the rich can’t buy more electricity since the utilities won’t sell it to them.”

“So how are we doing overall?”

“Well we’re doing pretty good. We have lots more production of oil from waste products. The thermal conversion process plants are being built right and left. There’s been a shift in production toward
'things we need' rather than 'things people will buy'. I mean, we had rationing right up to the transition and we were rationing more things than they did back in the last century during World War II, but even without our being able to enforce rationing any more, the people who own the goods we would ration are doing it without being told. So we're gaining on both fronts. We're reducing consumption and increasing production of oil and other products. I think a few more months of this and we'll be over the hump."

“So what do you recommend we do?”

“Sir, I don't think there is anything we need to do and I don't think there is anything we could do that won't happen anyway. So far as I'm concerned, the only thing my whole department is needed for is keeping track of what's happening. I don't think most of my staff, what there is left of it, will be paid for much of anything that's in their job descriptions. There are a lot of them who seem to be making good money by providing information on how to conserve and where resources are located and such. Actually the information is mostly in the computer system and any good hacker could get it without us.”

“So that's more bad news.”

“Sir, I hate to say it but it’s really good news that I’m almost out of a job. It means that the problems that I've been battling the last six years aren’t problems any more. I don’t feel like retiring so I’ll look for something else to do; maybe something to do with International Trade. Maybe we can trade some of our goods for oil on the barter system. Anyway, I've typed up my resignation and I have it here.”

“You typed it up yourself?”

“I had to. My whole office staff seems to have found other things to do besides take care of me,” he chuckled.

“I'll be sorry to see you go. You've been with me for almost six years now.”

“You may not have seen the last of me, sir. I may drop in to ask for your cooperation on some international trade deals.”

“Best of luck to you and your wife.”

“Sal, I only came down here for old time’s sake. Don’t talk to me like you owned me.”

“Sorry, Barry, but I’m in a tough spot here.”

“You certainly are. From what I hear they have voice and video recordings of you ordering the deaths of several people. They also have the testimony of some of the guys who pulled the trigger since they got them on video, too. Looks like you have a tough case to beat.”

“That ain’t the only thing. I’ve bought half the judges in this State at one time or another and now I can’t get even a nibble. What the hell’s going on?”

“It’s this money thing, Sal. The judges you want to buy would have to get enough from you to go abroad and be rich for the rest of their lives just from that one bribe. But most of them don’t want to
leave the country and their families for the rest of their lives. You see they don’t have much use for
the currency you can give them without leaving the country.”

“But that’s perfectly good money, Barry. I ought to know, I laundered most of it myself. It can’t be
traced. I can even have it put into a Swiss bank account for them. Why won’t they take it?”

“Because any sudden wealth is very noticeable, Sal. And if they can’t use the money for years what
good is it to them? It just isn’t worth the risk.”

“So why won’t you represent me. Are you too good for me now?”

“Sal, first off you are guilty as hell and they got you dead to rights. Second, I got to think of my
reputation.”

“Your reputation as what? A shyster lawyer who’d take any case if it paid enough?”

“No Sal, my reputation as a lawyer who wins cases. I want those cases where some promising,
young go-getter is accused of a crime and there’s reasonable doubt. I want those cases where the
D.A. is going over the line and trying to help his case along by underhanded tactics. That’s where the
big money is now, Sal.”

“What do you mean? Isn’t there big money in defending somebody accused of murder?”

“Not particularly. Not when the case is organized crime. We get paid for seeing that justice is done.
We get paid for preventing an innocent person from being convicted. Somebody will get paid for
representing you in court. They’ll even get paid pretty well if they can find some holes in the
prosecution’s case. But they won’t get paid the big money that keeping a young person productive
who would otherwise rot in jail will bring. They don’t get the money that you get for showing a
prosecutor cheated to try to get a conviction of an innocent person. And as if that weren’t enough,
you have a reputation, Sal. If I continue to represent you, then your reputation begins to rub off on
me. Other defendants will be afraid that I’ll be seen as representing guilty scumbags, no offense
meant. They’ll want to be associated with lawyers who represent falsely accused innocents, instead.
You know, like the way Perry Mason only represented the innocent. What jury would convict a person
defended by Perry?”

“So how much money would it take to change your mind and represent me?”

“Sal, I don’t want to leave the country for good. My daughter’s a senior at Swarthmore next year. I
want to attend her graduation ceremony. My son’s on his high school wrestling team. I want to see
his matches. My parents are moving into a retirement home in Florida. I want to be able to visit them.
I don’t think you have the kind of money that it would take to get me to give up all that. I don’t know if
there’s enough money in the world for that.”

“I could see to it that you don’t get to enjoy those things, you know Barry.”

“Really. How are you going to pay for that? What chance would your thugs have to get away with
such a crime? Your Euros or Yen or whatever seem to have less and less value to Americans these
days. I think a couple of months ago you might have pulled it off. Now I don’t think you’ll have much
chance. In a couple more months, I think you’ll be laughed at. The police seem to have cameras and
bugs everywhere these days. The only reason I can speak freely to you now about these things is
that ours is a privileged communication and the police are becoming very careful about people’s
rights these days for some reason.”
"So what should I do?"

"Hope that the lawyer you get is brilliant or that the judge has a soft heart because you don’t really have much hope otherwise. You see, Sal, something vaguely approximating justice is coming into the world. I didn’t expect it. I didn’t want it. But it’s here now and, as always, I go with whatever’s best for me."

Good morning, Your Honor. Glad to have you back. What will it be today?

"Just my usual haircut… No, I think I want the works today Harrison, give me a shave and hot towel in addition. I could use some soothing, today."

"Yes sir. If you’ll just give me your glasses?"

The aged barber whisked the chair needlessly one last time and took the judge’s glasses, placing them carefully on the counter in front of the wall-to-wall mirror behind the elevated chair. The judge seated himself comfortably in the familiar leather chair and was reclined, then a hot towel tenderly placed over the lower part of his face. The barber busied himself with smoothing the blade of his straight razor on the leather strop while humming quietly to himself.

"Isn’t it a bright and glorious day, Your Honor?” he asked as he removed the towel which had done its work of softening the beard and soothing the nerves.

"Some might say so, Deacon, but though the day is cloudless, it is surely not a bright day for all of us."

"Why Your Honor, I can’t believe a man as important as yourself, a superior court judge; would not see this as a bright day."

"It’s this new economy, Deacon. It used to be that I could make my rulings without concern for my pay but only for the law. Now as I make a ruling or pass a judgment or issue a writ, I have to be concerned with whether it will cost me money."

"I don’t understand, sir. How could your making a ruling cost you money?” the barber asked as he whipped up lather with a brush in a cup and gently and smoothly warmed the judge's cheeks, chin, and neck with it.

"Just to take one small example, a judge over in Carter County ruled that the police had to tell a man where his wife was. About a week later he found and killed her. He beat her to death while their pre-school aged children watched. The Payers considered that ruling was instrumental in her death and it will probably be years before that judge stops being paid less as a result. Then there are all these cases in which lawyers are asking to have their clients released from prison because they say the crimes for which they were convicted are no longer possible, you know, like writing bad checks. If the judge releases them and they commit other crimes, the judge loses pay. If the judge keeps them in prison and they turn out to be model citizens there, then the judge loses pay. I tell you, Deacon, it’s getting so every decision I make can cost me if I don’t get it right."

By now the barber was quickly and effortlessly drawing the straight razor along the judge’s cheeks, keeping the skin flat and taut with the fingers of his other hand.
"I know what you mean. When I was a young man I made some foolish decisions and they sure did cost me. Of course, when I was in prison I did learn to cut hair. It was easier than working in the laundry. I was sentenced to five years hard time for having that little ten dollar bag in my car. After I got out, having done my full time, I was an angry man, a very angry man. I decided to get a job in a barber shop where that judge might come in and get a shave."

At this point the razor was sweeping smoothly down the judge’s throat in practiced strokes.

"I figured I could let the razor slip, just a little mind you, and before anyone could do anything that old judge would be dead right there in my chair."

The last stroke made, the barber wiped the remaining lather from the judge’s face and neck with a warm damp towel followed by a gentle drying on another warm towel.

"But by the time I had gotten a chair and had a good enough reputation as a barber to get a judge to sit in my chair, not only had the old judge died of natural causes, in his own bed mind you, but I had a family to support and children that needed me. So I never did even so much as nick a legal neck."

The chair was moved to its upright position and the judge, a little pale despite the warmth of the shave on his cheeks, said," That’s quite a story. How much of it’s true?"

"Not a whole lot, Your Honor, but then I didn’t really take an oath to tell the truth when I agreed to be a barber. Heh heh. You want the usual trim?"

"Yes Deacon… Did anyone ever tell you that you preach sermons in the strangest ways?"

"Oh, sir, I been told lots of things. Barbers cut the hair of almost everybody and if they talk, I listen. Sometimes I even learn a thing or two."

"Well Deacon, I think I learned a thing or two today in a barber shop. One thing I learned was that it’s a bright and glorious day."

What do you think of the class so far?"

“It’s neat, Ricardo. I had no idea there were so many kinds of liquor.”

“I bet you didn’t know there were that many kinds of drinks either did you?”

“I knew there were a lot of drinks. I figured there’d be maybe a couple hundred.”

“Well there are thousands.”

“They’d better be in the book ‘cause I’ll never remember them all.”

“They are. But I still think you’ll fail as a bartender.”

“What do you mean? I make a great martini, dry as a desert.”

“Yeah but you don’t have good sense. You’d give drinks to a drunk until he passed out.”
“It’s his money. If he wants drinks why shouldn’t he be able to buy them?”

“Jeff, what does a bartender get paid for?”

“For serving drinks and keeping up the bar.”

“Is that all?”

“Well, there’s being a good listener.”

“Jeff, please remember that it isn’t like the old days.”

“You’re darn right, Ricardo. It costs a lot more for a beer these days.”

“Jeff, listen to me. It used to be that you were paid for how many drinks you sold and nothing else. Well, maybe a few tips for friendly service. But now you’re being paid for the consequences of what you do.”

“Yeah? So how does that change anything? If I don’t sell any drinks, I don’t get paid. I bet that’s still true.”

“Yes, I guess you’re right about that. If nobody uses your services as a bartender I guess you wouldn’t get paid.”

“Hah. See?”

“But Jeff, what if you gave some guy his fifth or sixth drink and he fell leaving the bar and broke his wrist?”

“I’d rush out and help him, of course.”

“No, no, I mean, what would happen to your pay?”

“What should happen to my pay? I served the guy. I sold the drinks. He got a good feeling for his money. Why should anything happen to my pay?”

“If the drunk fell down because he was drunk then you are partly responsible for his injury. If he can’t work for a while, you get less pay for a while. If the guy needs medical treatment, then you’ll be paid less to compensate for that. The mere fact that the guy is feeling significant pain will show up as less pay for you.”

“Hey, that’s not fair. I didn’t push him. Just because he does something stupid doesn’t mean I should suffer for it. He’s a grown man. If he can’t hold his liquor he shouldn’t drink so much.”

“But Jeff, he was drunk on liquor you gave him. If you hadn’t given him the booze he would have been sober enough to avoid falling.”

“It’s still his own fault for falling. Nobody made him drink.”

“You allowed him to drink your liquor. You stood there behind the bar and every time he asked for more you gave it to him, even when you knew he was becoming drunk.”
“It’s his money. If he wants to spend it to get drunk what business is it of mine.”

“Part of why you’re getting paid is for taking care of your customers. If you help them do something dumb, you aren’t taking care of them at all. I mean, you know that alcohol makes you stupid if you drink too much. So you know that if you give a guy too much to drink he’ll be too stupid to take care of himself. You’ll need to do that for him. So are you going to take care of that guy until he sobers up and gets smart again? Are you going to stay with him every minute and carry him and hold him up when he falls and drive him home and be sure he doesn’t pass out, vomit, and strangle? You going to do all those things? I don’t think so.”

“Jeff you can’t just give people all they want to drink. You know the alcohol makes them do dumb things and they’ll hurt themselves. You have to say, “That’s enough for you, wait an hour” when they’ve had enough. Otherwise, you know that sometimes they’re going to get hurt.”

“You mean I’m their nanny?”

“You’re their nanny if you give them enough booze to get drunk on.”

“You’re telling me that some guy who works hard all week comes into my bar and wants to have a few beers and I’m supposed to tell him I won’t serve him? Doesn’t he have a right to buy liquor whenever he wants with his money?”

“Sure he does, Jeff. He has every right to buy whatever he wants whenever he wants. But that’s your liquor he’s trying to buy. You don’t have any obligation to sell it to anyone unless you want to. Just because some guy has money doesn’t mean that you have to sell to him. It’s your right to refuse service to anyone, for any reason you like, or for no reason at all. You’re nobody’s slave.”

“Okay, I don’t have to sell but what if this guy comes into the bar already a little tipsy? Are they going to blame me if I only give him one drink and then he gets hurt?”

“The Payers would blame both you and whoever gave the guy the other drinks but mostly you because he wasn’t as drunk when the other guy served him.”

“Well what if somebody wants to buy a whole bottle of scotch? That’s enough to get anyone drunk. If they buy the bottle I can’t always watch what they do with it.”

“No, you can’t. So you’d better know that person well enough to know how they’re going to use that scotch. If they take only one or two drinks a day, you’re all right. If they drink it all in one afternoon, you’re taking a big chance.”

“Well, damn. Everybody I know really well would take that scotch and get smashed, except maybe my mother.

“Then you’d better not sell bottles of liquor to anybody.”

“You know, Juan, I thought the hard part of this job was going to be remembering how to make the drinks. Now it sounds like it’s a pretty risky business. You’ve got to keep track of how many drinks everybody’s had and everything.”

“Like I said, Jeff, I don’t think you’re cut out for this job.”
“Say, that bit about it’s being my right to refuse service to anyone, what if I won’t serve blacks, or women... or Jews?”

“Yeah? What about it?”

“Isn’t that unfair? Shouldn’t a person be able to buy what they want no matter what their race, creed, or color?”

“Well, I think so, sure. But if you’re forced to sell something of yours to somebody else then you don’t really own that something at all, do you?”

“You’ve got title to it with the computer so it must be yours.”

“But if it’s yours, can somebody take it away from you... even if you don’t want to give it up? I don’t think so.”

“But you do admit it’s unfair that just because you’re black or whatever you can’t buy something that other folks can buy.”

“Nobody said you couldn’t buy it if you were black. It’s just that you can’t necessarily buy some particular luxury item from some particular owner. See, it’s like this. Say some person has a store that sells jewelry. Jewelry’s a luxury, right?”

“Right.”

“So you go into that store and ask to buy a diamond ring and the guy there says, ‘Get out of my store. We don’t serve trash like you.’ Well it’s his store so you’ve got to leave.”

“Hey, that’s even worse. Why can’t I be in the store?”

“Because it’s his store, dummy. Okay, so you’re mad at him, aren’t you?”

“Damn right, I am. I’d like to bust him one in the face.”

“Well, sure. Anybody would. So you tell a payer what a shit that guy in the jewelry store was and how he badly he treated you.”

“Why should I tell him? Is he going to go beat up the guy?”

“No, dummy. But he will see that the guy gets paid less than he would otherwise. Also, the people who gave those rings to the jeweler won’t get paid for a ring you bought from him; they’ll get paid for the ring you bought at the store down the street or off the Internet. So if you make diamond rings, who would you want to have selling your rings?”

“The guy down the street, sure. But what if the guy down the street feels the same way? What if all the jewelry shops refuse to sell things to me?”

“What if the sky falls on you? Come on Jeff, be reasonable. People can earn money selling you jewelry. You think there won’t be lots of folks who want that money? People are greedy. You can depend on that. There’s bound to be lots of greedy jewelry owners. Besides, if they won’t sell to you, there must be lots of other folks like you they won’t sell to, so you should go into the jewelry store
business just to sell to those people yourself even if you have to make your own jewelry. You’d make a fortune."

“What if none of the jewelry makers will give me their jewelry to sell?”

“What if you were making jewelry? Would you turn down a chance to have somebody sell your stuff? What if you were just getting started and trying to establish a reputation for the things you made? Wouldn’t you take a chance on some guy just getting started? Sure you would. I’m telling you, Jeff, human greed will guarantee that before long any bigot who refuses to sell to women, or blacks, or Jews or whatever, will be out of business because it will cost everybody he deals with money for him to refuse sales to them. Being a bigot is a very expensive proposition any more.”

“But you can still refuse service to anyone?”

“Sometimes refusing service is the smartest thing you can do. Sometimes it’s a really dumb thing to do. If you can’t tell when it’s smart and when it’s dumb, then you aren’t going to make much money and nobody’s going to want to work with you. You’ll have to get a keeper to tell you what to do if you want to have a lot of money. I can’t believe you’re that dumb, Jeff.”

“I’m not dumb. I’m just lazy. I don’t want to have to think that hard. I don’t want to have to pay that close attention all the time.”

“Then you have to choose, don’t you? You can choose to be lazy if you like, but it’s going to be expensive.”
Chapter Twenty-Three: At Work

In which Niall works with Jerome and a truck named Bart and finds out how to make oil.

Loading the bundles of branches, small logs, and twigs did rapidly get tedious, but by the time he had the truck loaded, he’d gotten pretty good with the grabber. He discovered that if he gripped too hard, he broke the branches and some fell to the ground. If he gripped too loosely, he could drop the whole bundle. A couple of times when he dropped the bundle, Jerome gave him a look but since Niall jumped out of the truck and reassembled the pile for a second try, Jerome didn’t say anything about it.

Back at the TDP plant they backed right up to the cellulose hopper, said, “Dump it, Bart,” and the back of the truck came up smoothly, pouring the wood into the hopper. There was a rather loud grinding noise that was quickly muffled and their load disappeared through the rather large hole in the bottom of the hopper.

Jerome then drove the truck to a row of trucks near the office and pulled it into line with the others. They got out and Jerome put back on his leather jacket.

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“Can I offer you a lift back to town? I’m going that way anyway and it’d be easy to drop you off.”

“Thanks. I sure could use the ride. I don’t know when the next bus comes by.”

They walked over behind the office building where there was a parking lot for cars. Jerome went right to a rather impressive-looking sports car whose doors opened at their approach.

Jerome said, “Get in. I think you’re going to like this ride.”

Niall got in and almost felt the car enfold him. The door closed itself and the seat adjusted itself to his body so he couldn’t feel any pressure points. The seat was pleasantly warm and the arm rests also automatically adjusted to the position of his elbows.

Jerome slipped in and said “OK darlin’, we’re going by Niall’s place first.”

Niall felt the tiniest of vibrations and the car seemed to almost levitate in a smooth acceleration out of the parking lot. So far as Niall could see, there was no steering wheel and no pedals. Jerome had a grin on his face as the car came out of the lot onto the highway. Then Niall felt the back of the seat press suddenly on his back and the countryside seemed to shoot back on either side. It seemed only a few seconds before the car slowed and went through the middle of town at a sedate pace. Several boys followed them for a while and when the car turned into Niall’s street they took a shortcut. By the time Niall was out of the car, they had come running up.

“Can we see the car, mister?” was said in all sorts of ways.

Jerome said to Niall, “I’ll be back to get you at about 6:30. We should be able to get several loads of those stumps tonight and turn in about 3:00 am.”

“That suits me fine. I’ll be ready.”

“You do have some work clothes, don’t you?”
“Not for this kind of work, why?” Niall asked.

“You can probably pick up some rough and ready clothes downtown if you get there before closing. There is a standard store just beyond the grocery.”

“Thanks, I’ll check in there right after I get a snack.”

Jerome gently moved the car through the growing pack of children and drifted quietly around the corner onto the highway.

Niall ate quickly and went to town to find the standard store. Once in the door he found whites in all sizes and many styles. He picked two pair of heavy duty work pants, some work shirts, and a warm jacket. Then he went to the shoe section and found a pair of work boots that fit pretty well. The store also had toiletries and a kitchen section in which he recognized the style of plates he had found in his own house. He started toward the door with his armload of clothes and was stopped by a middle aged man whom he assumed was a clerk.

“Where are you going with that stuff, mister?”

“I was going to take it home and put some of it on. The other set I was going to wear tomorrow.”

“Who are you and where do you live?”

“I’m Niall Campbell and I live over on Maple Street in Sam Witherspoon’s house. I’ll be happy for you to examine my references. Have you a computer handy?”

“Right over here.” The clerk motioned.

The TV was on the counter in front of the toiletries section. Before the clerk could say anything Niall said firmly, “Jeeves, tell this man who I am.”

“Very good, sir. This gentleman is Niall Campbell of Aldie, Virginia. He is currently working with Jerome Small at the Aldie TDP plant. He is expected to return to work in 48 minutes. His current account balance is $84,503.28. Will there be anything else, sir.”

Niall thought, sometimes it’s really fun to have a valet.

“That will be all, Jeeves.”

“Very good, sir.”

The clerk had not been expecting such a performance and was psychologically off balance.

“Well, I guess it will be all right this time but next time, check with me before you start to prance out of here with an armload of clothes.”

“I shall be happy to cooperate with you in every particular,” Niall intoned adopting just a hint of Jeeves tone of aloof superiority.

Niall managed to suppress the grin until his back was to the clerk.
Hurrying home, he was able to get the new clothes on before he realized that he had forgotten to get a belt and long socks. Hoping that nothing would happen to his only belt, Niall put on two pairs of socks and the boots.

Jerome was right on time and Niall brought a box with several sandwiches (which had exhausted his supply of bread) and several small boxes of milk and juice (which took a lot of his breakfast supplies).

“Good thinking, Niall. Now we can share and get a little variety.” Jerome showed an insulated container in the back of the car which had room for the drinks Niall had brought.

As they drove sedately through town, Niall asked Jerome how he came to have such a car.

“I saved up and bought it, of course. How else would I get it?”

“No, I mean this has all the appearance of being a very expensive car. How could you afford it?”

“The only thing I spend money on is this car and a few clothes.”

“That's all?”

“Well, maybe a few dates. But I find the car itself is enough entertainment. Girls really love it. And if I drive up to a cafe in this car I get really good service. It also got me that truck I am driving. The guy I got it from must have thought I was going to make him a millionaire,” Jerome chuckled.

“Doesn’t that put a lot of pressure on you to earn quite a lot of money with that truck?” Niall suggested.

“Well, yes, in a way it does. But I only have to earn a little more than the usual for a truck of this type to keep my reputation. I don't have to earn as much as that fellow thought I would based on this car. Since I work harder than anyone else at the plant, I figure I should be able to beat the average pretty easily. Besides, this is a quick-paying job. So that guy has already gotten paid some for having given me the truck. It isn’t as if he’d paid anything for the truck himself. What he’s getting now for it is pure gravy.”

“Speaking of getting paid. How does that work? I mean, who pays me?”

“For this particular job it’ll be a joint payment, that is, two Payers will collaborate on the amount. They’ll each be getting information about the job from the other and using that confirmation, each will be able to do a quick run-up of the net benefit. The payer at the building site will be giving slow pay. That is, you won’t get much at any one time but it’ll last for years. The Payers at the TDP plant will be paying much quicker. The contribution of the wood to the oil flow and fertilizer and such will be generating benefits rather quickly, which should last a couple of years. The electricity on the grid is pretty standard since all the electrons are about the same so a kilowatt here and a kilowatt in New York both get the same pay. The oil is a little different since we dispose of most of that locally, at least in the winter. In the summer we send most of the oil to a refinery which is kinda like the grid so that’s pretty standard and takes only a few months to pay out. The winter oil is the fastest pay since keeping houses warm is a benefit that’s realized right away and the heating oil we produce here is burned within a few weeks.”

“Yes, but who is the person that actually does the paying.”
“Oh. Well the construction site payer was that guy that came over with the owner. He noted the transfer and saw the condition of the site and will know what would have happened to the site if the stumps were just left there. He should have already done the entry of the benefit and the rate of depreciation and under what circumstances the benefit would have ended. So if something happens to him, another payer can step right in and make our payments for that site. At the plant we have three Payers, since the plant runs all the time. They record who brings in what loads, the weights and materials brought, the trucks used and so forth. They also keep track of the amounts of the various products and where they're sent. Some other Payers at the destinations pick it up from there for confirmations of arrival and consumption.”

“You know, it sounds just like the kind of information they used to keep in the old days. They were always checking inventory and shipping invoices and such. I assume the Payers use computers for all this?”

“Sure. Doing it on paper would be a lot more work.”

“So the computer network is aware of the flow of all the goods and all the work that’s going on all the time?”

“Don’t give me that religious stuff. Computers are no more aware than those tree stumps we’re picking up,” Jerome scoffed.

“Then why do you call your computer, here, Bart?”

“Well I have to call it something so it can tell when I am talking to it and when I am talking to you.”

“Yes, but you gave it a human name instead of a number or something like that.”

“But that doesn’t mean that it’s aware, even if the computer does talk like Bart Simpson. It’s just a computer and it isn’t alive.”

“Who said it was alive?” Niall said, surprised.

“You said it was ‘aware’ and that means alive. You sounded just like those religious nuts who say the computer network is a living being. They’re like something out of a scary Sci-Fi movie.”

“All I meant was that the information was in the various databases and could be accessed at any time. Computers aren’t alive, for goodness sake,” Niall tried to put reassurance in his voice.

Jerome’s reaction to his comment had given Niall another bad turn. If the computer system itself was the agency that was controlling people, if it had escaped its human control; that would explain why Niall was unable to identify the people behind the tool. If the system that could so easily be used to control people had come to have a mind of its own and worse still a will of its own, then the problem was more serious than he had thought.

Still, from what he knew of computers, granted that it was many years out of date, there was no way that the computers could be intelligent enough or wise enough to take over for themselves. Of course 15 years was a long, long time in computer evolution. Perhaps by some fluke or accident... No that was just impossible. It had to be impossible.
By this time Jerome had arrived at the stump dump. There was the promised front-end loader. It was a rather substantial piece of equipment and, as such, very valuable. It somewhat surprised Niall that Jerome would be trusted with it.

“What if someone else came along and drove off with that thing.”

“It wouldn’t let ‘em. It is expecting me and only I can drive it.”

“Now who is talking like the machines are alive?” Niall laughed.

“You got me on that one.” Jerome grinned. “OK, we’ll take the easy ones first, the ones that are kind of by themselves. Then we supplement with branches until we have a full load. I’ll put the first stump in the back and the second in the front. While I am getting the second, you fill in around the first stump with branches. Then while you pack the second stump I will strap the first and so forth. Ready?”

“Let’s roll.”

Jerome parked the truck near two rather outlying stumps, but within range of a large pile of brush. Then he took off his leather coat and put on a somewhat battered heavy white jacket that was behind the seat. He was already wearing his boots and white pants. Then he went to the loader and climbed into the cab. The machine quickly and efficiently approached, grabbed, and lifted the first and larger of the two stumps. Then it swung ‘round and approached the truck from the back and, almost gently, placed the stump in the back of the truck. Niall began grabbing clumps of brush and limbs and stuffing them in the back corners and around the sides of the stump so it wouldn’t shift when going over bumps or around corners.

Jerome soon approached from the side with the second stump and Niall hurriedly moved his grabber arm out of the way as the stump was lowered into the front of the truck body. Then Niall resumed tucking branches and brush around the stump, working from back to front. By the time he finished, Jerome was already almost finished attaching straps over the top of the load from the sides of the bed of the truck. There were take-up reels just under the bed into which the ends of the straps were fed and they took up the slack.

Back in the cab, Jerome told Bart to get going and the truck slowly wheeled back to the road. Jerome used the drive back to the plant to describe how the truck and the loader had communicated and adjusted the load so it would be properly balanced and centered.

“In the old days it would have been just drop her in and let her rip,” Jerome commented. “Now we won’t be more than 2-3% off the same weight on every wheel. They expect the trucks to last years longer.”

They backed the truck up to the hopper, and Bart released the straps, rewinding them, inclined the bed, and slid the whole mass of tree parts into the waiting hopper. Niall was expecting a loud noise but instead there was nothing except the crunch of the wood itself.

“Is it broken?” Niall asked.

“No. But it is night and people don’t want that kind of noise at this time of day. We need to put the sound blocker on.”
Jerome approached a TV attached to the side of hopper. “Okay, Snarf, put on the lid. That’s all we have this load.”

A large thick cap lifted up from behind the hopper and settled down over the opening, completely blocking it. Niall put his hand on the hopper and could feel strong vibrations but there was almost no sound.

“How do they make it so quiet?”

“They have anti-sound generators, you know, speakers that make a sound that cancels out the sound of the stumps being chopped. It’s just a large scale of the anti-sound systems on Bart and Darling. It takes some electricity, but that’s a lot cheaper than the reduction in net benefit would be if we blasted the neighborhood with sound all night.”

“Let’s get another load.” After several more loads, Niall and Jerome had become a smoothly functioning team. On their way out to get the last of the night’s loads, Jerome drove Bart over to the other end of the plant and asked for some diesel fuel. They were directed to some 50 gallon drums and Niall loaded two of them into the back of the truck with the grabber.

“They only asked for a full tank for the loader but I like to give a little more than expected. Leaves a good impression, you know,” Jerome explained. Bart, 100 gallons of diesel for Matilda. How much do you need?”

“Fifty-seven gallons.”

“To the pumps, Bart.” The truck obligingly maneuvered next to the fuel pumps and Jerome filled his tanks.

“Bart wasn’t really thirsty but I always like to start the day with the tanks about full. Bart, will you need servicing tonight?”

“No servicing recommended at this time.”

After the last load of the evening Jerome said, “I’ll pick you up at the same time tomorrow. I think we have about three more nights of stumps and that ought to about do it for the cellulose for a few days. Then we can split our shifts so you drive Bart half the day and I take him the other half. Think you can learn it by then?”

“I’ll certainly give it a good try.”

As the days went by, Jerome lectured Niall on what kinds of loads were high profit and what low. He talked about efficient paths between jobs when there were no full loads to be had from any one place. He also mentioned scouting on numerous occasions. It seems that one of the things Niall could do was to find additional sources of organic materials to be run through the process.

In the afternoons before Jerome came by to pick him up, a group of boys would assemble to see the car. One of them was the boy from the grocery store. From him Niall discovered that a lot of the area farmers visited the store. Niall soon took to visiting the store and striking up conversations with the farmers. It was only a few days before he had several leads. In one case, it was a cow killed by lightning. In another, it was some worn-out tractor tires. Cleared brush came from this farmer and a torn down old barn from that farmer.
By the time the stumps were all processed into oil, Niall had established a set of clients for his services. He found that he could often fit the small amounts of trash the farmers had into not quite full loads he was assigned by Jessica, who notified him of bigger sources. In this way Niall managed to almost always have a full load when he arrived back at the plant.

It was as a result of these contacts with the farmers, and their discovery that Niall was living alone, that he found himself invited to Sunday dinner on a farm. Niall decided that it was worth the risk that the farmer had a spinster sister, to get a chance to explore how the transition had affected farm life. He was also getting rather tired of the bland standard food.
In which we meet a patent attorney who is changing jobs.

“Look, I know there aren’t patents any more. I know there isn’t work for a patent attorney. That’s beside the point. I know patents and I know inventions. I can leverage that knowledge, but I need help.” Martin was sweating without realizing it, and his voice roughened slightly with the undertones of his rising desperation. “You have the Web skills I don’t have. You know how to set up websites and I know the content they should have. Between us we can get rich if you’ll just work with me here.”

The thirty-something woman behind the real wood desk pushed her glasses back up her nose and then lowered her face to look at Martin over the tops of the lenses. “Everybody thinks they can get rich with another website. I been in this business for years. Sure there’s guys that got rich on a website. Google, eBay, there’s a score of them but that don’t mean that every guy with a bright idea is gonna make a fortune.”

“Please just listen for a minute. I really have a dynamite idea. It’s bound to work.”

She rose to her feet, disengaging jean-clad legs from their position on the seat of her leather chair, and extended her hand for a good-bye-and-maybe-I’ll-be-lucky-enough-to-never-see-you-again handshake. “I get six guys a day in here with the same song and dance. I heard it all before. I ain’t got time to listen to you guys and do my work. Okay? So please close the door on your way out.”

Martin was struggling to contain his anger, or perhaps to avoid bursting into tears. “Okay,” he said, mechanically shaking her limp hand. “But you’ll regret this. One day not so long from now, you’ll regret not working with me.”

“I’ll cry in my beer. Now leave.”

Martin turned toward the door with a scowl on his face. He was tempted to slam the door as he left, but restrained the impulse and just stood looking at the closed door for a few seconds. When he turned, he saw the secretary looking at him with a sympathetic expression on his face.

Martin’s face flushed briefly then he said somewhat stiffly, “She really will be sorry she wouldn’t work with me.”

“Oh, she’s just tired and overworked. She said yes too often in the past, and she’s a little bitter about it now. But if you really are having trouble finding someone to help you... and your problem isn’t too big, I do know someone you could try. He doesn’t have her experience or contacts but he should be able to help you get started at least.”

“At this point I’ll try almost anyone.”

“Let me give you his name, number, and email address. I would suggest calling after 4:00 this afternoon.”

“Thanks.”

Later that same day, having walked back to his office downtown, Martin sprawled in his chair behind his desk. Three months into the new money and it looked like the building owner would probably ask
him to leave soon because other prospective tenants would be asking for the office space. He no longer had clients. He no longer even had a secretary. After twelve years working for him, she had left for another job. Of course he couldn’t blame her, since she wasn’t earning anything sitting around the office. Secretary… that reference he gave me. Where did I put it? It’s after 4:00 maybe he’s in. Let’s see. Jasper Morton. Poor guy. Stuck with a name like Jasper. What kind of parents…? Oh well, I might as well get this over with.

Martin picked up the phone and entered Jasper’s number. A woman answered after a couple of rings. “Could I speak to Jasper Morton, please?”

“Who are you and what has he done now?”

“I just want to talk to him. I don’t know anything about what he may have done.”

“That boy is a real trial to me. But I’ll get him if you like.”

Martin heard her yell “Jasper! Some guy on the phone for you. Don’t tie it up all day, now.”

What have I gotten into now? I’m calling some kid. What kind of cruel joke is this anyway?

“Hello?”

“Hello. My name is Martin, Martin Hall. I’m a patent attorney. I got your name and number as someone who could help me set up and run a Web page.”

“Can you tell me who it was that gave it to you?”

“He’s a secretary to a professional Web developer in the Foster building downtown.”

“My uncle Harvey. Of course. How can I help you?”

“First off I want to know how old you are.”

“I’m 13, almost. Does that mean you don’t want to work with me after all?”

“Kid, at this point I would want your help if you were 6. Can you really set up a website for me?”

“Certainly. I’ve set up several of them for my friends. They’re easy. What do you want to accomplish with it?”

“I want to make it a site that people can use to find inventions that will help them do whatever they do better.”

“That sounds promising. How do you do it?”

“I thought you were the expert in setting up websites. You tell me.”

“No Mr. Hall. I mean how are you going to have them search for the inventions? If they already knew there was an invention that would do what they needed they wouldn’t need your website. They could just google it.”

“Oh. I hadn’t thought of that. I was just going to have the inventions listed.”
“No. That’s not good enough. Anyone can do that. Listen. I have friends that could help us with this. Is it okay if I bring them in?’

“How old are they?”

“Is age really that important to you, Martin? Does it matter how old they are if they can help?”

“I guess you’re right. I really don’t care. Will you at least tell me how many there are?”

“Only three. The four of us have been doing things together for a couple of years now. Just a second while I get them in on this call.”

What the hell have I got here? How is he going to add them to this call? Martin was not into electronics himself, so he was quite impressed when a few seconds later he heard a light soprano voice say, “Okay we’re here. What have you got for us, Jasper?”

“I’ve got a man who wants to set up an inventions website. He’s a patent attorney who’s got a…”

A young girl’s voice broke in—a fast, slightly disorienting mixture of preteen enthusiasm and cynical authority, “Not any more he isn’t, Baby Einstein, that’s just one more job that went to /dev/null at the transition.”

Jasper responded just as quickly, his voice shifting comfortably into a tone of long-standing intimacy and good-natured verbal sparring, “Yeah, Professor Obvious – thanks for the G2. My point is that he has an idea that I think we can work with.”

“Swell. What’s the idea?”

The rapid fire exchange suddenly stopped and Martin realized that they were all waiting for him.

“Ah… well, I was thinking that there are millions of patents in the system.”

“Can you skip the primer? Just give us the ‘Cliffs Notes’ version.”

“So, Alice, ever consider actually allowing anyone else to speak? Or are you still going for Vice President of Logorrheacs Anonymous?”

“Fine, Gasper, my aural acuity shall be inversely proportional to my loquacity. But please be forthwith, Mr. Hall. I have things to do.”

“Go on, Martin.”

“Ah… I’d like to have the inventions searchable in a way that makes it easy to associate inventions with whatever process or product one wants to improve. That way it would be easy to find things that might make products better that the developer would never have thought of otherwise.”

“See, Alice. It’s basically a good idea. Everybody has access to the lists of patents. But I figure what he knows is what kind of information they have. He knows what people have had to put in their patents. I figure we can use that information to generate an algorithm that’ll do what he wants. What do you think?”
“The product should be useful. Mickey, didn’t you do a paper on library science last year?” Another youthful feminine voice Martin noted, but softer and with less edge to it than Alice’s.

“Yeah, Emmy, but it won’t help with this.” This voice was clearly in the process of changing. “Categorizing is going to be necessary but they don’t go beyond that. What we need is some way to relate things that might go together functionally. That’s the crux we have to bear.”

“Don’t go ursine on us here, Mouse. Why don’t you guys think about it for a couple of days while I set up the basic website and come up with the right way to describe this thing so it’ll be popular with the search engines?”

“Okay by me.”

“Call me Wednesday about 4:00 and we’ll see what we’ve got, okay?”

“Suits me. Bye guys.”

“Bye.”

“Bye.”

“Can you come up with a list of the information people have to include in a patent? If at all possible, I need you to have it to me tomorrow, Mart-- uh, Mr. Ha--, uh…” Martin let out an audible sigh--the sort of sigh Jasper had heard more than once from the adults in his world.

“Just make it Martin, Jasper. If we’re working together, let’s go by first names.”

“Ok, well! Ok, Martin. Ok. So, I’d really like this stuff tomorrow -- you can send it by email attachment. You know how to do that?”

“I think I can just about handle that, thanks.”

“Oh, ok. Sorry. Ok, so send me the attachment, so I can look it over… Bye-bye uh. I mean bye. Bye, I’ll talk to you later.”

The phone in Martin’s hand was silent. Martin felt like he had been run over. What happened? It was like the kids just took his idea and made it their own. At first he was amused, like it was some kind of joke. Then he felt a little angry. After all it was his idea. Then he felt resigned. Nobody else was willing to help him. Besides it was obvious that they saw things about the idea that had never crossed his mind. Maybe he should play along. He certainly wasn’t getting anywhere on his own. Finally he just felt depressed. He booted his computer and found the Web page that told what one must do to get a patent and forwarded it to Jasper’s email address. Then he turned off the computer, put out the lights, and stood looking out of his office window at the afternoon shadows.

Spring was just getting started and the light green of the trees promised new growth. Usually Martin savored this time of year. His family loved to take a long vacation each summer to someplace they had never been. But the last two years that had been impossible for one reason or another. Martin had hoped that this year would be different. He had known that the transition would mean changes for his work but he hadn’t expected the whole concept of patents to fall by the wayside. There were still patents in law but nobody seemed to care. It didn’t matter who used the inventions, the person who held the patent was getting paid. Everybody who helped to use the patent also got paid. Patent attorneys began to report that they weren’t getting paid for defending patents in court. Judges weren’t
getting paid for conducting the trials. It appeared that restraining the use of productive ideas was not going to be considered a benefit. The inventors didn’t seem to care since their income had increased markedly. It seemed that having the idea in the first place and making it available to others was felt to be rather important. But that meant that patent lawyers really didn’t have much to do.

His lawyer friends in other specialties also were feeling the pinch. Corporate law was dead on its feet. Since money could no longer be awarded in a case, there was little incentive to sue. Then Martin got his idea. It all seemed so simple until he tried to get help with the parts he didn’t know about. Then he discovered that he couldn’t just offer somebody money and have them jump to do his bidding. He had to persuade them that what he was doing would be a major benefit. Well, he was having trouble doing that. It seemed obvious to him that putting ideas together was a good way to make better products. I mean they said that as a culture got more elements there were more ways to put them together and thus the rate of inventing should get faster and faster as more and more things were available to be put together in new combinations. At first he’d been sure that this would make him rich. Now it just seemed a waste of time.

Martin finally went home. He didn’t even go to work the next day. He did get a phone call, however.

A girl’s soprano voice, seemingly quite upset, erupted from the phone. “This is Alice. Listen. Mr. Hall. I highly recommend that if you have any actual interest in this project you so graciously have dumped on our laps, you move your ass over to that computer and set your brain in gear. Now. Now! Move it!”

Martin was dumbfounded. “Ah... ahh... ok. Ok. I’ll--ok, I’ll work on it.”

“See that you do. Goodbye.”

“Ah... Goodbye.” And Martin hung up.

“Oh, okay, right, I’ll get right on it.”

The phone call was not over however. Alice said,” Too much?”

“Yeah, you think?” Jasper’s sarcasm was showing through. “You learned that in acting class? I mean, come on, ‘move your ass?’ Who talks like that? Really classy. And your mom would kill you.”

“Well, we had to do something!” Alice said, flustered. “I don’t know how to order people around -- I was just winging it. You know, ex tempore and all that. Jeez, I hope I didn’t hurt his feelings. Do you think I hurt his feelings? You said I needed to shock him a little. Oh, man. Ok, maybe I should call him back and apologize?”

“No, what’s done is done. Either it works and you got him out of his funk or it didn’t.”

“It’s okay, Alice,” Emmy said soothingly. “None of us have had any experience at psychotherapy.”

Poor Martin didn’t know what to think or feel. It was like getting hit in the face by a bucket of cold water. Some 12-year-old girl was bossing him around like he was a little brother. His emotions went through another series of changes, ending with determination. He crossed the room to his daughter’s study desk, booted her computer, and started thinking. How does one categorize inventions at a more fundamental level than the classes used by the patent office? He came up with several
structures and rejected them all. Finally he put together a rather long list of categories he had considered, gritted his teeth and sent it off to Jasper.

How had Alice found out about his first mailing? Probably Jasper sent it to her. I wonder why.

His phone rang again. It was Jasper this time.

“Hi, Mr. -- uh, Martin? Hi. It’s Jasper. Ok, this is a lot better, thanks. But, uh, it still needs some work. Kind of a lot. Maybe the others will want to have a go at it -- I don’t know. We’ll see. Anyway I have a website set up and some sample questions that it should ask. We’ll let the others see what we’ve done tomorrow and that’ll take some of the blame off you.”

“Jasper, why did Alice call me about the categories and not you?”

“Because we--me and the others--we thought maybe you needed a fire lit under you. We could tell you were getting down about all of this, but really -- we think it’s a good idea; it has potential -- really. Emmy and the others, they said you were getting depressed -- well, Emmy said your voice ‘reeked of depression,’ but she can be a bit hyperbolic that way -- anyway, we figured you needed a little electrotherapy to jolt you out of it. Alice seemed like a good choice; she’s been in this acting troupe for a while, and they just finished Hamlet. So, anyway, we thought she’d be good at that kind of thing…”

There were several long seconds of silence followed by, “Martin? Are you there?”

“Yes, yes I’m here. What kind of classes are you in at school?”

“We’re not in a school. We home-school.”

“What are you studying?”

“Whatever we want to. We don’t really have a teacher. We pretty much learn whatever interests us.”

“Uh, home-school?”

“Yes, homeschool. Like school, but -- at home. Home. School. We study whatever we want, when we want, how we want. No teacher, because we teach ourselves. I mean, the adults, sure, they help -- they can drive and such, and sometimes we have to go places where driving is useful. But we learn what we want, when we want, how we want. Trust me. It works.”

“Don’t the other kids pick on you… or think you’re sort of nerdy?”

“What other kids? That’s the whole thing about homeschooling, Martin. It’s just me and the others. And sure the others think I’m a nerd. It’s sort of a compliment.”

“But what about the ‘other’ other kids -- the ones in real schools?”

“What’s a real school, Martin? Never mind. Don’t answer. The ‘other’ other kids? What about them? I’m not a science experiment, Martin. I mean, I have regular kids for friends, if that’s what you’re asking. I play soccer, you know, and…”
“Okay, okay. I get the picture. It just takes me a minute. I have to get adjusted. I’m afraid I’m old-school. Heh, heh… Okay, not a good joke. But sometimes I get the feeling that you and the others are just toying with me. Like I was the butt of some big practical joke.”

“No, no. The idea is actually a good one. It’s going to be fun to play with it. I think we may even make some money off it, seriously.”

“I guess I really don’t have any choice but to trust you, do I?”

“You don’t have any reason not to trust me either. Go to my website. It has my life story there. See if I’m trustworthy. Check me out.”

“I’ll do that. What’s the URL?”

“I’ll send it to you in an email. You know, Martin, I think maybe you don’t know exactly how powerful the Internet is, just quite. Do you know what you’re dealing with? You really aren’t taking very good care of yourself.”

“What do you mean?”

“I learned all about you in twenty minutes on my computer last night. I know what you paid for your house, I know what grades your kids are getting in school, and I know how you met and fell in love with your wife. You don’t take care of yourself, Martin. If this were last year I could have spent most of your money and you would never have known what happened.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Your mother’s maiden name was Olsen. Your dog’s name is ‘Fetch.’ You like green peppers on your pizza. Anything else you want to know?”

“All right, stop, I believe you. Christ, kid, is there anything you can’t do?”

“Sure, lots of things. But I don’t waste my time trying to do things I can’t excel at. Lucky for you that list is a short one, and web design isn’t on it.

“I don’t want you to take this in the wrong way, but I think it’s probably a pretty good thing you ended up finding me -- well, me and the others -- or I think this idea of yours would have ended up in the circular file. Coming, Mom! Got to go now. Call me tomorrow, a little after 4:00. Bye.”

Martin sighed and put his head down on his desk. This isn’t how it’s supposed to be. I give the wise counsel to clients. I don’t get taken care of by a 12-year-old boy and his chums.

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“Meeting, come to order! We have to be a little formal today because we have to get a lot done. I’ll run the meetings if that’s all right with you Mr. Hall? Mr. Hall. Uh… Martin?”

“Uh, sure.”

They were seated around a coffee table in Jasper’s home. Martin would have said it was a den except it had a desk setup with computer and attendant electronic components, some of which looked home-made. A coffee table in front of a couch was surrounded by cushions on the floor which
Alice and Mickey seemed to prefer while Martin and Emmy occupied the couch. Jasper was seated in the office chair that had served the desk but was now drawn up to one end of the table.

Alice was thin with dark hair, brown eyes, and a narrow face. Even lounging on her cushion she seemed always active. Her foot jiggled as if her subconscious was doing some quick dance and her hand was often going to her mouth to further erode her already short nails. Mickey was at least 5 and a half feet tall, slender, and beginning to show signs of needing to shave. His hands would often pat out some complicated pattern on whatever surface was available. Emmy was black, short, and radiated serenity. She was taking notes on her laptop computer which didn’t seem to conflict with simultaneously contributing to the conversation. Jasper was short, even for a 12-year-old. His gestures were quick and decisive.

“Okay does anyone think they have a basic approach that will give us an algorithm for matching need to invention? Mickey.”

“I think we’re going to need a program that constructs itself by natural selection,” he said looking over Martin’s shoulder. “I don’t think there’s any way we can keep up with nor modify the code accurately enough to make it work otherwise. So I think we should be coming up with parameters to use to determine success and failure in the search modules.”

“Any opposed? Next, anybody got a general approach for what factors to consider in the success determination? Alice.”

“Almost all inventions manipulate energy in some way. We could base the factors on the kind of energy, the kinds of transformation, and the conditions of the transformation.” Alice’s eyes seemed to be examining Martin’s innermost thoughts as she spoke.

“Don’t forget control of energy like in thermostats... and the scale of the energy. Size matters,” put in Emmy.

“Emmy, be recognized, please,” Jasper said with just a hint of sharpness in his voice as he moved to the front edge of his chair.

“Recognized schmecognized. Ok, ok. Sorry. I'll get with your pseudoprogram. I'll play along. Prime Minister Rasper, permission to vocalize?”

“Right. Okay, we have what I consider a good basis for a first try; we just need the details. Mickey, you come up with energy forms and conversion types. Emmy, you take conditions of operation, like in air or water or some chemical bath, temperature and so forth. Alice, you take energy storage and size or scaling factors. I'll take regulation and control.”

“Now we need to have the computer be able to look at an invention as revealed in a patent application and correctly identify all the factors you’re responsible for. I need some ingenuity here, folks. If you need Mr. Hall for anything I’m sure he’ll be glad to help. Any other matters? Okay, formal over.”

“Jasper, this is going to take a lot of programming grunt work,” Alice said. “Do you think we should consider bringing in some computer nerds for specific code? I know we could do all the programming ourselves but I don’t think we have the time right now. I mean, I’ve got that thing at the Julliard next month, and Mickey has his photography show to get through.”
“I don’t know, Alice. I think that’s a political potato. How do you feel about it, Mr. Hall? Can we let others share some of the loot?”

“Loot? What do you mean?”

“The pay we’ll get if this takes off like it should. Remember that the more people we involve, the more people share the pay.”

Martin was still recovering from the meeting. He had expected it to take hours and yet it had been over in minutes. The fact that he had been given no tasks and had said nothing was quite humbling but that was what he was beginning to expect. He was also beginning to believe that the group had done some “dumbing down” for his benefit so he could understand what they were doing. He had noticed that whoever was talking, other than Mickey, would look at him whenever examples were given. It was frightening to consider what the meeting would have been like had he not been there.

“I don’t mind sharing the wealth. If it takes off, there should be plenty for everybody.”

They were all grinning at him. “See, Alice? Lawyers can be good, even at sea level,” Emmy said and the group broke up laughing.

Martin was puzzled—”Uhh, am I missing something?”

“You know, Mr. Hall: ‘Why put lawyers on a submarine? Because deep down, they’re not that bad.’”

“Oh. I heard that one, but it wasn’t as polite.”

“So Emmy’s joke was that at sea level…”

“I got it, I got it, Jasper. And thanks, Emmy. I guess.”

Martin was still a little emotionally tender and even though he had been made the victim of lawyer jokes since he told his friends in college that he was going to law school it hurt a little that The Others had done it, too.

Just out of curiosity Martin asked,” What do you really need me for? I don’t seem to have any tasks to speak of.”

“Isn’t it obvious, Martin? You’re the adult. Look at us. We can’t drive. Mickey sounds like malfunctioning hydraulics. I have a zit the size of a third eye on my forehead. Do you see the benefits of having a post-pubescent humanoid on this project?”

Martin suddenly realized the project wasn’t really his anymore.

“If I’m the front man, what are you, Jasper?”

“Well, I guess I’m the coordinator. I see the world as a 4-D puzzle with all the parts there to be put together. I look at the parts and see how they have to fit together if I want the picture to come out this way or that way. All I have to do is move a few parts and they all bump and jiggle and come together. It’s kind of like playing billiards only the balls are in 3-D space and they aren’t round but lots of shapes. Oh, and the web design. I got into that when I was five. I’m pretty good at it. It appeals to my artistic side.”
“And you Alice?”

“I’m the emotional driver,” Alice said around the edge of her thumb. “You know how Emmy’s sort of the empath around here? She can tell what people are feeling, sometimes even before they know it themselves. Well, she feels emotions but I can put emotions there. Like when things go crazy and people don’t know what they are talking about but they still keep on talking and it gets everything in a mess. I try to keep them in line. I guess that’s why I like music and the theatre and such. When I perform I’m making the audience feel what I want them to feel. People are really interesting, you know? I mean, not in a way that makes me want to know more of them, but they’re interesting. I mean, it’s all Plato’s forms and whatnot -- everything is an imitation of something -- so I figure, why not just do it? Just do the imitation thing? Plato was totally right. You read much Plato, Mr. Hall? Maybe his Republic? Not even in Greek -- a translation?”

“Not even, as I guess you’d say, peripherally.” Martin shook his head, wonderingly.

“Ok, ok. Well, it’s the cave thing. All we see are the shadows on the cave wall. What we can’t see are the things that are making the shadows, right? So, that’s what I’m interested in. The things making the shadows. Oh, and I can cook really good pasta.”

Martin was beginning to feel a headache coming on. “Mickey?”

“Okay, I’ll play. I am the logician.” Mickey was looking at some kind of transformer figure and flipping it from one configuration to another. “I break down problems into their component parts so the solution becomes obvious. That’s how I got my nickname. People stopped calling me Michael and used Mickey instead because they said I kept having Mickey Mouse ideas.”

Jasper broke in, “Mickey, it was your ears!” and the others laughed.

“Yeah, you guys crack me up. Listen, Martin, everything’s really, really easy, if you break it down enough into its component parts. I think I’m the opposite of Alice--she thinks everything’s incredibly complex. I think everything’s incredibly simple. But that’s cool. She’s into philosophy; me? I like biology and life processes -- evolution of complexity, chaos theory and whatnot. Oh, and sports. I’m sort of ok at basketball. I mean, I’m tall for my age and have big feet, no cracks guys, so it should be a natural for me. And if you calculate things properly, anyone can make a basket. It’s a matter of simple triangulation and then, of course, basic physics. You take the height of the basket…”

Now it was time for Martin to interrupt; his headache was full blown: “Emmy?”

“I often think I’m the group’s mother. I know I’m the smallest here, and I’m also the youngest, if only by 78 days and 6 or so hours. The others call me ‘Mom’ sometimes, and that’s mainly to annoy me, because I’m so small but I sort of try to keep things together. Mainly, I’m into languages, which are all detail-oriented, all about picking up the pieces; but they’re also about the bigger picture. I only have five or six right now -- languages, not pictures" Emmy chuckled at herself, “Well, plus two ancient ones and a few programming languages, but no one counts those anymore -- but I guess you could say that’s my thing. Other than that, I’m sort of into animals -- mainly horses.”

“Horses have their own language. It’s almost all body language, of course. But if the rider can learn that language and has the courage and will to dominate the horse, riding can be like the most wonderful conversation. It uses your whole body and it’s like music and dance and poetry and I don’t know, like team sports, too, I guess, all mixed up into one art form. Besides they make the most wonderful, patient pets and when you’re on that horse you have this feeling of exalting power, you know?”
Martin didn’t know, and he realized he’d never know. And he realized he really, really needed the sort of drink these kids were years from being able to enjoy legally.

“If you’re the mother figure, perhaps I should audition for the father figure, then, Emmy?” Martin said with a grin.

“Actually, Mr. Hall, we have chosen you for an Uncle figure, if you don’t mind,” Emmy said.

Martin experienced a sudden lurch in his emotions. Emmy reached out and squeezed his arm, Jasper nodded, Mickey punched him on the other shoulder, and Alice grinned at him. He wasn’t in Kansas any more, Toto. He felt adopted. The smoothly functioning group before him seemed to have welcomed him. He also was convinced that they knew him much better than he knew them and they accepted him despite that. His feelings of failure began to abate for the first time in months. His headache dissipated.

He even felt brave enough to ask, “Why have you let me into the group? I have the impression that you are used to doing things with just the four of you.”

They looked at each other and after a moment of nods and shrugs Emmy said, “Jasper felt that your idea should be pursued. He also knew that you really didn’t understand what it entailed. He knew that to solve the problem we would need a representative to the world of adults. So, since it was your idea, he decided to see if you could do that job. At first Alice and I didn’t think you could do it. She thought you were condescending and considered us children and wouldn’t work with us anyway. I thought that you were so depressed that you would be unable to work at anything. We suspected that you were clinically depressed but Jasper did some investigating and decided that your state of mind was probably situational, that if your situation changed you would probably be just fine. But he said that we couldn’t just do the job for you and hand you success that you had to do your part to earn that success.

“That’s when I suggested using Alice to jolt you and get your emotions to react to something other than your lack of a job. Alice is a very good actress and we felt that by her stepping on your pride a little and shocking you with her language because 12-year-old girls aren’t supposed to talk that way, she could change your emotional state.”

“Well she certainly did that!” Martin said, laughing.

“Today we found that you were treating us as equals and taking us seriously and not as somebody to pat on the head and dismiss. Jasper respects you, and Mickey thinks you made sense so we decided you were an acceptable adult. We’re really coming to like you, Mr. Hall… Martin.”

Martin’s high lasted for days but he was never able to explain to his wife why his mood changed so radically. She just wouldn’t understand and for a time she even thought Martin was having an affair. But it soon became obvious to her that Martin still found her very attractive, so she just came to accept his happiness as one of life’s miracles.

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About eight months later we find the group, minus Martin, in Jasper’s “cockpit” comparing notes.
“Problem graphed here. Over 90% solid, improving matches for each serious attempt to find appropriate patents. That should be translating into improvements within two to three months. But where’s the money?”

“Alice? Over $8000 last month is…?”

“Trivial, Mouse. Should be an O. M. better.”

“Jasper?”

“In one sense it is, Mickey. Sure we’re getting plenty of money to buy what we want to buy. Emmy’s rather happy with her new horse, for example. But I think in a larger sense it’s a big problem for the Payers and the economy.”

There was a pause. Mickey’s head came up and he actually looked at Jasper’s face. Alice stopped writing in her book. Emmy got a startled expression.

“Rescale!” breathed Alice as Emmy gripped her arm.

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” Emmy asked Mickey?

“Beyond the dreams of avarice,” Mickey nodded, grinning.

Then they all started talking at once in tensed, almost hushed voices.

“Epidemic. Payer problem. How to know. Reputation. Online. Everybody can.” These words and phrases were murmured by various members of the group.

“Usual jobs or a special case, oh ghostly one?” Alice’s dark brows rose.

“Usual, I think,” Jasper said. “Saturday morning I suppose, so we don’t interfere with Emmy’s riding too much.”

“So, Mr. Hall, we’d like you to present this to the Payers as something they should include in the accounting system.” They were meeting at Jasper’s once again in the usual formation with Jasper speaking. There had been quite a change in the computer equipment at the desk. All of it was new. “Call it another invention if you like but this time it’s a social invention rather than a mechanical one.”

“What is it, Jasper?” Martin asked.

“It’s just a way to prevent people from trying to hog credit. You know, like when you do some work that had somebody else’s help and you don’t let the Payers know that they helped, as if you had built a house and claimed to have cut down all the trees for the lumber yourself.”

“Well, how can you prevent that?”

“Reputation, Mr. Hall,” Emmy said. “Each person must have a public reputation, a reputation that anyone can view. Sort of like an individual person’s Web page but one that other people create.”

“I still don’t follow you, Emmy.”
“Okay, let me give you an example. Let’s say you’re a patent attorney in the old days. Let’s say you have a really good patent application that a client wants your help with. This idea is worth millions. So what you do is prepare the application with flaws, flaws will make it possible for someone else to get a patent for that idea that is sound and by which that other person can get most of those millions. Then you sell that idea to some other company. That would be immoral, of course. The original inventor would be the victim of your immoral behavior. But what could he do about it? You did create a patent for him and that patent did allow him to have protection for an invention, but just not the invention he thought he was getting a patent for. So he can’t sue you and expect to win. And he has no way to tell the world and especially other inventors what you did to him. So you can go right on doing the same kind of thing to other inventors.”

“But what if every time someone wanted to do business with you they could check a Web page and read about your past? What if every prospective client could find out what you had done to that inventor? What would happen to your business? No one would trust you to act for them. What we propose to do is make it possible for anyone who feels cheated to tell the world about the person who cheated them. In short, to give everyone a Web reputation.”

“But, Emmy, that’s outrageous. Think of the scope for slander, for libel, for unfounded accusations? A person could have their reputation ruined for nothing at all.”

“Be calm, Mr. Hall,” Alice said. “It’s not what you think.”

“Well just what is it then?”

“Mickey, you explain it,” Emmy suggested.

“The problem, Mr. Hall, is that people will want to cheat to get more money.” Mickey’s voice was now in a bass register so if Martin closed his eyes he would have thought he was listening to someone much older. “Some people will give in to that temptation. We need to make cheating so obvious that the temptation will be very small. The best way to find out about cheating is to have people who are cheated report the cheating. Cheating no one knows about doesn’t worry anyone but God. So when cheating is reported it needs to be investigated.”

“Are you following this, Mr. Hall?”

“Yes, Emmy, but I don’t see how that’ll prevent false accusations.”

“The computer can do most of the checking on reports of cheating. When the cheating involves capital goods, you know, tools and such, the computer follows what happens to them. It keeps records about that kind of thing. So denying the person who supplied your capital is rather easy to detect and knowing who supplied those goods and so forth right back to who mined the ore and who felled the timber is also known.” As he spoke Mickey was interweaving a complex rhythm of finger taps while staring into space. “Your education and training is also easy for the computer to follow, so knowledge of chemistry, for example, can reasonably be attributed to the classes in chemistry one has taken, and to the books and journals one has been able to read. The computer also knows who taught the classes and who wrote the books and so forth. Which people are working with you is known to the computer, as we found out at the transition, so that couldn’t be hidden or falsified either.”

“It turns out,” Alice put in, “that our very own invention engine was one of the ways that people believed they could get away with not giving credit. They thought that no one would know that they found an improving invention from using our Web page. So there were lots of inventors and
producers who, for one reason or another, didn’t give us credit for improving their products. That’s costing us quite a lot of money.”

“So you want the computer system to verify the accusations?”

“Exactly, Mr. Hall. You see, if people expect the computer to know if their accusation is true or not, they’ll be both unlikely to lie to get credit and unlikely to lie to hurt someone else.”

“But that doesn’t prevent more subtle lies, does it? The computer can only detect lies about things the computer has data about.”

“True,” Jasper put in. “But there have always been and still are letters of recommendation and answers to the question ‘What do you think of Joe as a worker?’ We just want to make those things public so that people are more careful of what they say. If you give a negative review of someone, you have to take responsibility for that review.”

“There’s such a thing as libel, you know,” Martin said.” Since the transition, quite a number of my friends have lost lucrative practices in prosecuting and defending libel suits. Without the threat of an action for libel, what’s to keep people from putting all sorts of negative statements in there about people they don’t like?”

“Oh, we think we’ve figured that out, too, Mr. Hall,” Emmy smiled. “You see, you have to put your comment in one of the given categories. We mentioned the work reputation, there’s also a housing reputation, a driving reputation, and a gun reputation and so forth. There isn’t any category that gives one the chance to just spew general insults about somebody.”

“But couldn’t somebody just put insults into any category even if it didn’t fit?”

“The computer has quite a dictionary, Mr. Hall,” Mickey said. “It can tell if what you put in has nothing to do with the appropriate topic. But even so, you have to remember that the computer is also writing what gets put in the reputation. People provide it with their comments but the computer translates that into standard forms so it’ll be easy to read, terse, and clear. If you managed to fit insulting statements into some category when they got translated into some standard forms they would be both germane to the category and make definite statements. Those statements could be checked, in most cases, by the computer. Thus, if the hothead affirmed that the computer translation was what happened, he would be responsible for that statement. If he was shown to have lied, that would become part of his own reputation. Because lying is relevant to most of the reputations, it would be posted in many places. Thus an attempt to slander could redound upon the slanderer as well as cost him in future earnings.”

“Redound? What does that mean?” Martin asked with a surprised look on his face.

“It means to bounce back upon, probably unexpectedly. In this case what was expected to hurt someone else turns out to hurt one’s self,” Emmy said, quietly with a kindly smile.

“Oh. Okay. I understand that.”

“Do you understand how we make it difficult to lie on these reputations?” Alice asked.

“Um, I think so. First, most things people might put in them can be checked by the computer. Second, what you say has to fit into a category like job reputation, or housing reputation, or driving reputation. This means that the topics that one can address in each reputation are limited by that topic. Third, the
computer will translate what you say into some stock answers which are well-written rather than quoting you verbatim. Is that it?"

“Yes, Mr. Hall, that’s it.”

“Does the person submitting an entry for the reputation have to type it in or can they just talk to the computer?”

“The computer should be able to handle your just talking,” Mickey said. “It’ll show you what it’s made of your statements and ask for confirmation. If you can’t read, it’ll talk them to you. This should make for easy access even if a person is blind or has other handicaps.”

“You say that just anyone can see these reputations? All I have to do is ask the computer for John Doe’s job reputation and it gives it to me?” Martin’s skepticism was showing.

Jasper could wait no longer and was at the front edge of his chair. “Well, Mr. Hall, it could be that way, but we’d rather have each person own their reputation so they can choose when and to whom to show it. There are things more important than reducing cheating. Cheating is somewhat self-correcting anyway by gossip even if the computer doesn’t help. We think it’s far more important that people should be able to control what the computer reveals about themselves to others. The computer is able to get to all sorts of information about everybody. You probably noticed that we’re able to find out a lot about people without their even knowing we’re getting access to their personal information.”

Martin vividly remembered how shocked and almost naked he’d felt when Jasper revealed that he knew quite a few things that Martin had thought were private. The idea that anyone could have such information just for the asking was downright frightening.

“So,” Jasper continued, “we’d like these reputations to be available only upon the request of the owners. That’s another reason why we categorized the reputations by type so that one could release just the information that was relevant without divulging extraneous material. At the same time, if one is going to release some of one’s reputation concerning some topic, like housing, say, one must release all the information on that topic. One cannot release just the good stuff.”

“Have you got a write-up of this plan for me to give to the Payers?”

“Sure. We even have an appointment for you at 3:00 tomorrow afternoon. That should give you plenty of time to prepare a brief, right?” Jasper said with a big grin and handed Martin two memory sticks.

“I can’t read this much material in a month,” Martin said looking at the multi-gigabyte sticks with his eyebrows raised.

“Oh the material for you to read is only about 20 pages. The rest is some programs and descriptions of some algorithms that should make this work better. If you convince the Payers at the meeting that this is a good idea, they’ll give it to some of the folks working on their computers that can understand it. Just give it to them after your presentation.”

“Won’t the Payers there be the ones who’ll make it work?”
“I’d be surprised. The computer nerds almost never get to set the policies. They just make them work. No, I’d expect the people you meet at first will have little understanding of what the computer does and even less of how it does it. Remember that most of them are old and retired.” Alice said.

“Alice, don’t say things like that to Mr. Hall,” Emmy rebuked. Then she turned to Martin to apologize.

But Martin was already laughing. “Don’t worry, Emmy. I don’t take offense at being called ignorant due to being old, especially when the people saying it are only in their teens. I remember how ignorant my parents were when I was a teenager and how much they seemed to have learned somehow by the time I was 25.”

They grinned back at him and Jasper said, ”Just sell it to the policy guys. We can always sell it to the computer geeks for ourselves. Our contact information is on both sticks.”

Oddly enough, Martin had little trouble convincing the Payers of the usefulness of the proposed software. Naturally, the Payers wanted to have their own people check out the details to be sure that it wasn’t all pie in the sky. The Payers had been very concerned about the same problem and were actively seeking solutions. The fact that a solution for this particular problem would also solve a host of problems for others in addition to the Payers was but dimly perceived by any of that group. We’re not sure about The Others.
In which Niall visits a successful working farm and buys a car.

Niall had decided that if he was going to live and work in the country he was going to need a car. There was a used car lot in town, so of course Niall started there. His first error was to walk onto the lot.
The prices were posted on the side windows of the cars. On the same sheet was the mileage driven, the approximate miles per gallon, and the names of previous owners. That looked almost normal to Niall. He was just getting into one of the cars when an older woman walked up and said, “Hold on there. What do you think you are doing?”

Surprised, Niall bumped his head on the roof of the car, (a second error) and somewhat angrily answered, “Looking over this car. What’s it to you?” (Third error.)

“Get your _____ off this lot and stay off,” was the abrupt reply.

“No. I want to buy a car. I’ll leave when I’ve finished my business here.” (Niall’s head hurt like blazes but need I say, fourth error?)

The woman raised a whistle to her lips (Niall hadn’t noticed that she carried the whistle but we can forgive him for that error) and blew a blast of at least 5 seconds. Niall was impressed at her lung power and his ears were impressed with the volume produced.

The response was not long in coming. Two men came hurrying out of the small office building on the lot and another man shortly came running out of a cafe across the street. Almost before he knew what was happening, Niall found himself grabbed and hustled toward the street and the oncoming man from the cafe. He was just on the point of using his Special Forces self-defense training (which he had not practiced in years, another error in one sense but not another) when he spotted a badge on the man approaching from the cafe. Figuring he was safe in the presence of the law he called out, “Let me go or I’ll flatten both of you.”

The officer immediately brought order by commanding, “Shut up and stand still if you know what’s good for you.”

Niall figured he was in for it since he didn’t think he could take on all three of them. He stopped struggling and stood erect, eyes narrowed; trying to remember the quick self-hypnosis techniques he had been taught years ago. He figured he was in for a beating right there on the street. Somehow he had violated some local taboo.

The woman had followed behind as Niall was hustled toward the street and began talking as soon as the officer had finished. “Came on the lot and started to get in a car without even looking for the owner. You’d think he owned the place. And when I called him on it, he got testy and told me he wouldn’t leave. That’s when I blew the whistle. I ain’t taking that from no slacker out for a joy ride. You arrest him, Charlie. I bet he’s wanted somewhere. You just check him out. You might show him the city limits, too. We don’t need his kind around here.”
“Calm down, Desiree, he ain’t resisting now so we can find out who he is in a minute.” Turning to Niall the officer said, “Who are you, mister. I seen you around town the last few days but you ain’t known to me.”

“I’m Niall Campbell. I live over on Maple Street in one of Sam Witherspoon’s places. I work out at the TDP plant,” Niall responded.

The policeman took a phone off his belt and looked at the screen for a few seconds. He punched a couple of buttons and looked some more. Then he punched a lot of buttons and waited for about 30 seconds.

“Desiree, I think you done blew it on this one. He checks out six ways from Sunday. He’s not wanted anywhere in the State and he ain’t wanted anywhere in the U.S. I even checked with Interpol. He has a clean record. He’s been working for the government overseas for the last 17 years and just got back in the country last month. And if that ain’t enough for you, he has over $80,000 in his account. He can afford to buy practically your whole stock of cars if he wants to.”

Well before the officer finished, the two men had released Niall and had backed up a step each. They began apologizing almost immediately.

Desiree wasn’t going to give up that easily. “What’s the matter with you, mister? What are you doing coming on somebody else’s property and messing with their stuff without so much as a ‘By your leave’? Don’t you have any manners at all? Do you just walk into other people’s houses and use their stuff? I could have shot you, you know that?”

Niall tried to answer the questions but Desiree wasn’t giving him any pause and talked right over the few words he got out.

Finally Charlie said in a loud voice, “Desiree, give the man a chance to explain himself.”

Desiree opened her mouth to reply and Niall quickly began to apologize.

“Please excuse my boorish behavior. I’m new here and don’t know how things should be done.”

That didn’t appease Desiree in the least. “What kind of place are you from that you can just ignore property rights? They let you just get in their cars without permission and do whatever you want with them? These are my cars and I take good care of them. Ain’t nobody cleans up their cars better nor checks the engine and body integrity more careful than I do. I don’t let nobody mess with them. I don’t care how much money you got or what high-class job you had before you got here. You keep your hands off my property unless I give you permission to touch it. You hear me?”

“Yes ma’am. You are right ma’am. I was completely wrong to do what I did. I’ll never do such a thing again to anybody. You’ve really taught me a lesson that my momma tried to teach me but I guess I was just too ornery to learn. I’ll always thank you in my prayers for helping me learn this lesson before I offended someone who was not as forgiving as you and who really would have shot me.”

With a little effort Niall found that he really did mean the sense of what he was saying. He really did feel badly about handling her property without even looking for the owner. That was the really big error he had made. Without that error the others wouldn’t have mattered, really. Appearing to have no money (he was wearing his work clothes) could have easily have been cleared up. She wouldn’t have startled him if he hadn’t been getting into her car without permission. She wouldn’t have spoken so
sharply to him, thus helping to provoke his rude answer and so on. All his problems were a result of his disrespectful attitude toward her property.

By the time he’d finished his apology, Desiree had calmed somewhat and Niall had experienced a surprising realization. After some further humble pie eating on Niall’s part, he was able to buy a car from Desiree. But the realization followed him during the rest of his day’s work.

As a child he’d been taught to respect other people’s property. He wasn’t to touch things when in other people’s houses without their permission. He wasn’t to go into others' yards and play with the toys there, no matter how interesting they were. He wasn’t to touch other people without their permission.

But he had always assumed it was OK to treat things that were public as if they were his own, almost. When he went to the park he could play on the swings and the slide as if he owned them. Of course he couldn’t prevent others from doing the same but he could use them without asking permission. When they went into a store Niall could touch the things that were for sale, in most cases, and when he couldn’t, they put the things behind glass or out of his reach.

He had gotten so used to this situation that by adulthood he didn’t even think about what was public and what was private any more. He just knew the difference, though he might not have been able to clearly say what the difference was.

But what was the difference? That now appeared to be an important question to answer. Now he was an adult. He should understand the difference. What was it that made him think that the cars on the lot weren’t owned by somebody? What made him think that it was OK to just get in someone else’s car? Yes, the cars were there to be seen. They were for sale. But that didn’t make them public in the sense he was used to. The food he got from the grocery was also out in public in the sense that it was on display. But it was still owned. He had no right to assume, just because it was standard food and he didn’t have to pay for it, that he could just pick it up and walk off with it. Somebody else still owned it. When he had selected clothes in the standard store, he had felt as if he could just take anything he wanted to take. Why? Just because he was not going to have to pay money to get the items? But that didn’t make them public.

What things were public? Before the transition the government had owned the streets and parks and a host of other things. Somehow Niall had gained the impression that that was not the case any longer. One reason was because the government just about didn’t exist any more. What did it mean to say the government owned a street when there was nobody from the government or of the government that had anything to do with the street? The police drove or walked patrols on the streets but they didn’t repair the streets. They didn’t accept responsibility for the street. In what sense did it belong to the police? Niall couldn’t see any way the police owned the street. Did the street belong to all the people? What did that mean? Such a statement made a mockery of the whole concept of ownership. Did nobody own the street? That made just as much sense as everybody owning the street. So who owns the street?

OK, Niall thought, back to basics. In the beginning somebody had to build the street. But it takes more than just one person to build a street. First you need the land, then you need materials, then you need a lot of labor. And tools, it took a lot of tools. Did the guys who did the physical labor own the street? What about the people who contributed the materials? What about the engineers who drew up the plans and specifications? For that matter, even streets, perhaps especially streets, need maintenance. What about the people who patch the potholes and rebuild the street after someone digs a trench across it? For that matter, somebody had to give permission for the street to be built where it was. No, wait, government is about gone, whoever that had been, there was a good chance
nobody was expected to do that any more. OK. Scratch the permission. But still, there were a lot of people who were involved in creating and maintaining a street. Would they all own the street?

What about the people who lived on either side of the street? They were the closest to the street. Did the street by existing next to their property give them any rights over it? No, that didn't make any sense either.

OK. Basics again. In the beginning, the land the street would be built on was part of the property of several people. So they owned the land the street was on in the beginning. Then they must have given the property to someone who represented the people who participated in the building of the street. And the builders must also have been given materials by still other people and the civil engineers must have contributed their labor and somebody contributed the tools. They all gave these things to the person in charge of the building project one way or another.

OK. Now we're getting somewhere. If that one person owned all that stuff, then it only made sense that he also owned the street that resulted. All those materials and all that labor had been given to him so together all those people who contributed had given him the street. He couldn't very well give back the labor or the materials that were part of the street. He could give the land with the street on it back but by then the land was only useful as a street. So the street belonged to the person in charge of the building project. That was the only way it made sense.

Is it still private property? Well, it pretty much has to be. What other kind of property is there in a society that seems to have no government? Who controls the street? What does it mean to control a street?

Let's see. Joe Smith builds a street. Then he says that Sally Jones can't walk on that street. What is going to happen? Will the police enforce that order? I don't think so. If they did enforce it that would probably reduce their pay. Will Joe stand on his street and try to keep Sally off it? I don't think so. Even if Joe did such a thing, would anybody contribute to his next building project? Probably not. They'd think he was crazy. So what if he wanted to close the street unless people gave him something, hold the street for ransom, so to speak? Would the police enforce that? Nope. I can't see that happening, either. Again, there'd be no pay for doing that. Almost anything that Joe wants to do with his street that keeps it from being used as a street won't get the cooperation of anyone else because they wouldn't get paid for doing so. There isn't much Joe can do with a street without the cooperation of other people.

Just because Joe owns the street doesn't mean that anyone else has to help him do anything with that street and it doesn't mean that anyone else is obligated to protect Joe's rights with respect to that street.

So even though individuals own all the property that used to be public property, other people continue to use that property pretty much as they did before. The owner gets paid for the people using that formerly public property, so owners will want the property to be used and maintained.

What's the difference between that public property and the same property now that it is private? Now Niall began to understand why there was a lack of potholes. The owners of the roads and the people who cooperated in the making of the roads were being paid for how much the roads benefit people. Therefore, they wanted to make a long-lasting, useful road which resists getting potholes. Anyone who wanted to make money from roads could maintain them (with the owner's consent) and thus get paid. Before the transition, the builder got paid the same whether the road got potholes or not. Then he got paid again if he was the contractor who repaired the potholes. So he would make more money if there were more potholes. The people who arranged for the road construction weren't paying with
their own money so they didn’t care how much money it was costing. Low bid won the contract so the builders would make the roads as cheaply as possible. It was almost bound to produce poor roads.

Since the transition, some individual was responsible for and was rewarded for the proper construction and maintenance of every bit of that formerly-public property. As a result, the public was much better served by that private property than they had been by that same property when it was public property. Curious. Somehow he would never have expected that.

The result of Niall’s experience was that he arrived at his host’s farm with his mind filled with thoughts about property, ownership, and what had happened to the concepts. The farmer, whose name was Dusty LeClerk, was about 10 years older than Niall and had a wife and several children. The two sons still lived on the farm, though they had built their own houses for their young families.

Naturally, Niall started asking questions.

How much had the houses cost? Nothing.

“Why not?”

“To start with, this is my land so there was no need for anybody to get paid for our using it. Second, the houses were going to be used by families, so the materials contributed would be earning pay as necessities for the contributors. Third, I persuaded the builders to come help us with the parts we were reluctant to do, like the plumbing and electrical work. They could have demanded that we pay for their work but since we did most of the work ourselves and fed the guys who helped us pretty well there was no question of that. So I own the houses and if they’re better than standard no one cares. Anyway, the boys will fill them up with kids before long. I already got one grandchild on the way, but don’t say anything because I’m not supposed to know.”

“So you built a luxury and gave it to someone else and no money changed hands?”

“What’s wrong with that? What’s mine I can give to whomever I want.”

“Well yes, but doesn’t that bypass the Payers?”

“Of course it does. What do I care? They aren’t gatekeepers for who gets luxuries. They have no power to prevent anybody from getting luxuries. They just have the power to offer luxuries to people who provide benefit. They pretty much keep their noses out of my life except when I take something to market or bring in some hands to help out.”

“Speaking of taking things to market, how have things changed for farmers since the transition?”

“Things are a lot better. This farm’s been in my family for over 100 years but there were a lot of times when we almost lost it. We pretty much survived by borrowing as much as we could and raising all the cash crops we could. There were times when only a soft-hearted banker, trusting us for one more year, came between us and having to auction off the farm to pay our creditors.

“This is the way it worked. We had to borrow to get enough money to put in a crop. If the weather was good and the market was good for our crop, then we would make enough money to buy some equipment. If the weather was bad or the market was bad then we got deeper in debt to the bank. Government programs came along after World War II and we sometimes made money by not
growing things but we had all these restrictions on what we could grow and how much of that. Lots of farmers just couldn’t make it. Most of the government farm support money went to businesses rather than farmers. One more case of the rich getting richer.

“Today I don’t have to worry about losing the farm. There aren’t any taxes and we don’t have to grow anything if we don’t want to. The worst we can do is not get paid at all. We have no creditors. We have no government regulations. We can grow as much as we want of whatever we can make grow.

“One of the best things is that we can improve the soil. We don’t have to grow cash crops every year. I have several fields that haven’t felt a plow in 4 or 5 years. I have several kinds of plants growing on those fields, all of which are helping to rebuild the fertility of that soil.

“Also, since it lowers our pay if we use a lot of fertilizer or insecticides, we’ve come up with all sorts of ways to kill the bugs with other bugs and bug resistant plants. We have a new kind of grass, for example, that puts nitrogen into the soil, covers and holds the soil to prevent erosion, and its roots go only a couple of inches deep so the crops growing on that same land don’t compete with the grass for nutrients. The grass is also drought resistant and tends to hold water in the soil. Bare dirt gets dry a lot faster than dirt covered with that grass. Of course, with the grass, it takes different techniques for planting and different equipment. They’re coming up with a new plant stalk that can have several different crops on top. They could grow corn and tomatoes and peaches, for example, on the same stalk coming out of the ground. Since the stalk is permanent and we can have crops on that stalk that become ripe at different times of the year, we can have three or four crops without ever replanting or having to disturb the dirt at all.”

Niall could see the eagerness and enthusiasm that Dusty evidenced came from real pleasure in his present life. The photographs on the mantle showed a man with a lot more tension and worry on his mind than the Dusty Niall saw before him. Clearly Dusty would hate to go back to the old ways.

It was also clear that Dusty didn’t feel like he was being controlled by anything or anybody. Niall had to admit that the farm certainly looked prosperous. Everything looked clean and in good repair. Dusty’s wife also looked healthy and happy. Niall began to feel like he had stepped into a Norman Rockwell painting. Dusty told his TV to call the boys and tell them lunch was ready. So Niall stopped asking questions for a while. When the boys got there with their wives (one each), there was much shaking of hands and introductions.

The food was delicious. Dusty was proud to say that everything but the spices came from his farm. It was all fresh; the meat, the vegetables, even the fruit.

Niall asked about the fruit and one of the sons who had seemed shy earlier was unable to wait for his father’s answer.

“We’ve started building our own greenhouses. We can grow crops now year-round. Since we can provide all sorts of crops ‘out of season’; we can get top prices. We’re even providing fresh vegetables to some of the top restaurants in D.C. I think…”

“Yes, yes. We know what you think. You’ll have the whole farm under glass before we know it,” Dusty said kindly.

Then turning to Niall, he continued, “Red, here, put up the first greenhouse three years ago. We told him he was wasting his time but he talked the lumberyard in Aldie into giving him the glass. I think it was the pies your mother cooked that actually persuaded them,” Dusty said, looking at Red. “Then he spent a whole year getting everything ready. He put in heaters and some contraption that would wash
the roof windows. He got seed and made some special soil for the plants, and the next year he was growing tropical plants in there: and placing his crops in luxury foods sections of stores. The next year he had those restaurants taking his stuff and this year he has requests from places 500 miles from here! He is making five times more per acre that Dan and I are. I’m right proud of the boy.”

Red’s wife glowed with pleasure. Dusty didn’t know it but she had been the driving force behind Red’s enterprising ways and it had been her idea to build greenhouses.

“Don’t you feel funny giving your crops away without knowing how much you’re going to get paid for them?” It had always seemed strange to Niall that farmers would give away all that food without some way to know what they’d be paid for it.

“Well let me tell you,” Dusty said with a laugh. “I was pretty leery of the whole idea in the beginning. But mother, here, had a garden back then that happened to have a pretty good crop of several vegetables. You know, carrots, peas, beans, and lots of tomatoes. Well she used to sell some of it to the grocery store in town before the transition and she just went ahead and took food in there like she always did. Well, it wasn’t but about three weeks later and she noticed that she had some more money in her account. So the next time she took in even more things. Before you know it, she was making a right good income from that garden. So I took a chance and took my crops to the same elevator I usually did. They accepted my crops. Took several weeks to get it all taken in. Sure enough, in a month I had a little increase in the account and in six months I’d made more money than I usually got in profit in a year. Now it was less dollars in income but there were no taxes to take out and I didn’t have to spend anything on the next year’s seed or fertilizer or gas or electricity. So I figure I came out pretty much ahead. Now that Red and Ted are working with me, we make about three times as much a year as we ever did before, during the best years.”

“But you don’t get to know what you will be paid before you agree to give up the crops. How can you go in blind like that? It seems like they take your produce and then come back later and just give you what they feel like giving you. They could be ripping you off.”

“You know, Niall, I thought that very thing myself. How could I trust that somebody would notice what I was doing and even if they noticed, would they pay me? But I knew the elevator operator was going to want my crops next year so he wanted me to get the credit. Also, if they didn’t pay me this year I sure wasn’t going to take anything in next year. I figured that I could survive a lot longer on this farm than those Payers could in the city. Also, I talked to a lot of my neighbors and we agreed that since our crops were all going into the same pile at the elevator, we’d better get pretty much the same pay per bushel or we’d know that something was wrong.”

“When the pay started coming in, we compared notes and, sure enough, you could tell pretty easily that we were being paid on the same basis. It did vary some depending on when we got our produce to the elevator but that’s always been the case. Some farmers like to shop around with the different elevators. I trust old Dave in Aldie. He played fair with me before the transition and he seems to be playing fair with me now.”

“Now that I think of it, though, the main thing is that I can afford to wait. That is, I don’t have to have my money right away. I’m not paying any interest to anybody. We don’t have to have money for things like insurance or clothes. We don’t have any bills coming in. You could say I’m being paid all the time, just not in money. I don’t worry about the bill when I go to the dentist or the doctor. For what I do here on the farm the free clothes do just fine. I get gas and seed and feed and fertilizer without having to pay for it. So I think I’m getting paid for my crops all year round. It’s just that the money part of my pay doesn’t come in until somebody eats the food I grow.”
“Why does the feed and seed store give you seed? Why do you get farm equipment free? Why should all those people just give you what you need to farm?” Niall couldn’t understand such generosity.

“How much pay will the seed store folks get for having seed sit in their warehouse and rot? What farmer is going to give them more seed if they waste what they have? If they don’t give seed to us farmers, why should they be paid at all? Same thing holds for the farm equipment. It isn’t earning money for the folks that built it or for the guys who transported it here from the factory nor for Jesse at his tractor lot if that gear just sits on the lot and rusts. It’s only earning money if people use it for farming. Nowadays, Jesse is always calling up to see what I need and when I expect to need it. He tells the factory what he thinks he can profitably place, and that’s what they ship him. We bring in the crops and that gets people paid right back down the line. The factory knows how much to make and when to deliver it and we farmers always have what we need. Also, whenever I don’t need some equipment any more or it gets old, I take it back to Jesse and he does something with it. I get pay for lots of that stuff, too. Of course, at first some of the gear I gave him was processed for scrap but I got a little pay even for that and it got that junk off my land. Oh, and gas, your TDP plant didn’t exist back at the transition, but the gas stations still gave us gas for farm work because they wanted to eat and we were a pretty high priority.”

“Farming isn’t ‘me against the world’ any more. It’s all of us, together. When I take a crop to the elevator I don’t worry about my price because I know they’ll get me as much money as possible for it because that’s how they get as much money as possible for themselves. Jesse knows I’ll get him as much money as possible because that gets me as much money as possible. When neighbors need some equipment, I loan it to them if I’m not using it because that gets all of us more money.”

Niall said, “If you think of it that way, maybe it’s not so bad.”

“Bad? Boy we farmers never had it so good. Anybody that’s willing to do the work can make it in farming these days. Everybody wants to help you and none of them have their hands out.”

Niall grinned and said, “You’re just sayin’ that ‘cause you want to keep these two fine boys close to home.”

On the way home Niall had more time to think. He still wasn’t being told what to do on the job and Dusty wasn’t taking any orders from anybody. So far he hadn’t found any restrictions on his actions except those of ordinary courtesy. Keep your hands off other people’s stuff and they’ll leave you alone. Niall had almost forgotten about the computer since he used it daily as a tool when driving Bart and he’d even become accustomed to having Jeeves around the house.

Was he being lulled into a false sense of security?
Chapter Twenty-Six: Changing Jobs

In which we find Niall headed West seeking truth.

Niall arrived home late that Sunday afternoon feeling pretty good. He was digesting an excellent meal. He had enjoyed the friendly company of happy people. He was happy with going to work tomorrow and taking it easy for the rest of the day today. As he entered the house, he glanced at the TV and thought about what he wanted to watch tonight. He enjoyed TV more now than he had before he went overseas. There was a lack of commercials and the shows were no longer filled with nothing but explicit sex and gratuitous violence. He never had to start watching a show in the middle since the shows could all be watched at any time. True, there was a lot of experimental theatre and other shows that held no interest for Niall but he only had a few hours a week in which he watched and there were always many things available that he did want to watch.

So he settled down on the couch and decided he would catch the live broadcast of the baseball game. The Nationals were at home playing against Boston and he decided to pick the game up in the middle live rather than starting it from the beginning. The stands were pretty well-filled. This surprised Niall since he couldn't remember such interest in the Nationals this early in the season in the past. It was good baseball.

Niall began thinking about the ratings for the games. This led him to remember that the computer in the TV that was showing him the game was probably reporting his activity to the network. That reminded him that the computer might even be able to see where he was looking on the screen to report that as well.

Niall became self-conscious. Someone could be watching him right now via the TV, even if he turned it off. The warm glow which had surrounded him since lunch with Dusty quickly dissipated. Its replacement was a colder than usual reality. His interest in the game waned and he turned it off.

He just sat staring at the blank screen of the TV, thinking. This computer network was simply too good a tool to control and manipulate people for it not to be used by someone. Those people at the baseball game were just like the crowds at the Roman circuses. A ration of bread each day and the Circus in the afternoon to keep their minds off their situation would keep the people quiet and in line. The parallels to ancient Rome were terrifying. Why didn't they show the iron fist in the velvet glove? Why did everything feel so free when the power for absolute control was right there on the wall? There had to be an explanation. There had to be a reason for the lack of apparent force.

Perhaps they weren't quite ready yet. Perhaps everything wasn't in place. Perhaps they were waiting for something to be completed. Perhaps there was a missing element. What could it be that was lacking? Were they secretly training police or troops? Worse, were they secretly training secret police? Still worse than that, were they brainwashing the children, somehow, to passively take orders? But he was visiting his own grandchildren once or twice a week and they didn't seem brainwashed or addicted to the TV. His daughter said that most children were now being home-schooled so that didn't seem like it could be brainwashing, either. If the TV wasn't doing it and over half the children were being taught by a parent, how could they be brainwashed? No, that didn't fit.

Training police? Why would they need to train police? They could force control of the mob just by cutting off the food supply. The same was true for soldiers. There had to be something, though. Maybe it had to do with the computers. The TVs seemed to be everywhere, so it couldn't be a lack of TVs. But there could be software issues. When he was studying computers 20 years ago, Niall
learned that the hardware was usually quite a bit ahead of the software. There were far more problems in using computers caused by software bugs than by bad hardware. Hardware was almost always easier to test than software, for example. Perhaps they were having problems in debugging their software. Perhaps hackers were disrupting things.

Could the freedom of the USA be dependent on the activities of a handful of computer hackers? It didn't seem likely to Niall. Surely the security of such an important aspect of the controlling network would be one of the first and most important priorities to the ruling group. Anyway, if the hackers did exist and were preventing what Niall was rapidly beginning to consider Judgment Day, he had no hope of finding them and his computer skills were far too old to be useful to them.

However, even if what they were waiting for had nothing to do with the computer system that connected the TVs and provided account information, the controlling group had to have some means of controlling those computers and that meant that they had to have a close connection with the computers. So if Niall wanted to find this cabal or whatever it was he was going to have to develop a close connection with the computer system himself. That meant that he needed to change jobs.

Did he dare go back to Enid Lee? Would that look suspicious? Could he come up with a cover story that would fool her and whoever else was watching? She'd said that all she'd done to get the list of jobs in the area was to ask her computer. Of course it probably was programmed to search for jobs for her but Niall figured it couldn't be that hard since he'd been finding information on computers all his life. He thought he'd try doing without her to at least find some computer-related jobs.

But it had been 20 years since he had last seriously worked with computers. He could hardly claim to be a programmer or software engineer. Perhaps he could get something that involved the hardware of the database servers. There had to be a huge amount of information in databases to keep track of the whole economy. Just the identifying information for every person the computers knew about would take terabytes of information.

"Jeeves?" The TV came on and from it a sound like a babbling brook.

"You rang, sir?" Jeeves had trickled in.

"Jeeves, I'd like to know if there are any jobs helping take care of the hardware that stores large databases of information."

"I'm sure there are, sir."

"Could you get me a list of any vacancies for such jobs?"

"Yes, sir. Right away, sir. Did you want all of them or just positions in commuting distance from Aldie?"

"How many are there in the whole nation?"

"Since your question about 'taking care of' was rather imprecise I can't give you a precise answer, sir. But if you meant personally touching the devices I believe there are 122 such openings announced for the nation. If you expand it to include those who work in the building, then there are over 3,000 nationally, sir."

"Where are they least likely to have many applicants for the work in that second category?"
"I believe, sir, that it would be most difficult at the Los Alamos site in New Mexico."

"Isn't that where they build the atomic bombs?"

"I believe that was a city in which many atomic bombs were designed, yes, sir."

"Is it still a government military base?"

"No, sir. They closed it down as a military base shortly after the transition, I believe, sir. But they had a large capacity computer facility there, sir, which has been an important part of the network since the transition."

"Why do they have trouble getting people to work there?"

"It's in the Rocky Mountains, sir, far away from any large towns. There's not much else to do there, sir, except work on the computer. They sometimes have trouble persuading people to work there."

"Sounds promising, Jeeves. Could you put me in touch with an employment office there?"

"Yes, sir. One moment, sir, I'll see if anyone is available."

Niall waited. He was a little impatient to get started now that he had some idea of how to proceed. Maybe his analysis of the situation was leading him astray but he had no idea how to fight back if this wasn't the way to go.

Brianna would be disappointed that he wouldn't be visiting her and the children so often. But there was the phone. He could see them by phone. If long distance were a luxury he'd be happy to pay for it.

"Sir, are you ready to talk to Julian Martinez about working in the Los Alamos area?"

"Yes, Jeeves. Please put him on."

"How do you do, Mr. Martinez? I'm Niall Campbell. Jeeves, please make my employment record available to Mr. Martinez at his convenience."

"How do you do, Mr. Campbell. I understand that you'd like some assistance in finding work in this area."

"Yes, Mr. Martinez. I've been wanting to get into the computer business. Back before I went abroad to work for Uncle Sam I really enjoyed my computer studies. I understand that computers have no doubt changed far too much in the last 20 years for me to become a programmer or software engineer but I thought there might be something computer-related that I could do, sort of on the fringes of the computing business that would allow me to learn what I could do in that line."

"I believe I understand what you want. We do have several computing facilities here in Los Alamos. We also have a labor shortage. I believe that we can probably find a variety of things you would find congenial and productive. Please allow me to look over your references and talk to some people here and I should be able to present you with several alternatives tomorrow afternoon. Shall I notify your man," at this Julian smiled slightly, "when I have something for you?"
"That would be most considerate of you, sir. I shall await your call. Thank you and good day to you, sir."

"It will be my pleasure to be of service to you, sir. Until tomorrow."

"Thank you, Jeeves. You may close the connection."

"Very good, sir. Will there be anything else, sir?"

Tomorrow. That's a Monday. I just did business with an employment office on a Sunday. That proves that employment offices aren't run by the government, Niall chuckled to himself. "Jeeves, please call Brianna, social call."

Niall explained that he felt the need to get away from everything and examine what he wanted to do with his life. He said that the mountains of New Mexico would let him have the isolation and the change of scenery necessary to discover himself. He said that he didn't know how long it would take... but that he didn't think he would be gone very long, perhaps only a couple of months. Brianna was disappointed but philosophical about it.

Niall next notified Jerome that he would probably not be driving with him more than another day or two. He told Sam that the house would be available again by the end of the week. He walked downtown with a couple of sacks of groceries to return them to the store and post a notice for the farmers that he wouldn't be coming by to pick up organic waste and gave Jerome as a contact person. He also spent a couple of hours on Tuesday morning sitting on Enid's porch chatting about life in general and what he had learned by working at the TDP plant. Then he experienced a feeling of loss as he realized that he would probably never be coming back to Aldie. He'd been treated well by the people of that small town and he would miss them, even Desiree.

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Niall had chosen work as what we might call a computer operator. His actual post was to be a human being in the computer center in case something needed to be done physically to any of the equipment. As his computer knowledge was out of date, he couldn't have expected anything much more technical. But for Niall's objectives, nothing could have gotten him closer to the very computers he felt were the key to finding the group that was creeping closer to controlling every aspect of life.

Niall had decided to drive to New Mexico and had allocated three days for the trip. He found that there was much less traffic than he had expected. There were trucks on the road, but not as many as there had been 20 years before. There were some very nice cars on the Interstate but, again, not as many. He wondered if the lack of traffic was a symptom of economic decay or of repression. He decided to find out.

Selecting a likely-looking truck stop, he pulled in and sought a place at the counter. After ordering and then waiting quietly for a couple of minutes, he was able to strike up a conversation with a trucker sitting two stools over. He was an older man (which is why Niall had selected the stool he did) and was happy to talk. Niall worked the conversation around to the traffic (which was not hard to do) and inquired whether it was just his imagination or was there less traffic than years ago when he left the country.

"Oh yeah. Traffic is down quite a bit from what it was years ago. I remember right after the transition when we had that gas shortage. There was almost nothing but trucks on the road in those days and not so many of them. People were trying to only ship essentials. Lots of folks found ways to make
things locally instead of importing from some place across the country. After the shortage ended there didn't seem any reason to stop making things locally if there was a local market for them."

"As for the cars, folks travel a lot more by train than they did before. It costs a lot less and it's a lot more comfortable. Also, fewer people own cars. Why spend half your money to have and maintain a car when you can get around just fine without one most of the time and can rent one cheaply for the times you do need a car. Cars are really expensive when you don't have to have one for getting to work. I don't own one myself."

Niall had noticed that his was one of the few plain cars on the road. Most of the cars he saw on the highway were obviously luxury cars. His own car was a hybrid, gas and electric. It got over 60 miles per gallon and would go pretty fast but Niall was in no great hurry. At least there was no ominous reason for the light traffic and it did make highway travel less stressful.

Niall also noticed that there were no billboards. There were discreet signs on the highway indicating products available at the next exit but no billboards or large garish signs.

The motels he stopped at were luxury places. The prices were not as high as he remembered but he was able to get rooms with no reservations and was able to order standard food in the restaurant at the motel. He was not surprised to find that Jeeves was available with each TV. It was comforting to talk with Brianna each night and ask the kids what they had learned in "school" each day.

He got to Santa Fe the afternoon of the third day and decided to spend the night there and report to Julian the next morning. He walked around the downtown and enjoyed looking at the authentic Indian and Spanish architecture and crafts. He was tempted to buy some jewelry for Brianna but decided he would have plenty of time for that later. The air was crisp and cooled quickly as dusk set in. He decided to buy a light jacket.

The clerk was helpful inquiring about his intended use for the jacket and finally ending by recommending several hiking paths and other activities that would be available near Los Alamos. Niall had the impression he had been served by the Chamber of Commerce or the local Booster Club. But as a result of the clerk's comments and suggestions, he had selected a different jacket than he would have and saved about 20% on the price.

Niall left the store wearing the jacket and feeling pretty good. The people here appeared to be just as friendly as the folks back in Aldie. He still had over $70,000 in his account. The new work just might lead him to the conspiracy he knew must be there. He went back to the hotel with more optimism than at any time since he had landed at Dulles Airport.

The next day Niall met Julian Martinez at his office in an actual office building in Los Alamos. Niall had begun to think that all offices were in homes. There were empty offices in the building, evidence of the disappearance of government-sponsored projects. After the usual greetings, Julian said they had an appointment at a computer server farm and data repository for later that morning. While they waited, Julian showed Niall around town, including several housing offices in Julian's building. On Julian's recommendation, Niall made an appointment at one of them.

At the appointed hour they went to the computation center where they met some of the people with whom Niall would be working. They were a diverse lot. Some were left over from the days when Los Alamos had been a major center for nuclear weapons research. Others were what Niall would have called hippies in his youth. There were some whose appearance was that of the American Indian, several Hispanics, and a smattering of Asians. He was interviewed informally for about two hours as people came by when they got a break from what they were doing to ask him questions and tell him
about what it was like to work there. Niall's responsibility was mostly physical security at night. He
was to be a night watchman. But he was expected to be able to replace and do minor repairs for
much of the equipment on the machine room floor.

His own questions had more to do with what services they were providing. His guess that they were
somehow involved with the accounting computers was correct. Over the next few days Niall learned
that this computer center had been one of the first places to be utilized for testing the programs that
made the accounting computer what it was. He even heard an amusing story from the first year after
the transition.

It seems that a bright young hacker and one of the security guards had the brilliant idea of increasing
the amount of money in their accounts without going through the formality of actually doing anything
to deserve being paid nor involving a payer. One of the operators on duty after hours was the guard's
girl friend. So the guard distracted the operator by making love to her while the hacker slipped in and,
using the console and his knowledge of the operating system, was able to gain access to the
accounts database and changed the values in his and the guard's accounts. Then he slipped out of
the building undetected.

They were riding high until the first time one of them tried to spend money. Then he found out that his
account was frozen by court order and he was to appear in the local court the next Tuesday for trial.
Since the two of them had no money, they couldn't run except on foot. They might have left the
country, but then they wouldn't have been a problem any more for the U.S. They did appear in court,
as requested and were presented with the evidence of what they had done. They pled guilty and
were sentenced to have their story publicized and made into a comedy movie. They had their 15
minutes of fame at the price of looking foolish to everyone who saw the movie. Naturally, the event
also became a part of their reputations. Lastly, the operator was so embarrassed that she broke up
with the guard.

What made the story so funny to the staff of the computer center was that by changing the amount of
money in their accounts the hacker and friend had identified themselves as the criminals. They hadn't
known that the computer system was highly redundant, such that when they changed the values in
the database in Los Alamos they made that installation's data no longer match the data at the other
installations. Therefore, the source of the insertion was sought, found, and examined. The entry of
data from the console considerably narrowed the range of possible suspects and the time of day had
identified the operator on duty. Her testimony concerning how the console had been used and her
evening activities had pretty much clinched the case.

Niall also found that changing the program that ran the accounting system required simultaneous
entry of the changes from each of the many consoles in the distributed system. The proposed new
code was freely available for several months for others to test before being installed. It was common
for computer science students to be assigned to find new ways to test new code. Also, the source
code for the accounting was freely available. Therefore, it was common for hackers and others to
attempt to find bugs and vulnerabilities. The rewards for finding problems and for providing solutions
were rather high.

The people with whom Niall would be working most closely weren't available in many cases, since
they worked other shifts. But he was taken under the wing of a crusty old operator named Fred
Gundersen who had been working there for some 35 years and dated back to the twentieth century.
He could remember when he had to have a security clearance to enter the building. He was also
carrying a handgun in a holster on his belt. Needless to say this caught Niall's attention.
"Will I need to carry a gun, too?" Niall was perfectly willing to carry a gun but he hadn't expected to have any call to shoot someone as part of his job.

"It's this way. There are some pretty crazy groups living in the mountains who would like nothing better than to destroy the accounting system and go back to a POM. For them this place is a symbol of all they hate. They've never actually attacked this place but there have been some nasty rumors about plans to attack it. I figure that if they do attack, there should be somebody to put up at least a token resistance. If they kill me, then they'll have shown their true colors as terrorists and the army can come in and root them out. Otherwise, if they just come in here and smash the place, it may not be replaced and nobody will be able to work here anymore. Most folks don't want to work out here miles from nowhere but for some of us it is as close to heaven on Earth as you can find. We like this place and don't want to lose it."

"You carry a gun so you can get killed?" Niall was half joking and half serious.

"It sounds kind of funny when you say it that way but that's what it comes down to. I'm willing to put my life on the line to protect what's mine. I don't ask anyone else to do so but I made my decision and I've never regretted it. I also haven't made a secret of my intentions. There are several others of us who feel the same way. They carry guns to work, too."

"Do you keep the gun loaded?" Niall asked.

"Son, you have to treat every gun as if it's always loaded. I wouldn't carry this gun unless I was willing to use it and an empty gun's not much good. If I'm going to be killed I intend to be very dangerous to my killers."

"Would it be all right if I carried a gun as well?"

Fred laughed, "Given your work history I'd be pleased and proud to have you join the 'Over-the-Hill Gang'. That's what we call those of us who carry guns."

"Do you issue guns or do I have to provide my own?"

"We aren't police and we aren't military. A gun's a luxury so you'll have to provide your own. Now that may take you a while so I wouldn't count on getting one right away."

Niall asked Jeeves where the nearest gun shop was and was told that it was in Santa Fe. Since acquiring the gun was not a high priority item, Niall figured that he'd wait until he was in Santa Fe for some other reason, and pick one up then.

But talking to Jeeves did bring up another topic that Niall had been wondering about.

"Fred, you've been working around computers most of your adult life, haven't you?"

"That I have. I even had a little computer to play with when I was in Junior High."

"Have you ever wondered... well," Niall said brushing his hair back with his left hand, "whether they are alive in some way? You know, like Jeeves. He sounds and I bet he could look just like a person on the monitor. It's spooky in a way."

"Oh yeah, I know what you mean. There was a movie called 2001: A Space Odyssey in which a computer was named 'Hal' and... and that computer seemed to be alive in a lot of ways. I remember
looking at my computer and wondering if someday computers would be like Hal and take over things. I guess that's been one of the most common computer-related fears of people since way back before I was born."

"So do you think they might actually have an awareness like people do?"

"I guess there must be some computer research going on that's trying to create a computer program that generates self-awareness in them but I don't think it'll happen any time soon. Have you heard about them using 'natural selection' to write computer software?"

"Can't say whether I did or not. It doesn't ring any bells."

"Well they got some way of writing software so it makes billions of copies of itself, each with some random little changes in them. Now most of them just die or fail right away and don't work at all. The software gets rid of those. But a few work differently. Most of those don't do a good job at all or make errors. But some do the job better. Those copies the software keeps and uses to repeat the whole process. After a time, the programs get better and better. Maybe something like that might one day make a living computer but I wouldn't hold my breath."

"But don't you ever worry about the computer taking over and running things?"

"Never. The computer doesn't give a damn. It doesn't care about anything. It's like a rock or a fire. It doesn't have any choice about what it does any more than those pliers over there choose what to pinch. If a computer ever tried to take over it would be because some person was using it, not because the computer wanted world domination."

"How can you be so sure of that?"

"Because they still can't make computers that take care of themselves. Sure they use computers to manufacture almost everything. But the computers break down in ways a person or an animal never would, just from not trying to take care of themselves. They haven't got any sense."

"Well I sure hope you're right."

The work was not that difficult, since it mostly required only that he be present but he made a point of studying some of the documentation for the systems he was protecting. He also asked a lot of questions about how the equipment typically failed and what kind of things to be sensitive to. The facility had its own uninterruptible power source and he was also expected to try to repair the large diesel engine in an emergency. He hoped that would never come, since he had never been particularly good with engines. He was paying close attention when they tested it one night and was impressed that it also ran quietly just as Bart had done. This engine also had its own computer, though it was not intelligent enough to have personality. Then he was told that it was the computer he was to repair or replace, not the engine itself. There were spare computers which could be used with the engine if the built-in computer failed.

Niall formed several friendships with other operators and some of the other staff. His frequent questions labeled him as someone who wanted to better himself in the organization, so everyone was happy to answer his questions.

Niall was invited to join several of his friends and some others to a party one Friday night. This party was a turning point in Niall's life, which, as turning points often do, looked very much like a disaster at the time.
Chapter Twenty-Seven: A Night on the Town

In which Niall meets a bartender and some fellow jailbirds.

Everything began happily, with the friends meeting in Santa Fe at a nice restaurant. Since Niall was the new guy, they had selected a Spanish cuisine establishment so he could find out about the real food of Mexico. There was much laughter, and though Niall was not usually a drinker, he did have two glasses of wine with the meal.

One of the "jokes" was to have Niall sample some rather hot dishes without telling him how hot they were. But Niall had been living in a culture in which very spicy foods were standard. The party was quite impressed when Niall not only ate the hot food without appearing to notice the "flavor" but even asked for seconds of one jalapeno-flavored dish.

After that he could do no wrong. When they had finished the meal, it was suggested that they go to another establishment that several of them knew, which served a very good home-brewed beer. That was such fun that still another establishment was suggested, and after a time Niall not only forgot how many places they had been to but that he really had no head for liquor.

By then the party was down to just three, each of whom was still steady on their feet but feeling no pain. After they each had a beer, one suggested that they show Niall how to drink tequila. They adjourned to the bar where they asked for three tequilas. The bartender gave them a long look and finally acceded to their request.

It was Niall’s turn to pay, so he told the computer he was paying for the three tequilas. They were placed on the bar. The others each demonstrated the appropriate technique for aficionados of the drink. Niall was not as steady as usual and did not demonstrate the requisite flair to prevent the others from laughing at his attempt. He immediately took umbrage and demanded another tequila for another try. By this time the bartender thought he had already consumed more than enough. He refused Niall’s order. Niall, already smarting under the laughter of his friends, took offense and began shouting at the bartender that he had every right to another drink and to get it on the bar quickly or he would have the bartender fired. After a couple of further exchanges, Niall leaned over the bar and took a swing at the bartender. The blow was a flush hit and knocked the man into the glassware behind him. The result was broken glass, a loud crash which effectively silenced the rest of the bar, and the bartender bleeding from the mouth, nose, and several cuts from the broken glass.

Niall’s friends were horrified and grabbed his arms to restrain him. Niall was rather surprised at the effectiveness of his blow and stood unresisting. He gave a bemused smile and said, “That will teach him to refuse my business.”

The police were called by the computer and arrived within five minutes. Niall was taken into custody and his friends were advised to take a cab home. Within 10 minutes, Niall was getting to know the inside of the Santa Fe municipal jail. His first intelligent move in the last several hours was to lie down on the bed and go to sleep.

He awoke to conversation from his cellmates, a serious hangover, and the realization that he was in trouble. He groaned and tried to sit up. This brought him to the attention of his new companions. One was an old man who had skin like leather, bleary eyes, and was missing several teeth. He had a neat haircut and clean clothes except for the spills of what looked like wine down the front of the shirt.
The other was a much younger man whom Niall would have said was about 30. He had dirty blonde hair, needed a shave, and was wearing all whites. He could have been a payer, except that Niall figured that Payers were not likely to be in jail. He looked healthy enough. In fact he was quite heavily muscled but had a narrow waist. His teeth looked nearly perfect in a lightly-tanned even face. One could even say he was handsome but he had probably looked better ten years before because there were telltale signs of dissipation around the bloodshot eyes.

“Good morning,” the younger man said. “Glad to have you with us. I’m Jean Baudin and this old timer is called Whiskey Pete. I don’t know where he got that name, since he obviously prefers wine.”

Jean extended a hand to Niall, which Niall shook and used to sit up. He wasn’t sure that was wise as it made his temples pound worse than ever but he found if he closed his eyes and held very still, after a little while the discomfort eased and he thought he might not have to vomit.

“I’m Niall Campbell,” he croaked. “Is there anything for me to drink around here?”

“If you are looking for the hair of the dog, I’m afraid you’re out of luck. Pete here would have drunk it by now anyway. There are some paper cups here. I can get you some water.”

“Thanks. You’re a life saver.” Niall drank two cups and felt slightly better.

“I’ll bet you’re in for drunk and disorderly,” Jean grinned at Niall.

Then the activities of the night before flooded back to Niall’s memory and he groaned again.

“I’m afraid it was more than that. I think there’s some assault and battery in there, too.” Niall felt even worse thinking about it and ten seconds ago he would have sworn that was impossible.

“Pete here is a resident because they don’t like to have him cluttering up the street for fear he’ll get killed. They also would like to find who gave him the wine but old Pete will never give them a straight story.”

“May I ask your reasons for being here?” Niall thought it only fair they each be revealed.

“I’m here on a bum rap. They arrested me for nothing. I had every right to be there. That owner must have bribed them or have something on them.”

“Sorry, Jean. You lost me there. I’m not thinking too well just yet. Where were you?”

“I was in my house. I was just going to bed when they burst in and grabbed me.”

“I take it you are referring to the police?” Niall was trying to form a mental picture of the event.

“Yes. They had this guy there who said he was the owner. Well, maybe he was but I got a right to a place to live and nobody else was using it, so he has no right to have me arrested.” Jean was quite indignant.

“Had the owner said you could stay there?”

“First time I ever laid eyes on him was when he came in behind the police,” Jean explained.
“Then who told you it was all right for you to stay in that house?” Niall persisted, thinking he had missed something.

“I could see there was nobody there. It was dark inside and there were no cars around. When I went in and looked over the place, it was obvious that nobody lived there. There was no trash in the trash cans. There was no food in the refrigerator or the cabinets. The closets had no clothes in them. I tell you, nobody was living there. So I figure I got squatters’ rights. I got there first. Let other people get their own place.”

“You mean you didn’t go by the housing office first?” Niall was beginning to wonder about this guy.

“They just give you the runaround and half the time they won’t even help you. I mean, I tell them I want a place to stay and they start asking impertinent questions. What business is it of theirs where I stayed before? Who cares whether I work or not. They got to give me a place to live, don’t they? I mean it’s right there in the Ten Rules. It says ‘Necessities are free to all as needed’ and I needed a place, so they got to give me one.”

“Ten Rules?” Niall was a little confused but it took his mind off his misery a little.

“Yeah. You know those ten rules that tell everybody how their money is supposed to work. Well one of them says they got to give you what you need like food and clothes and a house to live in. They got no excuse to arrest me.”

Niall did have some vague recollection about ten rules having to do with the new money, but he hadn’t paid attention to it then and it just had never come up since he got back to the U.S.

“But if you were in somebody else’s house without their permission, weren’t you trespassing?”

“I told you, there was nobody living there. How can I be trespassing when there’s nobody living there? Now if I’d just come in on some family or something, they might have a case. But there was nobody living there. It was an empty house. I have every right to it.” A sudden realization dawned on Jean. “Damn, I bet somebody else is going to move into that house and I was there first. You don’t suppose that guy wasn’t the real owner but just some guy who wanted the place for himself, do you? If that’s what happened, I’m going to kick up quite a fuss. It’s bad enough they arrest me for no reason. But if that guy thinks he’s going to get away with grabbing my house, too, I’ll show him.”

“Well don’t punch him in the face, whatever you do. I don’t think they like that around here.” Niall was thinking of his own troubles.

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Later that morning, the cellmates were taken upstairs to the courtroom. The judge sat at her bench near an empty jury box. There were no spectators so far as Niall could see except a couple of idlers in whites near the back of the room.

Whiskey Pete was first. The arresting officer told the judge that Pete had been found on his back in an alley behind a restaurant. Upon investigation it was found that he was “stinking drunk” and unable to walk. The officer had taken Pete to the clinic where he was checked and found to be only drunk. Later the officer had returned and talked to Pete to attempt to ascertain who had given him the alcohol. No bottles had been found near Pete that could not be attributed to those thrown away by the restaurant. The officer had already been to the restaurant to remind the workers there to
completely empty all bottles that contained alcohol before throwing them away. They claimed to have done so last night. Pete would not or could not account for the source of the alcohol he had drunk.

The judge commended the officer for his conduct on the case, then turned to Pete. “Pete, why will you not go home when you have a bottle? You know that you could die of exposure out on the streets. You could also be hit by a car. Now I am going to excuse the officer here for disturbing your rest in the alley since it was clear that you were not able to take care of yourself. If you press charges against him I will rule against you. Do you need help to get home?”

“No, your honor. I can walk just fine now. Thank you.” Pete responded and turned away to go.

Niall was astonished. It seemed that the policeman was the one on trial. Pete had been in jail and the arresting officer was the one who had to justify his actions in dragging a drunk off the streets. What kind of crazy court system did they have out here?

Jean was the next brought before the judge. The arresting officer again stated what he had done.

“Your honor, I was on second shift and making my rounds when I got a call about a trespasser at 432 Winstead. The complainant asserted that he owned the house at that address, and that someone was in the house without permission. I confirmed the identity of the complainant and that he did indeed own the property at 432 Winstead. The complainant accompanied me to the property. We entered the residence and found Mr. Jean Baudin apparently preparing for bed. He expressed outrage and told us to leave the property immediately. He asserted that the house was his. I activated the computer in the living room and pointed out to him that it confirmed the complainant as the owner of the residence. Mr. Baudin continued to assert that the house was his and refused to vacate the premises. The owner asked me to remove Mr. Baudin, since Mr. Baudin was adamant about remaining. I therefore exercised force to remove Mr. Baudin from the premises.

“Upon reaching the street, I released Mr. Baudin. The owner had brought Mr. Baudin’s suitcase and clothing to the street. Mr. Baudin then packed his clothing and some toiletries in his suitcase and headed for the house again. It was apparent to me that unless physically restrained, Mr. Baudin intended to continue to trespass. Therefore I brought him to jail to await the opening of court this morning.”

The judge turned to Jean and inquired if the officer had correctly described the events of the preceding evening.

“Pretty much, your honor,” Jean replied.” But I want to assure you that there was nobody living in the house when I got there. It was empty and there was no food or clothes or even trash in the trash bins. Nobody was living there and I had every right to move in. I was not bothering anybody. He had no right to have me evicted. I don’t have any money and I needed a house. This house was empty so I took it.”

“Mr. Baudin, the house was owned, and still is owned by Mr. Kitrell. That house is his property. He may leave the house empty if he so chooses. You have no right to use Mr. Kitrell’s property without his consent. In fact, you attempted to use Mr. Kitrell’s property over his objections, expressed directly to you upon the premises in the presence of a witness. Despite being lawfully removed from the premises, you attempted to return to those premises over the expressed objections of Mr. Kitrell. Therefore it is clear that the officer acted within his duty in arresting you and bringing you to jail. You had given every indication of intent to repeat your offense if given the opportunity.”
“You mean, was I going back into my house?” Jean burst in. “You’re darn right I was! I got a right to have a place to live. It’s right there in the Ten Rules. It says ‘Necessities are free to all as needed’ and I sure needed a place to spend the night. Besides, I was there first. There was nobody there when I got there.”

The judge finally rapped her gavel to end Jean’s advocacy. “Mr. Baudin, you will be silent for a moment and listen to me. The Ten Rules describe the money we use and what it is able to buy. That rule, ‘Necessities are free to all as needed’ means that money is not able to buy necessities. It means that if no one gives you a necessity you have no right to take that necessity. If someone does give you a necessity for whatever reason and that necessity provides you some benefit, then the person who gave it to you will be paid by a payer if their actions result in a net benefit for that pay period. There is no requirement on any individual to provide you with any particular item or service. If someone gives you bread, or a shirt, or allows you to use a building of theirs... it is because they willingly did so. There is no requirement that anyone give you anything unless their actions have prevented you from being able to gain access to necessities. For example, your arresting officer placed you in jail. This was done by the use of force, for you did not go willingly to jail. Having placed you in jail, he was then required to provide you with necessities for your health and well-being while you were so confined. I believe that you were provided with breakfast this morning?”

“Yes, your honor,” Jean admitted.

“Then the officer did his duty toward you. So far as I can see the officer did his duty in every respect. He released you once you were no longer on Mr. Kitrell’s property the first time and it was only when you insisted on returning to that property that he resorted to bringing you to jail. He brought you to this court at the first opportunity so that your case could be adjudicated. The owner and the arresting officer were both acting well within their rights and duties.”

“But your honor, there was nobody in the house. It wasn’t doing anybody any good. And I needed a place to live. It isn’t fair that he should have an extra house when I need a house and have none.” Jean was obviously quite convinced.

“Mr. Baudin,” the judge said, “it is clear to me that you either do not understand or do not wish to admit your guilt in this matter. Therefore, I must ask you whether you will accept my judgment or prefer another court.”

“I don’t understand, your honor,” Jean replied, apparently uncertain for the first time that day.

“The officer brought you to this court because he was the one who had to defend his actions in using force to arrest you. Unless he could show that you were going to continue to use force or were not able to care for yourself, then you would be released immediately. In your case, your persistence in returning to the property of Mr. Kitrell indicated that the officer had to use force to prevent your using force toward Mr. Kitrell in using his property without consent.”

“But you are guilty; it would appear, of a crime against Mr. Kitrell. Therefore, as the defendant, you have the opportunity to choose a court in which your case will be tried. That is, we will attempt to find a court that both you and Mr. Kitrell agree upon as appropriate and hold the case there. Mr. Kitrell has indicated his willingness to have my court try the case. Now I am asking if you also are willing to have my court try the case. If you agree, we can proceed. If you do not agree, then you may select from the available courts in this jurisdiction.

“Do you agree to have your case tried in this court?” the judge repeated the question.
“I guess so.” Jean was uncertain still.

“Do you wish to have an attorney represent you in this matter?” the judge asked.

“Yes, your honor, I do.” Jean now was certain.

“You may leave the courtroom to obtain the services of an attorney. Please return within one hour. There is a terminal just outside the door that you can use. Bailiff, please escort Mr. Baudin to the terminal and see that he is able to use it to get an attorney.”

Niall’s case was the last of the three. He accompanied the arresting officer to the bench to stand before the judge.

“Your honor, I was working the second shift on patrol when I got a call from Mau’s bar on 7th Street about a disturbance. When I arrived, I found the accused being restrained by two other men. The bartender was behind the bar where there was a considerable amount of broken glassware and bottles on the counter behind him. The bartender was also still bleeding from the nose and lip and had some cuts on his back and head from the broken glass. The patrons of the bar asserted that the accused, one Niall Davitt Campbell of Los Alamos, had struck the bartender in the face with his fist one blow, which had caused all the visible damage to the property of the bar and to the bartender’s person.”

“Mr. Campbell was unsteady in his walking and slurred in his speech. The two men holding him had also obviously been drinking but said that they had each had several drinks at several bars. They asserted that Mr. Campbell had been angered when the bartender had refused to sell him further drinks and had punched the bartender once on the face. Mr. Campbell said, ‘That will teach him to refuse me a drink.’ and did not deny having struck the blow. When asked if the bartender had made any move to strike Mr. Campbell, all witnesses agreed that far from having struck Mr. Campbell or having tried to strike Mr. Campbell, the bartender appeared completely surprised when Mr. Campbell struck him. Being thus unprepared for the blow, he had lost his balance and fallen backward into the glassware.”

“In as much as there was considerable evidence that Mr. Campbell had inflicted intentional bodily injury upon the bartender and given Mr. Campbell’s continuing belligerent attitude, I brought Mr. Campbell to jail pending the opening of court this morning.”

The judge turned to Niall, “Do you wish to correct or amend in any way the testimony of the arresting officer?”

“No ma’am. So far as I can remember the officer was completely correct to bring me to jail and used no undue force,” Niall said.

The judge turned back to the officer and asked, “Does the bartender wish to prefer charges against Mr. Campbell?”

“No, your honor. I don’t believe so. I think Ricardo is more embarrassed than anything.”

“You will go contact Ricardo and make quite sure, officially, that he is not pressing charges. I want all the specifics recorded so there is no doubt.”

“Yes, your honor. I would have gotten them last night, but Ricardo needed to get his cuts seen to at the clinic.” The officer hurried out of the room.
“Now then, Mr. Campbell, you understand that you are in a very serious situation here whether Ricardo presses charges or not. You have admitted to striking someone who was not threatening you. You did enough damage to him by that attack that he needed medical attention. You also caused some damages to the property in the bar. Let us dispose of the little matters first. Are you prepared to buy all the destroyed property in the bar?”

Niall did a rough calculation and said, “I believe that I have enough money and I am quite willing to buy everything I broke in the bar, especially if someone will dispose of it properly for me.”

The judge smiled. “In that case, let’s get that done while the officer checks with Ricardo about those charges. Bailiff, a terminal, please.”

The bailiff brought out a TV and set it on the judge’s bench.

“Contact Mau’s Bar and ask to speak to the owner of the broken glassware and bottles.”

In a few moments the voice of someone on the terminal responded, “Yes, your honor?”

“I understand that there were significant damages to your property behind the bar last night due to the actions of one Niall Campbell in assaulting your bartender. Is that correct?”

“Yes, your Honor, it is.”

“Do you have a total cost of the damages to the luxury items destroyed?”

“Yes, your Honor. We were expecting your call. We’ve calculated that the damages come to $638.44 and have so informed the accounts computer, complete with scans of the damage.”

“Mr. Campbell, do you agree to buy the items you damaged in the amount of $638.44?”

Niall intoned, “Your honor I wish to buy the items so described at the price of $638.44. Please debit my account accordingly.”

After the usual confirmations from the computer and the bar’s agreeing to dispose of the broken materials, the judge resumed.

“Why did you strike the bartender?”

“Your honor, I believe it was a combination of things. First and most important, I had drunk too much. Had I not been drunk, I don’t believe I would have struck him for so minor a matter. Second, I was embarrassed because my friends were laughing at me over something silly. Finally, he was refusing to sell me any more drinks. Naturally I took this as criticism of my behavior in having drunk so much. I struck out at him simply because of my mental state. Though this may explain my action, I do not think it in any way excuses my action.”

“I see. I hope you understand, Mr. Campbell that we cannot allow, we cannot tolerate one person physically attacking another person except to defend himself or his property.”

“I do understand that, your honor. I would not have it any other way.”
“I am glad to hear that because if you accept this court you may find my judgment harsh. Are you willing to accept this court?”

“Yes, ma’am. I am prepared to accept this court’s judgment without reservation.”

“Do you wish to have the representation of an attorney?”

“Your honor, I am guilty of unprovoked assault. I have observed your judgments and feel yours will be just in my case. Unless you advise me otherwise, I will forgo an attorney in this case.”

“Very well. Mr. Campbell yours is a particularly serious case for several reasons. First and most obviously, you have inflicted bodily harm on a fellow citizen working to serve you and you did so without provocation. That alone warrants a strong response from this bench. Secondly, you have revealed a weakness with respect to alcohol that makes the offense even worse. Alcohol is readily available in this community. There is no reasonable way that you can be prevented from acquiring alcohol, as a case earlier this morning made abundantly clear. Your weakness, therefore, can be expected to result in further such attacks on your fellow citizens. Finally, the sheer irrationality of the action, its lack of warning signs for the bartender, indicates that there is some other factor that is putting you under considerable stress at what may be a subconscious level.”

“Therefore, Mr. Campbell, these are the alternatives I will present to you.”

“Your first alternative is banishment. You will take yourself from this community and never return. Your reputation will include your actions and a warning from this bench about your unpredictable violence. Few would want to risk working with you. If you return, you will be considered a dangerous outlaw and any citizen may reasonably expect to be attacked by you at any moment. Therefore, your mere physical presence will be considered as a threat to attack.”

“Your second alternative is to wear a collar that will introduce into your blood stream a chemical tranquilizer whenever your emotional State becomes excited. This will prevent your having any strong emotion, whether good or bad. It is only half a life but it will protect others from your irrational attacks.”

By this time Niall was in a cold sweat. His decision to trust this judge appeared to have been completely wrong. His expectations concerning the sentence had been perhaps a 30 day jail term at the worst. But she was talking about lifetime sentences and all for one stupid, heedless punch.

“Your third alternative is as follows. You will give up drinking altogether for the rest of your life. Now I realize and understand that there is no way we can monitor your behavior in this regard. If you choose to go back on your word in this matter, you will be able to drink and we may not find out. But we will add a prohibition on buying alcoholic beverages to your account. This should alert any who would otherwise sell you alcohol.”

“Will you also attend Payer School for a full term of instruction, beginning as soon as a replacement can be found for you at your workplace or one week whichever is sooner. At Payer School you will be under observation and you will have opportunities to drink and to lose your temper. Should you do either, you will default to the first alternative above of banishment.

In the event you successfully complete the course of instruction at Payer School and I get good reports on your behavior there, I will remove all restrictions from your account and your record will be cleared in all public records. Of course, should you later appear in court, the judge will have your complete record available.”
“Your honor, the third alternative, Payer School, seems to me the most attractive but I don’t know what Payer School is.”

“Payer School is a school that persons who wish to become Payers are advised to attend before actually becoming Payers. Attending this school is not required for prospective Payers because any mentally competent adult is acceptable as a payer. You will not be required to become a payer even if you complete Payer School successfully.”

“You should also understand that any work you do while in Payer School will not be paid. Therefore, in effect, by taking this option you lose the opportunity to earn money while in school. Naturally, work you did before entering the school will continue to be considered for payment and your account may grow while you are there.”

“While in Payer School, you will not be allowed to have luxuries nor to spend money. You may not give luxuries to others who are also attending Payer School. They may have some other restrictions but I believe those are the main ones.”

“Your honor, I believe those restrictions are quite acceptable to me. I would like to accept your third alternative as my sentence,” Niall said and bowed his head to the judge.

Things moved quickly then. The arresting officer returned to the court with the deposition from Ricardo saying that he would not press charges. Niall used the terminal outside the court to notify Fred that he needed a replacement at work. Fred said that they would get along without him while he was away, and to watch his step at Payer School and come back clean.

The officer at his elbow said that he would not need to get his things from Los Alamos. At his request they could be put in storage for him there. Niall asked the officer in Los Alamos to get his things from his apartment and put them in storage for him. The officer agreed to do so.

Within the hour Niall was at the bus station headed for Payer School.
Chapter Twenty-Eight: Sent to the Office

_In which Niall vicariously visits the Old West, meets some new friends, and has to go to the Principal's office._

Niall could hardly believe his eyes as the bus pulled into the station. To begin with, the bus had horns. Not the kind that warn other motorists but the kind that grace the heads of big, bad bulls of Texas extraction. These were longhorns with a spread of over six feet from pointed tip to pointed tip. Along the sides of the bus the color scheme was a mural of the Texas prairie with sage brush and the occasional antelope in the distance. The bus itself appeared to be quite old-fashioned, harkening back some thirty years to the age when diesel buses ruled the road. Of course the bus was quiet and smokeless, as were all the other vehicles Niall had seen, but it looked old enough that one expected to see a plume of black smoke billowing at the back such a behemoth.

The door of the bus slid smoothly back to reveal a second apparition that somehow suited the exterior of the bus exactly. The driver was wearing a black sombrero decorated with what appeared to be endless star fields twinkling in the subdued lighting that brightened immediately as the passengers rose to disembark. Beneath the gaudy hat, was a serape-clad individual of swarthy visage and a prominent, hawk-like nose above a gold-toothed smile.

“Adios, amigos,” boomed a voice with a pronounced drawl which seemed drawn directly from the Hollywood studios of the 1930’s. Before the brightening lights caused the image to fade, Niall could have sworn the interior appeared to be a saloon. Niall knew it must be only a simulation, because there was no way the bus was as wide and deep as the inside had looked.

As the last passenger descended the stairs, the driver rose and clanked down the stairs himself. He was wearing high heeled boots that any cowboy worth the name would have been proud to keep in his foot locker until he was ready to celebrate reaching the end of the trail with a huge herd by hitting every saloon in Dodge City. They were decorated with flowers and horns of their own and a shine that was dazzling. They even had small spurs attached at the back, which gave a cheery jingle with each step.

Niall was surprised again when the driver thrust out his hand and almost shouted, “Howdy, pardner.”

“Ah, howdy, yourself, pardner,” Niall replied.

“You goin’ on to Albuquerque, pilgrim?”

“Yes, sir, I believe I am.”

“Well step right into the Last Chance Saloon and make yourself comfortable. We’ll be headin’ out just as soon as I get finished talking to the trail boss, yonder.”

“Thanks. Don’t mind if I do.”

Niall’s escort to the bus station was grinning from ear to ear at Niall’s expression and said, “Don’t mind Tex. He just likes to pretend that he’s still in the Old West. He’s really a Greek from New York that came out here to retire several years back and took up driving this bus as a hobby. Fixed it up right nice, he has. Well, good luck at Payer School.”
Niall shook hands with the deputy and turned to climb aboard the bus. It looked little different from other buses inside at the moment. The seats were arranged so that every other row faced the back of the bus with tables between the facing seats. Niall liked to ride facing the front of the bus, so he swung his small suit-bag into the overhead compartment and sat on the aisle facing the driver’s control console. At least that looked modern to Niall. There was a wrap-around screen behind the steering wheel that appeared to have all the status information and nothing much else.

After a few minutes some other passengers began to board. Most of them were in small groups, but there were a few singles. One of the singles placed a briefcase in the overhead and sat opposite Niall.

“Going far?” broke the conversational ice after a few minutes of trying not to stare at each other.

“I'm changing buses in Albuquerque for a little town named Golden.”

“You must be going to the Payer School. There's nothing much else out that way. As it happens, I'm headed that way myself. Wellman's the name, Darwin Wellman. Just call me D.W. Everyone does.”

“I'm Niall Campbell. Good to meet you.” And they shook hands.

D.W. was what might be called an average 68-year-old white male who had been able to avoid both success and manual labor all his life. He was of average height, say, perhaps about five feet, ten inches tall and about 175 pounds with a small paunch. His hair was thinning on top, and toward the front there were now only a few strands left to justify DW thinking of himself as ‘not one of those bald guys, thank goodness.’

“So you're going to become a payer, right?” D.W. commented, nodding yes as he did so.

“Perhaps. I haven't decided quite yet.” Niall didn't want to go into his reasons for attending Payer School and hoped his answer would deflect attention from his situation.

“Well, no doubt about it in my mind. I know what I want and I know how to get it. The Payers have all the real power in this country and I mean to straighten out a few things when I’m a payer. Know what I mean?”

“Not really. What did you have in mind?” Maybe this would distract D.W. from questioning Niall about his recent past. It wasn’t that far to Albuquerque and Niall figured he could tolerate whatever his seatmate wanted to talk about so long as he didn’t have to pay close attention.

“You know. There’s lots of people who don’t get the credit they deserve for what they’ve done. I could tell you stories. But never mind. Let me just say that…”

“Head ‘em up and move ‘em out” boomed the now familiar voice of the bus driver. The lights dimmed and suddenly they were in a Hollywood version of a Western saloon of the 1880’s. There was the sound of a piano and a babble of voices. Several cowboys sat at a table playing poker. A long, polished bar had several patrons and two bartenders pushing large mugs of foaming beer down the bar. At the back of the bus there was a small stage but no show girls, at least not yet. Niall could still see out the front window of the bus and he could see that they were leaving the bus station, but the motion was gentle. An older bearded man dressed in shabby clothes and worn out boots approached across the sawdust covered floor of the saloon and asked, “What’s fer ya?”
If Niall concentrated, he could see the side of the bus, but the illusion of the somewhat soiled old waiter was quite well done. He even seemed to be looking Niall in the eye as he asked. D.W. ordered a small beer and before Niall could think what to say, the waiter spat a stream of tobacco juice into the spittoon located near the table.

"Nothing for me thanks." Niall managed to get out. He didn’t know whether to laugh or vomit at the seeming reality of the expectoration.

D.W. said, "It doesn’t really serve a beer but it does put the illusion of a mug on the table and if you act like you are grabbing the handle it will even make it look like you’re drinking from it. It’s kind of fun, in a way. It sure keeps the kids quiet and entertained. It’s all run by computers, of course. It must have cost the driver quite a bit to have it installed. This is all luxury stuff, you know. One of the regular passengers was telling me that the driver must have spent over $10,000 in getting it fixed up like this. Of course, I admit that he does get more passengers this way but this is luxury stuff and he doesn’t charge a thing for it. He should make this a luxury ride so people would have to pay for it. Clearly, he’s an idiot but it’s his money and if he wants to waste it this way we can’t do anything to stop it.”

Niall noticed that a girl of about four years was staring raptly at the head of a horse which had just poked its nose in a window of the saloon near the girl’s seat. Within a minute he could hear giggles and squeals coming from her direction as the horse seemed to be talking to her.

Niall directed his attention to the driver who had his feet up on the dash of the bus and was talking to the people at the table nearest the front of the bus. From the inside, the door of the bus appeared to be the swinging doors of a saloon and over the top of the doors one could just make out a dusty street with wooden sidewalks and the fronts of several stores across the way.

"Who’s driving this bus, anyway? The driver isn’t paying attention at all.”

"The computer, of course. It isn’t legal for commercial passenger vehicles to have human drivers when underway." D.W. responded. “They had a bus wreck about 8 years ago when a driver fell asleep at the wheel and killed over 20 people.”

"Isn’t legal? I thought they didn’t have laws regulating businesses any more.” Niall said.

“Oh, the legislatures still pass laws like that. It’s just that nobody pays much attention to them. The folks that make buses and trains and planes for passengers make them so you can’t drive them without using the computer. Now this is an old bus, but nobody would work with the driver if he actually tried to steer the thing with passengers on it. So one of the first things that they did to it when Tex had this old crate fixed up was to install the computer controls. He could grab that steering wheel right now and try to turn it but it wouldn’t do him any good. The computer does the actual controlling of the bus.”

Niall and D.W. continued their conversation for most of the trip with D.W. explaining how he had become a great success in business, several of them, in fact.

Upon reaching the bus terminal in Albuquerque, they stayed together while D.W. got his suitcase. Then D.W. asked a nearby TV which bus would take them to the Payer School in Golden. It seems they had a two-hour wait, so they had time for lunch. There was a fast-food type place in the station but it was too soon to eat, so they looked around for something to do. The magazine rack held little attraction for Niall, and D.W. said he wasn’t going to do any more reading than he had to since he figured that they’d be doing a lot of reading in school. Niall finally suggested asking Jeeves what there was to do. D.W. thought it was a stupid idea but said to give it a try.
“Jeeves?” Niall said to a kiosk phone terminal.

“You rang, sir?”

“We’ve got a couple of hours to kill here. What is there for us to do?”

“Perhaps you’d like to meet some of the other members of your class at school, sir?”


“It’s okay with me, I guess.”

“Let’s meet them, then, Jeeves.”

“I shall inquire as to their preferences, sir.”

There was a brief pause after which Jeeves intoned, “They are approaching from your left, sir.”

D.W. looked one way and Niall looked the other, since they were facing and each looked to his left. Niall couldn’t tell at first who they were, but then saw two women and a tall, handsome man coming toward them.

“There they are, over toward the buses,” Niall said.

D.W. turned and stared for a moment without picking them out but soon it was obvious that three people were looking at them and walking briskly their way. Well, two were walking briskly. One limped slightly as she moved. This detracted not at all from her obvious grace and classy demeanor. Her face had an exotic cast, not only in complexion (flawless) but also in a slight difference to the eyes and cheekbones from classical English beauty. Her clothing complimented her breathtaking beauty to perfection, emphasizing her best features and concealing any flaws that might exist. Such clothes were far from standard issue. Clearly this woman had considerable wealth in her background in addition to that which she wore on her back. She didn’t look anything like one expected a payer to look.

Niall’s attention did not get back to the others until they had come quite close, and the limping beauty was still some steps behind them.

“How do you do? My name is Oscar Prudeaux. I’m pleased to meet you,” the tall man said extending his right hand. He wasn’t quite so handsome up close, because the lines in the face and the thinning hair were unmistakable to one nearby. The throat was getting a bit of turkey wattle when his head was held a certain way. His hands, though still able to deliver a firm, man’s handshake, were beginning to show the ravages of age in the parchment quality of the skin and some age spots. His jacket and tie were in very good taste, but not at all flashy. Though of luxury quality they did not indicate great wealth, only great comfort. Niall found himself beginning to like Oscar already.

“How do you do? My name is Niall Campbell.” Niall said to Oscar and to the lesser of the two ladies.

“Hello, I’m Natalie Carraway,” she said giving a handshake of surprising strength. But Niall’s attention was already being diverted to the beauty.
“My name’s D.W. Wellborn. Glad to meet you,” D.W. got in quickly and by taking a couple of steps
and extending his hand, he was the first to be acknowledged by the regal one.

Stopping at a little distance from the others to avoid being rude to D.W., the lovely lady accepted his
handshake and said, her glance taking in the others, “I’m Leyden Rutledge.”

There were traces of an English accent mixed with other elements. It was clear Leyden had been
many places in her life. Her face bore the closer scrutiny much better than did Oscar’s. But then she
was probably 15 years his junior, if not more... or looked it at least.

“Are we all going to the Payer School at Golden?” Oscar asked with a warm smile. There were
general nods of assent and a variety of smiles of varying qualities. They fell to talking, with D.W.
doing a little light bragging about his past, while looking mostly at Leyden. Oscar seemed to want to
engage Niall’s attention and after a few comments began gently probing into Niall’s past. Niall’s
paranoia immediately kicked in and he excused himself to go to the men’s room. When he returned,
he discovered that the women were gone.

“Where are the ladies?” he asked with raised eyebrows.

“They seemed to think you had a good idea,” Oscar said laughing slightly.

“It’s nearing lunchtime. If we’re going to eat before the bus leaves...” D.W. observed.

“We can’t abandon the ladies,” Oscar said. “One of us should go reserve a table while the others wait
here to be found.”

“I’ll go,” Niall said, much to D.W.’s relief, which showed, and Niall’s relief, which didn’t show.

So as the party rejoined for the noon meal, Natalie and Niall sat rather quietly while Oscar and D.W.
carried on a mild competition for the attentions of Leyden.

Finally it was time to meet the bus for Golden and school. The bus was a small one that would only
comfortably hold about a dozen people, hardly more than a large van. It was nothing like the “Last
Chance Saloon.” There were no illusions and no fancy paint job. The driver wore ordinary standard
clothes except for a fancy belt buckle, two gold rings, and the seemingly obligatory decorated boots.
This driver was bored, since his route was a local one and, though the passengers kept changing, the
scenery did not.

There were several other passengers on the bus besides the Payer School party, but none of them
looked to Niall as if they were prospective Payers. Some of them were obviously too young. The only
two older passengers were a black woman of indeterminate, though advanced, age... who somehow
seemed to belong in the desolate landscape outside - and an older man who sat in the back and
looked ordinary. He seemed to lack the outgoing, people-oriented personality that Niall associated
with Payers.

“Does anybody know when we get to Golden?” Leyden asked of the passengers. The stolid back of
the driver seemed to reject questions.

“It’s just down the road here a piece. We should be there in ten minutes or so,” a young cowboy type
replied.
“Thank you,” Leyden smiled at him warmly, instantly earning him the animosity of at least two of the male passengers.

The school at Golden was about 20 miles Northeast of Albuquerque. It was in the middle of nowhere so far as Niall was concerned, but he had been in nowhere before and at least this nowhere had some trees. The school, composed of barracks similar to a military base except there were no fences and no guards, seemed to be about the only reason for Golden to exist. There were also no cars and precious few parking lots, which had an assortment of pickups and SUVs baking in the early afternoon sunshine.

The bus pulled up in front of one barracks that looked a little more prominent than the others. It also had a sign saying “Administration.”

The bus stopped near the sidewalk and the driver, sighing deeply, opened the door and descended to give the departing passengers access to their luggage. Heat boiled into the interior, meeting halfway the seven persons who rose to leave the bus. To Niall’s surprise, both the black woman and the ordinary-looking man from the back of the bus also got off.

There was competition between Oscar and D.W. to be the first to carry Leyden’s luggage and D.W. accidentally picked up one of Natalie’s bags. Upon discovering his error, he hastily dropped the bag and secured the correct one.

Niall noticed and laughed, looking at Natalie. “Here, let me get that for you. I seem to be the least burdened of all the passengers.”

“I don’t need the help. I have only two bags and I don’t have a limp,” she replied with just a little edge in her voice.

“Yes, but I need the practice being a gentleman. You see, I haven’t had any practice in doing so for the last 15 years and I’m sure I’ve accumulated quite a bit of rust and lost a lot of hair since then.” Niall replied, still grinning.

“I really don’t need the help.”

“Oh, all right,” she said, finally breaking down and returning at least a part of his smile, “but only the smaller of the two. We don’t want being a gentleman to be too much of a shock to your system.”

D.W. and Oscar tied in their race to open the door for Leyden. This resulted in a conflict resolved by Natalie who had a free hand (thanks to Niall) to open the door for the rest. She and Niall shared a secret laugh at the situation and he gallantly stayed behind to bear her company in the painfully bright sun, while the old black woman and her helper entered.
Inside, the air conditioning was raising goose bumps on the exposed skin of Leyden’s arms, a fact that was noted carefully by Oscar and D.W. The dim lighting within after the brightness of the sunlight caused a general pause while sight returned to the party.

“Welcome, welcome. I see we all made it this time.” The greetings came from a short woman of middle age whose personality was obviously belied by her clothing. The clothing said she was strictly professional, cool, efficient, and all business. Her voice said she was cheerful, kindly, and warm.

“Are we everyone you expected?” Oscar asked, flashing his practiced smile.

“Well, we were expecting seven and you are seven. We were expecting four men and three women and that matches. Are any of you here for some reason other than to attend our Payer School?”

Their demurral was enough to start the welcoming rush again. “Now you all are just as welcome as you can be. We have a nice set of rooms just for your class. You will all be bunking in number 23, which is just down the road to the left there,” she swept her arm in a quick little arc toward the white gravel road that could be seen out the window. It looked blinding even through the tinted windows.

“I'm Brenda Thompson, the chief administrator, paper pusher, and maintenance worker around here. If you have a problem here you should tell me because I can probably do something to help. So if you'll just come over to the desk and sign in and get your packets of welcome, we'll get you all settled and comfortable in three shakes of a lamb’s tail.”

“Packets?” D.W. said. “It ain't on the computer?”

“Of course, it’s on the computer. How do you think we printed it? But we find that people like to have it written on paper and some of them even like to carry it around with them.” She smiled, “Of course you can just ask the computer here in the office whenever you like if you want to see the information.


“Because there are no terminals in your rooms nor in your barracks at all,” she said with a hint of a smile as if she expected a response.

“No computers?!?” several of the trainees said, clearly quite surprised.

“But how will I…”

“My shows, I’ll miss my…”

“My grandchildren…”

“Calm down. Calm down. Let me explain,” the now brisk administrator said in a sharp tone.

With that the group quieted but there were still some agitated movements of hands and blinking of eyes. Niall was as surprised as the others but, perhaps, for different reasons. First, he was surprised that anybody would be allowed out of the view and hearing of the central computer system. Second, he was surprised at how dependent the others in the party seemed to be on the omnipresence of the computer.
"First, I must point out that Payers may have no luxuries, at all, ever, for the rest of their lives. Living without the computer to meet your needs will bring home to you what you are giving up. Before you make your first payment, an irrevocable step from which there is no turning back, you must be certain in your own minds that you will be able to stand living without luxuries. The six-week course of study here is as long as it is in part so you can thoroughly test your state of mind."

"Second, as a payer, you must be sensitive to the people around you. They are your responsibility and your rewards. You must notice them. You must hear what they say rather than what you expect to hear. You must read their body language to see if it matches their words. You must be able to empathize with all kinds of people. The computer takes your attention away from others. You depend on it to tell you what happened rather than trusting your own senses."

"Third, you feel watched when around a computer. This reduces your feelings of temptation when you have an opportunity to do something you would feel embarrassed for other people to know. In our situation, you will find yourself with opportunities to use and consume luxuries. If you knew the computer would observe that behavior, you would very likely restrain yourself. But with no computer, you can get away with secret consumption. No one will necessarily know if you cheat and use luxuries. We want you to find out how you will react to temptation, because you will be tempted if you become Payers."

"Therefore, you will not have the computer available in your barracks. You will not have it available in the recreation rooms or in the cafeteria. It will be available in the classroom and here in the offices. But nowhere else. Naturally, this does not extend to your payer phone. When carrying that phone, you will have contact with the computer but it is a limited contact."

"Is that clear to everyone?" Nods and murmurs of agreement followed.

"All right, then. Get your copies of the handouts and check into your barracks. That's number 23. It's your choice of the rooms. None are very good," she finished with a grimace.

They took their turns picking up the handouts and turned toward the door in a straggling column once again. Niall and Natalie were once again near the back of the column. As Niall got his papers, the administrator said to him in a quiet though not secret way, "Please come back here as soon as you're settled. There are some things we have to go over."

Niall thought, "Boy, here we go. She's going to read me the riot act."

So it was a quiet and surly Niall who carried Natalie's suitcase the several hundred yards of blazing heat between the oases of the air-conditioned barracks. Since they brought up the rear, they found all the more convenient rooms were already taken and of the five rooms that were left, one didn't have a functioning toilet and another looked like the painter had stopped half way through the job. Rejecting these impossible rooms made the resultant choice simple if not a pleasure.

Having minimal belongings, Niall found himself back in the heat and then back in the administration building within 15 minutes. He brought something of a mood with him. He was ready to bite nails and was disgusted with the whole situation. It's wonderful what fifteen minutes in the New Mexico sun without a hat can do for your mood when it looks like your next six weeks will be spent living in a dump. Of course, he had spent most of the last 15 years living in an environment that was far worse, but we human beings get spoiled really fast.

Once again it took his eyes a little while to become accustomed to the dim lighting of the room. But this time he was more attentive to his surroundings. The walls were beige with two windows on the
front wall and one to each side wall. The back of the room had two doors, one to either side of the receptionist's desk. This time there was a receptionist, sort of. An old cowboy was sitting in the chair with his boots (none too clean) on a corner of the desk. His hat, which was tilted down over most of his face, had seen better days and was sweat stained and frayed around the edges of its highly curled brim.

Niall approached the desk and cleared his throat... Nothing.

"Excuse me, please," he tried. Still no effect.

Finally, his mood beginning to boil over, Niall gave the bottom boot a strong shove forcing it to the floor with a crash as the cowboy hit the floor with the flat of both feet. It was then that Niall noticed the badge that had been concealed by a fold of the loose shirt on the slim-figured man.

"Well, well, well. You are something of a violent cuss aren't you?" the deputy said, frowning. "Judge up in Santa Fe warned me that you were a little quick on the trigger. I guess she was right. Mister, I don't know what's eatin' you but you better get it outta your system now or I'm gonna escort you to the State line one way or another and I'm comin' back alone. You got that clear?"

"Yes, sir," Niall said.

"Judge told me I should cut you some slack on accounta you been out of the country for a time. So I'm gonna tell you this once. Folks from 'round here don't touch strangers without asking permission first. They don't hit, shove, push, or act disrespectful. Now you're going in to see Ms. Thompson. I got a lot of respect for Ms. Thompson. I won't take it kindly if I hear you didn't show her the greatest respect. Now you get your attitude in a respectful place. You put a polite smile on your face. And you use your Sunday manners every second with her or you may not even make it to the county line."

By this time the deputy was about four inches from Niall's nose and though they were about eye to eye, Niall had the feeling that this man was able to back up his words with actions.

"She asked me to come see her when I was settled in the barracks. I'm settled, so I'm back. Just now this is about the best I can do for a smile. If it isn't good enough, you better show me a place to sit and wait." Niall put on a smile that, though obviously not heart-felt, was a decent effort.

"Her office is there," he said indicating the door to Niall's left.

Niall nodded, said "Thank you," with a small bow and turned away from the deputy. He approached the door with some trepidation, squared his shoulders and knocked.

"Come in, it's open," from behind the door.

Niall opened the door and stepped through.

"That was quick. You got settled in good time. I hope you got a comfortable room. Please sit down, Niall." Brenda, a cheery smile on her face, had risen to her feet behind her desk and was pointing to a comfortable chair to the right of her desk.

"Thank you," Niall said, and took the offered seat.

"I understand you're here as a part of a sentence by Judge Blake."
“Yes, ma’am. They hustled me on the bus right out of the courtroom. They even had a bag of toiletries ready to give me. I guess they had a pretty good idea what was going to happen right from the beginning.”

“Judge Blake is usually pretty well organized,” Ms. Thompson laughed. “First off, did you get a chance to glance over those booklets to get acquainted with our campus and how we do things?”

“I’m afraid not. I just dropped my bags and the handouts in my room and came right back here.”

Brenda nodded. “That’s all right. You can look them over later. There isn’t really much in them since we have very few rules here.”

“But you’re a special case,” Brenda said sitting up straighter and leaning forward. “I understand that you’re not really intending to become a payer. You’re one of Judge Blake’s rescue attempts. We don’t mind her using us as a half-way house, but we make no attempt to give you any special treatment just because you’re not really intending to become a payer.”

‘Okay,’ Niall thought. ‘Maybe this won’t be so bad after all.’

“Quote,” she said in a sing-song voice, “A payer is not allowed to have money or anything that money can buy unquote. That means that you’ll have to do without alcohol and nicotine and any other recreational drugs you may be taking. Coffee and tea are considered necessities for some reason, so those are permitted.” A look of disdain crossed her features. Clearly she was someone who either had never used caffeine or was a recent addict just coming off the stuff, and, complete with evangelical surety, enjoyed a heartfelt obligation to nag others into compliance with her new life, Niall mused.

“I see that you’re wearing a wrist watch that seems to be a luxury model and your jacket’s not standard issue. You’ll report to the laundry and get two sets of yellows. One you will wear while the other is in the laundry. Each evening you will get a clean set of clothes from the laundry and each morning you will return to the laundry the clothes worn the day before. Should your clothes become soiled, you may go to the laundry at any time and exchange them for clean clothes.”

“What’s wrong with these clothes?”

“Nothing at all. You can continue to wear them if you like. It’s your choice. But the other students here all wear the yellows as part of their training. Before becoming a payer, they need to really know what it is to live without luxuries. Therefore, we have adopted the yellow standard issue clothes as a means of identifying the students from the actual Payers among us. It would not do to have some Non-payer use a luxury and be thought to be a payer. So you can wear what you like, but if you want to be comfortable around the other students you should look like them at least.”

“Okay, that makes sense,” Niall nodded.

“You will eat at the mess hall. Do you have any special dietary requirements?”


“You’ll have the infirmary available if you have any medical difficulties. A lot of our students are old enough that we often need medical treatment nearby. Do you have any medical conditions that we should inform the doctors about? They can get your records, of course, if you ask for treatment, but if
there’s some condition that would require special equipment or medications that they don’t have on
hand, we can make arrangements with the hospital in Albuquerque.”

“I have a bad knee but there’s nothing special that it requires. I have a prescription for malaria
medication that I’ll need to get filled in a couple of weeks. Usually it’s no problem.”

“While you’re here you’ll get a taste of doing without luxuries. If you can’t go without them, you need
to find out now, before you become a payer. Once you become a payer, once you make that first
payment, there’s no going back. You can never again have money or luxuries for the rest of your life.
There are no exceptions. You are completely identified as a payer when you make a payment and
your identity is indelibly marked in all the computers in the system on every screen of information
about you. I cannot emphasize too strongly that it will do you no good to plead or say you were not in
your right mind. There will be nothing anyone can do for you. The computer will not even be able to
indicate that you own any luxuries and it will not have any account for you.”

“We do frequently lose some of the students who cannot do without cigarettes or beer or some such.”
Again her mouth pursed with disapproval. “To find out whether they can resist the temptation, we
make alcohol and tobacco freely available in the mess hall and in the dorms. It will be there within
reach whenever you are at your weakest. If you succumb to the temptation, you are the only one who
needs to know. We will not check up on you and will not expel you if we find that you’re using the
drugs. But you will know and you will know that to use those luxury items after you become a payer
will expose you to being ejected from the payer organization. Once ejected, you will no longer be a
payer and will be branded as a failed payer on all information about you in the computer. For all
anyone knows you will be a payer who accepted a bribe. No payer will acknowledge you. You will
have lost any respect that you may have earned. This condition is also irrevocable. If you are found
guilty of taking a bribe, you can never be a payer again unless your conviction is disproved beyond a
shadow of a doubt. Proof of having consumed a luxury is all the evidence necessary to convict you.
Is this point clear?”

“Yes ma’am, but I’m not going to become a payer.”

“So long as you’re here, everyone will treat you as if you were intending to become a payer anyway.”

“Now... because we believe that the Payers are the heart and soul of what makes our economy so
successful, we make every effort to prepare each student to be an effective payer. But we cannot and
do not succeed with everyone, by any means. There are some who just seem to lack the personality
to be a good payer. We recommend and sometimes plead with those students not to become Payers.
But whether to become a payer or not is their choice and we may not make it for them, no matter that
we feel their decision will be a personal tragedy for them. They must be allowed to become Payers if
that is their decision. Also, if they decide they don’t want to make the commitment to become a payer
for life, we don’t make any attempt to change their minds. A reluctant payer cannot be a good payer.
Do you understand that whether you become a payer is your choice and no one may require that you
become a payer and no one may prevent your becoming a payer, not even a judge.”

“I understand. The choice is mine and mine alone.” Niall was becoming a little impatient with the
conversation. What did she think he was, a first grader?

“And that it is irrevocable if you become a payer?”

“I understand that once I am a payer I can never return to my former status and consume luxuries,”
Niall nodded, sheesh.
“Mr. Campbell, in your case the judge has requested that we inform her if you consume any alcoholic beverages or if you lose your temper or both. You understand that these requirements are those of the judge and not our requirements. But we will cooperate with the judge in this matter. We will honestly report what we observe. Therefore, please be above suspicion. Do your best to avoid even the appearance of anger and avoid any mouthwash or drink that might be mistaken for alcohol. We don’t want any suspicion and we don’t want to have to make any difficult decisions. Because, rest assured, you will not get the benefit of any doubt. Think of yourself as having two strikes on you, so don’t take any pitches that are close to the plate.” Brenda smiled at her masculine analogy.

“I understand. I’ll be like Caesar’s wife,” Niall soberly replied. “Maybe this is a prison after all,” he thought.

“Good,” she said. “I understand that you’ve been out of the country until recently so you don’t have some of the knowledge that most of our students arrive with. Therefore, I’m going to give you some material that I’d like you to read in the other room. It’ll take less than a minute to read, but it’s the basis of everything we do here, so give it some thought and then come back and we’ll discuss it. Shall we say 10 minutes?”

She took a single sheet of paper from her desk and handed it to Niall.

Niall rose, thanked her, and went into the waiting room to read.

Damnedest school I was ever in Niall thought. The subject matter all on one sheet of paper? They have got to be kidding me.

Sighing, Niall sat down to read on one of the vinyl-covered chairs next to a reading lamp that looked like a failed high school shop project. He was relieved to see that the paper had only a few lines of writing on one side. This is what it said:

The Ten Principles of the New Money

The Computer Accounts

1. Money exists only in the computer accounts of individual people.
2. Only the individual owning an account can have money deducted from that account.
3. Money cannot be transferred from one person’s account to another person’s account.
4. Purchases are made by having the amount of the purchase deducted from the account of the purchaser.

What Money can Buy

5. Money can buy only goods and services designated “luxuries.”
6. Goods and services designated “necessities” are free to all, as needed.

The Paying Profession

7. It is the duty of a profession (to be called here “Payers”) to evaluate each person’s actions and to pay them accordingly by increasing the amount of money in their accounts.
8. Only Payers can increase the money in an individual’s account.
9. All Payers must be volunteers and all volunteers must be accepted unless and until evidence of their biased or dishonest payments is produced.
10. Payers can never have money or luxuries for themselves, even if they stop being Payers.
As she had said, it took him less than a minute to read the page. These must be the Ten Principles that Jean mentioned, Niall thought. Yes, there it was in number 6. “Goods and services designated ‘necessities’ are free to all, as needed.” It sure sounded like propaganda right out of the Communist Manifesto.

Then he remembered Jean quoting this principle as his justification for moving into someone else’s house without permission. It seemed that private property still existed, since in any “everybody is equal” system either the house would belong to the community or everybody would have only one house. The judge certainly seemed to have little sympathy for Jean’s attempt to take over the house.

Wait. Be systematic. What about the first principle? Money exists only in computer accounts of individuals. Yes, I understand that. That’s pretty simple. I remember getting my account at the airport. I guess I have nothing to ask about that one.

The second principle is “Only the account owner can spend the money in it.” That’s pretty simple, too. If it’s my money, it makes sense that I’m the only one to spend it. I don’t think I’ll need any questions on that one, either.

Third is that the money can’t be transferred from one account to another. That doesn’t make sense. How can they put it in your account in the first place if it can’t be transferred? Where does the money come from if it can’t be transferred? That one she is going to have to explain.

Fourth, when you spend money it goes out of your account. That makes sense. Of course, it conflicts with number three. Maybe she can explain that one also, fat chance.

Fifth is money can only buy luxuries. Okay. But what’s a luxury? Who says what a luxury is and what isn’t? Sounds like a lot of power in the hands of whoever does. That’s a definite question right there.

Sixth is that Communist one.

Seventh is just saying there are Payers.

Eighth is that only Payers can put money in your account. That seems simple enough.

Ninth is that anybody can be a payer and you can’t force anybody to be a payer. She already went over that with a steam roller.

Tenth is that Payers can’t have luxuries no matter what, for life. She pretty well rode that one into the ground as well.

Okay. I’m ready. Let’s see if she has any good answers.

Niall rose to his feet and knocked on Brenda’s door. He was soon back in the comfortable chair and some of his attitude, the one so thoroughly squashed by the deputy, was seeping back.

“Do you have any questions about what the first item means?”

“No, it seems pretty simple,” Niall replied and was about to go on when the administrator asked him a question.

“What does that mean for a corporation?”
“What do you mean?” Niall asked.

“If money can only be in the accounts of individuals, what does than mean for a corporation? Can a corporation have money?”

Niall paused. “No. I guess they can’t.”

“What about a government? Can this county have money?”

Niall paused again. “No, they can’t either.”

The administrator said, “Go on.”

Niall paused and said, “No organization or group or church or family or anything can have money except individuals.” He paused again. “Payers can’t pay an organization or a group or a business. Payers can only pay individuals.”

The administrator nodded. “That’s correct. Do you have any questions about the second principle?”

Niall looked down at the list again and read “Only the individual owning an account may have money removed from that account.” Maybe there was more here than met the eye.

“Can the judge impose fines?” he asked.

“No, she cannot. She cannot have money removed from anyone’s account but her own.”

“Can the government take any money from my account for taxes or any other reason?” Niall asked.

“No, the government cannot have money removed from anyone’s account regardless of whether they have a reason. Only the individual who owns an account may have money removed from that account. That is literally true. It means exactly what it says. That is why every time you buy something, you must explicitly tell the computer to debit your account in the amount of whatever.”

“About the third principle. That doesn’t seem possible.” Niall declared, deciding to take the initiative.

“‘Money cannot be transferred from one account to another account.’ That seems to be a simple statement. Can you explain what you mean by saying it’s impossible?”

Niall sat forward, his elbows on the desk, with his fingers forming a steeple and explained. “Money is no good unless it can be traded for something. Something which cannot be traded cannot be used as money. Therefore, it is impossible to have a money which cannot be transferred from one person to another.”

The administrator allowed a brief smile to break the even line of her lips, slightly touched with what Niall took to be a shade of burgundy gloss, and leaned back in her chair. “Mr. Campbell, you have money in your account. I believe that you have bought luxuries. Therefore you have experienced what you are describing as being impossible. Step one: you have had money placed in your account. Where did it come from? Did a payer put it there? Yes. Did that money come from somewhere else or did the numbers in your account just get bigger? The numbers just got bigger. No other account got smaller when yours got bigger. When you spent money, the numbers in your account got smaller. No other account had its numbers get bigger just because yours got smaller. In other words, your money
comes into existence when you are paid and your money ceases to exist when you spend it. Do you agree that this is what happens?"

“Yes, but that isn’t a trade.” Niall defended, warming to the challenge of the debate.

“Then let’s try another tack. Do you give up money when you buy something?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“Do you get something when you buy something?” she persisted.

“Yes.”

“That sure sounds like a trade to me. You give something and you get something or am I missing something?” she added, again with a brief smile playing across her mouth.

“No, but the guy who I got the thing from didn’t get my money. Therefore, there was no trade.” That should hold her, Niall thought to himself. I’ve got her on that one. Then unbidden and at the moment unwelcome, the image of Enid Lee flashed in front of him; he had been wiser than she as well, correct?

“Who said you were trading with the guy who gave you the item you bought?” Brenda countered.

“What was it, by the way?”

Niall said,” I bought a car. Let’s use that example.”

“OK. Nobody said that the trade was with the guy who gave you the car.”

“It was a woman who gave me the car.” Niall paused.” No, you didn’t say that the trade was with her. But then who was the trade with? It wasn’t with the guys who made the car. It wasn’t with the guys who brought it to the lot. It wasn’t with you. So who was it with? I say there was no trade at all.”

“Let’s take those people one at a time. From your point of view as an individual, you gave up something, your money, and you got something, a car. Right?”

“Right.”

“From the point of view of the woman who gave you the car, she gave you the car and she got paid for her helping you by a payer giving her money. Therefore she gave up something and she got something, right?”

“Well I assume that she got paid something for that.”

“Right. She probably got paid something for giving you the car. Now what about whoever brought the car to the dealer. Did they give up anything?”

“They worked and they had wear and tear on their truck and they burned gas.” Niall could have gone on but thought that was enough.

“And did they get paid for the net benefit of those actions?”

“I guess so.”
“What about each of the individuals who participated in or contributed to the manufacture of the car? Did they each give up something? Did they each get paid for the net benefit of the consequences of their actions?”

“Okay. I get your point. Each person involved in this whole affair both gave something and got something. So what? I didn’t trade with any of them.” Niall felt triumphant. Her whole case was falling apart.

“Mr. Campbell, is a trade an exchange?” she just would not give up and admit he was right.

“Of course.”

“When all those people who got money for helping benefit you with the car spend their money, will a lot of goods and services have been exchanged?”

“They will have been given to other people but not exchanged. In no case are two people exchanging items.” Niall was shaken a little but still felt he had the better of the argument.

“Mr. Campbell, what you are describing as exchange is called ‘barter.’ There is no money, no medium of exchange, involved in barter. When you use money, even a POM, you are not directly exchanging items but are using a medium so that you don’t have to directly exchange item for item with other people. When you use a POM you may, under some circumstances, actually give up a physical object such as the currency form of that money, but the person you’re giving it to only values it because it can be traded in turn, not for its inherent usefulness, such as was the case before the transition.

“Speaking of which, at one time all money was commodity money. Then the money itself had value to the individuals in and of itself. But few monies have been of value in and of themselves for the last 100 years in any economy I can think of. The essence of what money is comes from its being a medium of exchange. Money makes it easier for people to exchange goods and services. In many ways it’s just another kind of accounting system.”

Niall considered something, started to speak, hesitated and then said, “So what you are saying is that because people want this account money they give goods and services to each other and that is the exchange.”

“Yes Mr. Campbell. The money in these accounts serves as a medium by which goods and services are exchanged. This is true even though the money in these accounts is never transferred from one account to another, even though the computer program will not allow money to be transferred from one account to another. Do you understand what that means?”

As Niall thought of the implications, they seemed to multiply, tumbling one over the other in a multidimensional kaleidoscope of relationships until he had to order them in his mind. “It means, for starters, that you can’t give your money to anyone else. It means no one can take your money, even by force. After all, what is there to take? It means that you cannot loan money to someone else. It means that there is no insurance, since there is no way one could pay a claim. I guess maybe it also means that when you buy something no one has a reason to cheat you. Of course that last one is a little tenuous, I suppose.”

“Ready for the fourth principle?” Brenda asked, her voice prying into his reverie.
“Fourth? Okay. This one seems the most obvious to me,” Niall said.

“Yes it is mostly just a description of the mechanics of how money is spent. What about the fifth principle? Here we describe what money can buy.”

“Glad you asked because I have a lot of questions on this one. First off, who’s to say what is a luxury and what is not a luxury? I should think that would vary from individual to individual. What’s a luxury to one person would be called a necessity by another.” That seemed obvious to Niall and he thought it was the strongest objection yet to the system, and so naturally he thought it should be obvious to everyone else.

“You’re quite right,” Brenda responded, continuing; “That which is a luxury to one person may seem a necessity to some other persons. But what has that to do with the fifth principle?”

“Hold on a second. What do you mean what does it have to do with it? Read it yourself. It says that money can only buy goods and services that are luxuries.”

“No. It says ‘which are designated luxuries’ which is altogether different. I can designate anything as a luxury. It doesn’t have to actually be a luxury in reality.”

Niall was a little disgusted and, truth be known, slightly let down at this seemingly feeble turn in the debate. “So all this says is that money can buy anything since anything can be designated as a luxury.”

“Not quite. What it says is that money should be able to buy only some things, not everything,” Brenda emphasized, with a slight arching of her neatly plucked auburn eyebrow. “Now it does not say what should be included as things that money can buy. It also doesn’t say how the decisions should be made, that is, which people or what group or what individual should make that decision. Given that some group has to make those decisions, it does not say how that group should reach a decision. It is left completely up to those who implement such a form of money.”

“Well, that answers my next question, too, then. I was going to ask who decides,” Niall laughed.

“Oh, we let the Payers decide,” she said.

“The Payers?” Something about that simple answer struck Niall as logically dubious. “Begging your pardon, Ms Thompson, but isn’t that like asking the fox to guard the hen house? I mean why wouldn’t they just make everything necessities so that they can have everything for free?”

“Oh, no. If they did that, then money wouldn’t be able to buy anything and the Payers would have no power to influence anything. No one would care about the Payers. The Payers want the desire for money to be a powerful motivation for people. The more powerful that motivation, the more important Payers are to the people who work to produce everything. Therefore, they are more motivated than anyone else to have as many things as possible be luxuries.”

She stopped for a moment, as if this point was a regular one for newcomers to ponder, and walked to the window, staring toward the distant hills, shimmering in the convection mirage of the heat.

“There’s a certain balance there, don’t you think?” she continued, noticing that Niall seemed more reflective than puzzled or panicked, the two major reactions to this point. “On the one hand, Payers want more things to be necessities so they can have them, but on the other hand, they want fewer things to be necessities so that they’ll feel more powerful. A self-correcting balance, don’t you think?”
“I guess that you’ll give me a similar answer if I ask about the sixth principle.” Niall said.

“Similar in some ways,” she said.” The principles don’t specify how we’re to designate necessities. Also, as you mentioned in regard to luxuries, what seems a necessity to one person may not seem necessary at all to someone else. But then, we can designate anything as a necessity whether it’s actually necessary or not. And, yes, we do let the Payers make that designation for us and for the same reason as before: a balance of opposing forces that should prevent extremes in either direction.” She paused for a moment, cast what seemed to Niall to be a wistful glance toward the hills and said, “Any more questions about the sixth principle?”

Niall thought of Jean and decided to go ahead, though the particular language was not to his liking. “This principle is clearly Communist,” he said with a rise in his voice approaching an accusatory tone. “How do you justify that?”

If the charge bothered her one whit, Brenda didn’t let on to that effect. “Okay,” she began, her elbow on the window sill and her body facing him at an angle that made Niall re-evaluate his earlier impression of average looks. “You had better tell me what you mean by ‘Communist’ so I can understand your comment.” she said, clicking the index fingers of both hands in an act of forming parentheses. Niall hadn’t seen that one in years.

“You know,” he began, searching his memory from his Foreign Service training for the verbatim expression, “from each according to his ability, to each according to his need, that sort of thing.” The last he added as a tribute to Derrin and his endearingly stereotypical English manner. “Pure Communism.”

Seemingly amused at this somewhat unexpected turn of the topic from the decisions she had made about Niall (layabout, surly, argumentative), Brenda began her argument as she sat down opposite him in one of the comfortable chairs on Niall’s side of the desk. “Shall we start with Socialism, then?” she asked.

“You can start with anything you like, but you are going to eventually end up admitting that it’s Communist.”

“We shall see. Socialism is government ownership and control of the means of production, correct?” Her tone was even and objective, neither threatening nor encouraging.

“Close enough,” Niall replied.

“You’ve been in this country for over a month now. Have you seen any government ownership or control? Have you even seen any government other than the police? Anywhere?”

Niall reflected for a moment and then realized that he was stalling for time, as he knew the answer intuitively as soon as she had put the question to him. There was no representative of government at either of the places he had worked. There were no rules that he knew of which had come down from government. There certainly were no government guys there checking to see if they were following the rules. Hell, he couldn’t even remember anyone bitching about the government, which had been a favorite topic of pointless griping when he had left the States. Of course there were Payers around from time to time, but that wasn’t government, if he was following Brenda’s train of thought.
“Okay,” he responded, slightly irritated at the fact that he was unable to successfully suppress the silly grin that moved across his face. “I agree that I have not seen any government control and all the property I have known of was not owned by any government.”

“So can we rule out Socialism for our society?”

“Yes. Agreed, not Socialist.”

“The Communist nations of the 20th century were all Socialist, so, though they called themselves Communist, they were really Socialist, right? What I mean is that they used the term Communism to personalize their form of State Socialism, would you agree?”

“Yeah, sure,” he allowed. “They lied about a lot of other things, too,” Niall said. Sure as hell lied about other things, he thought, half hoping they might continue this skewering of the Eastern Nations Group, - one of his favorite whipping boys, for obvious reasons - but she was already moving on.

“Okay, but on to Communism,” she began. “In a commune, by definition, most things are owned in common. Have you seen any property that was owned in common since you’ve been in this country?” she asked, eyebrows raised. Niall again lingered on the pretty auburn glint off her eyebrows, and then rejoined the conversation.

“No, okay, but how could I tell?”

“For one thing, you’ll notice that when you buy something all the money comes out of your account. How could the computer register the ownership of something which you own only half of? Which half would be owned by which person? Just like there cannot be joint accounts, there cannot be joint ownership. Therefore, no property is owned in common. Therefore, no communes.” Now she was sounding like a lecturer and Niall immediately wanted the warmer Brenda back, the one who had him thinking of her, but most definitely not in the role of lecturer.

She continued, “Mr. Campbell, how does a Communist State acquire the goods it gives to all? What motivates the producers of those goods to work?”

“If they don’t work, they are jailed or shot. That seems like ample motivation to me,” Niall added, with more than a healthy dose of sarcasm. It occurred to him that Brenda would have only minimal knowledge of his past, whatever was in the envelope from the court, and that he might get to explain it in depth, more casually, if...

“What motivated the people who gave you food?”

“Sorry. Say again?” He hoped that she had not been able somehow to divine what he was thinking. He didn't know how, but damned if some women couldn't do it.

“What motivated the people who gave you food?”

“They’d get paid for it.”

“All right. Would somebody shoot them or put them in jail if they didn’t give you food or a place to live?”

“Uh, no,” Niall was beginning to feel trapped.
“In a free market economy, say, what is the motivation of those who work?”

“They want to trade what they produce for other things.”

“What was your motivation for working this last couple of months?”

Niall was almost squirming. “I wanted to better myself. I like being usefully employed.”

“Was anybody forcing you to work? Was anybody forcing you to give your property to someone in need?”

“No.”

“Then in what sense is the economy you’ve been living in Communistic? I’m afraid I don’t understand,” she added, almost gratuitously, it seemed to Niall.

“None, I guess.”

“Mr. Campbell, my point here is not to make you admit that you’re wrong, it’s to point out to you that there are all sorts of ways to be sure everybody gets whatever they need to live, in the sense we have been discussing these last few minutes. The way we’ve chosen is to pay anybody who gives someone else what they need. It doesn’t matter whether we call what is given a luxury; a necessity or what have you.”

“The Payers pay for the consequences of the action, not the morality or virtue of the action. If you need food and someone gives you food, they get paid. We don’t have to force anyone to do this, since there’s almost always someone at hand willing to do it for the money.”

“Okay. So it’s not Communistic or Socialistic. It still sounds like welfare to me.” And speaking of me, Niall thought, when is she going to call me Niall and leave that Mr. Campbell behind? Probably when I call her Brenda and not Ms. Thompson.

But something told him not to just yet.

“You may call it what you will.” she said, as if she had, once again, been reading his mind. “Now let’s get to the part that is important for us here at the school, shall we, Niall?”

He could only look at her and hope that he didn’t look as surprised as he felt.
Chapter Twenty-Nine: Dorm Life

In which Niall finishes in the office, gets his books, and learns more about what happened while he was away.

Niall was feeling less certain that the apparently simple statements were really as simple as they appeared. They seemed to have consequences that would never have occurred to him. This payer principle was the longest of the ten, so there was bound to be something here that was not what it seemed. It was time to tread warily.

Niall cautiously began, “The key word in this principle seems to be ‘evaluate’. The Payers evaluate each person’s work and pay them according to the value of that work. What does ‘value’ mean in this context?”

Brenda smiled as if pleased with his question. “You do understand that value is in the eye of the beholder. Each individual evaluates things for himself. There is no sense in which one person can be said to correctly know the value of anything for some other person. That is, if I think I know the value of something to you, I am almost certainly wrong. Only you can know what value you place on some object or service and that value can and will change over time. Are we agreed on that?”

“Oh, yes. That’s pretty obvious.” Niall nodded in agreement.

“So let’s consider how prices are set in a free market. The price of an item can and will vary over time. Each trade in which that item is bought contributes to what is thought of as ‘the price’ of the item,” Brenda said, making the quotes with her fingers. “But each individual trade shows only some aspect of what one individual thought the item was worth to him. It only shows that the individual was willing to pay at least as much as he did pay. He may well have been willing to pay more. Therefore the ‘going market rate’ or ‘price’ (more fingers) is not an accurate or true measure of the value that any individual places on the item, either. Yet the free market works quite well and the individuals who participate in that market are able to pursue, and achieve, sometimes at least, their ends.”

“But so far all you have said is that the actual value is unknowable.”

“Yes,” Brenda nodded vigorously, her smile broadening. “I think it probably is unknowable. But useful prices are being set. Evaluations are being made in the free market. And in the same way, Payers are evaluating, they are setting prices on various kinds of benefit. Some Payers may pay a little more and some a little less for specific benefits, but rarely is there a great discrepancy between two Payers. Just as there is rarely a great difference in the prices paid for specific items in a free market.”

“Therefore, the word ‘evaluate’ in this principle is only referring to that assigning of a specific amount of pay. It does not in any way represent some sort of measure of true value or value to some specific individual. For example if a doctor is paid $500 for saving someone’s life in an operation, what does that have to do with the true or actual value of the doctor’s action? To the individual whose life is saved the act is probably worth a lot more than $500. For someone else who doesn’t know the person who was saved, it might not be worth anything.”

“Right after talking about the free market you said ‘in the same way Payers are setting prices’. What did you mean by that?” Niall asked.
“The Payers actually constitute a free market for people who work. But that’s taken up in some depth in your classes so I’d rather not get into that just now. I’m sure you’ll have a full treatment of it before long.”

“All right, then. How about principle eight? ‘Only Payers can increase the money in an account.’ Didn’t we already get that in one of those early principles?”

“No,” she said. “That’s just the closing of the circle, so to speak. We talked about how money can be removed from an account and this shows how money can appear in an account. Do you have any questions about it?”

“No, but I do have questions about the ninth principle. It says that all Payers must be volunteers. Why do they have to be volunteers?”

“What kind of Payers would they be if they didn’t want to be Payers at all? Why do you think we go to such pains here to weed out those who wouldn’t like being Payers? But most fundamentally of all, to force someone to be a payer would be a form of slavery, especially when you consider the tenth principle.”

“Oh, yes. I can see that. But the ninth principle also says that all volunteers must be accepted. Doesn’t that mean that you might get a lot of bad Payers?”

She smiled, “From your question, one would think that being a payer was a wonderful thing and that we have thousands of people demanding to become Payers beating on our doors. Most people don’t want to be Payers. This is good because we need only about three to five percent of the adult population to be Payers. Second, wanting to be a payer is the most important characteristic in a good payer. Unless one likes that life, one will not be able to do it really well.”

“Most important, though,” she continued, “is that it gives everybody the opportunity to put their money where their mouth is in an almost literal sense. If you don’t like the way Payers are paying, then become a payer and do it yourself. Back before the transition, we used to have all sorts of talk about discrimination and affirmative action and glass ceilings and what not. Now you hardly ever hear of that sort of thing. For one reason, it reduces your pay to discriminate on any basis except performance. For another, there are many Payers of every ethnic and racial group I ever heard of. If you don’t like what one payer is paying, change location, change the work you do, or wait a while and the next payer will probably pay better.”

“We do get some bad Payers. After all, Payers are just people. They’re not saints and they don’t have godlike powers. Some are definitely biased. There have been some scandals among the Payers. But oddly enough, they mostly do get better or violate their vows and are kicked out or judge some work that doesn’t let their bias show. The Payers control each other because their reputation as a group is very important to them.”

“Okay. I’m sure you’re glad that we’ve reached the last principle,” Niall smiled. “Payers can’t ever have luxuries or money. Now I have to ask why anyone would want to be a payer?”

“Yes,” she smiled back. “That is the companion question to why do we let everybody who wants to become a payer. The basic reason, I think, is that everyone wants to feel important to other people. We all want to think that others respect us and like us. Since Payers can give you money, everybody pays attention to them. Everybody notices what they do. So long as things are going well, we like the Payers in general. Also, Payers do make very important decisions. They really are important to everyone’s success and happiness. That’s a form of power which is very attractive to some people.”
“Another motive is that some people want to do good things for others. Payers can motivate other people to do good things. It might make a grandmother feel good to reward a mother for taking good care of her children, for example.”

“In a few cases people have wanted to become Payers to defend their group from being discriminated against by others. In that way they could be sure their group would not be underpaid.”

“One of the most important reasons for many men is that they can no longer do their former work but don’t want to just sit home all day. As Payers they can still be involved in a meaningful way.”

“There are as many motivations as there are Payers, I guess. No two are the same, but they also are not completely different.”

“Why can’t Payers have luxuries?” Niall persisted. “That seems unfair to make them give up things they may have worked hard for.” He was picturing what his own life would be like without the luxuries he enjoyed.

“Payers must have the trust of the people who work. Otherwise those people will ignore, or even worse, attack the Payers. One of the most valuable things a payer has in his favor is a reputation for being fair and unbiased. How would it look for a payer to have an expensive car? It would look like he’d accepted a bribe. Or how about if all the Payers lived in the expensive part of town and never went to the poorer sections? It would mean that they were separated from the very people who have the least power and can least defend themselves from those with power.”

“But these reasons pale beside the most important reason. If Payers can never have luxuries, then it’s easy to tell if they’ve accepted a bribe. Anyone who observes a payer consuming a luxury knows that that payer has been bribed. There’s no other way, other than theft, that the payer could have acquired the luxury. This ease of detection not only keeps the Payers from temptation, it also gives the people who work confidence that those who pay them are not corrupt.”

“If Payers could have money, that would mean they were paying each other or worse, themselves. If they could pay each other and have luxuries, I think you can see what would happen. They’d be completely out of control. As it is, Payers must live among the people at the bottom of the social pyramid.”

“Since they live at the bottom, everyone else is at least as well off as they are. Thus, Payers have a powerful motive to raise the quality of life at the bottom. The poor can serve the same function for society that canaries served in the mines. Just as the birds would faint from poisonous gases before the miners did and thereby give them warning that there was poison gas in the air, so does the condition of the poor indicate when things are going wrong in the economy. With the Payers right there and with the power they have, such problems are addressed quite quickly.”

“But why can’t they have money or luxuries after they can no longer pay? That seems a cruel thing to do to them after years of service.”

“That restriction prevents deferred bribes. ‘I’ll give you luxuries later if you’ll pay me now.’ This provision is to prevent suspicion. As a practical matter, when a person is too old to pay, there aren’t many luxuries left that one can easily consume, anyway.”

“When I was sent here by the judge, I rode on a bus that had decorations like I’ve never seen before. It was like a Wild West saloon in there. One of the other passengers told me that it cost the driver
over $10,000 to decorate it that way. That means that such decorations were a luxury. But we had some Payers riding in that bus. Weren’t they consuming a luxury and shouldn’t they have been disbarred or whatever it is you do to cheating Payers?”

“What did it cost you to ride that bus?”

“Nothing.”

“So the ride was a necessity?”

“I think, given my sentence, it certainly was for me,” Niall grinned.

“Were any of the other riders asked to pay to ride?”

“Not that I could tell. It looked like it was free to all as your item six says.”

“If a person has some luxury which is made freely available to others and which the person does not have to give up in order to make it freely available, they may share it with any and everybody without penalty. It isn’t a luxury for those other people. They don’t have to pay for it. If you sing on the street, for example, anyone may hear you. But if you sing in a theatre, you can charge money to people to hear you perform, and that makes your singing a luxury.”

“On the other hand, if you had a box of chocolates and were handing those out, a payer should not take any because what they take someone else could not have. That is, they would be reducing what was available to others. If there had been other passengers who wanted to ride your bus, the Payers would have left the bus and given their places to those passengers. The reason being that the resource would have become scarce. Do you follow the reasoning?”

Niall nodded and there was a pause. Finally he said, “I can’t think of anything more to ask, right now.”

“Don’t worry, you’ll think of plenty more later in class but I think that, for now, you understand well enough to not be lost in class. In fact, I think you’ll do rather well. Your experience abroad seems to have given you a flexibility of mind that many others lack.”

She stood and shook hands with Niall and wished him well in his studies and, more importantly, in not yielding to the temptation to drink or lose his temper.

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Niall went to the bookstore to pick up his textbooks. He grinned at the thought of how Sam, from the Frobisher Mall back in Virginia, would have approved of his having actual paper texts. On the way there, he heard a clock chime three o’clock, or, more likely, a recording of a clock on a loudspeaker, and in a minute or two people began coming out of some of the barracks. “It must be class change. Boy, it’s like being back in high school,” Niall thought. Then he noticed that almost everyone he saw leaving the buildings was wearing yellow outfits. They were cut along the same lines as the standard issue whites, but just a different color. For a moment it struck him as being odd but then he remembered, “Payers can never have money or luxuries for themselves, even if they stop being Payers.” and remembered that it was part of the program to give them a taste of what it was like being a payer.
He also noticed that almost everyone was old. In fact, he was about the youngest person he could see. Brenda had been only about 35, he guessed, and the deputy was about 45 but these people were almost all obviously over 60.

It seemed strange at first but then he remembered that most of the Payers he had seen were also over 60. He guessed that it would be much harder to give up luxuries for the young. The thought that each of these people were giving up much of what made life pleasurable in exchange for something quite intangible gave Niall pause. The sincerity of these people was unquestionable. Acquiring the status of payer must be very important to them. Was there anything so important to Niall that he’d give up everything he’d worked for since he was a youth? Other than the lives and health of his immediate relatives, he could think of nothing.

The bookstore was almost deserted. Since very few of its customers could buy luxuries, there weren’t many people needed at the bookstore. As a result, he was waited on by an old woman in whites. She eyed him somewhat suspiciously because he was wearing neither yellows nor whites.

“What do you want these texts for?”

Niall handed over the sheet of stationary from the administrative office on which the list of his books was written. By good fortune, the letter had the administrator’s signature on it and indicated that Niall was a student at the school.

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“Getting a pretty late start aren’t you, son? The rest of your class has already been here and gone.”

“Yes, ma’am. But better late than never.”

“You’re right there, sonny. I was over 60 before I found what I wanted to do. At least you are getting’ an early start on paying.”

Rather than get involved in an explanation that would reveal his sordid past, Niall let her believe that he was just another payer-to-be in training.

Arriving at his home for the next six weeks, Niall was disappointed to see just how small the room was and how Spartan the furnishings. There was one single bed, a bookcase, a desk with chair, a rod across one corner of the room with a few wire coat hangers, and some sheets and blankets folded on the mattress. The single other door in the room was for the bathroom. It at least had a good bathtub with railings to hold while entering. He remembered jail and thought that it was more accommodating in some ways. Well, they told him that one of the points of this place was to let one know what it was like to live without any luxuries at all. He figured that wherever a payer went after this place would seem like luxury indeed.

As Niall changed into his “new” yellow standard issue clothes he wondered what he could do to entertain himself. There was no TV, of course. What was he going to do after class? There were his textbooks, but they didn’t promise to be exciting reading. Already bored with the room and the view of another barracks building out the single window, Niall went back into the hallway and along it to the lobby-like area near the front door. There were quite a few comfortable places to sit and most of the seats were taken. Niall recognized them all, of course, but couldn’t remember several of the names.

They seemed deep into a discussion of the transition, which Niall had missed completely. He slowly walked closer and took an unoccupied seat quite near, but not really part of, the circle involved in the discussion.
“But they had to do something like that, otherwise all the owners of stocks and bonds would have lost all their money,” D.W. was saying.

“I have no quarrel with the stockholders getting dollar for dollar, what I don’t like is that the people who were running the companies were given ownership of them,” Leyden (whose name Niall remembered quite easily) replied. “That doesn’t seem fair to me. My cousin knows a man who had been practically gutting a company before the transition who got ownership of I don’t know how many millions of dollars worth of capital equipment, you know generators and trucks and things, just because he was the Chairman of the Board when the transition happened.”

“So who would you have had assume ownership of the capital, some random guy off the streets?” Oscar said.

“No, I think the capital should have been given to the workers,” Leyden shot back.

“That’s just the old Socialist dream of the workers ruling the world,” the quiet man who had helped the black woman with her bags countered. “That would never have worked because each worker would have gotten a different piece of equipment or several small things and none of them would have been satisfied.”

“It could have worked,” Leyden said. “The workers could have voted on what to do with the goods.”

“Yeah, right, I’m sure they would have agreed on everything. You would’ve had one argument after another. It would’ve been chaos.” D. W. said.

The quiet man said,” I think it was just another way for the rich to keep their advantages. They had all those lobbyists working on Congress. They thought they were going to lose everything and that was how they thought they could save themselves and keep their undeserved wealth.”

Oscar replied, “But if you gave the capital to the workers, how would you have decided which worker got what? You’ll remember that Congress was adamant about no collective ownership.”

Leyden said, “I never understood why they did that. Seems to me that all the public property the government had was collectively owned all along.”

Natalie said, “Collective responsibility is no responsibility at all.” Then she added, “You should hear that repeated over and over in class. Each individual must be responsible for his own actions. You can’t get credit or blame for what some other adult does or fails to do.”

Leyden shot back, “Then how can we pay a person who makes capital goods when somebody else uses those goods well? Isn’t that paying one adult for the actions of another adult?”

“No, that’s paying people who are working together for the results of their joint efforts,” the quiet man said, “even though the work they each do is at different times and places.”

Niall was beginning to think he had better come up with some other way to think of him, since he seemed to be holding his own in the conversation.

“Yeah,” said D.W.”, collective isn’t the same at all. If it were collective, the guy who uses the tool the other man made would get paid for all the tools the guy made. The credit would have to flow both ways.”
“What? That makes no sense at all. What do you mean?” Oscar asked.

“Say a group of people is a collective,” D.W. began, happy for a chance to defeat Oscar in verbal combat in front of the beautiful lady. “If person A makes a tool and person B uses it then the whole group gets the credit. So person C would get paid for person B using the tool and person A making the tool. So if person A made 10 tools, person B, who used only one of those tools, would get paid for the use being made of the other nine. They would all be paid the same. Don’t you see?”

“Besides, the CEOs of those companies were then responsible for the use made of their capital goods. If they did nothing useful with them, then they lost a lot of potential income,” Natalie said.

Niall addressed the group, “I was out of the country when all this happened. Why did they change the money, anyway?”

They all started to answer, then stopped, laughed, and turned to Oscar. “Why don’t you start, Oscar,” Leyden said and earned a glower from D.W.

“OK, Leyden. You know about the wars in the Middle East and the oil price rise, don’t you, Niall?”

“Oh, I am Niall Campbell. I’m afraid I have forgotten some of your names and I don’t think I ever heard others.”

“I’m Clayton Fielding,” the formerly quiet man said.

“I’m Natalie.”

“You I remembered,” Niall smiled at her.

“I’m Wendy,” the black woman said.

“And you’re Oscar and you’re D.W.,” Niall stated, looking at each of the men.

“Okay, yes, I know more than I care to remember about the oil wars, but I wasn’t paying much attention when the oil prices were raised.”

Okay, I’ll start there. About 2010 things came to a head in what was Iran and Iraq. Civil and religious wars had everybody afraid of everyone else and nobody wanting to let the other guy sell any oil. There were all sorts of terrorist attacks on the oil fields, the pumping stations, the storage tanks, and the ships that were in or near the ports. The problem also spread to other Islamic oil producers who, naturally, blamed the Christian West in general and the U.S. in particular. When the U.S. and the UN tried to put a lid on things to maintain their oil supplies using military force, the other nations started an oil embargo. This didn’t stop all the world’s oil flow by any means, but it did reduce the supply enough that the prices went through the roof. Inflation became rampant, the huge debts that the U.S. had incurred to pay for their military adventures had to be expanded enormously to pay for oil, and the rest of the industrialized world wouldn’t invest in our bonds, since they had problems just as bad or worse than ours.

Well, what with one thing and another, just what things aren’t important - and I won’t say since that will just start an argument - we got huge inflation and huge unemployment. There were Socialists, Communists, libertarians, anarchists, gold standard folks, and what not. It began to look like we were going to follow in the footsteps of Russia in 1917 or Germany in 1933 and end up with some kind of dictatorship. There were armed mobs in the streets in some towns. But then, in what was almost a
miracle, this crackpot theory started to spread on the Internet. It offered a solution not only to the immediate economic problems we were facing, but to the problem of preventing their return."

Oscar was in his element. He was preaching even though it wasn’t religion.

“Before you knew what was happening, it seemed like everybody was talking about the problems that physical object money caused and how it was silly to use antique money in the modern world. They were pointing out to one another that so and so wouldn’t be a problem with the new money. Other people were volunteering to be Payers. Even some prison in Alabama volunteered to test the idea on its prisoners. The elections of 2010 were in mid-stream and suddenly lots of the candidates were promising to try this solution. Now I figure that none of them thought it would work and we would have to back out of it, but that it would get them elected and eliminate this problem of inflation and the international debt for the time being. They figured that we would never get enough people to be Payers. But they were wrong. There were so many old folks who were hanging on for dear life with the inflation wiping out their pensions, that the prospect of never having to worry about food, housing, and medical care again sparked a flood of volunteers. Most of them said things like, ‘I ain’t got nothin’ you could call a luxury now, so I got nothin’ to lose becoming a payer and at least I’ll eat.’ I don’t think they really understood at first what it meant to be a payer. That’s why they started these schools to let them know what it was going to be like. A lot of volunteers never actually became Payers, but there were enough who did that we got by easily.

In any event, the new Congress got together and everything was coming apart in the economy. So they passed the new money law and said it would take effect in two years. They promised that all the debts would be paid by goods when the conversion took place. The international debt was to be settled after the transition and all we had to do was hang on until then. People who owned stock were promised dollar for dollar for the market value of their stock at the time of the conversion. People who owned property could keep it without paying taxes or give it to somebody who would use it and get a continuing income and us old folks would not have to worry about medical bills or inflation eating our pensions or not having anyone to take care of us when we could not take care of ourselves. It seemed to give just about everybody hope and we were able to last the two years, barely.

“The foreign nations were afraid we were going to refuse to pay our debts, especially the oil-producing nations. They threatened to cut off our oil supply if we went through with it. We did and they did. But we fooled them. We didn’t collapse. Everybody pulled together like we hadn’t done since WWII. Within two years, we were producing more oil than we needed and were offering to trade oil to our former debtors for what we owed them. Since the price of oil abroad was still very high, we did all right.

“Anyway, that’s why we changed the money. It was sort of a national hysteria. There are still some people right here in the U.S. who don’t think it’ll work, but they’re considered the lunatic fringe now. I even think the rest of the world is beginning to wake up to the fact that what we have here works.”

“And we Payers are the ones who make it work,” Wendy said proudly.

“You aren’t a payer yet, Wendy, any more than the rest of us are,” Leyden said.

“But I will be, just you wait and see. I’m going to do it right and I’ll be one of the best.”

“Go for it, Wendy,” Oscar said patting her on the back. “Lead us on.”

Niall spent the rest of the evening until bedtime asking questions and getting answers about all sorts of things. He especially asked about the computer setup but none of them knew particulars, just that
they started with these really cheap little TVs which connected to the Internet and had little computers which could identify voices and fingerprints. They put them in all the stores that were selling luxuries and in a couple of years they were replaced with ones that could also recognize faces and retinal patterns and still later, in the really expensive stores, they did a DNA match and scent analysis. The home TVs sort of came along with that. They became the universal interface with the outside world. They provided entertainment, telephone, Internet access, smoke and fire alarms, intruder warning, thermostatic controls, and they kept track of your medical condition as well for some problems. People had started personalizing them pretty early on and almost everybody had a name for their TV and the TVs started having personality as well. Just as Niall had Jeeves, so many others had servants or friends or even pets in their TVs. Niall discovered that Jeeves was one of the more common personalities. That explained why the TV had adopted so complete a persona so quickly.

No one seemed to question why the TV/computers should be in every home with access to private information about all who were near it. Niall figured that the average payer had no more idea what the real purpose of those TVs was than the average citizen. They were just something that was part of everyday life. The conspiracy was still hidden. At least there were no obvious computers in the barracks. One never knew, of course.
Chapter Thirty: Return of Jean

In which Niall and Jean are together again and Niall discovers a new lead on what might be behind the computers, and where.

For a student, the day is organized around the class schedule. Niall had several classes, each with a different subject. He learned, he disputed, he came to terms with that which seemed silly when he first heard it. But he began to understand. Niall was studying all these subjects mixed together. He would get a little here and a little there. After classes and the evening meal, the students gathered in the lounge and discussed what they were learning in class. For some it was old hat, common knowledge in the groups in which they lived before they came to the school. For others, this was their first contact with the rationale behind their economy. Sometimes the conversations were almost like tutoring. In other cases the discussions were almost bitter political debate over deeply-held beliefs. But in every group the topic was always how the new money worked, how it functioned, how it provided the medium of exchange for the society, its consequences, and, most of all, paying.

Part of the reason for this was that there was no other entertainment. There was no entertainment TV, no movies, no radio, no plays, and no parties. No one wanted to be seen drinking or smoking, since that would indicate failure. If one stayed with the others and got involved in conversation, it was easier to avoid thinking about what one did not have. They were all here (with a few notable exceptions) to become Payers. This was a major change in their lives, so they thought a lot about paying. Since they shared all these characteristics, regardless of their other differences, there was no one who wanted to change the general subject of the conversations. The outside world, which they were preparing to influence by their decisions, was lost to them for this timeless time, since their contact with it, via the ubiquitous TVs and news media, was cut off.

In this tiny world in which all the other people accepted what Niall could only doubt, he naturally felt a pressure to conform to their way of thinking. There were only two possible reactions in such a situation: he could change to think as they did, or he could rebel and reject everything they stood for. Niall was still not completely over his traumatic experiences of the last 15 years; and the paranoia that would have been debilitating to most people had they not had access to the healing drugs, was still present in his psyche, though to a very small degree. Niall rebelled. He did not become violent. He didn’t appear to lose his temper. But he did refuse to accept as valid what the other students believed so easily. Niall was able to find interpretations of his experiences that denied the validity of what he was being taught. Many of his arguments with his instructors took place in his mind. He would not allow others to know the intensity of his disagreement, that is, until he found a friend.

It was 11 days after Niall’s arrival that one Jean Baudin descended from a bus in front of the administration building with a disgusted look on his face. One of the first people he saw was Niall walking between classes. Here was a possible ally against a most unreasonable world. At the least it was someone who might know a few angles to take advantage of.

But Niall was hurrying away without having seen Jean, so Jean had to put off the reunion. But by some not-so-subtle questioning, Jean was able to discover the barracks where Niall lived and managed to “happen to run into him” at the cafeteria.

Niall was glad to see Jean because Jean had been an ally when they were in jail. He knew that Jean disagreed with the general way people looked at things in these parts.
“Do you know what that crazy judge did?” Jean sputtered when Niall asked what he was doing in Payer School. “She told me that I had a choice of banishment or coming to Payer School to learn how things work around here.”

“I had something of the same alternatives given me, except that I also had the choice of wearing a collar that would drug me to keep me calm and probably to serve as a warning to others that I was psycho.” Niall laughed.

“How does she get away with giving sentences like that?” Jean wondered. “I’ve been before judges in several countries and they hit you with a fine or some days in jail, but that’s it. There’s none of this giving you a choice of sentences and exile, for goodness sakes. They haven’t done exile in two hundred years.”

“Oh, they explained that in one of my courses,” Niall said. “History, I think it was. When judges couldn’t use fines any more because nobody can take money out of your account except you, they started to have to use other means of punishment. The Payers were paying for consequences and keeping a person in jail who isn’t dangerous is expensive for the judge who keeps him there. Then, too, the number of crimes and criminals dropped to very low levels and there were no more lawsuits, so there was a lot more time for the judges to consider what would be the best thing to do in each case. As if that weren’t enough, some people started setting themselves up as judges without having any connection with the State or local government. People who wanted a judgment would agree on a judge, state their cases before whoever they had agreed on, and accept the determination of the judge. Those who went back on their agreement to abide by what the judge decided had that added to their reputation in a Declaration. It wasn’t long before people found that it didn’t matter much whether the judges were official or not.”

“What does all that have to do with anything?” Jean interrupted. “This judge is still crazy.”

“No, really. The only judges who could get cases were those who were impartial and treated everybody fairly because both parties had to agree on who the judge would be. The best would find solutions that made both parties happy.”

“Well that stupid judge we got sure didn’t make me happy. If I had known what the sentence would be I’d have demanded another judge. But that attorney I got. They must have some sort of sweet swindle going where the attorney recommends the judge and then gets a kickback. He told me she was the best in the State.”

“At least you aren’t doing jail time,” Niall said soothingly.

“I think the whole setup is a conspiracy. They have to be making money off this thing somehow,” Jean maintained stoutly.

“Okay, so there’s a conspiracy. I haven’t been able to spot it. Every time I think I have it figured out, there’s some twist and I realize that isn’t it. Have you got any idea how they’re pulling it off?” He wasn’t expecting Jean to really know, but Niall had been without someone to confide in for a long time and the temptation slipped up on him without his realizing it. He was also no longer so conscious of the computer hearing and seeing everything as before, since the computer was only part of his life while in class. Naturally he suspected that there were hidden cameras and microphones and who knew what else in the barracks but since they were not obvious and no one acted as if they were observed he stopped being conscious of its presence.
“I’ll tell you what I think,” Jean said in a low conspiratorial voice, “I think these Payers they got all over the place are what’s doing it. I think they got something up their sleeves. I know some of these guys around here are sincere and really are giving up luxuries and all that, but I bet there are a bunch of Payers that have all the luxuries they want. I think those guys are the ones that are in control. What do you bet that there are some Payers that can pay themselves? They can go around looking like rich guys and then in secret they pay themselves as much as they want.”

Niall said, “I thought of that, but how do they fool the computer?”

“They don’t have to fool the computer, they control the computer. It does just what they tell it to,” Jean maintained. “These courses they teach here are for these suckers who’ll do the work for the secret guys. Just because they tell you there’s no way to both pay and get paid, don’t you believe it.”


“Why should we do anything about it?” Jean asked, surprised. “They got it made. I just want to get in on the good deal. I figure that if I can figure out how they control the computer they won’t miss a few million dollars.”

“Do you think the secret’s to be found here?” Niall asked.

“No. This place is for suckers. I think the Payers who can pay themselves have to have some place where they can hide out to enjoy their luxuries. They have to have some place where regular folks don’t go. And they’d have to defend their hideouts from people who just wandered by,” Jean paused and looked at Niall expectantly.

Niall looked back and raised his shoulders in a shrug.

“The POM colonies, man. It’s obvious,” Jean finally continued. “Remember how they ran out all the Payers when they took over? They claimed to have bought all the land around those towns, but I bet they got rid of the folks that objected.”

“POM colonies? What are they?” Niall asked. This was something that they’d not covered in any of his classes.

“The way they tell it,” said Jean, “there were a few folks who didn’t want the new money. They distrusted the whole thing. So some groups of them got together during the last two years of the old money. They came together around charismatic leaders, mostly, and colonized towns in the backwoods. New Mexico had quite a few of those groups because of the mountains and the independent attitudes of the folks out here. Anyway, they kept the old money and set up their own economies. Of course, they had a bunch of farms around each town and stocked up on food, figuring that everything was going to collapse when the new money came in. Most of them expected a small war in the U.S. with riots and starving mobs going about the countryside looking for food, so they about made fortresses of their towns and they picked places back in the hills which were easy to defend. You’d have thought that they were preparing for the end of the world.”

“So you call those towns ‘POM colonies?’” Niall asked.

“Yeah. But I think it’s all too pat. I think those places all fell apart in the first year or two after the transition. I think the rich Payers took them over and use them for their playgrounds. I mean, why else would they let them continue to exist when the army could take them out with no trouble?”
“I don’t know.”

“Those places are the only hidden places around. I mean, I’ve gone all over and those are the only places you can’t get in.”

“Why can’t you get in? Are they castles or something?” said Niall just stringing Jean along by now.

“They might as well be. They have roadblocks and armed guards. They also have these fences with barbed wire on the top,” Jean replied.

“Have you seen these with your own eyes?” Niall asked skeptically.

“Yes, I have. They threatened to shoot me if I didn’t go away. I was just asking for something to eat and a place to sleep and you would have thought I was the devil himself.”

“And they had guns and barbed wire on the fence?”

“Damn right they did. Guns with a big clip sticking out the bottom. You know, military guns. They’re trying to hide what they have up there.”

Now Niall was interested. He hadn’t seen any place barred by guards in all his travels since he had returned. Of course he hadn’t been to any of the army bases, but the airport only had police types sort of keeping the peace, not barring entrance. This did look like it might be the kind of place he was looking for. It was worth investigating at least.

Niall first tried the local library. They did have some books on local history, but they were more about Billy the Kid and ranchers than about things since the transition.

Niall could have used one of the library computers to explore the issue, but he felt that would just be inviting trouble. Such inquiries would be bound to bring him and his suspicions to the attention of the very people he most feared.

He did ask some of the other students about places to go fishing in the area. He got several long detailed answers to that question. They eliminated quite a few places as possible POM colonies but didn’t actually say anything about local places to avoid.

He did manage to bring up the subject in a cafeteria discussion. He had chosen his group carefully. He wanted people who were from the central New Mexico area (which most were anyway) and who lived away from the cities. He also wanted hunter and fisherman types who might have actually had contact with a POM colony. He didn’t dare risk bringing up the subject more than once, since that would be suspicious. By being from out of State and even, in many ways, from out of the country, he felt that natural curiosity would account for asking his about them once.

“What happened to the people who wouldn’t accept the new money at the transition?” Niall said hoping to edge gradually into the subject of POM colonies.

“Some of them just left the country. But that was a tiny number. Most just said, ‘You’ll be sorry’ or ‘Don’t say I didn’t warn you’ but really didn’t do anything in particular,” a student said.

“There wasn’t any organized resistance? I would have thought there would have been groups that would have resisted with more than ‘You’ll be sorry,’” Niall probed.
Another said, "You better believe there were. There were some criminal gangs that practically went on a rampage for a couple of weeks after transition day. They thought there wouldn’t be anybody to stop them. Got shot to pieces for their trouble, too."

"Wasn’t there any organized opposition out here in New Mexico?"

"Oh, sure. But they just hid up in the hills. They were no bother."

"What ever happened to them?" Niall pushed ever so gently.

"They pretty much kept to themselves around my place. You have any trouble with them out your way, Marty?"

"No, Jack. We don’t bother them and they don’t bother us. They come out to trade sometimes."

What do they do back up in the hills?" Niall asked.

"Well, I don’t know for sure. They make some craft work jewelry from silver and pretty stones. They also do some pottery and wool blankets," Jack said.

Marty said, "I got my wife some bead work from one of them once. But usually I just traded for the jewelry and blankets."

"You’ve actually traded with them?" Niall asked, delighted.

"Yeah. I was a farmer and rancher over near Manzano," Marty continued. "There’s a pretty big colony up in the hills around there. Most years I could do quite a good business with them. Of course I have to barter with them. The other farmers round there and I keep each other informed as to what we ask and what deals they offer so we can generally keep the prices reasonable. And with Albuquerque so close, we don’t have any trouble finding some place else to take our crops."

"What are they like?" another student named Steve asked, taking the burden off Niall.

"They’re just really poor folks trying to squeeze a living out of the ground. I think they keep their women working year round on those blankets and pottery and stuff. It’s all hand work and it must take a lot of time."

"Do they have electricity?" Steve asked. "I wonder why they stay up there if they see on TV what the rest of us live like."

"I don’t know. They really hardly talk at all except to dicker. Lots of the stuff they want I don’t have much of. They’re always asking for medicines and ammo and metal tools, even stuff like nails. I did trade them a sports bow a couple of years ago and a few arrows, but I don’t feel good about giving them ammunition."

"How come they need medicine? Don’t the doctors get it sent to them for free?" Niall asked.

Jack said, "They won’t let the Payers in and they won’t let the computer make accounts for them and if the Payers can’t see the benefit, they can’t very well pay for it, so none of the pharmacies sends any medicine up there. I suppose they come to town to the hospital sometimes but I can’t remember ever hearing of anyone who did."
Niall asked, “Why does the government tolerate them? Why don’t they go in and get them out of there?”

“Why should they?” Marty asked.

Niall started to answer and then stopped. “Because they are using a POM?”

“What makes you think it’s a crime to use a POM?” Steve asked, laughing.

Niall said, “I thought Congress passed a law changing us over to the new money.”

“They did,” Steve said. “But they didn’t make anything else illegal.”

“I don’t understand,” Niall said. “If the government made a new money didn’t that make the old money illegal?”

“No. Just irrelevant,” Steve said. “Look, if you have something that you want to trade with someone else and they want to trade with you, whose business is it except the two of you? Nobody’s.”

“If you’re a businessman and want to accept some currency for a loaf of bread you own you can do it. But if that loaf benefits that other guy then you and those who helped you get that loaf will be paid by the Payers anyway, whether you accept his currency or not. So if giving that guy a loaf of bread gets you money anyway, he doesn’t need to pay you, does he.”

“So let’s assume that he doesn’t really need the loaf. He is just going to feed it to the seagulls. So he gives you currency and you give him the loaf and he feeds it to the seagulls. You got the currency but the folks who helped you get the bread aren’t getting paid anything. They won’t like that, will they? So they stop helping you get bread. If we assume that you want to continue to get bread, then you’d better give your bread to people who’ll benefit from it so that those who helped you get the bread will be paid also.”

“Now, given that situation, what good would the currency be to you? Who would want to accept it in trade? Nobody. Therefore it’s not a temptation to anybody with half a brain. The old POM just became irrelevant. It wasn’t a medium of exchange any more. Why should the government care what you do with it any more than they care what you do with the pretend money in a table game or Confederate money from the Civil War?”

“So,” Steve concluded, “why should the government drive the POM colonies out of the hills?”

Niall tried again, “Because they’re probably not getting the medical treatment they need. Marty did say they wanted medicine.”

“If they choose to not come out for medical treatment, we have no right to go in and impose it on them,” Marty said. “How would you like to be seized, taken to the hospital, and have some doctor treat you when you didn’t want to be treated?”

“But I’m not sick,” Niall countered.

“That’s what you think. When was your last checkup?” Marty asked.

“None of your damn business,” Niall shot back.
“Precisely,” Marty said.

“Well perhaps there are some children there who need medical attention,” Niall said.

“We don’t know that, do we? You want someone breaking into your house because you might be neglecting a child there?” Jack put in.

“Maybe they’re damaging the environment by cutting down all the trees or polluting the streams.” Niall was running out of ideas.

Marty said, “I live down stream from them and I haven’t seen any pollution. If they’re ruining the land up there, they’re being very subtle about it. But if there was a big surge of mud or something like in the water, we’d be up there in a hurry. We all depend on that river.”

“I guess it wouldn’t do any good to say they might be plotting or something up there.” Niall was conceding with humor.

“Just because you can imagine something bad someone else might be doing doesn’t give you the right to barge into their lives and take over. Besides, what would happen to the pay of a policeman who barged in and didn’t find anything wrong? He’d lose pay for months over something like that. In fact, there’s a good chance he would be up on charges himself,” Jack finished.

So Niall now had a focus for his suspicion. Nobody bothered the people in the hills. They did some trading, but they didn’t need medical care from the hospitals. That in itself demonstrated that they had all the doctoring they needed right there in the hills. They also must have their own hospital facilities and some source of the medications that modern science had made available. It was clear that there was more behind these POM colonies than met the eye. Jean’s flight of fancy and wishful thinking may have hit closer to the truth than Niall had suspected. The trick would be to find some way to investigate without being found out.
Chapter Thirty-One: History Lesson

In which Niall finds out why things went wrong.

One of the classes Niall was expected to take included a brief history of money. In this class he got a new perspective on much of history in general.

“All right class, shall we begin?” The young instructor’s high pitched voice cut through the gentle murmur of chatting students.

“This session is on the history of money. Since I appear to be the youngest person in the room by quite a few years, I won’t try to tell you what it was like to live in a POM economy. I’m sure you know that far better than I. But since I have been up at University for quite a number of years, perhaps I can give you a new perspective on it and explain, to some degree, why things happened to you as they did.

Let’s start at the beginning of history. I realize that is a rather late place to start, but we don’t have all day. By the time history began to be written, money had been in existence for thousands of years. Accounting had been invented and money was well on its way to taking the forms that would seem most familiar to you before the transition.

At first money was, itself, something that one could consume. You might be able to eat it or wear it or wrap up in it on a cold night or ride it. It took many forms because it was a commodity in each case. But it was a special kind of commodity, a commodity that was so widely used that everyone could be confident that if they didn’t want to use that commodity themselves they could easily find someone who would accept it in trade.

This made each of those special commodities something new in the world. It made each a medium of exchange. A medium of exchange makes trade much easier because then trades don’t require a coincidence of wants. That is, person A does not have to want what person B has and person B does not have to want what person A has for a trade to take place between A and B. If person A has what person B wants then person B can offer a sufficient amount of the commodity which serves as a medium of exchange knowing that person A will want that. Then person A can then go to person C and trade the commodity for what person A really wanted all the time.

In this way trade was made so easy that cities became possible, specialization became practical, and government inevitable. This was the age of agriculture. The great majority of people lived and worked on family farms and pastures. Only a small percentage lived in the towns and worked at other things. This meant that relatively few things were traded. Most things people used they or their families made for themselves. Since so few things were traded, most people were experts on the things they traded, so it wasn’t easy to fool the person you were trading with. But there were others who didn’t want to trade. They wanted to take, by force if necessary.

Someone had the bright idea to mint coins to provide standardized units of the commodity metal. Each denomination of coin was to have exactly the same amount of metal and be of the same purity. Thus trade was simplified and increased where coins were available. In fact, the monetary units the coins represented became a means of indicating relative worth for otherwise quite different goods. ‘That is worth three coins while this is worth five coins.’
Banks were invented as a safe place to store one’s money if one could not afford strongboxes and guards. One could write a message to the banker to give some of one’s money to someone else and the check was invented. The bank could issue pieces of paper that represented a certain number of coins each and the banknote was invented.

It was while this development in the physical features of money was taking place that the concept of the ‘account’ was born. If one deposited gold coins in a bank, the bank would record in a ledger that the deposit had taken place. When one returned to the bank to get some of the coins, one might be given other coins of the same weight. The coins were all supposed to be the same, so it shouldn’t matter exactly which coins one were given, so long as one was given the same number of that kind of coin as one deposited. The record of the number of coins deposited and the number withdrawn was the account.

From the depositor’s point of view, the money was just a set of records. That meant that it was possible to create money which did not physically exist. For example, if a bank had 100 gold coins deposited by 5 people at 20 coins each, it could loan out 20 of those coins to a sixth person. Then each of the original 5 would have 20 coins each and the borrower would also have 20 coins for a total of 120 coins. But the number of actual physical coins would still be just 100.

So long as all 5 of the depositors did not withdraw their money at the same time, this ‘sleight of hand’ in the accounts would do no harm and the effective amount of money in the economy was increased. But sometimes, if the bank loaned out too much money or if the borrowers were unable to pay off the loans, then the bank would fail and the amount of effective money in the economy would drop suddenly.

I hope that all this has been only a review for all of you. I’ve given it just to get you to remember the circumstances of money’s development. As you can see, the commodity money of 8,000 years ago and the money in a bank account are still fundamentally the same thing, just in different forms. A trader from 8,000 years ago would quite understand that you were giving something to another person in exchange for what they gave you when you wrote that check to pay for it.

So the question I want all of you to consider is what do all these monies have in common? What characteristic do they all share? If you cannot answer this question correctly, then you haven’t been paying attention since the transition,” the young man smiled cheerfully.

There was a general murmur in the class of people saying, “POMs, they are all POMs.”

“Yes,” he smiled. “They are all physical object monies. They are all either physical objects (commodities, coins, paper) or represent physical objects (accounts). That was the easy question. Now the hard question. What difference does that make? What is it about physical object money that matters?”

Silence. Finally a tentative, “People can steal it?”

“All right. Yes. That is something that matters. If a thing is a physical object and usable as a money, then it can be stolen. Can our current money be stolen?”

“No,” in a chorus.

“Why not?”

“Because it isn’t a physical object?” someone ventured?
“That’s true, but many POMs also exist in computer accounts just as our money does, yet the money in those accounts can be stolen. There is some other characteristic of POM money that is different from our money so that our money cannot be stolen and POM money can. What is that characteristic?”

“You can’t give our money to someone else. You can give a POM to someone else,” Oscar ventured.

“Very good, Oscar. Yes. POMs are transferable from one person to another. With our accounts, the money cannot be transferred. If money cannot be transferred, it cannot be stolen.”

“Wait a minute,” Niall interrupted. “If money cannot be transferred, how can it be a medium of exchange? That doesn’t make sense.”

“Would anybody like to take that question for me?” the instructor asked.”OK, Natalie, have a try.”

“My two girls sometimes didn’t want to share their toys even when they weren’t playing with them at the time. So I would offer each a reward if she would let her sister borrow the toy for a while. That way, each girl gave up something to the other. They traded. The rewards I offered were the medium of those exchanges.”

“But they each had a toy the other wanted to play with. They could have traded without you,” Niall pointed out.

“People don’t have to use money at all. They could use just barter,” Natalie shot back.

“People, we’re drifting. Let’s concentrate on why a person gives up ownership of something to someone else,” the instructor put in.”D.W., can you help us?”

“If I have something you want and I give it to you, what do I get? With our money, if the thing benefits you, I get money. I’m getting paid for whatever it is. I am trading the item for the money. The fact that the money doesn’t come from you is irrelevant,” D.W. finished triumphantly.

“But that isn’t a trade. You aren’t exchanging anything with whoever you gave it to. The payer gives you money but you didn’t give him anything,” Niall felt on firm ground.

D.W. persevered. “From my point of view as the producer of the item I’m giving up something to get something, and so for me it is a trade. For the person who buys that item (assuming it was a luxury item) they also give up something and get something. They give up money and get the luxury item.”

“But the person who produced the item isn’t trading with the person who consumes the item. They’re each trading with the Payers,” Niall maintained then thought again, “No, wait, the Payers aren’t getting anything out of this. They aren’t trading. There isn’t really any trade here at all.”

If there isn’t any trading,” Clayton said, “how come all those produced items keep getting into the hands of other people? How is it that I produce something and give it to others and other people do the same thing all over the country? It sure looks like trade to me.”

The instructor held up his hand. “How many parties are involved in a trade, Niall?”

“Two, of course. What else could it be?” Niall replied.
“Wendy, how many parties are involved in a trade?” the instructor said, turning to Wendy.

“In a POM there are two parties to a trade involving money, though there may be many individuals involved. In our economy there are always three parties involved in any use of money. In a POM economy the parties are the buyer and the seller or, put another way, the producer and the consumer. In our economy there is the producer, the consumer, and the payer. Our economy has three-party trades,” Wendy subsided with a somewhat surprised but happy look on her face.

“Niall, what is the function of a medium of exchange, what benefit does a medium of exchange provide for a society or an economy?” the instructor said turning back to Niall.

“A medium of exchange makes trade easier,” Niall replied, shrugging,

“Go on.”

“It lets people specialize. It allows people to do the things they are best at rather than having to do what everybody else does.”

“Would you say that in our economy goods are moving freely from those who produce them to those who consume them?”

“Well, we all ate breakfast this morning,” Niall grinned.

“When you worked, did anyone tell you what to produce or how you had to produce it?”

“No.”

“So if we don’t have trade, how are these things happening? You’ve said that you weren’t forced to produce. Why did you produce?”

“I wanted self respect. I wanted to be considered important. I didn’t want people to think I was a slacker. The money was nice, too,” Niall admitted.

“So you were getting something back for the benefits of the work you did. You worked and you got rewarded. Does that sound at least similar to a trade, from your point of view?” the instructor was closing in for the kill.

“Well, I always thought of trade as being between two people, not three.”

“But when you bought things back before the transition, how often did you actually give money directly to the owner and how often did you give it to someone else? Weren’t those cases in which you gave it to someone else cases of three parties, the owner, the clerk, and you?”

“But the title went from the owner to me. The clerk wasn’t involved in the transfer. Or at least the clerk never owned the item,” Niall’s rear guard battle.

“Ah, but the payer never owns the item either. But wait; let’s look at this in another way which might make it more acceptable. Perhaps if you thought of yourself as trading with the society as a whole. You give society the fruits of your labor and society gives you some of the fruits of other people’s labor in return.”
“But,” Niall said, “Society isn’t a person. It has no mind. It owns nothing at all. Individuals own things. There is no trade between an individual and society.”

“All right,” the instructor laughed, “for some people looking at it that way makes the idea easier to grasp but something tells me that it’s just possible that you aren’t one of those people. So, let’s avoid the word ‘trade’ since that seems to be a stumbling block. Niall, would you agree that at the beginning of the day all the property in the economy belongs to a set of people and at the end of the day some of that property belongs to people who didn’t own it that morning?”

“Sure. That’s obvious.”

“Would you say that this change of ownership was forced in some way? Would you say that it came about as a result of coercion?”

“I haven’t seen any,” Niall conceded.

“Class, do any of the rest of you know of any case where property changed ownership as a result of force or coercion?”

There was a general shaking of heads. Oscar said, “I know there are robberies and things are stolen sometimes. Do those count?”

“Did ownership of the property change or was it just the physical possession that changed?” the instructor asked.

“I guess those are just changes of possession rather than changes of ownership,” Oscar agreed.

“In fact,” the instructor said, “the possession of those items, now that they are reported stolen, can constitute a crime. It is very difficult to account for possessing property you don’t own, especially if that property is stolen.”

“So, Niall, all these changes of ownership should be called what? We can’t call them ‘trades’, you say, because person A and person B are not exchanging goods with each other, alone. What, then, are these changes in ownership? They aren’t robbery or theft because, in those cases, ownership doesn’t change. They aren’t examples of charity because the people who give are getting something as a result of their giving.”

“I don’t know,” Niall replied after a pause.

“Could we say that whatever they are, they correspond to trade in a POM economy. Ownership changes in a POM economy by trade and ownership changes in our economy by this, shall we say, ‘tradelike’ activity that involves three parties. Now in our economy there are actual barter trades which involve only two parties, so there is some of what you can comfortably call trade but the vast majority of transfers of ownership involve the Payers and thus are three-party interactions.”

“So, to get back to our points. One significant way that our money and POMs differ is that POMs are transferable and our money is not. There are several consequences of this besides the fact that POMs can be stolen and our money cannot. Can you think of any?”

“The only way to get our money is from the Payers. You can get a POM from anybody.” said Clayton.

“Right. So what? Niall, what difference does that make?”
Niall was a little taken aback, paused, then had an idea. “The Payers control our money because only the Payers can give it to you. POMs can’t be controlled so long as there is currency or coins or whatever. You can’t prevent people from passing their money to whomever they want regardless of what they’re buying. You can make it illegal but you can’t stop it. That’s why all the POM nations have black markets and organized crime.”

“That also means,” Clayton said, “that so long as the Payers are moral, our money is moral, since you can only get it by doing moral things. Since a POM is used for all kinds of purchases, both moral and immoral, a POM must be amoral.”

“Now wait just a darned minute!” Niall barked out. “Only people can be moral or immoral. You can’t say that some physical object is moral, immoral, or amoral. It’s just silly.”

“Yes, Niall,” Clayton said quietly, “Perhaps I said that poorly. Payers use our money to reward good behavior. People use POMs to reward all kinds of behavior, much of it bad. Thus the Bible says that money is the root of evil.”

Oscar spoke, “First Timothy, chapter 6 verses nine and ten, ‘But they that will be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.’”

“I wonder what the Bible would have said about our money,” Wendy mused. “I think it is the root of much that is good among us.”

“Class, we’re wandering,” the instructor said. “Back to consequences of money not being transferable. So far we have that it can’t be stolen and that it is controllable.”

“People don’t try to cheat you when you buy things. We don’t have all that misleading advertising and planned obsolescence, bait and switch and so on,” said D.W. “They know they can’t get money from you, so they don’t need to fool you and they don’t try. In a POM economy you only have to fool some of the people some of the time to make a fortune.”

“Isn’t that just another form of theft?” Niall pointed out.

“Yes, but we’d been talking about theft by taking rather than theft by fraud.” D.W. countered.

“I know. I know,” said Leyden. “There are no alimony or child support or property settlements in a divorce. When a couple get married, the money he earns stays his and what money she earns stays hers, even if they get a divorce. A girl can marry for gifts but she can’t marry for money,” she laughed. “Back when we were a POM economy there were terrible court battles over how much of the couple’s money each would get. Some girls would marry rich old men and divorce them a year or two later and get a lot of money from them.”

“Okay. Well done, Leyden,” the instructor said. “That is a major difference. Money belongs to individuals and not couples or companies or clubs because it’s not transferable. If two people could share an account, money paid to one could be spent by the other and that would be a transfer of the money. Therefore, we have no joint accounts of any kind for anybody. POMs, on the other hand, can and do have joint ownership of money from not only two, as in a marriage to thousands, as in a club or a corporation.”
“Can you think of any others? There is one that is a real biggie.” The instructor looked around, especially at those who had not yet spoken.

“Did any of you ever work in a bank?”

“Oh, I know, credit, loans. You can’t have loans or credit,” Natalie said, excitedly.

“Niall, why can’t there be loans?’ the instructor asked quickly.

“Because a loan is a transfer of money from one person to another,” Niall shot back.

“But what about credit? Why is there no credit?” the instructor had a gleam in his eye.

“Because… well, let’s examine the situation. If you wanted to buy a luxury the owner could just give it to you, but that would be a gift, not credit. If the owner said ‘Take it now and pay for it later’ the ownership would not be transferred until the item was paid for, so there would be no credit in that case, either. Since the transfer of ownership only occurs when money is deducted from the buyer’s account, and since the money will not be placed there until the benefits are known, you can’t actually buy anything until you have all the money,” Niall sat back rather pleased with himself. The instructor looked at Niall with a grin and said, “What about if the payer gives you the money now and says you can earn it later?”

“That isn’t legal, is it? They were telling us in another class that the benefit must exist or occur before payment and we have to record what that benefit is and how the work done contributed to it with the payment. So that would be against the law.”

“Class, is what Niall said true? Is it illegal?”

You could almost hear crickets chirp as the class froze into immobility, hoping not to be called upon. The silence lengthened. Finally, Wendy timidly raised one hand just a little.

“I don’t see how it could be illegal for the payer to give you money. The Payers are making judgments. There isn’t any law about how the Payers must pay because if there were it would be Congress making payments.” Then her hand was clutched in her lap.

The instructor just looked at the rest of the class. More silence. Finally Niall raised his hand and was recognized.

“I think I was wrong. I agree with Wendy. I mean, there couldn’t be a law telling the Payers how to pay. If there were, then those who made the law would be the Payers. Besides, the Payers could just ignore the law and it wouldn’t be enforced.”

“Niall, I am impressed. It took me years to understand that point. There can be no law controlling payer payments, because no such law could be enforced. Therefore, all payments the Payers make, no matter how outrageous, are legal. It isn’t the law that restrain and motivates Payers, since the Payers, by the way they pay, control law enforcement. It’s having to live among the general population at the bottom of the social class pyramid that keeps Payers in line.”
Chapter Thirty-Two: zero-sum

In which Niall discovers that things are not what they seem with a POM and there's work for everybody.

“To review what you have said so far: POMs can be stolen, our money cannot because our money is not transferable. POM can be used to motivate any behavior whether good or bad. Our money is as moral as the Payers.” This one gave Niall a little frisson of fear. “No society can control how a POM is used when it’s in the form of currency or coins. Our money is easily controllable.

“There are several more differences between POMs and our money. Think, now.”

D.W.’s face brightened, “Counterfeiting. A physical object can be counterfeited. POMs can be faked. Our money is almost impossible to counterfeit and even if it were it could not be done on a large scale or it would be obvious.”

Niall thought that Jean’s idea about rogue Payers, paying themselves and living in the POM colonies could be a way that large scale counterfeiting would not be so obvious.

“Very good, D.W. We can add that to the list. Who’s next?”

“The South American nations often have a problem with inflation,” Leyden said. “With a POM you can just print as much money as you like. It doesn’t matter whether there’s anything to buy or not. With our money prices are always the same.”

“Excellent, Leyden. That is a big difference,” the instructor said.” With POMs the supply of money is independent of the supply of goods and services for sale. With our money, the supply of luxury goods and services for sale determines the amount of money that exists to buy things. We use the Payers’ adjustments of paying for benefits rather than the prices of luxury items to be our free market. Therefore, we never have inflation or deflation of our money supply.

“Can anybody think of another difference?”

There was a long pause with some shifting but there were no hands up this time.

“OK. Most classes don’t get this last one even though it might be the most important of the lot. Let’s approach it gradually and perhaps you can figure it out before I tell you.

“Do any of you play poker? Good. If each of the players in a poker game begins the game with $100 in chips and one of the players ends the game with $150 in chips, what do we know about the winnings and losses of the other players?”

D.W.’s hand went up, “Somebody else must have lost $50.”

“Yes. Some one player or some combination of the other players must have lost at least $50. Why is that?”

Oscar said, “Because if you add up the losses and winnings of all the players the total will always be zero. In order for one player to gain some other player must lose. If it wasn’t that way the game could go on forever.”
“Exactly! That situation where winnings and losses have to balance out is called a ‘zero-sum game.’ Is an economy a zero-sum game?”

“Oh course not,” said Niall. “The market is a win-win situation. In every trade each trader gains by the trade. That’s how specialization increases everyone’s wealth.”

“Quite right. Now let’s look at a POM economy simple purchase. Leyden, you will pretend to be buying a hat from Oscar. Leyden you have $20 and the hat is being offered for $15. Are you willing to pay $15 for that hat?”

“I guess.”

“Aren’t you sure?”

“Well, I’d like to pay less than that. It looks like it’s only worth about $5,” she responded.

“Good. So what do you say to Oscar?”

“I’ll give you $5 for the hat,” Leyden smiled at Oscar.

Oscar got right into the swing of things,”$5?!? That hat is worth $25. The only reason I am willing to part with it for only $15 is because I like you and want to encourage you to trade with me in the future.”

“Well, I might go as high as $7, since I am in the store,” Leyden countered trying to sound reasonable.

“Look, I am a poor man merely trying to stay in business, here. I guess I could go as low as $12, but it’s taking bread from the mouths of my children.”

“Great acting,” the instructor interrupted, “but let’s assume that the two of you finally complete the transaction at a price of $10. Tell me about your relationship? How did it feel?”

“I was competing with Leyden, trying to get as much money as I could from her for the hat,” Oscar said.

The instructor quickly asked, “Oscar, what was Leyden trying to do?”

“She was trying to get the hat for as little money as possible.”

“So, Leyden, what was your relationship to Oscar?”

“He was my opponent. I had to make him think I would never pay more than just a few dollars. I had to pretend that I hardly cared whether I got that hat or not. He wanted all my money so I had to be careful to see he didn’t get it.”

“Class, who won? Did Oscar win because he got $10 or did Leyden win because she got the hat?”

Niall jumped in before the others could. “They both won because each benefited from the trade.”
“Yes. They both won. Both got what they wanted to some degree without harming the other. Since the trade was voluntary, they could each win. And if you extend what we just saw here to the whole economy you will see that it optimizes the outcomes for the economy as a whole as well.

“But let’s look at the exact same interaction and see only the money part of it. Leyden how much money did you have to begin with?”

“I had $20.”

“Oscar, how much money did you have to begin?”

“I had nothing but a hat.”

“So the total money in the beginning was $20. How much money did you have at the end, Leyden?”

“I had $10 left.”

“Oscar?”

“I had $10, and no hat.”

“Just the money, now. We are ignoring everything else, no matter how relevant or important it may be. So, looking just at the money, who gained by this transaction?”

“Oscar did,” D.W. said. “Oscar gained $10 and Leyden lost $10.”

“Does that sound like a zero-sum game?” the instructor asked.

There were general murmurs of agreement and Niall saying, “But it wasn’t a zero-sum game. They both benefited from the trade. They wouldn’t have made the trade if it wouldn’t benefit both.”

“I did not ask if it was a zero-sum game, I asked if, when we look just at the money, it sounds like a zero-sum game. Does the money part, looked at all by itself, look like a zero-sum game?”

“Only because you are ignoring the other half of the trade,” Niall conceded.

“What was the relationship between the buyer and the seller in our case of the hat?”

Niall said,” They were trading. They were each getting what they wanted.”

“What else?”

Natalie said, “They were also opponents. Leyden admitted that she was trying to fool Oscar and Oscar was trying to fool Leyden. They didn’t feel like they were cooperating even though that was the end result of what they were doing.”

“Anything else?”

“Oscar got the money, so he won,” Clayton said.

“Oscar only won if the other people selling hats got less for their hats than Oscar did,” Leyden said.
“Class, notice that we are measuring the success of the sellers here by the money they get and ignoring the costs to each and the satisfaction experienced by each. But more important, notice that even though, as Niall says, they both benefit by the trade, they each are taking a point of view of opposition to each other.

“This is the point of view of the zero-sum game. In order for me to win I have to make someone else lose. If you aren’t a winner you must be a loser. In that kind of situation what happens to those who are relatively weak?” The instructor looked around the room hoping for a new contributor.

Niall, of course was eager to answer, “They both win so long as the market is free. They both improve their situations.”

Clayton turned to Niall and said, “Really? What if the sellers of hats get together and decide that none of them will sell a hat for less than $19. Leyden is only one person. How can she compete with price fixing of the hat sellers?”

“At those prices,” Niall said, “there will be a lot of other people willing to sell hats for a few dollars less.”

“But you’re assuming that the market stays free,” Clayton said with a touch of anger. “You’re assuming that other people can enter the market. Since there’s money to be made by keeping the prices of hats high, the hatters are motivated to punish anyone who sells hats for less. With people looking upon each other as enemies, how can you keep the market free?” he finished triumphantly.

The instructor asked, “What has happened to those who were weak in POM economies, historically?”

“They get weaker and poorer,” Wendy said.

“What happens to the rich and powerful?” asked the instructor.

“They get richer and more powerful.” said D.W.

“Until what happens?”

“Until the economy falls apart,” said Oscar. “And when the economy falls apart the political system will not be far behind. Take the economic chaos in Russia in 1917 or in Germany in the 1920’s or look at Rome in its long decline. Whenever an economy gets rich, the wealth becomes more and more concentrated until the foundation of that economy is destroyed. In Rome it was the middle class farmers who formed the basis for the success of Rome. But as Rome got more powerful and more wealthy, that very class of farmers was destroyed and the whole economy came to depend upon annexing more areas and enslaving more people until they could no longer expand and could no longer afford to pay the army to protect them.”

“That’s only because they destroyed their free market. If they had left it alone, if they had kept the government controls out of it, they could have remained strong,” Natalie countered.

“How could they have done that, Natalie?” Wendy asked quietly. “How could they have prevented the rich from destroying the free market?”

“It wasn’t the rich, it was the government,” Natalie maintained.
“Weren’t the Senators rich? Weren’t the Caesars rich? Who paid for Julius’ run for office? Who paid the armies?” Clayton was definitely heated. “It was always the rich. The rich were the government. They controlled it and they ran it to benefit themselves.”

“Regardless of whether it was the rich or the government what difference does it make?” Natalie said fiercely. “Did it really matter whether it was one or the other if the free market was destroyed? Because in a POM economy, even if a society is fortunate enough to somehow approximate a free market, that freedom will always be destroyed. That’s because people can make money by destroying the freedom of the market. One can make money by forming monopolies. One can make money by making legislation favorable to one set of people over another set of people. One can lie and cheat and steal and threaten in the market. There are many ways to abuse the market and they all make money for somebody.”

“But it’s stupid to destroy the free market,” Niall said. “Everybody suffers without the free market. If the government would just let the market alone it would be better for everybody.”

“Niall, did you ever hear the story of the monkey trap?” the instructor asked.

“Monkey trap? No.” Niall replied.

“Some explorers in a tropical region found some large heavy pots with small necks in the forest. They picked up some and shook them and found that they had nuts in them. When they asked the natives what they were for they replied that those were monkey traps. The monkeys could smell the nuts in the jars. They would reach inside and grab a handful of nuts but then would be unable to withdraw their arms. Since the jars were heavy the monkeys had to just stand there next to the jar until the hunters came and shot them. This shows that the hope of an immediate, relatively small gain will often cause monkeys and people, too, to do stupid things. The immediate reward for destroying the market always proves to be too tempting for some people to resist. The money they can make by destroying the freedom of the market will always overcome what good sense they might have. At the end of the 20th century, there were no free markets of any size left in the world, since every society had a government and those governments always imposed limitations on their markets.

The simulation of a zero-sum game that results from the use of a POM is what makes individuals think they can benefit when they make others suffer. When it’s obvious that the benefits of a free market help everyone to attain their ends, why would people seek to destroy it unless they didn’t understand their actual situation?

We’re nearing the end of our time so I’ll give a brief review of the main points.

POMs are transferable therefore they can be stolen and borrowed.

POMs have a physical manifestation, such as currency, thus they can be counterfeited and produced in any amount whether goods and services exist to be bought with it or not. Inflation and deflation are possible with POMs.

POMs are used by everybody, thus their use cannot be controlled so their use encourages moral, immoral, and amoral behavior depending on what the money is offered for.

POMs simulate a zero-sum game causing people to think they are independent of each other when they are really dependent on each other.”

Niall’s hand shot up.
“Niall, we can deal with that next time.

Our money is not transferable so it cannot be stolen and there is no credit or loans of our money.

Our money is given only by Payers, so the behavior it motivates is as moral as the Payers make it.

Our money does not simulate a zero-sum game, since it emphasizes that if others benefit we benefit. It makes obvious our interdependence.”

After class Niall was still fired up to talk about the points covered in class and since he didn’t have another class for two hours, he asked Oscar if he would like to continue the discussion in the cafeteria. Oscar grinned an acceptance and they set out in search of food.

“Seriously,” Oscar said. “We actually were spending over 25% of our human resources on maintaining the money. Of course, you’d think of cashiers, bookkeepers, accountants, and tax lawyers as not being needed any more but there was also no need for banks, insurance, and stock markets. Whole industries were no longer needed. When you add to that the number of people in government who were no longer needed to enforce various laws or distribute welfare, it added up to over 25% of the workforce. Then too, there were all those buildings and janitors and computers and paper and office furniture and so on and on.”

“There were millions of people suddenly out of work. What did they do?”

“At first there were a lot of scared people. But then they discovered that a lot of things that people weren’t paid to do before they could get paid for now. Child rearing, for example, generated a continuing income for mothers and some fathers. home-schooling mothers in particular had a pretty nice income. The contractors who did road work and infrastructure construction suddenly were recruiting everybody they could who could do the work since the streets and dams and bridges and such had been neglected for decades. There was construction going on all over. The folks who built equipment and supplies for the contractors had a huge surge in requests for materials and tools. Contractors also did very well in the housing industry in renovating old buildings. There were lots of office buildings that were converted to other uses.”

“But what about those bankers and insurance salesmen and bookkeepers and such? They weren’t going to make construction workers. What could they do?”

“The accountants and bookkeepers discovered that there are lots of things that need to be kept track of and organized. Inventory still needs to be monitored. The bankers found that their skills in recognizing good investments were quite useful in helping the capital producers decide how to distribute their resources. In a lot of cases the bankers only needed a little education to make excellent coordinators. The people who were well-educated enough to be comptrollers and financial officers and such found it easy to adapt to the new economy. They had lots of skills that were useful.”

“What’s a coordinator?” Niall asked. It was a job category with which he was unfamiliar.

“They bring together people who could cooperate to accomplish some large project and make sure the information each needs about the others is available at the right time and place. Like if you are going to build a house, you would need lumber and tools and nails and plumbing and wiring and cement and shingles and people who knew how to build with and install all those things. They would
need to have the materials show up at the right time and place and the various people who would work with them would need to get there at the right time and have the plans available so they would know what they were going to be doing. They would all have to agree ahead of time. The coordinator sees to all those things. When things go wrong as they always do on any complicated enterprise, they are the ones who get the resources, human and otherwise, that are needed to make things work. For some big projects you might have several layers of coordinators each with their own specialty. Naturally the Internet is an enormous help, since they can advertise for what they need and when."

"Why do people obey them?" Niall asked.

"Nobody obeys them. They can’t give orders. Well, they could, but if you disobeyed they couldn’t do anything about it. They provide information. If you know that by showing up first thing in the morning next Tuesday and installing plumbing at the house being built at 1433 Maple Street, you could expect to get paid for the benefit for years, then you have a good reason to do the work. If you said you were going to do that job and then just didn’t show up, there would be some Declarations about you in your references file. If you’re willing and able to do a good job and you let it be known that you’re available, you will probably be contacted by several coordinators with work you can do. The better you get, the more important the projects that you will be offered."

"What if they make a mistake?"

"Then they look bad and people are less likely to want to work on the projects they try to put together. But everybody makes mistakes and since you can get paid pretty good for fixing things after a mistake, there are always lots of folks around who will try to help out."

"How do they find projects to do?"

Oscar scratched his head, “I really don’t know. I suspect that people bring them ideas and other coordinators probably just look for problems that need solving. Lots of those in the building trades had training as architects or civil engineers. There are also a lot of them who used to be contractors."

“What about big projects like a dam or large bridge? If a project takes years to complete, do all those guys not get paid anything until it’s done?"

“That’s right. But when you have finished, the pay comes rolling in regularly and you don’t have to lift a finger. It all depends on whether you want a little now or a lot later. Those big projects also attract a lot of people as they get near to completion, since the payoff is nearer."
Chapter Thirty-Three: Self-Betrayal

In which we meet Mr. Sharpe and his staff and Niall tells the truth perhaps at some cost.

He was rather portly and wore what looked like a silk suit under a flowing cape. He had a carnation in his buttonhole and his shoes shone with an almost inner glow. He had a large ring on his left hand that must have had over two carats of diamonds around a large ruby. He walked into the classroom, saw the chair behind the table, snorted and gestured to someone in the hallway. An older man in a chauffeur’s uniform pushed in on a dolly a rather large reclining chair and positioned it beside the table.

“Thanks, Reggie. That should do,” he said and the man in uniform took the dolly with him as he left.

Rotating his large paunch toward the class, he seemed to examine each of the expectant faces before him, then grimaced and turned toward the chair. “Open” he said seeming to address the chair. It obediently tilted itself toward him and rose up to receive his considerable bulk. He leaned back into the leather covered cushions and the chair gently adjusted its position until his movements indicated satisfaction. For a moment he closed his eyes and seemed about to take a nap. Then he roused himself, tilted slightly forward and addressed the class.

“I am Mr. Sharpe. I'll never be a payer. I earned my wealth and I don’t intend to ever give it up. But I know how the payer organization works and you need to know as well.

“The payer organization is both a bureaucracy and a free market. Until you understand how it can be both of these things at the same time you’ll never understand it.”

He smacked his lips a couple of times, sighed, and continued.

“How is it a bureaucracy? It has a hierarchical structure composed of offices. That is the essence of bureaucracy. There is a considerable division of labor within the organization.” He seemed to be reciting by rote something memorized and his tone became lower and quieter. “Most Payers are rather highly specialized. Their actions are coordinated by those above them in the hierarchy. Some of the people in this hierarchy are not Payers, of course, but their skills are needed to operate the hierarchy. Where possible, Payers do the administrative work, still called paper shuffling, even though there is little actual paper left in administration.”

He gave a slight smile and lowered his gaze from the ceiling to which it had slowly migrated. He smacked his lips again and licked them slightly. This time the sigh was even larger, puffing his cheeks.

“You can call the payer organization offices and someone answers the phone. You can ask questions and get information. You can praise or complain. There are buildings of payer offices, though most Payers don't have offices.”

He paused again in his rather dry lecture. One hand rubbed his belly for a moment. “Reggie?”

“Right here, sir,” came from the hallway and Reggie reappeared now wearing what appeared to be the garb of a bartender from the 1890’s, complete with apron and garter belts holding his sleeves. He carried in one hand a small table and in the other a tall, elegant glass and a brown bottle with beads of moisture beginning to condense on its surface. In a few seconds, Reggie had placed the table
beside Mr. Sharpe, and placed the glass and bottle side by side on the table within easy reach. Then he took a bottle opener from his pocket and placed it next to the still sealed bottle and left the room.

Mr. Sharpe looked achingly at the goods on the table, then turned resolutely away.

“From just looking at the offices and watching what goes on there you would never know that the people involved were Payers except for the way they dress. But these bureaucrats oversee a tremendous information processing and communications organization.” His gaze wandered back to the bottle then away again to the class. “Billions of facts are processed daily around the clock. They keep track of all the luxury items in the economy and most of the capital goods. They keep track of most of the people as producers and all the people as consumers, including the Payers.”

He smacked his lips a couple more times, glanced furtively at the bottle and continued.

“The hierarchy is a huge locus of power within the economy, somewhat similar to but much larger than any authoritarian government. The influence of the organization extends from the highest councils of the largest enterprises to the simplest producer of home made goods. Decisions made in the organization influence the directions the economy will take quite strongly.”

Sitting up suddenly to an almost upright position (with the cooperation of the chair) he suddenly barked “Do you believe that the payer organization is a bureaucracy?”

There was a startled nodding of heads and murmurs of agreement.

“Whew. That calls for a sip, I believe.”

From his now upright position he turned eagerly toward his reward. Grasping the bottle in his left hand and the opener in his right, he caressingly and lovingly drew off the metal cap from the bottle. Then, returning the opener to the table, he took the bottle in his right hand, the glass in his left, and began the pour, a look of delight, almost rapture, on his face. The golden liquid slipped quietly, gently, and smoothly into the bottom of the curved glassware, curling and bubbling with delighted effervescence at its release from captivity. Closing his eyes he brought the glass to his lips and, sighing with pleasure, took the first sip, then a larger one. Carefully placing the glass once again on its coaster, he turned toward the class and issued an enormous belch.

“All right. That was the easy part,” he said leaving the class in doubt as to whether he was referring to the beer and the belch or the explanation. “The Payers look like an organization even down to nearly wearing a uniform. Their offices look like offices. But they don’t look like a free market, do they?”

A puzzled shaking of heads and murmurs of “no” was his answer.

“Are there any of you who do not know what supply and demand are? Never mind, you probably don’t know even if you think you do. A market is a situation in which trade takes place. Notice I did not say it was a place. Thousands of years ago a market had a particular location. People brought to such places what they were willing to offer and found there others with goods to exchange. Today you don’t have to be near someone in order to give them something or get something from them. Therefore, a market today is a situation not a location. It’s an opportunity to exchange with other people.”

“Do Payers exchange with each other?” he asked eyeing them warily.

After a moment of hesitation there was a shaking of heads and murmurs of “no.”
He sighed hugely. He shook his head and looked to the heavens or at least to the ceiling. Then he confronted them. “Do Payers exchange with each other? What do they have to exchange?” he barked.

“Money?” (We will omit the name of party who gave this foolish answer to protect the guilty.)

“You people are going to be Payers? We’ll never survive it. You’ll destroy the economy.” Mr. Sharpe groaned in a magnificent display of disappointment.

“Payers can’t give money to each other,” Oscar said.

“Bravo,” he said slowly clapping his hands in sarcastic applause.

“What do Payers have to exchange?” he repeated staring at them one after another with a scowl.

“Knowledge?” Natalie offered.

“There,” he smiled serenely. “That wasn’t so hard, was it? Knowledge, information. What must a payer have to do his job? Knowledge and information. A payer has to be aware of benefits and costs. A payer has to understand how things are interrelated. Could you walk out of here right now, see some benefit, and know whom to pay and how much? I don’t think so. You’d need a lot more information and probably more knowledge than you have now.”

“Each of you has information and can gather more. You have knowledge gained over the course of your respective lifetimes. Some of you know about one or more kinds of work. You may have been a brick layer,” he said pointing at Leyden, who giggled in response. “You may have been a secretary,” he said directing his gaze at Niall who bowed slightly from the waist in acknowledgement, with a grin. “You may have been a stay at home father,” he said sighing in the general direction of Oscar, whose eyes got big. “You may have been a farmer?” he inquired of Wendy, whose broad smile and nod indicated he wasn’t far from wrong. Whatever things you did with your life, you should have learned from it. You should have some understanding of how things work. Your fellow Payers need your knowledge and understanding just as you need theirs. When you eat at the lunchroom, you can notice what foods people prefer and which they avoid. A few of you may have some idea of the nutritional value of the various offerings.”

Mr. Sharpe paused, looked at the still half full glass, then reached for it again. This drink was only a couple of swallows. He looked almost at the point of tears as he contemplated how little of the golden liquid remained in the glass. Then getting control of himself he resolutely turned back to the class and continued. “If some Payers needed to know what food was eaten and what the nutritional value of that eaten food was, you might have that information for them. Therefore you can exchange with them, discovering from them what you need to know and giving to them some of what they need to know.

“This is exchange, people. This is give and take. This is trade. There is also information you need in order to coordinate your actions with the actions of the other Payers. For example, where will your knowledge and information be most useful to the other Payers? How much money should you have available to pay for certain kinds of benefits? What proportion of the pay for an organization should go to the various roles played in that organization?”

Grimacing, he went back to his bored lecturer tone and rocked his head from side to side as he almost recited, “In a hierarchy, orders flow from the top down. What flows back up?”
“Information,” Oscar announced trying to sound more confident than he felt.

“Well. You’re getting better,” Mr. Sharpe sounded somewhat surprised. “Yes. Information flows up the hierarchy. Why does information flow up?”

“The people at the top want to know what’s happening so they can make good decisions.” D.W. said.

“Do the people at the top get accurate information?”

Leyden said, “No. They hear what they want to hear. Their lackeys learn to tell them just what they want to hear.”

“What else?”

Niall said, “Information acquires what you might call static along the way. Every time information goes from person A to person B, some of it is lost and misunderstanding creeps in. The signal to noise ratio gets worse.”

“All right,” the instructor said, taking the last sip of his tall, cool one, now departed, “what does this mean for an organization, especially one as big as the Payers?”

There was a painful pause as the class digested the implications of what they had just heard. They were relieved to see Reggie reappear to take away the table and the empty containers for it gave them time to think. Finally, Niall said, “The people at the top who make the decisions don’t have the information they need to make those decisions. Therefore, at best, they are making informed guesses.”

“Therefore?” the instructor said raising an eyebrow.

Leyden said thoughtfully, “Therefore, those at the top shouldn’t be making the decisions.”

“That seems obvious doesn’t it?” the instructor gave a beatific smile looking, from certain angles, like an overgrown cherub in an expensive suit.

“The people at the top should not be making the decisions,” he continued. “So how can decisions be made if you don’t have someone at the top making them?”

“Elections!” Clayton burst out. “Decisions can be made by voting.”

“Good. Does the payer organization make any decisions by elections?”

“Yes. We had that in our history course,” Natalie said." We categorize products and services as luxuries, capital, and necessities by the votes of samples drawn from all the Payers. We also use elections to decide on the prices of luxuries. And ah... oh, we also use elections to decide on the proportions of the available money to allocate to various benefits.”

Niall jumped in, “How are those votes? They’re more like surveys or polls of the Payers. The people who design the questionnaires and who interpret the answers can get whatever result they want. The people at the top are still making the decisions. They just don’t want to admit it.”
“OK, Niall, let’s take these three kinds of elections or surveys one at a time and see how they work. First was the categorizing of products and services. This is a simple question. ‘Is this item a luxury, a necessity, or capital?’ Do you see some way to bias that question? More importantly, do you see some advantage to anyone for categorizing some item one way or another?”

“Sure,” Leyden put in. “If the item’s a necessity, the Payers get to have it. That gives them an incentive to make luxuries into necessities.”

“I think we all agree that’s true. That’s an incentive to label all consumer goods as being necessities. How will people treat Payers if there are few luxuries?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, you do realize that the amount of money the Payers can pay is determined by the amount of luxury goods and services available for sale. So if almost every consumer good and service is a necessity, the Payers would have almost no money to pay with. What would that do to the respect and attention Payers now get?”

“I guess that wouldn’t be so good for us,” Leyden admitted.

“Let’s take clothes, for example. What if all clothes were labeled necessities? How could you distinguish a payer from anybody else?”

Leyden looked quickly down at her hand-decorated stockings.

“You couldn’t,” Niall said.

“Let’s consider another, even more basic point, the proportion of people in the population who are Payers. If people don’t have to give up much to become a payer, then there should be a lot more people who are willing to become Payers for the power. That could result in far too many Payers and therefore far too little respect and power and goods, for that matter, to go around. If too many things are labeled as necessities, there will be too many Payers. The Payers wouldn’t like that. So they have incentives to keep the list of necessities within bounds.

But by far the most important reason why not too many things are labeled as necessities is that the other people in the society wouldn’t like it,” Mr. Sharpe continued. “Payers have to live among the common people and are, therefore, quite sensitive to how other people feel about things, especially how they feel about Payers. The Payers fear appearing greedy.

Therefore, there’s a balance between incentives to make more things necessities and more things luxuries. Those random samples of the Payers assure that we come pretty close to the sentiments of the society as a whole when those decisions are made. Reggie, please!”

Once again Reggie appeared in the doorway. This time, he appeared in the guise of a head waiter in a luxury restaurant and in addition to a pristine white cloth over his left arm, he carried a bowl from which there issued visible evidence of hot water and the most enticing of aromas. He brought the tempting prize close to Mr. Sharpe’s face and gently wafted the aroma toward his client. Mr. Sharpe’s eyes closed slowly then snapped open. “Bread, what breads have we?”

Reggie reached into a pocket, drew out a brown card, and handed it to Mr. Sharpe with a small bow. Mr. Sharpe viewed it critically and made his selections. Reggie accepted the return of the card with another small bow and departed taking the bowl of soup with him.
Mr. Sharpe looked lingeringly after Reggie or perhaps after the soup then turned once again to the class.

“The next kind of election is the kind that sets prices for luxury items. This is more of a calculation in many respects, since the Payers try to set the prices at what it costs to produce the good or service. The use of a large sample of Payers makes use of what has been called the Delphi effect. This is the tendency of a large sample of people to be better at predicting the future accurately than any individual, no matter how ‘expert.’ The questions on these surveys are ‘This is the item, these are the resources used to create it, what should the price be?’ As you can see it’s difficult to imagine slanting such a question in any particular direction. Besides, the closer the Payers come to setting the price at the actual cost of production, the more wealth there is for everyone else and the better people will like the Payers. Therefore, there is no incentive to try to cheat in some direction. Even the producers of the luxuries maximize their own pay if the prices are set at production costs. Do you see?”

“Yes, sir. Your description raises quite a number of other questions, but I do see that there is little opportunity for bias and no motivation for attempting to bias the results,” Niall nodded.

“Moving on, then, to the last kind of election, we get the allocation of money to various kinds of benefits. Here is where you see the most scope for cheating, right Niall?”

“Yes, I do. Those who produce steel want more money for steel. Those who produce cloth want more money for cloth. There must be lobbying and pressure groups and everything.”

“But Niall, they are allocating money for kinds of benefits, not for kinds of products. The allocations are for such things as environmental protection, health, education, and security. How can you tell what product will help each of those benefits? I would imagine that steel, for example, would contribute to all of them, depending on how it is used and how it is produced. The same thing holds for cloth. What kind of work did you do last?”

“I worked at the Los Alamos computer facility which would help everything but before that I drove a truck for a TDP plant which mostly made oil, gas, fertilizer and electricity,” Niall answered.

“Is there any benefit you can think of that the production of energy would not contribute to? What benefit or benefits would you have lobbied for?”

Niall paused, then said, reluctantly, “I don’t know.”

“Now let’s suppose that the allocation is made for a month and then something unexpected happens, like, say, a volcano erupting on the West Coast. Do the Payers have to stick with their former decision? Do they need permission to begin paying for benefits that were not expected to be needed when the decision was made? Clearly the Payers’ individual decisions will adapt and adjust to the circumstances in which they find themselves. Therefore, the allocation of money to the various kinds of benefits is more in the nature of the setting of policy rather than the creating of a budget.”

By this time the entire class was being distracted by the aroma of fresh baked bread coming into the room from the hallway. Reggie and two helpers dressed as waiters now brought in another, larger table which fitted exactly over the large chair in which Mr. Sharpe semi-reclined. The table had a fine linen cloth almost painfully white and was graced by silver, china, and crystal. Reggie brought up the rear with a silver soup tureen. As he placed it on the table in a prominent position, the others hurried out and back with containers from which the bread aromas were issuing plus what looked like butter and a set of jam pots. Several kinds of bread were taken from their containers and placed about the
table. Reggie picked up the ladle and the thick bowl that was in front of Mr. Sharpe and proceeded to spoon two portions of the soup into the bowl. Placing it before Mr. Sharpe he once again bowed slightly and withdrew. Steam rose gently from the various foods and moisture condensed on the crystal goblet which seemed to contain water. Niall’s stomach gurgled loudly which broke the mood of the class into one of amusement.

Mr. Sharpe continued the presentation while selecting a bread and spreading it with the softened butter and some of the jam.

“Do you see how these kinds of decisions can be made by payer votes or surveys?”

“OK. I will accept that they can make meaningful decisions by these so-called elections. At least until I can think of a reason not to,” Niall grinned.

The instructor took a large bite of the bread, readjusted his bulk in the recliner, then addressed the class.

“We are considering how the payer organization is both a bureaucracy and a free market. So far we have easily observed that the organization is a bureaucracy. But we have not seriously discussed the issue of the free market aspects of that organization.” After a pause to address the soup with a gentle and graceful dip of his spoon he continued. “The first step in that direction was to point out that the organization is controlled by the information that moves up the organization both in the sense of reporting to superiors, which is standard operating procedure for bureaucracies, but also in the sense of making decisions of various kinds through elections. The main thing I want you to notice is that the organization is really controlled from below. That is, its policies and directions and major decisions are made by these surveys of samples of the membership. This is the mechanism by which the free market aspects of the organization become important.”

More bread and a couple of sips of the still hot soup were enjoyed.

“A free market operates by individual traders doing what seems best for themselves without having to take into account artificial restrictions, limitations, and controls. Gravity is a restriction on us all, sadly,” he said glancing down at the bulk of his midsection. “But it’s not an artificial restriction. The enforcement of laws controlling trade is an artificial restriction. A monopoly is an artificial restriction. Taxes are an artificial restriction. In a free market the only thing one must take into account is one’s own best interests. One can give when one decides it is best and keep when one decides that is best.”

“Take the role of a producer in our economy. You provide work of some sort. Who is able to buy your work?”

“Everyone who has money to spend,” Niall said.

“No,” Clayton said. “People with money to spend can’t give it to you. It’s the Payers who can give you money.”

Niall felt a little hot in the cheeks.

The instructor said,” So only the Payers can give you money?”

“Of course. Niall just isn’t used to our money quite yet. He’s only been in the country for about 6 months.” Oscar said, leaning over to punch Niall gently on the shoulder.
“Does that mean that there is only one buyer for your work?”

“No,” Leyden said, “any of the Payers can pay you for your work. There are millions of Payers.”

“So we have millions of Payers who buy work and millions of producers who sell their work. Are the Payers controlled or artificially restricted in what they buy or what they pay for it? This is a crucial question, so consider it carefully.”

The class respectfully was quiet for a while which gave Mr. Sharpe an opportunity to devote more attention to his soup which still needed cooling.

Niall was one of the first to hold up his hand to give an answer.

“I think we just discussed the decisions of the payer organization that tells the Payers how much they can pay as an organization and what they are to pay for. Therefore I would say the controls and restrictions are artificial.”

There was a pause and the instructor looked around the room with that one raised eyebrow. Finally, Natalie said, “OK, I'll take the other side. I say that those controls are natural and are part of the market itself.”

The instructor raised his hand and said, “I expect full participation. You may switch sides of the argument at will, but I want to hear well-reasoned arguments on both sides. This is how you can show me that you understand the payer organization and its functioning. Since the organization does make decisions and since it is a bureaucracy, the burden of proof will be with those who contend that the controls and restrictions are natural. Who would like to go first? Natalie?” And he applied himself to what was left of his snack.

“We discussed in another class that the Payers are free to pay as they want to pay. That is, they must take the consequences of their payments but there is no law that controls their paying and there never will be, since that would cost the legislators money.”

“If no one else has a rebuttal to that statement I will recognize Niall. Ah, good, Clayton?”

“Just because the government doesn't have a law or any enforcement mechanism doesn't mean there can't be other sources of artificial controls. The Payers' organization could create artificial controls internally. My daddy used to tell me about how the union leaders would manipulate what were supposed to be democratic organizations.”

“Will you let that stand? Is there any reason to reject that assertion? Come on, think. Oscar?”

“If the payer organization is to institute a control or restriction it would have to have some way of enforcing that restriction. It would have to have some means of punishing a payer who diverged from the others. The Payers cannot employ force, such as corporal punishment, since that would be against the law and other Payers would pay to have that law enforced. Thus, the only kind of punishment that would be available would be social condemnation or ostracism or something like that. These responses are natural, like gravity, and not artificial, like laws.”

“Response? Clayton again.”
“But the organization could come up with rules and code them into the computer. In fact, we’ve all taken classes in how to make a payment and the procedures that must be followed in such cases. These are restrictions on the Payers that are set by the organization and the computer enforces them.”

“Come on, someone besides Oscar. Yes, Wendy.”

“The computer is not restricting how much a payer can pay nor is it controlling who can be paid so long as one is not trying to pay another payer. The computer is more like a cash register than an enforcement agency. The computer will not limit the decisions that the Payers make, individually or in groups, for large payments, concerning what should be paid for or how much. Therefore, it doesn’t restrict nor restrain trade between Payers and workers.”

“Rebuttal, anyone? Niall? Is there some way in which the payer organization controls or restricts the payments which individual Payers or groups of Payers can make?”

Mr. Sharpe paused, waiting for another comment and taking another bite of his diminishing bread supply. Finally, “OK, what does restrict the size of the payments?”

“The production of luxuries,” several voices said.

“What limits does a payer have in paying?”

“They do have a limit for individual payments but so does every trader in a POM market. Nobody has unlimited funds,” Wendy said.

“So, from the point of view of the producer, the Payers constitute a large market for the work producers do. Are the Payers free to buy what they wish, so long as they stay within their budgets?”

There was general agreement.

“Does that mean that from the producer’s point of view, there is a free market?”

“No,” Niall said forcefully. “There is no trade between individual workers or producers and individual Payers. The workers give things to other people and the Payers give things to the workers. That isn’t a trade.”

“Reggie?”

“Yes, Sir?” Reggie said, appearing in the doorway looking every inch as one would imagine a very correct butler right up to the white tie and tails.

“My feet hurt, Reggie.”

“Right away, sir,” Reggie responded and went out the door.

“Niall, is there anything about a free market that requires that the exchanges of goods and services must be between pairs of people? Can there not be an exchange in which person A gives something to person B and person B gives something to person C and person C gives something to person A? That’s a three party exchange in which each party is giving something and each party is getting something but there’s no direct exchange between any two of them. If there are no artificial restrictions on that exchange, wouldn’t that be an example of a free market at work?”
“But it isn’t trade,” Niall maintained.

Reggie reappeared not quite so correctly dressed with a waistcoat (tasteful though not subdued) and white gloves followed by what looked to be a Balinese dancing girl by her costume though without the rings and long fingernails. She carried what appeared to be a carpetbag.

“But is it a market and is it free? If people are exchanging goods and services freely, isn’t that situation a free market?”

Reggie moved the table aside and knelt at Mr. Sharpe’s feet, gently removed his shoes. Then he carefully drew off the socks that covered the feet.

“You can call it whatever you like but it isn’t trade. Trade is between two parties, just two. It isn’t a merry-go-round of gifts or whatever you call them,” Niall said trying to ignore the operations at the feet of the instructor.

“We’ll call it a free market then. Next consider a free market in a POM economy. You will have to imagine a hypothetical free market there, since there are no industrial economy free markets that use physical object monies. In every case, there are both formal restrictions like laws and informal and often illegal restrictions like monopolies and cartels. So in a POM free market the producer brings something to market to trade. If it’s a product, the producer will offer it for sale, presumably at the prevailing market price or a little higher, and wait to see if anyone is willing to offer that much money for his particular product. If no one does, the producer may reduce the asking price. If someone does offer the asked-for price, a trade of money for goods may take place.”

By this time Reggie had taken the table with the remains of Mr. Shape’s light repast from the room and the young woman had opened her bag and withdrawn several small bottles and jars.

“In our economy, the payer is in the position of the POM consumer in the sense that the payer enters the market with money to offer for a certain kind of benefit, presumably at the prevailing market amount for that benefit. If no producer is willing to provide that benefit, then the payer may decide to increase the amount that she is willing to pay. Do you see the parallels here? Do you see how the payer and the producer each have choices in how to invest their respective resources? The producer can invest his work in the production of any benefit he chooses. The payer can invest his money in any producer he chooses.”

The woman had made her selections from among the items in front of her and opening one, she put a small quantity of something that smelled exotic in her palm, placed her other palm over it for a few moments, then with her fingertips she began to apply the material to the soles of Mr. Sharps feet. The strokes were slow and light.

“Wait. This isn’t the same at all,” Niall burst out. “The payer doesn’t come to an agreement with the producer on how much the producer will be paid for the benefit. There is no contract between them. The producer doesn’t even know for sure which payer will pay him or whether he will be paid at all. The Payers are not required to pay him, even if he deserves it. The producer is totally at the mercy of the Payers. And when the Payers do pay, the producer cannot very well take back his work and say that he isn’t willing to do that work for that little amount of money. It isn’t like the POM free market at all.”
Next the girl took a jar from which she dipped a small quantity of a white cream which again she warmed between her hands before applying it to the tops of Mr. Sharpe’s feet. The scent from the crème was hardly noticeable but reminded one of tropical flowers.

“You’re right, Niall, that the markets are not identical. But they are not as different as you appear to believe. The Payers do pay after the fact, just like the businesses that pay commissions or the stores that accept things for sale on consignment. If a salesman doesn’t sell any of the product, he doesn’t get paid, just like a worker today whose efforts don’t provide any net benefit. If an artist places several of his pictures with a gallery and the pictures don’t sell, then the artist gets no money. In neither case is there a contract saying that the salesman will have a certain income just for trying to sell nor a contract that the artist will be paid for having produced paintings even though no one wants them. Do you see those parallels?”

“Sure, but so what? That still doesn’t make the Payers and the producers a free market. They aren’t a market at all because there are no trades,” said Niall, ‘the rock.’

By now the woman was massaging Mr. Sharpe’s foot, pressing firmly with her thumbs on the sole and flexing and bending it in a variety of directions.

“Yet the producers get money for the work they do just like in a free market, right?”

“No. In a free market the producers are paid by their customers. In this economy they are paid by the Payers. It’s not the same.”

“If you work in a large business in a POM economy, who is paying you? For that matter, who is the owner?”

“The company pays me. It doesn’t matter who the owner is. It’s probably a lot of people who own stock in the company.”

“So the Payers correspond to the company, don’t they? The company pays you through its representatives in the payroll department just like the payer organization pays you through its individual representatives. The money doesn’t belong to the Payers just like the guys in payroll don’t own the money they distribute. The stockholders who do collectively own the money you’re given, don’t even know what you’ve done to deserve it. So you can’t really say that you’re doing any kind of direct, person-to-person trade with them. Yet you are exchanging your work for their money. That sounds very much like a worker being paid by Payers to me.”

“You will notice that the company was given the characteristics of a person by the law. Therefore, before the law, it is still two people trading directly with each other.” Niall felt that he was on a roll and he was becoming used to the woman’s presence at the feet of Mr. Sharpe.

“All right, let’s try another approach. In a POM free market, the participants each give up some things and get some things. In each exchange the trader can agree to the trade or reject the trade. There exists no authority to deny one the opportunity to bargain with whomever one likes. You may not get the trades you want but that would be because the other traders rejected your offers not because some outside agency prevented them. Do you agree with this description of a POM free market?”

Having finished her massaging the woman beckoned toward the doorway. Reggie reappeared still in his valet costume, with a large bowl and a fluffy white towel over his arm.

“Yes. That sounds right to me.” Niall acknowledged.
“In our economy, people also give up things and get things. When people give up things in our economy, do they get to choose what to give up? Have you seen any case of someone having their property taken by some authority? I know that there is still occasionally theft and armed robbery but have you seen anything taken by force by any agency of the society?”

Reggie commenced to wash and dry Mr. Sharpe’s feet.

“No and I must agree that I haven’t heard of any cases either. I’ve been in a couple of situations in which I was expecting property to be taken by the authorities and it was not,” Niall said magnanimously.

“Have you spent money in our economy?” the instructor asked.

“Yes, I have done so several times.”

“Were there any restrictions on what you could buy imposed by any payer or other third party?”

Niall was now on the horns of a dilemma. If he told the truth about the judge’s sentence of no more alcohol he would have to reveal that he was not actually here to become a payer. On the other hand he really didn’t want to lie to these people many of whom had become his friends.

After a brief pause for thought he decided to tell the truth. “Yes there are. I committed an assault while under the influence of alcohol. The judge gave me a choice of sentences. The one I accepted involved not drinking again while in the court’s jurisdiction. Therefore, I am restricted to Non-alcoholic beverages by the court.” Niall thought he might have heard a few small gasps behind him from one or more of the other students.

“But you were given a choice of sentences and some of the choices involved your buying alcohol, right?”

“Yes.”

“Then you chose to stop buying alcohol,” the instructor continued.

“Yes.”

“Therefore I ask if you know of any other case in which some authority limited your choices of what to buy?”

“Not that I recall.”

“Then would you say that you are free to buy what you like with your money.”

“I guess so.”

“So in our economy, you give what you choose and buy what you choose. Is that also true in a POM free market?” the instructor asked.

“Yes and you have a lot more choices of things to buy in the POM free market. Here you can’t buy capital or necessities,” Niall pointed out.
With clean feet, Reggie drew on a fresh pair of socks and replaced the patent leather shoes which had been warmed and brought in by one of the former waiters.

“Do you have to accept capital or necessities if they’re offered to you in our economy?”

“Well, no.”

“Do you have to offer anyone capital or necessities, even if they really need them?”

Niall remembered Jean in court trying to demand that he be allowed to live in the unoccupied house. “No.”

“So those changes of possession are free as well even if they are not direct trades?”

“I suppose so,” Niall conceded.

“So whether there are actual trades in your way of thinking about it, all the transfers of goods and services from one person to another in our economy are done freely and without coercion being involved in any way?” The instructor closed in for the kill.

“Yes, I suppose they are. At least I haven’t been coerced or threatened by anyone since I got back in this country.”

“Then whatever you choose to call our way of exchanging goods and services, the exchanges are all free. Now I suggest to you that most people would be willing to call that a free market. I further suggest to you that the same forces that shape a POM free market also shape the relationships between Payers and those they pay. Supply and demand rules in both cases.

Tomorrow we will explore that aspect. You might do some thinking about supply and demand, Niall, before our next class. I find that your objections are making these issues much clearer to the others.

Dismissed. Open!” to his chair which brought him into an upright position. He leaned forward onto his feet, turned, and strode out the door with a swirl of his cape.

Behind him Niall turned to look at his classmates. No one would meet his eyes.
Chapter Thirty-Four: Oscar Confesses

In which Niall is rejected, accepted, and reflected.

That evening Niall was a little worried as he approached the barracks after the evening meal. His classmates had seemed a little shocked to find that he was a convicted felon or whatever assault and battery was. He wasn't sure what kind of reception he should expect. He had eaten alone in the cafeteria. The only people who had come to his table had been people who were not in the class.

When he entered the lobby where everyone gathered for bull sessions before bed, the room quieted noticeably so he went on through to his room and sat on the bed for a minute. Had he really blown it when he confessed his crime? Would they reject him now that they knew? Was he now in “Coventry” to be shunned and ignored whenever possible? What could he do about it if that were the case? You can't force people to be nice to you.

Well, if he hid in his room all night it would be the same as being shunned. He might as well find out right up front if he was to be considered persona non grata, or still a human being and a friend. He combed his hair again, chewed a breath mint (no point in giving them any other excuse to dislike him), squared his shoulders, and practically marched into the hall and onward to the lounge.

Once again the sound level dropped when he entered. Some heads swiveled his way and others studiously did not look his way. It wasn't good but perhaps it wasn't disaster either. He saw an empty chair and headed toward it trying to appear casual and feeling anything but.

He sat and the group of three became a collection of four. He looked at each of the others but they each looked away. The silence in his immediate vicinity slowly spread to the others in the room. Now all the heads were turning his way. He felt his face growing hot. His stomach felt hollow despite just having eaten. He momentarily wished he had not eaten quite so much.

“What have I done?” he asked. “I'm still the same guy I was yesterday.”

“But you aren't what we thought you were,” Natalie said. “Sure we knew you were in the Middle East and you might have had to do violent things but this isn't the Middle East. You don't need to do violent things here. I asked about you and found that you hit a bartender for refusing to sell you another drink after you were already drunk. You didn't need to do that, that was just plain you. In vino, veritas.”

There was a murmur of agreement and some nodding of heads around the room. A few of the faces were showing some signs of anger.

Oscar, who had been sitting alone on the other side of the room, said in a rather loud voice, “May I say something before we string Niall up by his thumbs. First of all I have to confess that I am not what I suppose I appear to be either. What do you think I was before I came here, Natalie?”

“I don't know. A business man, a lawyer, a professor?”

“Anyone else care to guess?” Oscar said looking around the room.

“An undertaker,” D.W. said quickly and got a good, tension relieving laugh.
“You’re pretty close, D.W. I was a preacher. I had a small congregation in what you would probably call a Fundamentalist church. I doubt that you ever heard of the denomination because there were never more than a few thousand of us. So far so good. There’s nothing wrong with being a man of God... if you are a man of God. I was a man who used people’s faith in God.

I won’t try to tell you that hitting a man in the face with your fist is a good thing because it’s a really bad thing. But there are worse things a person can do. There are pains one can inflict which go far deeper than the bones of the face. The face will heal and I am sure that the bartender will be more careful about how much booze he sells to tipsy customers.” Oscar’s small smile gradually faded and his head dropped.

“I used people, taking advantage of their faith in God and twisting it for my own ends. I strongly opposed the new money when the idea was first becoming popular. I gave fiery sermons against it. I told my people it was the work of Satan. I said it would result in gross immorality. That poor men and women would stop working to live off the work of others while living lives of debauchery. I told them their teenagers would leave home to get away from their authority and fall into lives of sin.

But what was I really afraid of? I’ll tell you. I was afraid they wouldn’t be able to give me their money any more. I wouldn’t be able to talk little old ladies into giving me their retirement money to build a bigger church. Sure I believed in God and sin and hell but that never seemed to stop me from doing things in his name that now shame me.

My home cost over 500 thousand. I had a place at the beach and one in the mountains. I was often at the country club. I gave sermons on my radio show about the evils of wealth and how those who stored up treasures on Earth could not have treasures in heaven. I preached about the rich young ruler who gave up all to follow Christ. Meanwhile I gave up nothing and followed no higher principle than greed.

My wealth included a beautiful wife and three children. At the time of the transition my daughter was 16 and my sons 14 and 11. My daughter was a cheerleader and very popular in school. Everything seemed to be going my way. The new money represented a threat to all that I possessed. I could envision the new church that was just beginning construction never being completed. Sponsors for my radio show would stop advertising. I still owed quite a bit of money on the house and the other vacation places. They would surely be taken from me. But the legislation passed and the transition was upon us.

Things began to go wrong. My daughter’s grades had begun to slip and her attitude toward her mother and me was becoming surly. My older boy was talking about dropping out of school. My wife said she didn’t like the kids my daughter was hanging out with. Finally, my wife caught her stealing money from her purse and grounded her for a week. My daughter was supposed to come directly home immediately after school and stay there. That was when my daughter left home one night and disappeared. We were frantic. We searched her room and found indications that she was using drugs. Our older boy confessed that he had gotten her started on them about six months before. We called in the police after the required waiting period but they seemed to be no help at all. We struggled on but the days passed in a haze of worry. We had to move out of our house due to the depression and my drop in income since we could no longer pay for it. We decided to take a smaller house. It turned out that we were able to get enough from the equity in the big house and the vacation places that we could buy a modest 4-bedroom place.

About a month after the transition we got word from the computer system that our daughter was in a city about 500 miles from where we lived. We left the boys with some friends and hurried to our daughter. She had gotten an account for some reason. Certainly she had little enough money at the
transition to put in it and I don’t know if she ever earned any money before we arrived. But when she identified herself to the computer, it recognized that she was our daughter and underage. She was in pretty bad condition from drug withdrawals and from not taking care of herself. She had turned to prostitution shortly after leaving home and her pimp had treated her pretty roughly. After the transition he’d tried to get her to work for luxury items but that just didn’t work out. So he left her. She was still ‘strung out’ for a couple of weeks on the drugs she had left but by the time we got to her she had been going through withdrawal for several days, had not eaten anything for quite a while and was dehydrated. We called a hospital and they sent an ambulance. Do you know she’d not even washed the garish makeup off her face since she had last gone out to offer her body? She was ghastly and she smelled terrible. It literally made me vomit.

Her mother was much stronger than I and, though pale, managed to give her some water and hold her. They talked quietly for a time while I was in the bathroom.

Her mother and I sat in the hospital with nothing to do but think. She told me what our daughter had been through. She also told me that she had found our daughter’s diary in her suitcase as she packed it for the hospital. She let me read it. At first the entries showed only the ordinary concerns of a girl in middle or high school. But they began to change about a year before. She had noticed the difference between what I said in church and on the radio and how we lived. She had seen me beg for the ‘widow’s mite’ and spend it on myself. She lost all respect for me and was ashamed to be my daughter. She lost interest in school and cheerleading. She changed the people she hung out with to a group that was angry at their parents and rejecting of their ideals. Her brother gave her some drugs and she found release in the high. It wasn’t long before she was dating the guys who would give her drugs and gave them sex in return. When that failed her, she resorted to stealing from her mother’s purse but after a time her mother caught her. The beginnings of withdrawal and the isolation from her friends were too much for her so she ‘escaped.’

Even when things were at their worst she wouldn’t call home. The idea of living with us was too unpleasant for her. She preferred the beatings by her pimp to my hypocrisy. At least he was honest in his exploitation of her. She felt free to hate him. She was supposed to love me and she couldn’t do that.

That night I got a little taste of the tortures of the damned. Remorse flooded me. Guilt, shame, and self-loathing were my constant companions for a time. In a couple of days she had improved enough that we could take her to our new house. I think, in a way, it was good that we weren’t in the old neighborhood and the old house. The change in scenery may have made it easier for her to endure being with us again. That next Sunday I prepared a sermon which said nothing about what had happened. I did it almost without thinking. At the service, I went through the ritual almost mindlessly until it came time for the prayer.

As always I raised my hands and said ‘Let us pray.’ Nothing came out. I was mute. How could I call upon God in that condition of sin? After a time I dropped my arms. I looked at the people of my congregation, those honest, earnest faces of true believers. I was the least of them. I was not fit to wash their feet. Yet I wore expensive robes while they wore the plain and simple garb of the working poor. I was so embarrassed, so ashamed of myself that I could no longer stand before them. I came out from behind the lectern and fell to my knees before the altar. Without uttering a word, I went forward on my belly crying brokenly, my hands outstretched to the cross. It was as if, I don’t know, as if my whole life was worthless and doomed. I would readily have ended my life then and there had there been some easy means to do so. But somehow, in my mind I could see the Lord on that cross and hear his words, ‘Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.’ I felt judged and forgiven. I felt cleansed. I didn’t feel happy or peace or exultation. I was not a new man. But I did know that I would have to become a new man for I could never again stand to be what I was.
I don’t know why but not a word had been spoken while I lay before the altar. Nobody seemed to move. When I got to my feet and faced the congregation it seemed as if everyone was still right where they had been when I had last seen them. It was as if time had stood still while I experienced my epiphany. I looked at them and said, ‘We have to make some changes starting with me.’ I then told them that I would not accept any gifts of luxury items from them ever again. That I had already accepted far too much from their hands. I swore to live as the least among them lived and I have done so. I swore to finish building the church with my own hands as much as I could and I did that, too. For some reason, the church was finished much faster when it was the congregation that built with contributed tools and materials.

As I looked at them and they looked at me I seemed to see them differently somehow. I saw people who were stronger than I, who deserved the luxuries I had taken from them. I saw people to whom I owed a great debt. They weren’t people to be cheated or bilked or scammed. They were people who could have and should have been my friends. They had trusted me and cared for me and followed me even as I had betrayed them.

In the weeks and months that followed I found that I could not preach nor pray in public. The few times that I tried the overwhelming guilt and shame would make me almost physically ill and I could not choke out the words. My pastoral counseling, on the other hand, improved greatly.

At home, my relationship with the children changed. Rather then send them to school I undertook their education while my wife worked. Oddly, it seemed to me, she had no problems at all finding things to do. It was as if a great torrent of pent up energy sprang from her. She was organizing other people and getting materials together and doing all sorts of things. At first she worked out of our house but before long she was given an office in a nearby shopping center and she began to get paid some significant amounts of money.

As my time with the children increased I began to see them as people and learn about them. I would take them to church with me because they could study there without distraction. I began the long and difficult process of winning the respect of my daughter and older son.

They were put to work by their mother. She had them helping her in the afternoons. It was not long before they, too, were earning money.

My daughter is now free of the drugs because they simply are not available. The young people in my congregation also started working, even the children in some cases. It was not as if they were doing regular nine-to-five jobs but they found things to do to earn money. They cleaned up the neighborhood and painted and repaired. They did things for some of our older church members. After a time it seemed like they spent half their time trying to find ways to be good to other people.

The change in the congregation was quite apparent as well. They were far better-dressed and there was far less complaining about health problems. They couldn’t tithe but they could spend time helping others instead. This suggestion, I am proud to say, was my own. The Lord, I believed, would far rather have ten percent of their labor go to helping others than go to building a larger building.

Though I now avoided all luxuries and never even looked at my account balance, I found life far more satisfying. I stopped worrying about money matters altogether.

Then one day, I realized that all the improvements in my life had come about because of the transition to the new money. The hospital that treated my daughter had not asked anything about our ability to pay. They just did what they could for her. I no longer had to worry about providing for my
family, since their needs would be met whether I were meeting them or not. My congregation was healthier and happier and had far less stress. The marriages that had been in trouble either broke up almost right away after the transition or, for lack of money to argue about, improved. No husband thought his wife stayed with him just for the money. No abused wife had to stay with her husband. No mother had to work outside the home to support her children. The elderly no longer worried about whether they could afford the drugs they needed. Even my own children were learning to help others now that I was setting them a good example.

Today my wife is a coordinator with an excellent reputation. My daughter is a mother of her own family and has a husband I can respect. My sons are making a good living, each in his own way. For them this story has a happy ending.

But for me it’s not yet over. For me I see God’s hand in this new money. I have really read the Bible these years since the transition. Whereas before I read it looking for reasons why people should give me money, I later began to read it looking for God’s message to me. Not so much in the words but in my heart. As I read the passages about money it seemed to me that those who sought money were some of the worse of the characters in the Bible. Jesus was angry at the money changers in the temple. He told the rich young ruler to give his money to the poor. He told the tax collector to return the money he had taken falsely. Yet with the new money I saw people doing so many good things for each other. I saw that those who were rich were among the best. It seemed to me that this new money was a root of much that was good. When somebody performed some act of kindness I couldn’t tell whether it was from greed or benevolence. Both the greedy and the kindly were acting the same way.

It seems to me that money is now a good thing because of the Payers. The Payers have made our money moral. The Payers have converted us from a greedy, grasping, lying, cheating, robbing, murdering, people into a people who care for others as they care for themselves. We love one another. We do unto others as we would have them do unto us.

This money saved my son and daughter and probably saved even me. Certainly I’m much more nearly the man God wants me to be now than I was before. I feel I must support the good works it brings about. The best way for me to help is to put my money where my mouth is. I feel called to become a payer for that is God’s will for me. I hope that some day, if I am a truly good payer, I’ll be able to preach and pray in public again. I hope that I will wash this stain off my soul. I pray that I can accept God’s forgiveness.

So you see before you a man much more deserving of your rejection. You see a man who almost destroyed his own children and betrayed the trust of hundreds of people. If you can find it in your hearts to forgive and tolerate me, how much more deserving is Niall of that same forgiveness and toleration. Is there one among you who is worthy to cast the first stone? Which of you is without sin? Which of you had anything bad to say about Niall before he, of his own free will, confessed the truth about his past? I did not. I saw only good in Niall. He is but mortal flesh and blood and is not perfect, but he is also our brother before God. His sins are surely our sins as well, for all of us will go before God undeserving of his blessings.”

As Oscar finished, he crossed the room and put his arms around Niall, kissed his cheek and called him brother. There were several others who had a tear or two in their eyes who also came forward to hug both Oscar and Niall. Before long everyone in the room was on their feet hugging each other and telling each other how much they cared for them.

Niall had been in the emotional depths of fear and isolation and was now wrapped in love and affectionate words. He felt as though he was no longer mentally in captivity. The paranoia which had
been his constant companion for years was dissipating. He experienced the feeling that he was truly home at last. The acceptance that had been his at Brianna’s apartment, in the little town of Aldie, in Los Alamos, and here in this barracks was finally getting through to his emotions. Finally he could feel safe.

Niall went to Oscar and gave him a big hug. He then held Oscar by his upper arms, looked up into his face, and said, “You are able to preach in public, Oscar. You just gave a magnificent sermon. Your congregation may have been only a handful of people but your message was a powerful one.”

Oscar’s eyes were filled with tears and all he could do was nod.

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Niall slept better than he had for years and awoke in the morning feeling great. Then he remembered that he was going to have to face Mr. Sharpe today about supply and demand. He had better do some thinking.

Everybody knew that the greater the demand the higher the price and the lower the price the greater the demand. No wait, that didn’t make sense. Try it again, simply. If the supply increased the price should go down and if the supply decreased the price should go up. Yeah that was it. If the price increases, the sales should decrease and if the price decreases, the sales should increase. But which one caused the other? Did the supply cause changes in the price or did the price cause changes in the supply? Maybe it worked both ways at the same time. Maybe they influenced each other. Or maybe whichever one changed first had that effect on the other. But then when the other changed in response, it had an effect on the former.

Wait, that’s a feedback loop. We’re talking about a thermostat type of thing. The price responds to perturbations in the supply in a way that restores stability to the system. If the price changes, the supply responds to restore stability to the system.

OK. So in a POM free market there’s stability despite the variety of things that happen in the real world to change supplies and prices and it all happens without any individual having to understand it and without any individual being in control of it. Now what does that have to do with the Payers? Where is the feedback loop for them?

There can’t be a feedback loop in the prices of luxuries, since those don’t change. So if the loop isn’t there when money is spent, perhaps it is there when money is earned. OK. What are the Payers buying by crediting accounts? Presumably they are buying net benefit. But what’s the price of net benefit? How can anyone know how much benefit is done to someone else? Hell, I couldn’t even say how much benefit something is that benefits me. You can’t measure something like that. And even if you could know something like that, how would you put a dollar amount on it?

No, it just doesn’t make sense. The prices of luxuries don’t change, so there can’t be a supply-demand feedback loop and you can’t tell what the prices are of the net benefits. That’s all there is to it. Both ends closed off. I think I have him this time. Right. No way out of that argument.

On the other hand, they tell me he’s been teaching this course for years. He must have something in mind. I know I’m not perfect. Maybe there was something I didn’t think of. Maybe there’s another angle to it. Think, darn it.

OK. OK. It can’t be the luxuries. That’s a dead end. It would have to be on the other side, in the payments to the workers. The workers are paid for the net benefit. No wait. The Payers don’t have to
pay for net benefit. They can pay for whatever they want to. So what do they want to pay for? What motivates a payer? I know what motivates Oscar. He wants to be a good payer, whatever that is. What does a good payer want? Benefits. Damn, right back where I started. Why does a good payer want benefits? So people will be happy. Why does a payer want people happy? So they'll be nice to the Payers. So the Payers are paying for their own benefits? Well, I guess that makes sense. The Payers pay the workers to make the consumers happy so the consumers will be nice to the Payers.

Well that's a feedback loop. Does it qualify as a case of supply and demand? Let's see. The money the Payers give to the workers has to be the prices. So that would make the consumer's treatment of the Payers the thing in supply. If the supply of rewards to the Payers goes down, there would have to be an increase in the price paid to make those people happy.

No. Let's make it more concrete. Let's say that the streets in a town are not being fixed. This makes the consumers unhappy. That would mean that the consumers would not be nice to the Payers. So the Payers pay more for the repairs that are being done to the streets. This should attract more workers to do that work; that makes the people happy again… Yes, that works. Let's see the other way. Let's say the people are nice to the Payers, so the Payers keep doing what they did before… There isn't any price change in that direction. If the consumers are even nicer to the Payers, the Payers don't change anything, either. It seems to work only one way. Consumer unhappiness about something gets more money spent on that thing. But consumer happiness doesn't reduce the pay. Is that a feedback loop? It isn't symmetrical like the POM free market loop. But it is feedback.

OK. Let's try from the workers' point of view. If there is X amount being spent to reward a certain kind of work and the number of people doing that work increases, then the average pay per person goes down in that trade. That should cause people to leave that trade. If the amount of money for a trade like, say, bricklaying, goes up, then the average pay to those in the trade goes up. That should attract more workers, so the average pay goes back down again. The supply of workers and the pay (or price) of workers, that's a feedback loop, right enough. It's even a complete loop, just like the POM free market.

OK, that's two feedback loops that are supply and demand. Perhaps there are more. What about the supply of Payers? They get the necessities without having to pay for them, but what constitutes a necessity? That can change. If the supply of Payers is too small, some luxuries can be relabeled as necessities. If the supply of Payers is too large, some necessities can be relabeled as luxuries. Of course, that's harder but it can be done. That's kind of a feedback loop, even though there's no money involved.

Three supply and demand situations each having its own feedback loop. Who would have thought?

Noises in the hallway indicated that the others were going to breakfast. Niall got quickly out of bed, threw himself together, and hurried after them. He didn't intend to miss any more of their acceptance than he had to.

When he got to the serving line he could see that several members of last night's group were already seated at a table and that the conversation seemed to be animated. As he approached he heard...

"I say he's just a fat slob who likes rubbing in our faces the luxuries he can afford," D. W. said.

"But you have to admit he knows his stuff," Natalie countered.

"He ain't so smart. He probably inherited money before the transition and has been living off that ever since."
Clayton put in, "How can you say that, D.W.? Have you checked into his background?"

“Well, no. But how many rich guys do you know who go around with a staff of body servants all the time?”

“Good morning, Niall.”

“Good morning, Natalie. It’s good to see everyone up bright and early this morning.”

There was a chorus of greetings from the others.

“Niall, we’ve been discussing Mr. Sharpe,” Wendy informed him. “What did you think of him?”

“I only know the obvious about him, what we saw in class.”

“Yes,” D.W. said, “but what did you think of what you saw. Pretty disgusting, wasn’t it?”

“It’s the first time I ever saw somebody eat a meal while they were giving a lecture.”

“But did it detract from the points he was making?” Oscar asked.” I thought it was a rather entertaining side show, but it didn’t take my mind off the points he was making about bureaucracy and the free market.”

“We can’t trust a guy like that. He’s a slob and he would look the part if he didn’t have all those obsequious servants around to wipe his chin and clean his clothes.” D.W. was dead certain in his tone.

“I wouldn’t go that far, but I agree it’s obvious that he was born with a silver spoon in his mouth and never had to do anything for himself,” Leyden said. “How can he understand the plight of the poor or how they feel about things? All his knowledge is theoretical, out of books.”

“But this is a pretty theoretical topic, isn’t it. What difference does it make if he understands what it means to be poor?” Wendy asked.

“There’s Brenda in the serving line. Let’s get her to tell us about Sharpe.” Niall stood up and waved at Brenda, who looked over and nodded an acceptance to Niall’s pantomime invitation to join them.

“Now we’ll get the standard line from the administration.” D.W. grumped.

“Oh, poo,” Natalie said grinning at D.W. “Brenda’s played fair with us so far. I think she’ll tell us the truth about Sharpe, too.”

“Can we learn only from perfect people? Must the prophet be as perfect as his God?” Oscar asked in his best tent revival voice and a big grin.

“We have to judge whether to believe people on their character as well as what they say, Oscar,” Leyden commented. “Sharpe’s character certainly makes a difference in how I will interpret his words.”

“Brenda, we all noticed Mr. Sharpe, as I’m sure you knew. What can you tell us about him?” Niall said as he rose and pulled out a chair for Brenda at the long table they all shared.
“He’s one of our best instructors. What do you want to know about him?”

“Is he for real?” Clayton asked.

The general round of laughter ended with Brenda saying, “He’s as real as it gets. He’s always been like you saw him yesterday for as long as I’ve known him, and that’s going on six years now.”

“How did he get rich?” asked D.W. getting right to the point.

“Cosmetics.”

“Cosmetics? Surely there’s more to it than that,” D.W. sputtered.

“He was a diver for the petroleum industry in the Gulf of Mexico. He was interested in the plants growing on the oil rigs, so he harvested some and learned to grow them in a fish tank. It turned out that one of them contained a substance that could be used for removing wrinkles. Mr. Sharpe was able to help them produce the substance in large quantities inexpensively.”

“That’s all he did? Grow seaweed?” Leyden asked incredulously.

“On what basis does a payer pay?” Brenda asked calmly.

“Net benefit,” Leyden said with her head down.

“Does it matter how difficult it was to bring about?”

“No.”

Does it matter whether anyone else could have done it?”

“No.”

“Does it matter what the producer’s character is?”

“No.”

“Then why ask the question?”

“Because it doesn’t seem fair,” Leyden pleaded. “Other people work hard for years and don’t get rich. Why should he get rich for playing around with a hobby?”

“Why should he stay poor when so many people have benefited from what he did?”

“Brenda, to shift the topic a little,” Niall put in, “why does he have all those servants? Why does he eat and drink during the class? None of the other instructors do that, even the ones who aren’t Payers.”

“I think he just doesn’t want to go all that time without enjoying his pleasures. After all, it’s his money. He can spend it however he likes.”
“Then how come he only had the one beer? It looked to me like he wanted more than just one,” Natalie asked.

“He’s an alcoholic,” Brenda said.

“Then why let him have any beer at all?” Niall asked.

“It’s his money. If he wants to buy beer, he can buy beer.” Oscar answered.

“But they only let him have one,” Niall pointed out.

“If they let him have several at a time, he might get drunk and hurt someone,” Natalie said.

“But,” Niall said, “they let him have all the food he wanted even though he is obviously overweight and under-exercised.”

“That’s because he’s only hurting himself. It’s his body and his life and if he wants to do himself in by overeating it’s his choice.” Natalie warmed to the debate.

“But look at those consequences,” Niall said. “Look at the net benefits. Here we have a person who has made a major contribution and who may make other contributions being allowed to ruin his health by eating too much.”

“Look at the consequences of trying to stop him,” Natalie asserted. “Who would you have make that decision for him? Who would enforce such a ruling? You would have us presume to make his life decisions for him.”

“But no one is obligated to give him or sell to him the tools, food in this case, by which to ruin his life. Doesn’t that reduce the pay for anyone selling him more food than he needs?” Niall continued.

“It’s his life,” Natalie maintained, almost nose to nose with Niall. “If you were giving him necessity food in over-abundance, then you’d be held responsible for his eating too much. But in this case he is buying luxury food. Those are his choices and unless someone sells him high calorie food labeled as low calorie or something like that, he’s the only one responsible for what he does to himself with his purchases.”

Brenda entered the discussion at this point. “You see, Niall, if we try to tell people how to spend their money we are denying them any responsibility for their own lives. If Mr. Sharpe dies of his overweight condition, no one else will be to blame. If we try to control his eating, then we assume responsibility for his eating and can rightly be blamed if he eats too much or the wrong things. I don’t think anyone wants the responsibility for any other adult’s self destructive actions. And even if they do, the rest of us won’t support their taking our freedom in the name of protecting someone else.”

“But what about that foot rub he got?” D.W. put in. “That was downright demeaning to that girl. It was humiliating. I was embarrassed for her. He shouldn’t make people do things like that, especially in public.”

“Hold on there, D.W. I didn’t see anything demeaning about her massaging his feet,” Wendy said. “Do you see medical treatment as demeaning?”

“That wasn’t medical treatment. That was a reflection of slavery. I should think you of all people would be opposed to such a display.”
“I thought she was beautiful in that costume,” Clayton said. “I think that costume made the foot treatment much more pleasant for Mr. Sharpe. I know I certainly enjoyed it more as a result.”

Wendy held up her hand for a moment to command the attention of the others and when they had quieted from their muffled laughter she said to D.W., “Do you consider the costumes of doctors and nurses and policemen and others to be demeaning?”

“Oh course not. That would be silly. Those are uniforms of respect.”

“Isn’t a dancer’s costume a costume of respect? Don’t you respect dancers?”

“Now don’t try to put that on me, Wendy. I never said anything like that.”

“You implied that, whether you intended it or not. I say that if she had come out in the uniform of a registered nurse you would have thought about her entirely differently. You would have defined her as medical personnel and would have looked at what she did as treatment for a physical ailment.” Wendy was getting a little heated. “I think that you saw her costume and defined her as a dancer from a strange land who was at the feet of a powerful white man and you thought of her as a prostitute or worse because of that.”

“I never…” D.W. began.

“How else would you call her medical treatment of Mr. Sharpe ‘demeaning’ unless you saw it as sexual exploitation?”

“Hold on. Everybody sit quietly for a moment and regain your composure.”

Brenda was leaning forward in her chair, her food forgotten.

“I am going to take this as a teaching moment. So everybody get into student mode and try to learn from this.” She paused and waited while each person settled back into less agitated positions. First, your duty as Payers has nothing to do with judging anything except consequences. If somebody wants to do their job in a clown suit or wearing a silly hat, it’s no business of yours.

“Second, whether an act is demeaning or not is in the eye of the beholder. For example, in Semitic culture, one does not show someone else the bottom of one’s foot unless one wishes to insult them because the bottom of one’s foot steps on all sorts of unclean things. Therefore, you can imagine how low one would have to be to wash someone else’s feet. Yet Jesus did just that. Does any Christian feel that Jesus demeaned himself by doing so? I think not. Yet to some other observer who didn’t know who the parties were and didn’t know the context within which it happened, the action would be seen as demeaning, the act of a slave.

Third, you must understand before you can judge. If you don’t know what’s going on, you cannot evaluate either the people or their actions. We saw in the classroom a beautiful (yes, Clayton, I thought she was beautiful, too) young woman who was caring for the feet of a man who had indicated that he was suffering from pain in his feet. Could this have been medical treatment? Yes, it could. Could it have been some sexual game? Yes, it could. Could it have been some sort of classroom demonstration of some principle of economics? Yes, it could. We don’t know now what the situation was. We can’t be sure we understand it. If we had to judge the parties involved right this minute we would each have to do the best we could with inadequate information. But we don’t have to judge
now. We don’t have to guess what was going on. We can recognize our ignorance of the situation and withhold judgment.

This last point is a very difficult one for almost everyone. But it is especially important for Payers to do this. It can be very embarrassing to a payer to rush to judgment and then be shown to have been in error. Producers can be justifiably quite angry when they produce benefit which is not recognized. Consumers are likewise irritated when they benefit and no one is rewarded as a result because they know that such benefit is not likely to be repeated.

“Now as to this particular case with Mr. Sharpe and the foot massage. What do we know about the situation?”

“We know that a woman came in during the class and worked on Mr. Sharpe’s feet.” Leyden said.

“We know she was wearing a costume that looked like it was from Southeast Asia.” Oscar added.

“We know she had a case with bottles and jars of things that smelled good.” Natalie said.

“We know that Mr. Sharpe was being served by people who were wearing costumes that matched what they were doing. That is, Reggie wore at least three different outfits and the waiters dressed their parts.” Wendy said.

“Those will do for the physical aspects of the situation. What do we know about the social aspects of the situation?” Brenda asked.

“It was supposed to be a class situation rather than a clinic or a café,” D.W. said with some emphasis.

“Mr. Sharpe said he was rich and not a payer, so we can assume that was probably true,” Oscar said.

“Were any of the people serving Mr. Sharpe slaves? Were any being threatened by weapons or persons wielding force?” Brenda asked.

There were several heads shaking “no” and some murmurs of negation.

“So can we say that the actions of the servants appeared to be voluntary? What do you say, D.W.?”

“Okay. I agree they weren’t slaves and they were working voluntarily. But what he had them doing was still degrading.”

“Do any of you think they were going to get paid for what they were doing?”

Heads were nodding and there were several verbal agreements.

“So some payer or Payers must think that what they were doing was bringing net benefit to our society. Do any of you think that what they were doing did not deserve to be paid? Clayton? D.W.? Niall?” After a pause to give everyone a chance to respond she continued.” If what they were doing was producing benefit, how could it be degrading? Do you have an answer for that, D.W.?”

D.W. looked down and shook his head.
“Now for the rest of you, I want you to be feeling smug and superior to D.W. so I can bring you back to Earth. D.W.’s feelings are important and valid and are needed in the Payers. D.W. should not feel in any way ashamed of those feelings. They are quite natural and D.W. should not try to repress them.”

By this point D.W.’s head had come up and his face had an expression of surprise. “Such feelings protect you and me and everyone else because they are a reflection of D.W’s desire to protect the weak and powerless,” Brenda went on earnestly. “If you were feeling superior to D.W., I ask you where is your conscience? Where is your empathy? Where is your human feeling of compassion for those less fortunate than yourself.”

By this time D.W. almost had a smile on his face. The others at the table were not looking so happy.

“You must remember that all points of view, all ways of viewing the world, all kinds of values are important and needed among the Payers. We would not have all Payers be the same and we would not reject anyone for their attitudes, even if they are intolerant of the attitudes of others. We try to explain what the situation is and how things work to all those who choose to be trained here for paying so that they will be able to be successful in their own eyes. We are not here to filter out the undesirables. We are not here to reject anyone. We are also not here to miss class and I see it’s almost time to visit with Mr. Sharpe.”

With that the group broke up. Those who had gotten there later and had not finished eating began to hurry through their last few bites and the others rose and took their trays to the dishwasher.
Chapter Thirty-Five: Return of the Fat Man

In which the supply of demand is fedback, looping unstably... Or something like that.

Niall came into class on a wave of mixed emotions. There was still the warmth of being accepted for himself, warts and all, from the night before. There was a sense of triumph for what he had thought out this morning about supply and demand. He also had some anxiety about how his ideas would be received, not only by the instructor but also by his friends. Now he was becoming worried about offending them by pointing out the flaws in their utopia.

This time he made it a point to sit in the front row, since he expected to be doing a lot of talking and he didn’t want the rest of the class to have to crane their necks to see him when he spoke. Once seated at the end of the row, he wondered if anyone else in history had ever concerned themselves with such a thought before. His emotions now had an overlay of feeling himself to be a little strange, on top of all the other feelings.

On this occasion the instructor was preceded into the classroom by the recliner on its dolly and followed by a small portable table with what looked like a variety of snacks and several bottled drinks, none of which appeared to be alcoholic. He settled into the chair, carefully selected a snack and took a huge bite, then chewed slowly, looking around the room as if they were all there only to eat. Having swallowed, wiped his mouth, and poured a drink from one of the bottles he glanced at the clock and said “Let us begin.

As I warned you last time we will today concern ourselves with the way supply and demand relationships shape the payer organization and its actions. I assume that you all have given considerable thought to this relationship.” The members of the class glanced quickly at each other, remembering what they had been thinking about both last night and this morning at breakfast.

“Therefore, I will limit my opening remarks to a few general points and expect you each to contribute to filling in the detail.

‘Supply’ refers to goods or services available for exchange. ‘Demand’ refers to the price people are willing to pay for those goods or services. In order to talk about supply and demand, therefore, we need to be explicit about what the goods or services are and about how the price is measured. You will note that ‘price’ is always expressed in terms of a money. This will be true even when the goods that are referred to by ‘supply’ are monetary units, or monies.

Supply and demand is a specific instance of what more generally can be called feedback. For example, our hands report what they sense to the brain. If the object being touched is hot or cold or sharp, the brain may have the hand pull back or drop the object. If the object is warm or smooth or soft, the brain may have the hand increase the touching.

This is a case of simple feedback. But there is also what one could call dual feedback or a feedback loop in which two agents give feedback to each other. Nature is filled with feedback and there exist many feedback loops of incredible complexity in the ecosystem. Human beings have recognized feedback loops in many ways. The concept of punishment for behavior we don’t like, for example, is an attempt to provide feedback in the expectation that such feedback will result in a decrease in the unwanted behavior.”
Mr. Sharpe was beginning to smack his lips again so he paused and addressed his interest to the partially eaten snack just before him. After a couple of bites and another few gulps of soda (perhaps a third of the bottle) he continued.

"Economists have noticed a particularly interesting form of feedback in market activity in the relationship between prices and the supply of goods of various types. Therefore we talk frequently today about supply and demand when we discuss economics.

The relationship between supply and demand in economics seems to assume that there exists a free market. Of course, in POM economies that’s almost never true. There are almost always governmental or other agencies which intrude into the market. But the tendencies and influences of supply and demand exist even in the absence of a free market. They are so powerful that they will always create a ‘black market’ whenever some agency attempts to prevent or resist their influences. Therefore, it would be foolish of us to assume that there is no feedback in our economy. It would also be foolish to assume that there are no feedback loops. So we will assume that there are some. My first question is ‘What effects can feedback loops have on a system?’"

Dead silence was the response. Worried glances passed among the class members and then a lot of people were looking down at their desks so that the instructor saw mostly the tops of heads. Needless to say, Mr. Sharpe took advantage of this pause to refill his glass as well as his plate.

Niall thought, ‘I sat up front to talk so I had better say something.’

“I think they could be either stabilizing or destabilizing. That is, I can imagine supply and demand keeping prices and supplies stable but I can also imagine a feedback loop generating instability.”

"OK. That’s a start. Now what characteristics would you expect a feedback loop which was generating instability to have?"

“I know. If an increase in one factor caused an increase in another factor which caused an increase in the first factor,” Natalie said. “Like before WWI when each nation’s mobilization convinced the other nations that they were going to attack and then, to get an advantage, one of the nations attacked first, since it was obvious that the other nation would attack anyway.”

“Or like a disagreement between a husband and wife can escalate as each shows signs of anger which make the other person angry too, and before you know it they’re yelling and throwing things.” Oscar said.

“Those are good examples,” the instructor said,” but can you give an example from economics?"

“The Great Depression is an example,” Leyden said. “When the economy slowed in the United States after the 20’s boom, a few banks failed. This contracted the money supply, so more banks failed. The process continued back and forth, resulting in a deflation and joblessness. It took years to get out of that mess.”

“Germany after WW I had runaway inflation.” Clayton put in. “They just kept printing larger numbers on their bills. I think it had something to do with the war debts.”

Niall said, “When employment falls, income and spending fall. This results in lower sales. This results in less demand. This results in more layoffs and less employment. You can even express that one in
terms of supply and demand. As demand falls, the supply falls and since the demand is a function of
the supply through wages, which are another supply and demand relationship, the demand falls
again.” ‘Damn, I was almost incoherent on that one,’ Niall thought, his face warming. ‘I’ll have to do
better or sit quietly in the back.’

“Good enough, people,” said Mr. Sharpe, plying his napkin. “If the causal relationship is positive for
both factors or negative for both factors, the relationship will be unstable. If the relationship is
negative for one and positive for the other, then the relationship tends to be stable. If a reduction in A
causes a reduction in B and a reduction in B causes a reduction in A there will be instability. If a
reduction in A causes an increase in B and an increase in B causes an increase in A then you tend to
have stability. Now can you give me examples of stability produced by feedback loops?”

“A thermostat does that. If the temperature falls, the thermostat increases the heating. If the
temperature rises, the thermostat reduces the heating. Of course you reverse that with cooling,” D.W.
said.

“Clouds increase when the temperature gets higher and that decreases the amount of sunshine
getting to the Earth which allows things to cool,” a contribution from Natalie.

“Anything from economics?”

“Didn’t they try to set interest rates higher or lower to keep the economy stable?” Oscar asked.

“Yeah, but it didn’t work all that well. The economy was so dependent on what was happening in the
rest of the world that they really couldn’t control it,” Leyden said.

“Doesn’t the POM free market keep both prices and supply stable?” Niall asked and tried to answer
his own question. “After all, an increase in supply lowers prices and a reduction in price lowers
supply. That would be an inverse relationship between supply and price when supply is doing the
causing and a direct relationship between price and supply when price is doing the causing. We
should be able to explain all the cases in which the market is unstable (that is inflation or deflation) as
a result of the interference of the government and monopolies and such. That is, if the market isn’t
free, it can’t function to maintain stability.”

“What about when supply is reduced due to natural causes like a drought reducing agricultural
production? The dust bowl of the 1920’s had something to do with starting the Great Depression,”
Natalie pointed out. “Wouldn’t that start one of the unstable feedback loops? And wouldn’t such a
loop have a big effect on supply and demand?”

“But the Great Depression was caused by government intervention in banking and such, not by the
dust bowl, according to my father,” Clayton replied.

Natalie came back with, “Small banks are very dependent on local conditions. If a small bank in a
small town has lots of loans out to local farmers and local businesses that depend on those farmers
and to local people for home loans, it would be very simple and highly likely that a drought that
affected the farmers would also ruin businesses and people would lose their jobs in those businesses
and not be able to make their house payments. With all those loans defaulting at once, the bank
could very easily go under. That would make things even worse because a lot of local people would
have lost their money.”
Oscar said, “I think the POM free market is only a stabilizing force when conditions are relatively
stable anyway. I think it can be overwhelmed relatively easily by governments and monopolies and
wars and droughts and such. I think it’s too dependent on the proper conditions to be robust.”

“Class,” Mr. Sharpe said coming up from a long drink of what appeared to be root beer. “You are all
making good points. But we need some factor that explains the relative stability of our economy in
comparison with the POM economies.” Then the instructor settled back in his chair and selected
another grape.

Natalie said, “I think it may be because in our economy some of the POM feedback loops are broken.
For example, in a POM economy, when people stop buying a certain item, the producers of that item
lose their jobs. Therefore, they lose income and stop spending as much. This causes others to lose
income and so on in a negative loop that’s destabilizing. In our economy, if an item stops being used,
it doesn’t affect the amount of money being paid. If the items are luxuries, there’s still money to buy
them and such excess money doesn’t cause price changes for the other luxuries, so there’s no loop
there. If the items people aren’t consuming are necessities, then they must be surplus and we should
stop making them, so it’s appropriate to stop producing them. If the items are capital goods, then
we’re doing fine without them so they should no longer be made. Therefore all the destabilizing loops
that might cause trouble in a POM economy don’t function in our economy.”

Leyden said, “Didn’t Mr. Sharpe just say that there were feedback loops in our economy and in the
payer organization?”

“Yes, Leyden, he did,” Natalie replied, “but those only involve money in one direction, not both. That
is, since only the Payers can pay, the people they’re paying can’t give the money to someone else in
some other feedback loop. Therefore, the feedback only involves money in one direction, from payer
to producer. Whatever feedback comes to the Payers as a result of their payments isn’t in the form of
money. In a POM economy, a change in movement of money generates feedback that’s also a
movement of money. Since POM money is independent of the goods for sale, there’s nothing
preventing a wild oscillation.”

“Very good, Natalie.” Mr. Sharpe was actually smiling. “In most of my classes no one gets that aspect
and I have to explain it. Now, does anyone have any other factor that might provide stability?” and he
took a particularly beautiful cupcake and carefully, almost tenderly, began pulling the pleats out of the
cup.

Clayton sat up suddenly, “Haven’t they been telling us that three-party interactions are more stable
than two-party interactions? The fact that there are three parties to all our money transactions should
make them more stable. In a POM economy, if you get an advantage you can use the money that
advantage generates to get still further advantages. Like when a successful business uses its money
to buy lobbyists to get legislation to give them still more advantages.”

“Yes,” Leyden said, “and when the people at the bottom stop having money to spend, it starts
feedback loops that cause the whole economy to slow down. Since the wealthy and powerful are in
control, they let hardly any money into the hands of the poor and things keep getting worse until the
whole thing falls apart.”

“It isn’t that simple, Leyden but that is the general idea,” Mr. Sharpe said, grinning.

“What is so stable about the three-party interaction?” D.W. asked.
“Well,” Oscar replied, “the one party dominates another party and that party dominates a third party and that third party dominates the first party. No one party can dominate both the others. That way they can have mutually rewarding interaction indefinitely. In our case, the Payers dominate the producers by controlling the money. The producers control the consumers by determining what is produced and who can have it. And the consumers dominate the Payers because the Payers live among them and need their social rewards. Each group is kept from taking over by the group that dominates it. It’s like the old game of rock, paper, and scissors.” (Click here for an illustration of this concept)

“So,” Niall said, “though external forces may limit or reduce production, there’s always a money reward for benefiting others. The flow of goods and services from producers to consumers (and Payers) is matched by a flow of money (and luxuries) to the producers. Therefore, a lack of money is never the reason that something worthwhile cannot be done.”

“Class, you have resolved too many issues too quickly so you’ll have to endure a lecture.” With this announcement, Mr. Sharpe pushed aside the litter of empty containers on the table in front of him.

“You are correct that it is the breaking of the destabilizing feedback loops that makes our economy more stable than the POM economies. You are also correct that the three-party nature of the basic economic relationships keeps any one group from dominating the economy. You can see these influences at work in the payer organization. Most of what you will do as Payers is collect and share information. There will be others to help you with this but since you’re the ones who’ll suffer from failure in this data collection, you’ll want similarly motivated people to gather the data you need. This data is the feedback you’ll use to make decisions about payments.

Your motivation for wanting things to go smoothly, making the general public happy is that only then will you get the respect and attention that you crave from the public. Your experience of how people treat you and what they complain to you about will keep you on the proper path whether you like it or not. This is another source of feedback to you. This feedback serves as your conscience. It will be as good as the public is good and as bad as the public is bad. If you allow the shortsighted, fearful, irrational demands that will be made upon you to control your actions, you’ll suffer in the longer term. If you stand firm and do the right thing despite the foolishness of your friends and acquaintances in the public, it will do you no good because most of the other Payers will give in to it. The public will get what they deserve. But if they suffer, even though they’ll deserve it, they’ll make you suffer too.

So what can a payer do? Alone she can do very little. That’s why the Payers must cooperate. That’s why it’s so important that anyone who wants to be a payer can be one, at least for the time being. The payer organization must be diverse or it will listen to only a little of the feedback it needs. It must be diverse or it will think of only a few solutions to the problems that the organization will inevitably face. It must be composed of freely cooperating people or its decisions will become ignorant and foolish. So what you can do is do what you must do. The system will make you do the right things whether you will it or not. The system will not pass a law or hold a gun on you. It will not threaten you with a fate worse than death. But you will find the system almost irresistible because the feedback you get will entice you, it will scare you, it will inspire you, it will tempt you, it will act upon you in ways you are not yet even aware of, and that’s good. If you could resist the system, you could destroy the system just as the system will destroy itself if it ever fails the society.

So don’t worry too much about having to be right all the time. Do the best you can and sleep peacefully because you don’t have to be perfect for everything to be okay.
Now that you have an idea of how the payer organization is controlled and shaped and kept in line, let’s look at how it manages to do its job. Let’s look at the techniques it uses to do its part in the smooth functioning of the economy.

The first thing is allocations of resources. We’ve pointed out how the organization and its decision-making apparatus is influenced by free market forces and the various feedback loops. But how are the actual decisions made that determine who gets to use what resources and to what ends?

My first question is, who makes the allocation decisions in a free market economy?

“Nobody,” some people said and the others said, “Everybody.”

“Correct. The market interactions, those beautiful and terrifying feedback loops, make the decisions. No they aren’t people, they are processes. But the results of those processes are the same as if some incredible and nearly omniscient super-mind were making the decisions. The amount of information being processed in those millions of free market decisions is prodigious and the result is distributed computing at its best. In this way the resources of the society are allocated by those who own those resources. Each person is trying to do what will generate the results they desire. In so doing, they gratify the needs and desires of others.

Now tell me some examples of this process with respect to particular resources.

Leyden’s hand shot up, “Labor is a scarce resource. Those who are not very good at a particular task get paid little for doing that work, so they are motivated to move on to something else they can do better. In this way people tend to end up doing the things they do best.”

D.W. was next, “As the supply of a particular metal is reduced, the cost to the society of using it in products increases and therefore the rewards to those who employ it are reduced. This provides a motivation to use other materials in its place or other products to perform the same functions. The result is that the use of the hard-to-find metal is reduced.”

Niall, thinking that he had better say something or be left out of the class discussion he had thought he was going to dominate, said, “There are many kinds of breads made from a variety of grains. If people prefer certain grains and certain breads, those will be consumed and there will be unused breads and grains of those not preferred. Therefore, those who produce those grains and breads will be paid less. They will shift their efforts toward the more popular breads and grains. Thus the market will influence the amount of land planted in those grains and the amount of each kind of bread being made.”

“Who makes the decisions as to the ores and grains and breads?” Mr. Sharpe demanded.

Oscar said, “The owners do. If anyone else did, they’d be operating with less information and likely also with less motivation to make good decisions.”

“What if an owner makes a bad decision?” Mr. Sharpe asked with a raised eyebrow.

“He doesn’t get paid and people are reluctant to cooperate with him,” Oscar replied.

“Wouldn’t that bad decision wreck the economy?”

“No, because no single owner owns a very large part of the ore, grain, or bread,” Leyden said. This is true of all the material resources. At most, a given individual might own one percent?”
“Why can’t one person corner the market on some resource?”

“I know!” Natalie squeaked. “Because capital is given, not bought. It’s the people who control the resources that own them and no one person can control very much of any resource.”

“Therefore,” Oscar said, “resources are allocated by everyone who owns or controls a resource. The process by which the society allocates resources is the free market.

“What do the Payers make decisions about?”

“How much net benefit was accomplished and who should get credit for it.” Wendy said.

“What else do they decide?”

“What things are to be called luxuries.”

“Anything else? What about how resources are to be used or where to place roads or where buildings should be built?”

Niall said, “Payers don’t make those decisions. They only observe and judge. They have no authority over anything except paying.”

“I think you’re ready to serve as apprentices now. Class dismissed,” Mr. Sharpe said almost in benediction and raised his hand accordingly. “Reggie!”
Chapter Thirty-Six: Wendy’s Tale

_In which Wendy reveals her guilt and becomes a true heroine._

That night as the group gathered, Niall felt like he was coming home. He looked with fondness upon each of the others. He could recall nice moments with each of the other five. He remembered Leyden’s smile when she first met him in the bus station. He recalled how D.W. took the time to explain to a stranger how the bus illusions worked. He recalled how Natalie had been kind enough to let him carry her bag when they arrived at the school. He felt more accepted than ever before in his life.

When he arrived, Clayton and Wendy were discussing what had happened the night before.

“I think everybody has things they are ashamed of in their pasts,” Clayton was saying. “I know I do. You could tell that Niall was ashamed of having hit the bartender. I think the most important thing was that Oscar and Niall trusted us enough to let us know the dark side of their lives along with the things they could be proud of.”

Clayton patted the seat on the couch next to himself on the couch as an invitation to Niall to join him there.

“I don’t know, Clayton, I just think there are some things that are so terrible that no one could accept that person again if it were known what they had done.”

“But Wendy, you’re talking about things like mass murder, not the kind of things that ordinary people like you and I might do.”

The others were approaching as they spoke.

“No. There are things… I can’t say.” Wendy’s face grimaced as if in pain and her eyes started to tear.

“Wendy, Wendy,” Natalie said looking almost horrified. “What are they doing to you? What have they said that’s so bad?”

“We didn’t say anything.” Niall said.

“Actually, I was suggesting,” Clayton said, “that since Oscar and you, Niall, had confessed guilty secrets that to balance things out each of the others of us should perhaps also confess to things we were ashamed of in our past. She seems to think that it would break up the group. That we couldn’t like one another if we knew bad things about each other.”

“I’ve done lots of things I’m ashamed of and most of them became public at one time or another but I can’t remember anyone ever rejecting me because of what I did,” Leyden said, hugging Wendy’s shoulder from the other side.

“Yeah,” D.W. added, “I’ve never had trouble forgiving others for their screw-ups.”

“Besides,” Clayton said with a grin, “now that we know Oscar is a preacher he can give you absolution.”
“I can give whom absolution?” Oscar said having just come in.

“Anybody who confesses to the rest of us something they are ashamed of having done. The idea is that since we all know something bad about both you and Niall we should each give our own confession to balance things out.” Clayton said.

“I’m not sure that’s such a good idea, Clayton,” Oscar said. “It sounds too much like forcing someone to reveal things they don’t want to. It sounds like ganging up on some poor soul who can’t defend themselves. It could be quite cruel.”

“How do you feel about your confession last night, Oscar?” Leyden asked.

“Now I feel really good about it. But last night I was terrified. I was picturing being rejected by you all. I was afraid of being an outcast. I know how frightening that is. I wouldn’t want to force that on anybody.”

Wendy looked at Niall and said, "How do you feel about your confession?"

Niall smiled quietly and said, "I haven’t felt this good about myself in years. Each and every one of you have told me that you accept me. It’s a tremendous relief."

“Well, if it’s all right with everybody, I’d like to take my turn whether anybody else chooses to do so or not." Wendy looked around with a somewhat shy raising of her eyebrows.

She was hugged by the other women and smiled at by the men seated in front of her.

“Oh, we wouldn’t make you, dearest Wendy,” said Natalie, then she became almost fierce as she looked around the group “and don’t you others even think about it or you’ll be dealing with me.” Though somewhat startled, the others quickly denied any intention of trying to get Wendy to tell more than she felt comfortable with.

Wendy bowed her head for almost a full minute to the solemn silence of the others and then began in a quiet, almost whispered voice. The others listened carefully.

“I was born and raised on a farm in the Deep South. I married a young man from another farm in the area and we farmed as tenant farmers. Luther was killed in an accident when I was 38 and I couldn’t stay in the house because the owner wanted to bring in another tenant, so I took my four children back to my grandmother’s three-room house which a kind farmer let her stay in for a small rent. It had been redecorated and some work had been done on it so it had running water and an indoor toilet but for those to work we had to have the pump working. Whenever the electricity failed, we had to save the water in the tank for drinking and cooking so we used the outdoor privy. Granny had some income from Social Security and I was able to get some money from Social Security also, after a time. We were able to do some gardening and my oldest boy got work on some of the farms in the area.

Granny wasn’t real happy to have us move in there ‘cause she was always one to want to have her own way so we had to be real nice to her even when she got unreasonable which was pretty often. But we were family so she had to let us in she said.
Granny taught my children to read out of an old McGuffey’s reader. She said she wasn’t going to have any illiterate grandchildren bringing shame on her so they were going to learn to read, like it or not. She had them reading the Bible and old newspapers that my oldest boy got from the farmers. Of course the papers were usually at least a couple of days old and there was often sections missing but the children got a pretty good idea of what was happening out in the world even though the papers was several days old in most cases."

As Wendy talked you could almost see her change into a younger, rural version of herself. Even her voice changed, taking on overtones of the Deep South and the rhythms of her speech and grammar were altered.

“Well, when the troubles came my youngest child, Di, was about 9 years old. The price of ‘lectricity got so high we kept the lights off most of the time and used the privy even when the ‘lectricity was on to save what we could. The local farmers couldn’t afford to pay my boys to work for them so we done lost that income. Prices of things we bought was gettin’ real high so we just about stopped going to town.

My oldest boy got fed up and went north to Philadelphia to try to get a job and a couple of months later my second boy followed him up there. He was just 17 but I knowed he wasn’t going to have any kind of life at home so I let him go on. Couple of years later my last boy done left when he hit 17 so it was just the three of us, me, granny, and Di.

Anyway me and Di walked the four miles to church every Sunday and the folks there was nice enough. When they saw we didn’t have good coats and shoes, they let us do some work around the Church and paid us in clothes. They knew we wouldn’t take no charity so they was kind enough to let us keep our pride and do the work. I guess the troubles weren’t as bad for us as it was for some of the better off folks around there ’cause we didn’t have much to begin with. We was still getting by though we couldn’t afford to go to the doctor when we got sick and we all seemed to get sick a lot that winter. I guess that must have been the winter of 2011 because the papers was full of stuff about the Ten Points Bill.

Anyway we saw in the papers that they wanted volunteers to become Payers. Now we didn’t know what Payers were, really, so we didn’t pay it no mind. But there was one of the men in our church that said he was going to do it. He was going to become a payer. So he got a ride into a big town about fifty miles away where they was teaching people to be Payers. He was there for about 18 months and when he come back he was dressed in these white clothes. I mean he stuck out in that outfit."

Her audience smiled appreciatively and nodded their heads, remembering how the first Payers had been so conspicuous.

“When he come to church that Sunday right before Christmas, he told the congregation that when people done good things it was his job to tell this computer what they done so it could give them money for it. He also said that food and clothes and houses and even doctor care was going to be free starting at New Year’s.

When we got home me and Granny talked it over and we decided it was too good to be true so we pretty much forgot about it and just kept on as before. But when New Year’s come the other kids told my daughter that folks were able to get groceries from the store without paying for them. So the next day we took the wheelbarrow and went to town to see if it was so. There was lots of people in the stores, so we went to a department store and sure enough, there was clothes that you didn’t have to pay for. Of course they was all white but they was well-made and sturdy so I got two dresses for me and one for granny. When we went to the children’s section we found out you didn’t have to pay for
any of the kids’ clothes, even the colored ones. I got two outfits for Di. My girl had never had pretty clothes like that so she was just about jumping up and down with the idea. She insisted on wearing one of them new outfits home instead of her overalls even though it was pretty cold outside.

Well, we were real happy about things and ate good for a few days till Granny got really sick. I had Di walk to the neighbors and ask them if they could call a doctor for us. Somebody come by a little later in a SUV and offered to take Granny into town. So the three of us put Granny in the SUV and we went with her to the hospital. They took her in and put her in a bed and hooked up tubes and machines to her but it didn’t help ‘cause they said she was just too old and sick with pneumonia. She was over 90. . . but when she died a couple of days later I couldn’t tell anyone for sure how old she was, ‘cause she kept saying different things when you’d ask her how old she was. That payer fellah from church come by to see her and asked us how they been treating her and who helped us get to the hospital and all so I told him what happened. He said he’d see to it that them as had helped us would get paid for it. I said they was just being neighborly and he said that didn’t matter. If you done something good for somebody you should get paid for it.

He asked me if I’d been paid for anything yet and I said I didn’t think so cause I only had about twenty dollars to my name. I took out my purse and showed him the money but he said that wasn’t money any more. I tell you I was feelin’ pretty bad about then what with granny dying and then losing the last penny I had in the world. I just about broke down right there in front of the payer and Di and everybody.

Well he could see I wasn’t feeling so good and he asked me if I had an account yet. I told him I never had enough money to go to the bank with. He said he was talking about a new kind of account. He said the new account wasn’t a bank account. He said I ought to come down to the courthouse and get an account set up with the computer right then. So he took us down to the courthouse where they had these computer machines set up and he took me over to one of them and he said ‘This is Wendy White’ right out loud but he wasn’t talking to nobody.

Only this machine suddenly said, ‘What is your full name, Wendy White?’

I tell you I about jumped out of my skin,” Wendy said and gave a little jump to show what she meant. The others chuckled or smiled sympathetically. “I didn’t want to say nuthin’ at first but the payer man, he said it was okay and Di was sayin’ ‘go on mama. Tell it who you are. ’ So I got up my courage and I said, ‘I am Wendy White. ’ But I didn’t hardly sound like me ‘cause I was so scared. The computer voice said, ‘Is that your full name, Wendy?’

“‘My name before I married was Hawkins,’ I croaked out, ‘So I guess my full name is Wendy Hawkins White.’

‘Please place your right hand on the plate,’ the machine said. But there wasn’t no plate there, just a round flat thing about eight inches across that had wires comin’ out of it. The payer said, ‘That’s it right there,’ and pointed at it. So I put my right hand flat on that thing scared it was goin’ to be hot or somethin’ but it was just cool and then the machine said, ‘Thank you. Now please place your left hand on the plate. ‘So I done that. Then the machine said, ‘Place your chin on the chin rest and look into the eye-pieces, please.’”

“By now the payer knew I didn’t know what to do so he showed me the chin rest and the eye-pieces. Then he went over my hair with a vacuum cleaner thing a little until the machine said it had enough. I tell you I was ‘bout as confused as a body could be. This didn’t make no sense to me at all.”
There were grins all around and Niall was nodding his head, remembering his first experience with the computer at the airport.

“Finally he had me walk up and down in the room a couple of times. Then he talked to the machine and told it something about my having helped granny get to the hospital and he paid me $25. Now I didn’t know that was what he was doing because he sounded to me like he was just gossiping with somebody. But then he told me to ask the machine how much money I had. So I said ‘How much money do I have?’ and land sakes if that machine didn’t say ‘Wendy Hawkins White has twenty five dollars.’

“I began to feel a little better but it was still confusing to me. The payer let my daughter get an account, too, and he paid her $10 for her help with granny. She was real happy about it.

“All the way home, Di chattered away about new clothes and having her own money to spend and such like but I didn’t really hear her. What with granny dead we didn’t have any excuse to live in her old house any longer. It wasn’t our land and it wasn’t our house. The man who owned that house could tell us to leave at any time. I mean, it was Granny he was beholden to. She was the one who had taken care of him when he was a child. It was granny’s husband who had worked his land and made profits for him for going on 40 years. We were just granny’s guests.

Besides, without Granny needing me to take care of her, what was there holding me to that land and that house? Maybe I could find some better place to live. Maybe I could get me a job in town. My boys had all made out all right as far as I knew. There wasn’t any crops in the ground this time of year in our garden so what was there holding me? Nothin’ but my fears.

So when we got home, or when we got back to the house I should say, I told Di we was moving to town. She asks if we’s going to Philadelphia. ‘No,’ I says, ‘just to town.’

The next Sunday I talked to the payer and some others about what jobs I could get in town and whether there was any place we could stay there. There was a rich lady in town named Ms. Fisher who wanted somebody to do housework for her who she could boss around. They said nobody else wanted to work for her since she was so picky and would yell at a body for nothin’ at all. I allowed as how after living with granny for eight years puttin’ up with Ms Fisher should be easy.

So next day me and Di walked to town and found the home of Ms. Fisher. I went round to the back porch where I told Di to sit and wait for me and I went up to the door and knocked and asked if Ms. Fisher might like to hire me to do housework for her. Well the man who answered the door, he asked me to come into the kitchen. So I went in. He asked my name and I said ‘Wendy is my name, sir.’ He showed me some real pretty glasses on the counter next to the sink and asked me to wash and dry them. They was some kind of fancy glass and real valuable so you better believe I was real careful and washed them all and dried them all with a dish towel real careful and didn’t leave no finger smudges at all. Then I washed some other dirty dishes I seen there on the counter and dried them too. By the time I done finished he come back and looked at them glasses real close. You know, he held them up to the light just so. After he done look at them that way he sees that them other dishes is cleaned to. He looks at me real sharp and says, ‘Did I ask you to clean these dishes, Wendy?’ And I says, ‘No sir, but they was dirty and needed cleanin.’

He give me a big smile and says, ‘Wendy you have got yourself a job.’ And I says, ‘Thank you sir and could you tell me if there’s a place around where my daughter and I might live?’

Well he sort of puckers up at that and asks me how old my daughter is. I tell him she’s twelve goin’ on thirteen and that she’s a good worker, too. I tell him that she’s sitting right outside if he wants to
see her. So he goes to the back door and there’s my daughter sitting on the steps of the porch looking at a cat that was walking across the yard. Now I done told her not to touch nothin’ and not to do nothin’ till I got back since these rich folks might have her arrested if she touched any of their things. She was a good girl, my daughter, and she had sat right there for the better part of an hour just looking ‘round at the garden and the fancy cars in the driveway that you could see from the back porch.

Well that old cat, he comes walking over to her just as bold as you please and he rubs his face on her leg as cats do you know. And she started to reach out her hand to pet him and then she remembered what I done told her and she snatched her hand back real quick like and put it in her lap and squeezed it with the other hand and squeezed her legs together on both her hands. She was wearing her new dress from the store instead of her overalls so we both thought she looked right pretty. I guess the man did too, ‘cause he said ‘I think I might know of a place. Wait here.’

So I stood right there with my fingers crossed on both hands prayin’ to God just as hard as I could. And I reckon He musta heard me on account of when that man come back he had a beautiful lady with him. He told her, ‘This is the maid I think you’re going to like and on the porch there is her daughter. Wendy tells me that her daughter is also a good worker. Her daughter is twelve and has been sitting there almost without moving for about an hour. She didn’t even touch Snack when he came by asking to be petted. I think they’ll both do very well for you.’

Ms. Fisher, that was the beautiful lady, she said, ‘Let me see your teeth, girl.’ So I opened my mouth real wide so she could see my teeth. I had lost a couple and I had several big cavities at that time so I was pretty scared she was going to tell me she didn’t want me. But she just told the man to take me and my girl to Dr. Green to see about my teeth.

I hadn’t never been to a dentist before and I can tell you that I was right scared. He had that big chair and those instruments and all. Well, he put me in that chair and he looked in my mouth and he went ‘tsk tsk’ and shook his head. I didn’t know what he meant but it didn’t look good, whatever it was. He said it was going to take a while and the man said he’d have somebody come and get me and my Di in a couple of hours. Di was out in the little sittin’ room looking at the magazines. That must have been heaven for her ‘cause she always did like to read and we never had enough reading stuff to keep her happy. Anyway that dentist and this woman that worked with him must have been busy on my mouth for over an hour and they stuck me and drilled me and poked stuff into my teeth until I was about to die. I was all sweaty, just soaked through by the time they finished even though it was nice and cool in there. Then they got Di in that chair and did the same thing to her only her teeth weren’t as old and worn as mine so it didn’t take as long.

I was scared that doctor was going to ask for money I didn’t have but they never said nothin’ ‘bout money so I guessed that the rich man who turned out to be Mr. Fisher, Ms. Fisher’s husband, I guessed that he had done paid for me. Well I can tell you I was feeling right grateful to the Fishers about then for what they done for us and I had only just cleaned some glasses for them. So when a young man come in to get us and take us back to the big house I was regretful it wasn’t Mr. Fisher ‘cause I wouldn’t get a chance to thank him right away. The young man was a real nice looking colored boy of about 30. He had this uniform on and when Di asked him about it he said that he was a ‘chauffer’ and them clothes was for driving. Well I ain’t never seen any clothes just for driving a car before so I figured this boy, his name was Andrew but the Fishers called him Andy, I figured he was pretty important.

Andrew told me that we’d, that’s me and Di, we’d be living in a room just off the kitchen in the back of the house. He said that Ms. Fisher would give us clothes to wear while we was working. He said we’d also get one day a week when we didn’t have to do no work at all after we give them breakfast.
I figured that we’d just about found heaven. We had a bedroom with a soft bed and a real thick mattress. It had its own bathroom with a real bathtub and hot water. And the soap smelled wonderful. It had real perfume in it. Ms. Fisher had some dresses for me to wear which were all the same and they was mostly too loose for me but she let me use her sewing stuff to fix them so they fit me good. The dresses was all too big for Di but Ms. Fisher said they’d have some for her too, in a few days and Di could wear the dresses she had until they got her new dresses. She had me measure Di so they could get dresses the right size.

Well it was one of the happiest times in my life. They had machines that made washing and cleaning just as easy as could be. They had a woman who come in just to do the cookin’. Me and Di was eating good ‘cause there was always plenty of leftovers and we had clean clothes to wear every day. Ms. Fisher insisted that we change clothes every day whether the dresses was dirty or not. And she also said it was OK to take a bath every day too, and use the hot water when we was washing. Sometimes me and Di would take two baths in one day ‘cause that soap smelled so pretty and Ms. Fisher said they had plenty of soap so use the soap every bath. And they did have lots of soap. I seen 20 or 30 bars of soap in this little closet they called a linen closet where they kept the towels and such.

I guess Ms. Fisher really liked me and Di at first there, ‘cause she even gave us a special perfume that you put under your arms to keep you smelling good all day. Those were good times.” Wendy sat somewhat dreamy-eyed for a few seconds remembering, with a little smile around her mouth. Then she remembered too much and her mouth hardened and her eyes became a little cold.

I reckon it was just too good to last, though. I would carry in the food to the dining table when they had meals and, after a time, even when they had some guests at dinner. One time a couple of the guests were dressed in all white just like the payer from my church. They were talking about some troubles at one of the businesses Mr. Fisher owned in town. There was somebody stirring up trouble among the boys who worked for Mr. Fisher. You see these men were Payers just like that man from my church and they paid the boys who worked for Mr. Fisher just like I got paid. From what they said, I could tell that it was the payer from my church that was making the trouble. They were right angry with him and even though I couldn’t tell just exactly what it was he was doing, it was clear that it was costing Mr. Fisher money, whatever it was.

I was feeling bad for the payer ‘cause he’d been nice to me and Di and he was a God-fearing man ‘cause he was in Church every Sunday. So next Sunday, after the service, I waited and asked him if he was having trouble with anybody because I had heard that Mr. Fisher didn’t like what he was doing. The payer, he said that Mr. Fisher was cheating the coloreds who worked for him. He said that the white men were getting paid more for the same work.

‘Well,’ I said, ‘ain’t that the way it’s always been?’ and he said ‘Yeah, but it ain’t supposed to be that way now. Now everybody’s supposed to get paid what they deserve. Look,’ he said, ‘Fisher’s got some tame Payers who do just what he tells them to do. He tells them to pay what his managers say to pay and they do it. I don’t know why they do it because Payers are supposed to be fair. Maybe they just got so used to doing what Mr. Fisher says that they don’t realize they don’t have to do what he says any more. Maybe he has some way to pay them off, I don’t know. But whatever it is it’s enough to keep all his colored workers poor.’

‘But I’m one of his workers, Mr. Deeds,’ (The payer’s name was Deeds.) ‘Mr. Fisher treats me real nice,’ I said. ‘You ought to see what me and Di live like now.’
He says, ‘How much have you been paid, Wendy? Want to know? Remember I paid you after your mother died.’ ‘My granny died,’ I said, ‘My mama died about 15 years ago.’ But he said, ‘Here, you ask the computer how much money you got now,’ and he held out this little cell phone thing to me but of course I didn’t know what it was then.

‘I still got what you give me. I ain’t spent any of it yet,’ I told him. But he said, ‘Just say “How much money have I got” to the computer here.’ So I said ‘How much money have I got?’ and it said ‘You have twenty-five dollars.’

“And he says, ‘How long you been working for the Fishers, now?’

‘Bout six weeks.’

‘Wendy, you shoulda been paid for that work. They’re getting your work for nuthin’, Wendy.’

‘But they’re lettin’ me stay in their house and eat their food and…’

‘But they’re getting’ paid to let you live there and they’re getting’ paid for the food they let you eat and they’re getting paid for the clothes they make you wear. Don’t you understand, Wendy? They’re cheatin’ you.’

I got mad then and I raised my voice to Mr. Deeds and I said, ‘No! They’re good people. They wouldn’t cheat me. They treat’s me and Di almost as good as family. I don’t believe you.’ And I turned and ran out of that Church with tears in my eyes. I ran out of Church. I guess that should have told me somethin’. If you’re eager to get out of Church there’s somethin’ wrong and it’s somethin’ in you that’s wrong.

Well I went back to the Fisher’s house and I went right to work even though Sundays was usually my days off. Di was out visiting some of her friends. She had friends now that she could play with. She never had time for friends before ‘cause we’d lived out in the country and when she had a little time off work it was too far to go to find some other girls to play with. Di had friends now because the Fishers let us live here. Di had dresses, right pretty dresses, because the Fishers let us work here. It was warm in our bedroom and we didn’t have to chop no wood or light no fires in the morning to get warm or cook food. I even had some new teeth because of the Fishers to replace those I’d lost. Everything we had now we owed to the Fishers. They just had to be good people.

So time went on and I overheard more things that just grieved my heart. Things about how Mr. Deeds was stirrin’ up trouble amongst the boys who worked for Mr. Fisher. Some of them boys done quit and left town with their whole families. This was makin’ Mr. Fisher unhappy cause he was havin’ trouble gettin’ enough boys to work to keep his businesses goin’.

Then one day I heard him cussin’ somethin’ fierce to his son. His son was helpin’ him run the business and young Mr. Fisher, when he come out of Mr. Fisher’s office looking angry red in the face, I heard Mr. Fisher yelling after him, ‘Whatever it takes. You hear me? Whatever it takes.’ And young Mr. Fisher he stormed out the house and slammed the front door. I tell you I never worked so quiet in my life as I did the rest of that afternoon and I kept Di doing things in the kitchen so Mr. Fisher wouldn’t even see her.

Couple of days later Di came home from visiting friends and told me that Mr. Deeds had been murdered. She said that somebody had done beat him to death. She said you could hardly recognize him but for his clothes and his phone which they done smashed, too.
I can't tell you how bad I felt then. I mean, the last time I done seen Mr. Deeds I had as much as called him a liar. And after all the good things he had done for me. I just started to bawl then, and Di, she got all upset too. I guess it was from me bawling, and all. Anyway she tried to comfort me and asked me why I was so upset and I told her about my last conversation with Mr. Deeds and what we'd said to each other. You know, so she'd understand why I was carrying on the way I was. I just couldn't stop cryin'

Well, Di, she got all quiet then and I could see her thinkin' but of course then I didn't know what she was thinking. I thought that she was just realizing why I felt so bad.

She was pretty quiet for several days, there. I thought she was mourning over Mr. Deeds the way I was but it turned out she was thinkin' 'bout other things.

My Di, she loved to read, like I told you, and the Fishers they had just lots of books and magazines in their house. They had several rooms with book shelves just crammed with books. Well one day I heard Ms. Fisher screaming from another room so of course I ran quick as I could to see what was the matter. It was Di. Ms. Fisher had come in early from riding still in her riding clothes and boots and had caught Di reading one of their books. Di was standing in front of Ms. Fisher with her head down but it was obvious that she had been sittin' on the couch with the book in front of her on the coffee table.

Ms. Fisher was screamin' ‘We just can’t trust no niggers even when they’re brats living in our own houses. You aren’t here to read, especially read my books and you certainly aren’t here to sit on my couch, ever. You're here to work, you little bitch, not give me any of your lip, you slut. ’ And she went on like that till she noticed me in the room. Then she turns on me. Her face wasn't pretty any more. It was all twisted and red right through her makeup. I can still remember watching the spit come out of her mouth as she yelled and she had this vein on her forehead that was sticking out like she was about to bust a blood vessel.

‘You,’ she screamed at me. ‘You spawned this filth. You didn’t teach her to keep her hands to herself. You didn’t teach her to respect her betters. What are you going to do about this?’ And I said ‘I'll talk to her and…’ but she done interrupted me and said, ‘No you're going to spank her and spank her hard.’

She'd done been waving her arms around while she was yelling and suddenly she noticed that she was holding one of those little whips that people who ride horses use sometimes. She held it out to me and said, ‘Hit her with this. Now!’ And Di’s sweet little face looked up at her and then at me with a look of horror on it. And I looked at Ms. Fisher and said, ‘But ma'am. . . ’

She grabbed Di and jerked her around to the same side of the coffee table as we were on and shoved the whip into my hand and said, ‘Hit her now or you’ll never get work again. I’ll have you living in the streets, you slut, now hit her!’

‘I can't hit my daughter with that. Please ma'am. Please don't make me do it. ’

‘She’ll starve. She’ll be a whore with the pox. Everybody’ll know that she’s a slut if you don't hit her. ”

Wendy was sobbing, her shoulders shaking, her face streaked with tears at the memory.

God forgive me, I hit her.

I raised my arm and I hit her over and over until Ms. Fisher let me stop. By the time I finished Di was on the floor screaming and pleading with me not to hit her. Ms. Fisher told me to get her out of there,
back to our room, and not to let her out for a week. I picked her up as best I could and half carried her back to our room with both of us crying. I must have held her for an hour and kissed her face and smoothed her hair and begged her to forgive me. I pleaded with her to forgive me because I knowed I'd done wrong. I knew Jesus, himself, could never forgive such a sin as I done. I know I can't forgive myself."

The others in the room were also in tears at the stark tragedy of it. Wendy had her hands over her face, her body shaking and her voice choked.

“You see, it was that job I wanted. Ms. Fisher was my boss and she told me to hit my daughter. I didn’t hit Di for Di’s sake. Hitting Di wouldn’t make her a better person. It wouldn’t teach her a lesson. All it would do would be to let me keep my job and my nice room and my pretty clothes and the good food. It was all for me that I hit her. It was my selfish, evil self that I hit her for. It was my greed made me do it. While I was trying to comfort her I realized why I had done it. I hated myself for it. I didn’t deserve all the nice things I had now. I felt so bad I had to go to the toilet and vomit. If I could have died right then I would have felt I deserved the Hell I was destined for.

When I got back in the bedroom I could see Di looking at me with those big teary brown eyes and I knew she could never trust me again. I had thrown away her trust. I had beaten the love right out of my baby girl. How could she feel anything but hate and fear for me after what I done to her? I promised her that I’d never hit her again, never, as long as I lived but I could see she didn’t believe me."

By then the box of facial tissue for blotting eyes was making its circuit around the room and almost everyone was taking at least one tissue. Wendy also blotted her eyes and wiped her cheeks and said, “I guess it’s a good thing Payers don’t wear eye makeup.” And the others laughed quietly. Wendy tried to laugh, too, but the lump in her throat was too big for that. Having gotten some of her composure back, Wendy took a deep breath and continued.

“A couple of weeks later I heard them talking about Mr. Deeds again. One of the newspapers in the big city about 50 miles away said that the police knew who had killed Mr. Deeds because they had recorded the voices of the killers while they were beating him. The computer had recorded everything up until they smashed the phone but that was enough to identify them. It was three men and they was employees of Mr. Fisher.

When they came to trial, the experts from the big city told how they could identify people using voices just as good as by fingerprints. They played the recordings of the sounds made during the murder and you could hear the voices of the three men quite clear. But the jury said they were not guilty. There were 8 white men and four white women on that jury and six of them were employees of Mr. Fisher. The prosecutor and the defense attorney were both friends of Mr. Fisher. After the trial, Mr. Fisher had a party for the three men and all the most important people in town were there. They were laughing about how they had killed Mr. Deeds and I had to serve them.

By then even I knew that the Fishers were not the good people I had thought they were. Even I knew they were cheating me. No matter how nice it was to live in their house and eat their leftovers, it wasn't worth it to me any more. But I didn’t know what to do.

Di was very quiet. She wouldn’t look at me hardly. I’d ask her what she wanted to do and she’d say, ‘I don’t know,’ and shrug her shoulders. But she never smiled. She wouldn’t go to play with her friends.

One day I finally got her to talk to me some. She confessed that she had been reading a history book. It told about how the slaves had been treated. She said she believed what Mr. Deeds had said about
the Fishers cheating us. She said the Fishers were treating us like slaves, even to having her whipped. I can tell you that made me feel lots worse but she kept on. She said that the Fishers got us to the dentist so we’d look better and our breath would smell better. She said the Fishers gave us those nice clothes and let us take baths with soap so much so we’d look nice and smell nice so we wouldn’t shame the Fishers when their friends came to visit. She said all those things the Fishers did were for them not for us. But she said all those things angry and I figured she was angry at me. That was all I could hear in what she said, anger at me.

The black folks in town took the news of the trial hard. They didn’t like it that one of their friends could be murdered and the killers get off even though everyone knew who had done it. Anyway, they stopped going to work. All over town the jobs they usually did weren’t getting done. Mr. Fisher told the food stores to not let them have any food and the clothes stores to not let them have clothes. But then trucks of food and clothes came into town from the city and went up and down the streets where the blacks lived and handed out food and clothes to those who asked. They also brought Payers with them. They were mostly all black Payers but they went all over town. They looked at the places the black folks lived and where the white folks lived. They went to the businesses where the black folks worked even though they wouldn’t let them in. One payer even came to the Fishers house but I had to turn her away. Ms. Fisher told me to have her get off her property and she, the payer, went just as quiet as a lamb. Just like nothing was happening. But she had her phone out and I know it could hear me talking to her.

Well, time went by and there come a day when there were lots of folks come to see Mr. Fisher and they was right mad. It seems that they wasn’t gettin’ paid near as much as before. In fact, lots of them wasn’t gettin’ paid at all. Mr. Fisher had his tame Payers there and they kept saying that they couldn’t pay any more. They said that the payer organization had had their own trial and had determined that the Payers, Mr. Fisher’s Payers that is, had been cheating. That they should have been paying the black folks just as much as the white folks for the same work. They also found out that the stores had been selling things to blacks as luxuries that were supposed to be free and had been giving things to whites, well, some whites anyway, that were supposed to be paid for.

It worked like this. A black man would buy something, like say, a TV and the store would give him a standard version of it and tell the computer they had given the luxury version. So the store would keep the luxury TV and give it to some white person, usually a friend of the store owner. The Payers who should have been keeping track of such things would just wink at it ‘cause they were white and the folks being cheated were black. Anyway, since those Payers had cheated they weren’t allowed to pay any more. They couldn’t pay anybody for anything and, of course, they already didn’t have accounts to have money in anyway so they couldn’t go back to having money.”

Mr. Fisher, he gave them some of the old money, you know, currency, and he told the folks to use that in town to buy things and that the store owners should take that money to pay for the things they bought, and that way, he said, everything would be all right. But the stores in town couldn’t get anybody from outside town to send them goods so they began to be pretty empty of stuff. Most of the farms around town didn’t have any produce because it was early spring and there weren’t hardly any crops to harvest yet. So the white folk’s grocery stores began to run out of food. Pretty soon the white folks were demanding that the stores give food and clothes to the black folks again so the white folks could get stuff from other places. So first one store and then another began to let us shop there again and before you know it every store in town except those owned by Mr. Fisher had lots of customers again and the folks that run them stores was getting’ paid again. Mr. Fisher’s employees began to quit, even the white ones, because they wasn’t getting paid much any more.

One day after this had been going on for about two weeks, Di was serving breakfast to Mr. Fisher and Snack went between her legs and she dropped a jar of jelly. Now the jar was plastic so it didn’t
break but a great gob of jelly shot out and got on Mr. Fisher’s shoe. He started to yell and cuss Di. I came in from the kitchen and heard what he was saying to Di. And I lost my temper.

‘You don’t speak to a lady like that, Mr. Fisher,’ I said. ‘You can talk to your wife that way and you can talk to your mistress that way but you can’t talk to a lady that way and my daughter is a lady and you can clean up your own mess.’ And I took Di by the hand and we marched back through the kitchen to our room. Before he could bust it down we were ready to go cause we were leaving with just what we come with, which was the clothes on our backs.

I opened the door and said, ‘Out of the way, Fisher,’ and brushed right by him, keeping between him and Di. We went straight through the house to the front door and out onto the big porch with its columns. We went down the middle of the sidewalk with the pretty flowers on both sides to the drive and down the drive to the street. I didn’t look back and I didn’t pay no mind to the gabble-gabble coming from Fisher either.

By the time Di and I had got to downtown I knew what to do. I went up to a payer and said, ‘How much money do I have?’ and he said, ‘What?’ and I said, ‘You’re a payer. You have a computer there that’s supposed to know how much money I have. Please let me ask it how much money I have.’

Well he turned that phone around and said, ‘Who is this?’ and the phone said, ‘This is Wendy Hawkins White.’ And I said quick, ‘How much money do I have.’ The computer said, ‘Twenty-five dollars.’

The payer got a funny look on his face and said, ‘You’re the woman who works for Mr. Fisher,’ and I said, ‘Not any more, I’m not. I’ll never work for that family again.’ He said, ‘Would you please come down to the police station then? We have some questions we’d like to ask you.’

I should have been terrified. I mean, Di’s eyes got big and I had flashes of remembering stories I’d heard about black men and women who had gone into that police station and hadn’t come out. But I was still so mad about what had happened that I didn’t have anything left to be scared. I just started walking toward the station and not slowly at all. Di was practically having to skip to keep up and the payer was really stretching his legs.

When we got there I saw that there were a number of State troopers in the building and I didn’t see any of the usual local policemen. They took me upstairs to a room with comfortable chairs for Di and me and they offered us refreshments. Not just canned drinks out of a machine either but real coffee or tea or even orange juice from a pitcher like the Fishers had for their guests. There were several men in suits there who were real interested to talk to me about what I knew about the Fishers. They asked me questions about who came to talk and what they’d said and what days they were there and just ever so many questions, a lot of which I couldn’t even answer. They asked Di what she had seen and heard, too. Well they recorded what we said and had us say that what we had said was the truth so help us God. When they had finished they thanked me and asked if they could give us a ride home.

I said we didn’t have a home, that we’d been living in the Fisher’s house in a room off the kitchen. I said we didn’t know where we were going to spend the night but it sure wasn’t there. They asked me where our bags were and I said all we owned was on our backs. Well, you never saw such a dither. They had people calling people and folks running in and out. Next thing I knew we were in a nice big car, almost as nice and big as the one Andrew drove for the Fishers before he quit a couple months back. They asked me what town I’d like to live in and I said I might as well go to a big city because
there was almost bound to be work I could do there. So we went to the city. The apartment there was even nicer than the bedroom at the Fishers.”

I worked in a restaurant for a while and after a couple of years I managed the restaurant. Then I spent some time teaching other people how to run restaurants. Di went to school, then college, and now she works in West Texas developing drought-resistant plants. I don't want to be too far away from her and I don't want to be too close to her either. So I just sort of live on the edge. I'm close enough that she can get over to see me when she wants to and far enough away that I can't just drop in on her. It's far enough that she doesn't need an excuse for not coming to see me but not so far that she can't get to see me if she really wants to.

Di has children now. I failed her but I don't mean to fail those grandchildren. I'm going to look out for them the best way I know how and that's by being a payer. I'm going to be the fairest payer I can be. There won't be anybody who can say I cheated them and there won't be any cheating by any other payer if I can prevent it. The Payers were the ones who brought something like justice to my little town. Mr. Fisher is still in jail as far as I know along with his son. Di and I even got paid for the work I did for the Fishers. Those three men that murdered Mr. Deeds left the country. Once word spread of what they had done, nobody wanted to risk working with them. It wasn't that there weren't any other bigots out there. It was that people who acted like bigots had trouble making money. They just didn't tend to produce much net benefit.

So I'm going to be a payer because that's the best way I know of to protect my grandchildren so they won't have to live a life like mine. They won't have to do what anybody else says just to get money. They won't have to beat their daughter to keep a job.”

Wendy settled back into her chair with a little of the grim determination she had shown in leaving the Fishers still showing around her mouth and a little of the sadness of her guilt still around her eyes.
Chapter Thirty-Seven: A Real Payer Talks

In which a veteran payer tells it like it is.

The little old lady in whites, her back straight, her wispy white hair caught up in a bun on the back of her neck, walked with serene confidence to the table at the front of the classroom. The students eyed her curiously. She was the first instructor they had seen who was a payer. Of course this was their first class in how to pay, so it shouldn’t have been surprising.

She smiled and asked without preamble, “What are your limits as a payer?” pronouncing her words with precision.

“No luxuries,” several of the class quickly responded.

“You can’t keep anyone else out of the club,” Niall said.

The teacher’s head turned quickly toward Niall. “You’ve been thinking. I like that.” Then turning to the rest of the class she continued, “What else?”

“The laws of physics,” another said.

“Limits as a payer, not limits as a human being. Pay attention to the questions.”

There was silence for a time as she looked at them impassively. “That’s right. There are almost no limits on Payers as Payers. Can you pay anyone you like?”

“Only if they’re not a payer themselves,” from the same student who had mentioned the laws of physics.

“You have guts. I like that. You’re also right, I like that even better. Yes, you can pay anyone who is not a payer already.

“Have any of you been paid since you came here?”

“They told me that we wouldn’t be paid for whatever we do here even if it benefits someone,” Niall said.

“That’s true. Is that a limitation on Payers? Are we not allowed to pay you? If I tried to pay you now could I succeed?”

No one seemed to know. The instructor gestured to someone outside the classroom who wheeled in a TV on a cart. The set must have been at least three feet wide. The young man positioned the set on the table facing the class and turned it on.

The instructor walked around to the front of the set. “Kermit, do you know the folks in this class?”

A green hand puppet in the shape of a frog appeared on the TV and seemed to look around the room. “Yes, ma’am.”

“What’s her name?”
“That is Natalie Holmes Carraway,” the Kermit seemed to say sounding like Kermit the Frog as well.

“Natalie, it is all right for us to show your account total to the members of this class?”

“Yes ma’am.”

“Kermit, show Natalie’s account total.

“Natalie, is that the correct amount.”

“Yes, ma’am, it is,” responded a somewhat embarrassed Natalie.

“Credit Natalie’s account with one dollar for serving as my example to this class to demonstrate the powers of a payer.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Natalie. Would you ask to have Kermit show your account balance?”

“Yes ma’am. Kermit, what is my account total?”

The amount that showed on the screen was one dollar greater than before.

“Natalie, did I just pay you?”

“Yes, ma’am, it certainly appears that you did.”

“It appears to be possible for a payer to pay you students.”

“So why are you not being paid while you’re here at the school?”

“Because no payer chooses to pay us while we are here?” Niall ventured.

“That’s correct. We could pay you but we choose to not pay you. What’s our motivation for not paying you?”

“You want us to know what it’s like to be Payers and Payers don’t get paid, no matter what they do.”

“Right, Niall. But doesn’t that show that the Payers also have the power to not pay, even when someone deserves to be paid?”

There were murmurs of agreement from around the room.

“How did you know my name?” Niall asked.

“Kermit can talk to my hearing aid, of course. Why isn’t there a law to force the Payers to pay people when they deserve to be paid?”

“Because such a law could not be enforced. We just covered that point in a history class.” Niall said.
“When did such a consideration ever stop a legislature from passing a law? Could the Prohibition Amendment be enforced back in the 1920’s? No. Could the war on drugs prevent organized crime from flooding the nation with illegal drugs? No. Could all those State laws against various forms of sexual behavior between consenting adults be enforced? No. So what’s the real reason there’s no law to force the Payers to pay people when they deserve to be paid?”

“I would say it was pointless and unnecessary but there have been all sorts of pointless and unnecessary laws passed over the centuries,” Leyden said.

“Yes, Leyden. That is true. Anyone else want to have a go at it?”

“Because the Payers pay the legislature and Congress and such a law would have bad consequences.”

“All right, Natalie,” the instructor said clapping her hands. “Since the transition, legislators have been held responsible for the laws they’ve passed. It’s had a marvelous effect on the amount of laws passed and on their content. What would some of the bad consequences of such a law be?”

“The legislatures would think they could control the Payers and would pass laws to try to control them,” Oscar said.

“The Payers would be thinking about the law instead of how much they should pay,” said D.W.

“It's impossible to pay for everything that deserves to be paid, since there are so many people doing so many things. So it would be a law that couldn't be obeyed. Therefore, any time someone wanted to hurt a payer, they could accuse them of not paying for some benefit,” Clayton said.

“Very good, class. Those are all good reasons. The point of this exercise is that the Payers are free to pay as they choose or not pay as they choose. There are no formal limitations on us. We are free in many ways. We are also very important to the proper functioning of the economy and the society in general. How can the society allow us to be unrestricted? Are Payers more trustworthy than other people? Are we the most intelligent of people? Do we never make mistakes? Why don’t we run amok? What keeps us in line?”

Natalie spoke up, “Well, we are good people. I’ve already formed friendships with the people in this class. I think I’m a pretty good judge of character and these are really good people.”

The instructor smiled kindly and said, “Maybe you all are good but that doesn’t mean that the other three million Payers are all good people. What keeps the bad apples from ruining things for all of us?”

“I was told that Payers are controlled by the consumers and the Payers control the producers and the consumers are at the mercy of the producers. So it's the consumers that keep Payers in line.”

“Niall, you're right in general. That relationship between producers, consumers, and Payers does exist. But how many Payers making really silly payments would it take to make everything fall apart?”

“Not many, I guess.”

“Let’s hope we never find out how many. Think now, class. What prevents bad payments by a few Payers from ruining everything? Remember that Payers can pay almost anyone and don’t have to pay. What’s left that might control Payers?”
A tentative hand went up in the back row. “Could it be the fact that the amount that an individual payer can pay is limited?”

“Yes! That’s how we Payers are limited. No one payer can credit an account with a large amount of money. The larger the amount, the more Payers it takes in agreement. For the largest payments and other important decisions up to 2500 Payers might be involved in the decision. Thus no small group of Payers can mess things up by wildly erratic payments.”

Niall raised his had and was recognized. “It looks to me as if a lot of things could go wrong with this. What if those 2500 got together and decided to take over? Wouldn’t they be able to control the legislature, for example?”

“Each set of 2500 is randomly selected from among all the Payers and they make only the one decision. Since there are over three million Payers at present, you can see that no small group of Payers could expect to have even one of their number be on each of the decision groups. Also, though important, those decisions are but a tiny proportion of the decisions being made.”

“OK. But how can you be sure the counting of the votes is being done fairly? I believe someone famous once said that it doesn’t matter who the people vote for, it only matters who counts the votes.”

“The lists of who is included in the deciding group are public and the vote of each payer is public. I’ve talked to Payers who’ve served and their votes are registered as they said they had voted. In the early days after the transition there were many who were suspicious of just such cheating by those who programmed the computers. They talked to each of the voters and confirmed that each of their votes actually was as the computer indicated. They never found a discrepancy. These days, I understand some folks still run independent checks to be sure it’s counting things correctly. They’re even paid for doing so by the Payers, I should add. It is very important to us that people trust us, as a group, of course. I’m sure there are individual Payers who are dishonest... we are only human.” She smiled somewhat grimly.

“Ah,” Niall said, “but the Payers make so many decisions. Some of them must be wrong. Even you must have paid unfairly from time to time.”

“Oh yes, I have made my share of bad decisions. Those payments that were too low we were able to go back later and correct. It’s not what we would like but, as they say, better late than never. Those times that I overpaid, well, all one can do is shrug and try to avoid such an error in the future.”

“What happens to the person who got overpaid?” Niall asked.

“Nothing unless, of course, there was fraud of some sort. Then they might be prosecuted as thieves,” she replied.

“And what happens to the money?”

“Sometimes the court will put a freeze on their accounts for a time but unless they refuse to come to court or something like that, the money is theirs. They can spend it as they like.”

“You mean they get to keep the money?”

“Once the money’s in their accounts it’s their property, period. They’re the only people who can have that money deleted from their accounts. Of course such fraud would be added to their reputation.
Everyone who might do business with them would find out about their actions. They’d have real trouble finding people who would cooperate with them. Also, there’s a tendency on the part of those who provide standard goods and services to refuse to give their goods to such people. Persons convicted of fraud sometimes find themselves in the position of having to pay for luxury food whether they want it or not. Even then, some who sell luxuries won’t sell to them. Life can be terribly hard for such people. Many leave the country permanently to escape such treatment. So in the long run, the problem tends to take care of itself without our having to even use jails.

Class, let’s get back to our theme of the constraints on Payers. We’ve established that Payers can pay anyone they like and refuse to pay anyone they like. We’ve shown why the law doesn’t even attempt to place limits on the Payers. We’ve also shown that a small group of Payers can’t run amok with their payments.”

The point of all this is to show you that as Payers you must restrain yourselves. You are not controlled by others. There’s no law and no organization that you can blame for your actions. The Payers, collectively, must take responsibility for the payments that they make. There are no excuses.”

Niall’s hand went up again.” What about if someone is holding a gun on the payer and demanding to have money placed in his account? Would the payer be held responsible for doing what he was told?”

“To begin with, the payer would be physically unable to make a very large payment, so the possible rewards to the gunman would be low. Secondly, the gunman identifies himself by accepting the payment. Third, the computer would be able to hear the payer’s voice and detect the stress that would certainly be involved. If it were a scent station it could also detect the stress in the body’s secretions. The computer would contact the police and would probably fake the acceptance of the payment for later confirmation. I don’t know of any case in which such a thief was successful. Now in case you think that the thief could threaten the payer’s family or some such ransom scenario, the stress would still be there.

Satisfied, Niall?”

“On this point, yes ma’am.”

“As I was saying, there are no excuses for the Payers. If the producers are not doing what they should, if things are going wrong, if people don’t like what’s happening, the Payers are to blame and they are handy. We cannot escape the wrath or disappointment of the public.”

Niall’s hand was up again.” I thought you said the Payers were not controlled by others. Now you’re saying that the Payers can’t escape the consequences of the way they pay. That sounds like control to me.”

“If you’re a trader in a free market, does the market control you? Does it tell you what products to bring to market and how you must talk to those you trade with?”

“No. It wouldn’t be a free market in that situation.”

“But if you demand a price for your goods that’s twice what others will accept for similar goods will you be able to sell your goods?”

“No.”
“Then you cannot escape the response of the other traders in the market. You suffer the consequences of your actions. The Payers are the same way. If they make foolish decisions, they’ll suffer the consequences of those decisions. They cannot escape those consequences. Just as the free market controls those who participate in it, so does the public, in the same sense, control how the Payers pay. They don’t tell the Payers what to do, but they do react to the consequences of the Payers’ payments. Just as the market responds to the actions of the traders, so the public responds to the actions of the Payers. The Payers are free. They are not controlled. But to get what they want from the public, the respect, the admiration, the trust, even the power, Payers must pay in certain ways. They don’t have to do anything unless they want the rewards. But then, none of you would be here giving up luxuries unless you wanted those rewards.

So what constrains the Payers? What makes us pay as well as we can? What makes us try very hard to pay fairly? Well, it isn’t rules. It isn’t threats of punishment. It’s our situation. To get what we want, others must get what they want. In short, it’s that we are part of a free market and the market, without coercion, without threats, without restricting our freedom, controls the results of our actions far more surely than any law or enforcement agency.

The reason we hold these classes is to help you understand your situation as well as possible so that you can get what you want from being a payer and so that we Payers can get what we want from you. We don’t have to try to force you to do anything so long as you do understand. That’s why we encourage you to discuss and debate things in your ‘spare’ time. That time is a major part of your education. You must know how your fellow Payers feel about things and how they’re likely to react to what you do. We’re all going to be in this thing together and we don’t want anybody drilling holes in the bottom of the boat to let the water out.

So that’s why you’ll want to pay close attention to what I’m going to try to explain to you. If you don’t understand something, you’ll ask about it. If you’re too scared to ask me, you’ll ask your new friends. You’ll discuss things and you’ll come to understand. None of this is all that complicated, it’s just a different point of view. You’ll be able to learn it.

First, you must understand that you are not paying for what people have done. You are paying for what they will do. Can anyone tell me in what sense that’s true? Then I’ll ask in what sense it’s false.

Yes, D.W.”

“Our power comes not from the payments we’ve made but from what people expect us to pay in the future. If they don’t expect us to pay for a certain thing, they won’t be motivated to do that thing.”

“What’s the basis for their expectations?”

“The payments we’ve made in the past.”

“So in what sense does our power not come from payments we’ve made in the past?”

“The public’s perception of those payments and the actual payments may be different. It is the perception that determines the expectations, not the reality.

“Right, D.W. This is why we make the reasons for each payment public. If John Doe is paid $1000, we want people to know what we thought deserved a $1000 payment. Of course, most payments aren’t examined by the public, since they really aren’t very interested in any payments other than their own. But if they want to search the database to see how payments are being made for some particular kind of production, they can do so.”
Niall once again raised his hand. “Isn’t that an invasion of privacy?”

“Did the consequences of your action affect other people than yourself?” the instructor asked.

“I guess so.”

“Would you have been paid if they had not?”

“Oh, no, I would not, so my action must have affected others or at least appeared to have done so.”

“Good. Now if it affects other people, it’s already public. Private things don’t affect others. If you burn your own property, that’s a private thing. But if the burning embers and smoke go onto someone else’s property, your action is now public. The same kind of thing holds true for the things you do that benefit others. Like it or not, those actions are public. If you do something to benefit someone else and the two of you choose to keep it a secret from the rest of us, that’s just fine. We have no problem with that. But if you do something and expect to get paid for it, know that your action must be public before you can be paid. Therefore, making your actions available to the public to validate your getting paid is not an invasion of your privacy.

To take an extreme example, consider the POM colonies in this very State. They rejected and ejected all the Payers who attempted to pay in their community at the transition and since then. That’s their choice. We don’t have them in the accounts computer. They’ve chosen to cut themselves off from the rest of us and since they’re on their own property and don’t bother us, we see no reason to try to make their actions public.

“To repeat, you are not paying for what people have done, you are paying for what they will do. We have seen in what sense this is true. Now tell me in what sense this is not true.

“No, D.W., give someone else a chance. All right, Leyden, go ahead.”

“We must base our payments on the consequences of people’s actions. Since the pay is for the consequences of past actions, we are paying for what they have done.”

“Yes. We only pay after the consequences, the benefits, are realized. We never pay for what we expect to happen. Therefore, we are paying for what people have done, in that sense. You will note that these two ways of viewing the statement are both true. In paying for the past we are influencing the future. If people don’t like what’s happening, the only thing we can do to change things is pay on the basis of what has happened in the past. We control the future by remembering the past. We control actions in the present by helping people interpret what happened in the past.

Next, I would point out to you that you are not alone. There are currently over three million Payers active in the U.S. Your payments will be but a small part of the huge number of payments that will be made while you’re active. This is both comforting and depressing. Comforting in that you cannot, by your individual actions, bring down the economy any more than your individual decisions as consumers before the transition could have destroyed the economy. But it’s depressing in that you cannot, by your own payments, have a great influence on the economy. The Payers, as a category of people, hold a great amount of power. But they cannot exercise that power individually.

This is why you must concern yourselves with other Payers as well as with yourselves. Some people will respect you because you wear whites. But other people will be angry with you because you wear whites. You will be held responsible for their actions and you will get credit for their actions and you
will be blamed for their actions. Because we are labeled and dress alike we are easily stereotyped. If you allow other Payers to be slipshod, if you allow other Payers to be corrupt, if you allow other Payers to consume luxuries and remain Payers, you attack your own reputation. The reputation of every payer will be your reputation. People will not look up your reputation on the net, even though they could. They will know all they need to know from looking at your clothes. You must keep your fellow Payers on the straight and narrow. You must be their conscience. You must be a sterling example to them. And you must expect them to keep you on the straight and narrow. You must expect them to be your conscience. You must expect to be watched and judged and evaluated by your fellow Payers perhaps even more closely than they watch and judge and evaluate producers. If you can’t take being watched and nagged and having demands made upon you, then you have no business being Payers. You’ll have to be just as tolerant and strive just as hard as you ever did in your previous walk in life.

Enough sermon. I can tell you about it but I can’t make you feel it. You must imagine it as vividly as you can, both the watching over others and the being watched over. If either role makes you uncomfortable, don’t become a payer until you can welcome both roles.

“Does this mean that you must always be just like all the other Payers? Absolutely not. You must do as good a job paying as you are able. You must be right even though it seems that everyone around you is wrong. Never make a payment unless you are convinced it is the right one. We may be judged as a group but every person you pay is an individual. You hold that life in your hands. You represent the society’s evaluation of that person. You have no right to be casual about your rendering of judgment. You must pay as fairly as you’re able. To pay too much devalues your judgment in the eyes of the person you pay just as much as paying too little. You cannot make yourself popular by being ‘generous’ with your payments. You only make yourself appear a fool. You’ll get only contempt. You cannot gain respect by paying less than is deserved. You’ll gain only anger and bitterness. You can only have the respect and admiration of those you pay by appearing, in their eyes, to pay fairly. Nothing else will do. There’s no second best. This is why it’s so important to specify accurately the benefits and the costs that led you to assign the payment you did. This is also why we use groups of Payers when the amount to be paid is large. We want the wisdom of many to contribute to that decision.”

The members of the class were somber as they filed out of the classroom.
Chapter Thirty-Eight: Natalie and D.W.

In which Natalie tells her side and D.W., well... doesn't.

Natalie was annoyed. Here she was trying her hardest to be open and accepting and tolerant and all those good things so she could start off on the right foot being a payer and they treat her like this. Even before they got here the men, particularly Oscar and D.W., went all drooly over Leyden and practically ignored Natalie. Then when they get off the bus, Niall almost demands to hold her suitcase when she rebuffed him twice. Couldn’t he tell she didn’t want anybody touching her things? I mean, there she was wearing her white gloves and sitting in a seat all by herself. Wasn’t it obvious that she didn’t like being touched?

Anyway, now they were talking like they wanted everybody to confess their sins. They even bullied Wendy, poor thing; she’s suffered so much, into telling about her life when anyone can see that she’s shy too. And there were only four left who hadn’t told their stories. Maybe I can make up something that will put them off, Natalie thought. No, they’d catch me in some inconsistency or other and might even throw me out of the group altogether. But what can I tell them about. I can’t talk about what I did in business, that’s old, pre-transition stuff anyway. It isn’t really relevant. So I cut some corners. Everybody did it then. It’s not like I was some big criminal or something. I’ll bet D.W. cut a few corners in his day too. Oscar certainly did. Niall even hit somebody for practically no reason at all.

Oh there’s Niall and he’s coming this way. He’s beginning to show signs of being sweet on me. Do I want him to? I mean it’s flattering and all that but he’ll want to touch me. Maybe I should just go back to town and stay with one of the girls. Their children are old enough now that I wouldn’t have to change diapers or anything. Susie has a large enough house. She’d even save money on her rent.

“Hello Natalie. You’re early. I figured I’d be the first one here.”

“Hello Niall. I wasn’t feeling very hungry so I just had a salad at supper.”

“You know, I really liked the way you stood up for Wendy last night. I’m sure she wouldn’t have had the courage to go on without your support.”

‘Oh, great,’ Natalie thought, ‘now he’s going to blame me for forcing Wendy to spill her guts.’ “Come now, Wendy has all the courage in the world. Look what she’s done. She had nothing and made herself successful.”

“Well I thought you were magnificent.”

‘He is getting sweet on me. Now what do I do? There’s Leyden, maybe she can distract his attention.’ "Hi Leyden. Won’t you join us? Sit here by me." 'Better her sitting next to me than risk Niall sitting down here.'

“Hi. Natalie, Niall, do you think we’re going to go on with this confession thing? I’m not sure I want to myself.”

“Leyden I don’t think you have anything to worry about either way,” Niall said gallantly. “I certainly don’t think any of us are under any obligation to say anything at all about our pasts. Those of us who told our stories got more out of telling them than any of the rest of you got out of hearing them. I know I feel much better now. I’m pretty sure both Wendy and Oscar do too. But the time and circumstances
have to be right for you before talking about your past can help. You’re the only one who can judge if you should go ahead. So I say it’s none of our business. Don’t you think so Natalie?

“Well sure. I mean I think you almost had to tell because of your probation situation and I think Oscar had so much guilt that he had to get it out. Something like the Ancient Mariner, you know? And Wendy, well she isn’t guilty of anything to my mind. Her guilt’s all in her imagination.”

“But she really feels it regardless of whether we think she did anything wrong or not,” Leyden said.

Niall said,” We don’t have to be guilty of something to tell our stories. It happens that those of us who have told our stories have all had guilt feelings and, perhaps, that’s why we feel so much better now. You’ll notice that Wendy smiles now, and she didn’t before. But, Leyden, your story wouldn’t have to show you were guilty of anything.”

“Oh, my story would sound trivial after the stories of you three. I’d be embarrassed to tell my story of wealth and privilege after the suffering we’ve heard about from you guys.”

“You’re feeling guilty about not having any guilt?” Niall laughed.

Natalie thought, ‘Now he’s falling into her lap trying to get her to tell her story. She’s so beautiful they just fawn all over her.’

Leyden smiled up at Niall standing before them, “No just embarrassed that my troubles sound… well, unimportant. I think you’d all be secretly laughing at me.”

“Leyden, we’d never laugh at you. We might laugh with you but not at you. We think the world of you.”

‘There he goes again. They all just fall for her. Why couldn’t anyone feel that way about me?’

“You’re just waiting until last hoping you won’t have to put yourself on the line,” D.W. said to Clayton as they came in the door.

“Hi, guys. Did you start without us? Oscar went back for a second helping of cobbler. So he’ll be about 30 seconds behind us.” Clayton said with a big grin.

“Well you put away quite a bit at supper tonight yourself.” Leyden said smiling back at him.

’It’s always Leyden, never me.’ Natalie thought.

“Where’s Wendy?” Niall asked looking around.

“She was in the office talking on the phone to her daughter. No telling when she’ll get here,” Clayton said.

“I’d still like to hear your story, Clayton,” Leyden said with a shy grin.

“Mine’s a boring story. We’d better save me for when we’ve had an exciting day and we need to relax and get drowsy,” Clayton laughed. “We’d much rather hear about your exciting and romantic life.”
‘I’d better join them in asking her or they’ll think I’m jealous,’ Natalie thought. “Yes, come on, Leyden, it’s easy. You just tell about some time when you weren’t beautiful and glamorous and successful. You must have had at least one such experience in your long and eventful life.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t know what to say. I’d be too embarrassed. I’d get stage fright,” Leyden said waving her palms from side to side.

Oscar who had just come in as she said it countered with, “I can’t believe such a beautiful and well-educated woman as you could have stage fright. You must have been on the stage before.”

“Oh no, I’ve never been an actress. I haven’t really done all those things you seem to think I’ve done.”

“What?” Natalie retorted. "Not even one divorce? Why even I’ve had a divorce. You could tell us about one of yours. Of course, I’m sure each breakup was all the fault of whichever husband it was. I can’t imagine you in the role of the unfaithful wife or irresponsible mother."

“But divorces are so common,” D.W. said. “The rest of us have never been a prisoner in a foreign country like Niall, nor been as poor as Wendy, and certainly none of us has been a TV star like Oscar, here. We can identify with a divorce. We can empathize with a divorcee.”

“Besides, there must have been something dramatic about at least one of your divorces,” Natalie said. “Even my divorce had its dramatic moments.”

“What would you call dramatic?” Leyden asked.

“Well, did any of your ex-husbands commit suicide when they couldn’t have you any more or did any of them try to kill you in a jealous rage? That sort of thing.” Natalie said.

“Did those things happen to you?” Leyden asked with incredulity.

“No it was more prosaic than that. Just the usual sex and money conflicts,” Natalie said shaking her head but sitting up straighter. ‘She thinks I’m too plain and bland to have ever truly aroused any man’s passions.’ “He didn’t actually try to kill me. At least I don’t think he intended to kill me.”

“My God,” Oscar said. “Your husband tried to kill you?”

“I don’t think so. At least, well, he was really angry and he easily could have killed me I suppose if he’d really wanted to.”

“What happened?” Niall asked with what looked like real concern on his face. “How could you marry a man who’d try to kill you?”

“When I thought of marrying him I had no idea he might actually try to kill me. He seemed really nice and he treated me very considerately.”

The men were drawing up chairs around her now and, though they still looked at Leyden from time to time, they seemed to be listening to her.

“You see, I met him when we were on a camping trip in the mountains. I was in graduate school at the University and some weekends we’d take off for some camping to relax and get a change of scenery. We were in the same political group, though we really hadn’t noticed each other before the camping trip. Around the campfire we would argue about politics. We were all libertarians so there
were lots of things to disagree about. Anyway, he was impressed with what I had to say so we walked together the next day on the trail and got to know each other.

He had a good job selling optical supplies and I was impressed by his car and his camping gear. Anyway I finished my MBA and got a job with a building supply business in Albuquerque and we continued to date... but began getting more and more serious about each other. He finally asked me to marry him and I consented.

He’d been considerate in our relationship. He’d let me set the pace on intimacy and I respected him for that. I know that many men, especially those I had known when I was in the army, had gotten pretty angry when I wouldn’t do certain things and the last year or so I’d stopped dating altogether. Of course when I got out after serving my two years and went to MBA school I figured the graduate students would be better-behaved, and most of them were.” At this she brought her knees together and pursed her lips a little. “But I always rejected right away those who were demanding. I think I got rather adept at spotting those who wouldn’t let me be in control.”

At this point Wendy came into the room and quietly took a seat near the others but behind and between Clayton and D.W.

“But I’m getting off the subject,” Natalie said, smiling and nodding to Wendy. “Dirk was good to me for several years or so I thought. By the way that’s not his real name. Our businesses were going well and so we decided to have children. I had girls two years apart. They were beautiful and once we got a good nanny they were hardly any trouble at all. By the time they were school age they were riding quite well. They looked so cute on their little ponies. They were in Pony Club and we would take them to little shows and such. They won lots of ribbons and made me so proud.

Well, at one show, one that Dirk didn’t come to with us, my oldest rode really well. I don’t think she’d ever done that well before and her pony just jumped every thing she rode it at like it was nothing. There was this girl that was favored in the event, one who seemed to always take the blue ribbons. Well she had a knockdown and two refusals. Her mother was furious because we’d always placed far behind her daughter before. We had the bad luck to be parked right next to her rig and we were putting things away, getting ready to go when she kind of sidled over to me.

‘Your girl was just lucky, you know. My Heather is really a better rider than your girl. It was just bad luck. I think somebody slipped something in her horse’s feed to make him refuse like that. I’d hate to think that somebody would do that just to get a win at a horse show. But then I guess a woman whose husband is playing around on her is desperate for success somewhere in her life.’” Natalie said with a pinched face and nasal, sneering tone. “I asked her what she meant about my husband and she said, ‘Well my friend whose name I won’t mention is having an affair with your husband and has been for weeks. I just assumed that you must have known. A wife can always tell unless she just closes her eyes to all the signs.’

It was really hard driving my rig back to the stable. I couldn’t concentrate on anything and I felt sick to my stomach and I kept having to ask the girls what they’d said. It was horrible. But by the time we got home I knew I had to find out for sure. Even though I was sure she’d said those things for spite she made me think.

In looking back I was able to think of several things that could be indications that Dirk wasn’t being honest with me. He did travel quite a lot in his business. But he was almost always home on the weekends. It’s true that we hadn’t had sex relations as often after my second was born but I just assumed that he agreed with me that sex really wasn’t that important now that we had the two children we’d planned on.
So after I got the horses put away I got on the phone to a detective agency. They discovered that not only was he having an affair with another woman and had evidence that it had been going on for months, but that he wasn’t being faithful to her either. He didn’t actually have a woman in every town as they say, but there were three or four at least.

Naturally I confronted him with the evidence and after denying it at first he finally admitted what was rather obvious from the photographs and recordings. He swore that he loved only me and that the other women were just for sex and he really didn’t care about them. He even cried and got down on his knees in front of me. Fool that I was, I believed him. We even had sex more frequently, sometimes as often as once a week even though letting him touch me was usually difficult.

This was about the time of the oil shortage and the economy going bad so my company was hurting and they were laying people off and I was worried that they might let me go too. The company was run by some rather traditional men and I figured that they would rather keep the men in the company and fire the women. So I was inclined to want to believe Dirk since his business was still doing pretty well and we could keep the essentials even if I lost my income.

Within a year though, I saw more signs that maybe he was at it again so I went back to the detectives and they caught him again. They told me he hadn’t even changed mistresses. I was furious and this time, instead of confronting him, I decided to get a little revenge. I did some calculations and the afternoon before the bank holiday for Thanksgiving, I cleaned out all our joint accounts and took his credit cards to the discount club and bought about $20,000 worth of supplies and other things we’d be able to use, someday.”

D.W. and Oscar looked at each other at that one. Natalie wondered what they were thinking.

“Then I had the locks changed on the house and wouldn’t let him in. We had a fight right through the door with each of us yelling about how we’d been mistreated. I didn’t tell him about the money though. After a few days, he found out. I’d already been to a lawyer and started the wheels moving on the divorce so I thought I had everything under control. I forgot that little girls tend to love their daddy.

I came home after work and found him there with the girls, who had let him in. He had found what I had done to his clothes and his sports gear and his electronic gadgets. He was livid. He started screaming at me and I screamed right back. Finally he grabbed my arm and slung me across the room and I hit my back on the corner of the couch and the back of my head on the coffee table. I was rather groggy but I was able to get my knees up in front of my belly and cover my head with my arms so when he kicked me he mostly hit my legs. I think he could have killed me then. I think he wanted to in some ways but the girls being there kept him from doing it I suspect. Anyway he smashed a couple of things in the room and then stormed out of the house.”

“What about the girls?” Wendy broke in. “Did they see all this? Were they in the room?”

“Yes. They were terrified.” Natalie, who had been merely solemn-faced before, began to squint a little and blink her eyes rapidly as if holding back tears. “They came over to me after he left. They were both sobbing and asking me if I was all right. I kept telling them that it was no worse than falling off a horse and that I didn’t think anything was broken. We just lay there on the floor for a while and cried together. Then I managed to get up and get to the phone without fainting, though I was pretty woozy from banging my head.
I called 911 and got some medical help because I really couldn’t have driven if my life had depended on it. I was able to go to work again in a couple of days so I wasn’t badly hurt but I had some really impressive bruises on my legs and one on my arm for the photographs that my lawyer took.

The divorce was an expensive one in lots of ways. It cost me over $80,000 and I know Dirk must have spent something in that neighborhood.” Leyden was nodding her head knowingly at this. “By the time we were finished trying to savage each other in court there wasn’t much left to live on. I’m sure you all remember how inflation was making things almost impossible for a lot of people in those days. Well I got the house and one of the cars and some child support but things were really hard for us because I didn’t have an income any more.

Dirk had made some accusations against me in court that were lies but my company fired me anyway due to the publicity. Even though I had the goods on him for infidelity that didn’t seem to make any difference to his company nor his customers so he kept his job.”

Wendy said, “Ain’t that just like men; Always holding women to a higher standard.”

“But he kept refusing to send the child support money and I kept taking him to court and he would lie about his assets. By this time I couldn’t afford to hire detectives to prove he was lying so the court accepted his lies.”

At this, Leyden, who was sitting next to her on the couch, put her arm around Natalie and gave her shoulders a small hug.

“The girls and I were still living in the big house though we had closed off most of it so we wouldn’t have to heat it. Again and again I thanked my lucky stars that I had bought all that stuff at the discount club on his cards. I was able to trade some of it for things we needed and, of course, we ate a lot of the food ourselves. We got sick and tired of rice and beans but at least we had food. There were many who didn’t have it nearly as good as we did.”

She had Wendy nodding at this one. She could remember when a meal of rice and beans would have been more than welcome to her small family.

“By this time the fierce anger I had felt toward him had cooled somewhat. I still hated him and did what I could to keep him away from the girls for those years. I mean, when he saw them he would give them presents and food that we couldn’t afford but he wouldn’t let me have the money to support them. And he’d tell them I was holding out on them because he was giving me plenty of money and keeping it all for myself.”


"I guess my story has been told a million times by a million women but for me it was anything but routine. There were times when I didn’t think I could go on. After a while that sick feeling in your stomach seems permanent and becomes hard to distinguish from just being hungry. I guess it wouldn’t have seemed so bad if we hadn’t had plenty of money all the time before. But then, suddenly, over the course of just a few months, I went from well-off to worrying about our next meal.

It was too late in the year for gardening but the girls would sometimes get babysitting jobs and would get some variety in their diets from their employers’ refrigerators. That was one benefit of living in a rich neighborhood, I guess.”
Natalie gave a deep sigh and looked at her hands, safely covered by white gloves, twisted in her lap. She hadn't expected to have those old feelings rush back on her from just talking about her divorce. 'Of course' she thought, 'this is the first time I really told anyone the story. I was too ashamed of what happened to talk to anyone about it besides my lawyer before.'

"Then the transition came. I went back to doing what I had been doing before in the building supply field. My knowledge and my skills were still relevant. I had to work out of our home at first and for a while there I was afraid that we'd have to give it up. I didn’t realize that since I owned the house we could keep it even though it was far too big for us to have it as standard housing. Well you remember the construction boom that started with the transition. I was right in the middle of it for this whole area. I had a good idea of which builders were on the ball and which were just singing a brave song. Within two years we had horses and an even bigger rig for hauling the horses since now it was horses, because the girls had outgrown ponies."

"Way to go kid," Niall said quietly.

"My relationship with Dirk changed, too. Not that I ever really liked him again. But I came to realize that the girls loved him and he wouldn't hurt them so I stopped trying to keep them away from him. Also, since there was no child support any more I had no reason to be angry at him for not paying it. I couldn’t and still can’t forgive him for what he did to me. But I’ve come to realize that by trying to hurt him by spending his money and breaking his things I was really being as bad in my way as he was being in his. I mean, his betrayal of me had already done all the damage it was going to do. I had been hurt and embarrassed by his infidelity but that wasn’t really a reflection on me at all. His behavior was his behavior and it really said nothing at all about me."

"That’s right, honey," said Wendy.

"I tried to explain that to my daughters several times but I don’t think I ever succeeded. They probably think he wouldn’t have been unfaithful if I’d been more of a woman. But I don’t think that was the case at all. I think he had to be unfaithful because of his own feelings of inadequacy. He just couldn’t believe that women could love him for himself so he had to keep chasing and proving over and over to himself that he could get women."

Again, D.W. and Oscar looked at each other on that one.

"But I guess each generation of women has to learn about men from their own experience. They just won't believe their mothers or learn from their harsh experience."

"So true, so true," Wendy said shaking her head from side to side with a grim look.

"Okay, I know I'm rambling and that this story needs a moral or at least a reason for being told. So here it is. Why am I becoming a payer? My own experience with our society has shown me that my success in life is largely due to Payers. Not that I owe anything to Payers in general or any particular payer. Becoming a payer was their choice and they did it for selfish reasons I'm sure. It was the life they wanted to live and they got their chance. But I've been in the competitive business world for over 30 years. I've been operating under pressure for all my adult life. That's enough. I want to slow down and relax more. 'Why not retire,' you say. I don't want to stop altogether. I just want the pressure off. This way I can still be involved but I don't have to get that job done any more.

What does it cost me? I've thought about that. I've always had luxuries, even when I was first divorced and we were living hand-to-mouth I still had that big house and there was that big truck in the garage that I couldn't afford to drive and I had leftover clothes and some toys like that camping
gear. But in the last few years they really haven’t meant much to me. I still like riding but with the girls gone off to lead their own lives and my business taking so much of my time I haven’t been able to ride more than two or three times a month. That isn’t good for either the horse or the rider. The big house is just a lot of housework. Sure I like to eat out but it isn’t that important to me any more. I’ve been to the best vacation spots but I really don’t like travel that much. Right now the life of a payer seems very sweet to me.”

“Natalie, if you’re finished I’d like to have a word to say to some of the men in our little group here.” Leyden had her feet tucked up under her and was turned sideways on the couch with her body facing Natalie. Her head was turned toward Oscar and D.W. as she spoke. “I saw you exchanging looks while Natalie talked. I know what you were thinking. You were thinking Dirk was quite justified in chasing other women because he wasn’t getting enough at home. Admit it. That’s what you were thinking.”

“No,” D.W. said. “I never thought that.” But of course he had thought exactly that.

“Well I must confess that I did have some sympathy for Dirk at that point in your story,” Oscar said with a little bit of sheepish grin showing.

“And you think it’s funny, too, don’t you Oscar. You think it’s always the wife’s fault when her husband philanders.” Leyden, despite her very kittenish and almost seductive pose was almost spitting at the two now.

“It’s not all like that Leyden,” Clayton said. “You have to remember that men are just different than women sexually. We’re designed to be attracted to many women. You’ve probably noticed, ever since you grew up, that there were lots of men attracted to you and it didn’t matter whether they were married or not.”

“But the good men, the men I could respect never went any further than to flirt a little. I always had contempt for those men who tried to get me into the sack even though they were married.”

“Leyden, what Dirk did to Natalie wasn’t funny at all,” Niall said. “There’s no excuse for what he did. He knew Natalie before he asked her to marry him. If he couldn’t accept her as she was he had no business proposing to her in the first place.”

At that Natalie’s head came up and she looked at Niall’s face as if searching for something.

“But, Niall, we have no idea how Natalie came across to Dirk.” D.W. said holding out his arms.

“Yes we do, D.W.” Niall said firmly. “Natalie has been completely consistent in how she has behaved toward us the whole time we’ve known her. Her dress, her body language, everything has told us that she is friendly but doesn’t want to be touched. I first noticed it when we were getting off the bus as we arrived here. You and Oscar were helping Leyden with her bags and I didn’t want to look like a doofus so I kind of pressured Natalie into allowing me to help her with her bags. I don’t think she wanted me to touch her bags. She has always been careful to avoid having any of us men sit next to her on a couch. She always is careful to go in or out the classroom door with plenty of room between her and the others. She’s been quite consistent and I can’t imagine any man who had gotten to know her well wouldn’t know that.”

Natalie’s eyes had at first gotten larger as Niall had spoken and then had quickly returned to looking at her hands. ‘He understands. He’s been noticing me and he understands!’
D.W., Oscar, and the rest were looking shocked at Niall’s comments.

“Darling, it must be so hard for you,” Wendy smiled kindly at her.

“Oh dear, I hope my hugging you didn’t…” Leyden said pulling back a little from Natalie.

“No, no. I didn’t mind. I rather liked the support. It wasn’t that bad.” Natalie held up her hands in a gesture of negation and shook her head.

“The point is, though, that you men are blaming the victim again,” Leyden continued. “Natalie gets abused and you blame her for her husband’s betrayal. You think just because Natalie’s not desperate for sex whenever her husband’s in the mood that he can sleep with anyone else he likes.”

“No. I think it’s sinful to even lust after another woman,” Oscar said, elbows on knees and hands clasped in an earnest attitude. “It’s just that a man really doesn’t have a choice sometimes and if a man has gone for a time without sexual release it becomes even harder. A man can’t always resist temptation. There are times when a man is weak. If he’s presented with opportunities to stray, over and over again, there’ll most likely come a time when he gives in. That’s just the way it is.”

D.W. was holding his hand up before his face and pointing at Leyden with his index finger even before Oscar finished. “You think his behavior justified what she did to him? He at least had the excuse of involuntary attractions. Biology was working against him. What excuse does Natalie have for what she did to him? She stole his money and she destroyed his property. It was vindictive is what it was.”

“You got real good control when you’re enraged, D.W.?” Wendy said. “You never do anything stupid when you’re angry?”

D.W. became flustered and stammered incoherently for a few seconds his face red.

“Say no more, D.W. I say you’ve done some pretty stupid things when you were angry,” Wendy finished firmly.

“Listen, D.W. it’s really none of our business. You don’t have to say a thing,” Clayton said grabbing his upper arm.

D.W. jerked his arm away and covered his face with his hands. After a moment he dropped them in front of his chest with fists clenched. His face alternately flushed and blanched as he felt anger and fear. His hands clenched or covered his face.

The others looked on with some concern. Even Wendy who had been so angry at him for his attitude toward Natalie’s situation became concerned and her heart softened toward him.

Some of the others asked what was wrong but he couldn’t tell them. Wendy apologized but all D.W. could do in response was nod his head.

Finally, Oscar said, “I think that what D.W. needs is some time to himself. He knows we’re all here for him on whatever terms he likes. Let’s turn in now because you all know what’s in store for us beginning tomorrow.”

Each of the group said something encouraging or offered help if he would accept it and Leyden even kissed him on the cheek. This would have made Natalie angry had it happened the day before or
even an hour before. It would have made Oscar a little jealous and would have thrilled Darwin. As it
was, after the others left the room to get ready for bed, Darwin put his hand on his cheek where the
kiss still tingled.

After a few minutes, when his emotional firestorm had calmed somewhat, D.W. reached into his
pocket and brought out an anachronism, an actual billfold. He opened it and removed something
which he unfolded to reveal was several sheets of paper. He flattened the sheets and read several
passages very quietly to himself.

“... I’m supposed to think about things, write down what happened, and why, and who was
responsible and how much fault was mine and how much was theirs, and so on and so forth...

Dr. Rhys-Jones, is not trying to get me to ego-trip. No, not for a second. What I’ve got to understand
is that for the most of my adult life, 35-40 years, I’ve basically been plowing ahead, to the next goal,
or want, or whatever. And that was it, period. Whereas most normal people go to work, come home
and kiss the wife and pet the dog, hug the kids and then settle in to rest the batteries for another day,
I had no idea what that was about. I’d come home, but I’d be dragging this monster behind me called
work, and I was always in its shadow or it was in mine, but we sure were a team. My wife told me last
fall that she couldn’t remember a single night when I came home and even talked beyond the ‘hi, how
are you?’ and ‘oh?’ and ‘um-hum,’ which you say when you’re not listening. Got to the point where
she finally gave up, tried to give us good food, but ended up feeling more like a waitress in a diner
than a mom and wife in her own kitchen...

D.W. turned the page and his eye found another passage which he read.

“If my life was a long string of pictures in a museum gallery or something, and if you started, say, in
college and came up to about three or four months ago, you would see an almost unbroken chain of
me getting cheated, screwed, taken advantage of, whatever you want to call it. From an unfair
fraternity election and some unfortunate property damage to more or less ruining the appearance of a
$150,000 car and related compassionate sentencing (including Dr. Rhys-Jones, thank you very
much), it has been this opportunity but, this job except for, that new position until. Every decent thing
I could have had for my wife and family was sabotaged by this incredible succession of people,
whose main goal in life seemed to be messing me up, assuring me the short end of the stick,
screwing me over to take the rewards I deserved.”

At this he shook his head but kept reading.

“And the worst part was the incredibly bad luck to have all of these people, one after another, in a
never-ending line of co-workers whose main job seemed to be messing up mine, getting me to quit,
or even asking me to leave. And with my temper, I was sent off more than once, but Dr. Rhys-Jones
says not to dwell on that part. Temper is not something I am denying, but neither am I going to keep
feeding it by constantly bringing it up. ‘This is a trait you need to starve, Mr. Wellman,’ she says, ‘just
let it die away from lack of attention and energy. It will,’ she says. And know what? I believe her. I
mean, she was right about The Dream and a ton of other stuff that won’t get mentioned here (or
anywhere), so I’m doing my best on this one.

Remember the picture gallery analogy of my adult life represented in a string of photos? Well, the big
news flash, again courtesy of Dr. Rhys-Jones is that the pictures are wrong. Simple, huh?”

“The pictures are wrong,” he whispered again, firmly.
"What she means is that the events happened, they sure did. But the way I looked at them was completely screwed up. ‘A view askew’ as my long-suffering wife would say. What brought them on was my inability to get along with anyone who crossed me over anything more important than plain or jelly doughnuts. My temper over my suggestions not being immediately taken brought them on. My refusal to work with anyone on a project that I was not heading brought them on, and so on and so on…”

Then further down he read a bit louder.

“She helped me to see one very strong, undeniable facet of my personality. It’s not that I want to boss people, or to squeeze the life out of their pet projects, or anything like that. But what is true is that I want the power to do that, if I chose. It’s complicated and definitely not going to change in my lifetime, with my limited capacity to see inwardly. I’ll never be Mother Teresa. But – and here’s where Dr. Rhys-Jones earns her fee in my eyes -- I don’t have to be the evil Dr. Fu Manchu, either.

All along I have needed to find an outlet to let that aspect of my personality play its role without destroying me and the people around me. I know that because life is so much better for me now. Even I have enough insight…”

At that point Oscar came up the hallway and into the discussion area.

“D.W.? Are you all right? Is there anything I can do? I thought I heard you talking.”

D.W. quickly refolded the paper and put it back into his wallet. Then he looked up at Oscar, who had halted about 15 feet away across the room.

“Everybody’s been telling why they want to be a payer. So you want to know why I’m a payer trainee? It sure as hell ain’t from humanitarian grounds, as we both know, but that doesn’t mean I can’t be a good payer. My reason’s simple: I’ll have power as a payer. It’s just that simple. I’ll have power to say to anybody that their work is worth such and such because it has a positive effect on x number of people and there’s not a thing they can do about it.

And that’s just the beginning how neat this is – with all of the talk about boundaries and peer consequences that we’ve been studying so hard for the past few weeks. There’s no need to cheat or throw my weight around because I’ll know and the people I pay will know that it’s my decision and mine alone.

I think that I’ll be a damn good payer. I say this not because I have one thing or another that you guys don’t, but that the whole thing represents an incredibly liberating answer for me. All my life I’ve been the one put in the wrong. I’ve been the one being told what to do. My ideas have been ignored. This is my last realistic chance to be somebody. I don’t want it to go wrong, and I’m going to do all I can to make it work. And that, simple as it is, is why I think – no, make that I know – that I’ll be a damn good payer.”

Oscar had been walking toward D.W. while he spoke. Now he reached for D.W.’s hand. He started to shake it. Then he pulled D.W. up from his chair and gave him a big hug. “You’ll be the best payer. The rest of us just want to be Payers. You really need to be a payer.”

D.W. was a little uncomfortable with the hug at first. But as Oscar gripped his shoulders and shook him to emphasize his last sentence he felt a surge of confidence.

“Damn right, Oscar.” And he punched Oscar on the shoulder.
Together they turned toward the hallway and the trials that awaited them on the morrow.
Chapter Thirty-Nine: Field Trip

In which Jean, Natalie, and Niall meet some new folks.

It was time for their first field trip. Though nearly all of the trainees had lived and worked with Payers around them for years, they had never really looked at the world through a payer's eyes. By joining Payers in the course of their duties and listening to those Payers speak their thoughts and concerns, the apprentice Payers would gain perspectives they simply couldn't grasp as students in a classroom. This was a chance to be as close to being a payer as one could get without actually paying anyone.

Most of a payer's daily activities consisted of gathering information and transmitting it to the vast database maintained by the accounting computers. The apprentices could participate in this data collection and thereby actually help get the payer's job done. For this reason, most Payers were willing to serve as mentors to the beginners. Of course, almost all Payers were sociable types and welcomed company in the course of their work.

Niall was a little uneasy about the trip. He still had no intention at all of becoming a payer and he knew that if he were asked to pay someone he would have to refuse. He was concerned about losing his present acceptance by the group if he set himself apart by not doing what the others did. He supposed that when his background had been investigated, the others had discovered the terms of his sentence but he assumed that the others were nonetheless thinking of him as someone who would also become a payer when the training was over.

Therefore, when the opportunity arose to be in a much smaller group who were going to join a rural payer, Niall jumped at the chance, even though none of the folks from his class were in that group. He justified it to them, casually, as an opportunity to be with his friend Jean (whom the others did not particularly like and whose reputation even in his own barracks was pretty bad). To Niall's surprise, Natalie also volunteered. For this reason Natalie, Jean, Niall, and a bald, chubby payer named Felipe [picture Friar Tuck] were the people in the jeep as it wound its way through the foothills of the Manzano Mountains Southeast of Albuquerque.

"You must always notice the hands of the workers to see who has calluses and who does not," Felipe was saying and gesturing as if the steering wheel really didn't matter at all. "They talk about automated farms but no matter how much fancy equipment a farmer has there will always be some hard physical labor involved. If their hands are soft, they're not doing their share of that work no matter how they're dressed."

"But how can you tell whose work is more valuable?" Natalie asked. "How does one compare slopping hogs with collecting the eggs?"

"Well, first we have to know what happens to the various products after they leave the farm. Naturally, the computer takes care of that pretty well. Then if one or the other of the workers did most of the work for a certain product, it's pretty easy to assign a rough percentage of that product's credit to that worker. There's also a lot of general farm work like fixing a tractor or working on fences or roads. This kind of work contributes to everything the farm does. So it earns a general percentage on all the products. You also have ideas involved. These are trickier. If someone suggests an improvement which they try and it works, we generally give about 25% of the improvement to the one who suggested it. Then the rest goes to the guys who implement the idea. We also have to stop pay on the technique, equipment or whatever which was replaced and estimate what it would have generated in product if it had been retained. Naturally, we're shooting in the dark sometimes and
mess up but it’s generally a good idea to miss on the side of the change improving things if you’re going to miss. This keeps them trying to think of more improvements. Being willing to change, like with the fertilizer thing a few years ago, is very important to our success.”

“But still, you aren’t there all the time to watch what each person’s doing and see how well they’re doing it,” Natalie persisted. “How do you know what they’ve done?”

“Well of course I talk to the farmers and their hands. You have to remember that even out here a man’s reputation is very important,” Felipe said, wagging a finger at Natalie. “If a farmer lies about what work one of his hands does or how well he’s doing it, that farm hand is not going to be working there next time I come by. The only way you keep your men working is to see that they get credit where credit is due. Of course, if some guy is shirking, you don’t really care if he doesn’t come back or not. If you’re being fair, the word will spread and you’ll have little trouble getting people to come out and work when you need them.”

“But even if they’re telling you the truth, how do you know how much benefit each is responsible for?”

“Oh, that’s easy. I only have to assign a percentage to each worker so they each get that percentage of what the farm earned for that period. Remember that I don’t discover most of the benefit that the farm’s products provide except for the small part that’s consumed on the farm. Basically, I contribute to some fields in a big spreadsheet that calculates the actual amount that each person should be paid. Naturally, I look over what the benefits were and who got them to be sure the payment is reasonable before I credit the accounts.”

The jeep swung round a corner while cresting a hill and a beautiful valley was revealed before them. The hills in the middle distance were dark with brilliantly white clouds moving leisurely away from them toward the plains and never quite making it. The ranch house was sheltered by a number of large shade trees and white fencing around the barn matched its trim and attracted the eye toward the working part of the establishment. A truck was unloading hay bales at the barn, using the winch at the eaves over the main door.

Felipe fell silent for the first time since they had met him. He seemed to smell the air and his eyes darted from one thing to another, seeming to see everything but the road. The road came down to near the small stream that had made the valley and the trees growing there blocked their view of the house and barn.

Where the road crossed the stream, Felipe stopped the jeep, got out, and took a box from under the front seat. He went down to the stream with a trio of very curious apprentice Payers following him. At the stream Felipe took a small sample of water and placed it in the box, which proved to be an analysis field kit. After a short time the kit indicated it was satisfied and they returned to the jeep.

“This is all left over from the fertilizer thing about ten years ago,” Felipe explained. “We have to be sure that the streams are free of too much fertilizer. Or in this particular case, too much animal wastes. This gizmo senses its location and reports its findings directly to the computer system. Of course I have to stay close to the spot where I got the sample until it’s finished.”

“What was the ‘fertilizer thing’ you mentioned?” Niall asked. “I was out of the country for about 15 years and just got back a few months ago.”

“You really missed a dustup on that one,” Felipe said laughing. “Some of the science guys did some tests and discovered that most fertilizers were doing more harm than good. Most farmers couldn’t believe it and some wouldn’t believe it but the scientists had the data. So we started cutting pay for
the farms that used very much fertilizer. That’s when they gave us these water testers. We were getting samples from ditches and streams and creeks. We even had guys dipping water out of the estuaries and from miles out to sea. We could track the fertilizer used back to who made it and who used it. There were farmers and fertilizer manufacturers mad all over the country. But within a couple of years our agriculture was producing even more than before and the rivers and the ocean were already showing improvements."

As they pulled into the drive that led to the main house, Niall saw some familiar tanks and pipes behind the barn. "Is that a thermal conversion processing plant there?"

"Sure. Out here it’s too far to truck the stuff to a central plant like they do back East. Most of the larger farms and ranches have their own units. They don’t run full time and they often get loads of hydrocarbons from their smaller neighbors. They usually make enough oil and gas to run all the farm equipment in the area and make all the fertilizer they can use. Of course they don’t use nearly as much as they used to," he chuckled.

At the main house several people and a couple of dogs came out to welcome them with words of welcome and, from the dogs, inquisitive noses. There were hand-shakes and introductions and invitations to stay for lunch. Felipe winked at the others and he gravely accepted the invitation.

They toured the farm with the farmer’s 13-year-old daughter who appeared to delight in showing off what a good farm it was and bragging unashamedly about what a smart, productive farmer her father was. Felipe got them in hand after about an hour of the tour and took them around to check on the things he felt were worthy of notice. It turned out to actually be a good farm.

Lunch was delicious and Niall began to realize why they had arrived when they did. Felipe was a payer and a good one but he recognized food that in a city would have been sold in a luxury restaurant. Of course, the fact that much of it was grown on this very farm and was being cooked by the boss of the place (the farmer’s wife) meant that to all intents and purposes it would never be considered a luxury. But Niall had rarely tasted finer.

Niall had inquired about the POM colony he’d heard was in the area and Felipe had agreed to drive them close enough to see the roadblock that the colonists had set up. So they headed deeper into the mountains. There was only about an hour of daylight left as they swung onto an old, crumbling two-lane road. It was clear from the cracks in the pavement and the vegetation growing in the road and overhanging the road that no one was doing any maintenance on it. As the road made a sharp curve around a rocky outcrop, Felipe hit the brakes because there was a small tree down across the road.

They all piled out of the jeep to help pull the tree out of the way. They had just gotten it off the road when four young men appeared. Their clothes were mostly brown and grey with leather hats and crude-looking shoes. Their pants were held up with suspenders and rather than buttons they had tie strings on their shirts. In comparison with the whites and yellows of Niall’s party, the young men’s clothing looked positively crude, primitive even. But there was nothing primitive about the revolver one of the men had in his hand, though it was dangling at his side.

Two of the men went immediately to the Jeep and touched it as if they had never seen such a thing before. The gun holder was above average in height and appeared to be in his mid twenties. The others were somewhat younger. The two at the jeep couldn’t have been more than 19 or 20. They were all slender to thin in build, but except for the gun wielder, appeared to have spent quite a lot of time outdoors, based on their complexions and their rough hands.
“Good evening,” Felipe said with a big smile. “Can we help you?”

“Oh, yeah,” the gunman said. “You can help us quite a lot. What have you got in the car, there?”

“Not much, we’re going back to Albuquerque tonight so we just brought some clothes, snacks and water,” Felipe said.

“Aren’t you carrying some guns?” the second man said.

“Shut up, Arnie. Let me do the talking,” the gun holder snapped, clearly somewhat nervous and on edge. “Okay, like he said, you got any guns?”

Felipe held his arms wide and said, “You can see we don’t have any weapons on our bodies and your friends, there, can see there’s nothing in the jeep but our suitcases, food, and water. We have no guns.”

“Okay, Arnie, you go around behind them and search them from behind. I’ll keep the gun on them in case they try anything.”

Arnie moved to comply and began with Niall, patting and squeezing various portions of his clothing.

“Cal, come and see this. There’s a box here that’s real cold inside. It’s neat. And it’s got bottles made out of plastic with water in them,” the short black-haired boyish one said.

“Billy, I’ll get to that later,” Cal said not taking his attention off the party in front of him. “Is that all they got in that car?”

“Yeah, Cal, I searched it good. Them suitcases just got clothes and bottles of stuff in them. The car ain’t got nothin’ in it that we kin use,” the other man at the jeep said.

“Like hell, Steve, these sandwiches are good. You ever seen such fine bread?”

“Billy, we ain’t after a few sandwiches and the creek’s got all the water we need.”

“Would you two shut up!” Cal shouted. “Okay, what have you got on you? You, you seem to do all the talkin’. You got any money on you?” Cal gestured at Felipe.

Felipe smiled broadly and said, “not this trip.”

“No money at all?” Steve was incredulous.

“No money at all,” Felipe said holding out his hands palms up.

Arnie had finished searching Jean and Niall by then, having found only their personal digital assistants in their pockets along with a pocket knife on Jean.

Steve’s eyes got big and he blurted out, “Cal, he’s in all white clothes. You don’t think he’s one of those Godless payer fellahs do ya? I mean, they ain’t supposed to touch money are they?”

Cal brought the gun up menacely on Felipe and with a grim mouth asked, “Are you a payer?”
“Indeed I am, Signore. Felipe Sanchez, at your service,” and he bowed deeply with a flourish of his hat.

“What about you guys? Are you Payers, too?” Cal asked, beginning to sweat despite the relative cool with the sun setting behind the mountain and the altitude. His hand on the gun was visibly trembling.

“Are you gonna kill 'em, Cal?” Billy asked with an awed look on his face.

“No! We aren't Payers,” Jean burst out. “We hardly know him. He was just showing us around.”

“How come he was driving, Cal? He must be the boss of these guys. We can’t trust 'em. You know that Cal. Payers are Satan Spawn. We pretty much have to kill them all,” Steve said, looking scared.

“Wait, wait. Niall’s got money. Lots of it. Doesn't that prove he ain't a payer?” Jean was sounding almost panicky.

The gun swung over to Niall and Cal asked, “Is what he said true. Do you have money?”

“I have enough money. I can buy whatever I need.” Niall answered calmly. His biggest worry was that the men would panic and start shooting without thinking about it. Niall was pretty sure none of the young men had ever actually killed anyone before and he wanted to get them to calm down.

“Show me the money,” Cal said.

“I can’t show it to you, it’s in an account. You know what an account is, don’t you?”

“Anybody can say that. Prove you have money. Prove it or I'll have to shoot you down now.” Niall could see that Cal’s nervousness was beginning to infect the others.

Arnie said,” Maybe he has something on him a payer wouldn’t have, you know, like jewelry or something.”

“Well there’s my watch and this ring. It’s made of gold. Payers don’t wear gold rings.” Niall pulled the class ring from college off his finger and held it out to them.

Steve grabbed it and looked inside. “Okay. It says 14k. What does that mean?”

Cal visibly relaxed and said,” It means that the ring is gold. You notice that the payer doesn’t have any rings. The woman is wearing earrings, too. Maybe they aren’t Payers after all.”

“Cal, maybe this guy with the money in the bank can buy us some guns,” Arnie put in.” They sure aren’t carrying anything worthwhile with them and I can’t imagine people having a car like that unless they were pretty well off. Especially with what’s been going on out here the last 15 years.”

“What are you gonna have us do, walk into a town with four prisoners and ask for the nearest gun store?” Steve asked. “That's just plain stupid.”

“Look, Cal,” Arnie began.

“No you look Arnie,” Cal said frowning. “I’m the boss here. We'll do what I say.”
“It’s just a suggestion, Cal. It ain’t like I got the gun. I’m just trying to get us what we come to get. If we go back with nuthin’ more than we got so far the Mayor will still have us over a barrel and Rush will have our guts for garters. I think we could wander these woods for weeks and not get a better chance than these people have just dropped into our laps. If this guy really does have lots of money he should be able to buy us just what we want without having to do more than walk around in a store. Why, hell, Cal, they even brought us something to carry the guns in.”

“But how you gonna make him buy anything, Arnie?” Steve said. “You walk into a store in a town holding a gun on him and you’ll be shot down like a dog.”

“Steve, we got four people here. We hold the other three here and one of us goes with this guy to make sure he gets just what we want. If we ain’t back with the guns in, say, three hours, then you start killing the others, one every couple of hours. I can’t believe he cares nothin’ about them. In fact, there’s a good chance this is his woman here. If he’s got the money you can bet she’d go for him rather than these other guys, even if he is old.”

At this Natalie blushed furiously.

“What makes you think you’re going with him to get the guns?” Cal asked, his attention now more on Arnie than the prisoners.

“Well it just makes sense, Cal,” Arnie replied. “You got to keep the gun with the prisoners and you can’t show the gun in town, so it has to stay here. Rush gave you the gun so you would always be the boss so you have to stay with the gun. You can’t send Billy ‘cause he ain’t got enough sense. Steve here would go after the first pretty girl he seen and forget all about the time and what we come here for. I’m the only one you got left to send.”

“What do you mean, I’d go after the first pretty girl I seen? I’d do a hell of a lot better job than you,” Steve shot out.

“Shut up, both of you,” Cal said sternly. “I’ll decide what to do and what I say is we can’t do anything tonight anyhow, so I’ll think about it until morning. Let’s get the car and these folks back to camp.”

Cal rode in the jeep with Felipe driving and the rest walked ahead of it. They went several hundred yards further and then cut off the road up a rather steep track that led to a sheltered hollow with a crude lean-to and a few blankets marking the camp.

Billy was sent to see if their snares had caught anything for supper and Jean and Niall were set to building a fire and gathering wood. Cal told Natalie how he liked his meat, as if giving orders to a scullery maid. There was a spring that fed a small creek about 30 yards from the tent and Steve was sent there to fill up the plastic bottles with fresh water.

Natalie said she had to use the toilet, so she was shown some bushes and Steve and Arnie went to opposite sides of the brush so she couldn’t escape. It was becoming clear that the young men were assuming that she was the key to controlling the others. So long as they had her, the others wouldn’t give any trouble.

Natalie was feeling miserable and panicky. Her gloves were already getting soiled and she felt like it would be worth her life to touch her face or her hair because of the contamination. The only thing that enabled her to not start screaming was that Niall seemed so calm. She kept telling herself that if Niall were that calm they must be all right. She thought she really didn’t need to relieve herself but had only used that as an excuse to get some privacy. But now that she was in the bushes, so to speak,
she found she really would like to go. She made herself a little barrier of brush and did her business and then looked for clean leaves to cleanse herself. Everything was unsatisfactory and she felt like she would never really be clean again. When she used to go camping she had always brought plenty of wipes and such but now... Well they had already called to her twice. She would have to face them sometime. So she came out.

Felipe had said he could find some food in the woods if they'd let him, so Billy went with him and after an hour or so they came back with their arms loaded with what looked very much like salad makings. Felipe insisted that some of them were spices and that the roots were very good, like potatoes.

Felipe took over the cooking, though Natalie said she was willing to help and before long they had delicious odors of roasting meat (two rabbits and a pheasant). They had buried several potatoes under the fire so they had rabbit, pheasant, potatoes and salad for their meal.

At first Natalie had felt too dirty to eat but by using freshly broken twigs as chopsticks she managed to overcome her near nausea and eat. It's amazing what exercise and outdoor air can do for the appetite.

By the time they finished eating, it was dark and getting chilly. None of Niall's party had been planning to spend the night in the open so they had to keep feeding the fire all night and Cal had the other young men take turns on guard duty while Natalie slept in the lean-to.

Felipe told Niall what he'd learned from Billy while they were gathering salad makings and seasonings. It seems that the four were from the local POM colony. There was a "palace revolt" in the making, as the Mayor's son wanted to overthrow his father. The source of the differences between them was that the son wanted to marry a young woman of the community and his father had his eye on the same girl. The son was sure that the Mayor was going to take the woman, at least as a mistress and maybe even as a second wife. Since the Mayor controlled the police, which was also the army, and therefore the community's guns, the son figured that the only way his group, which included most of the younger men in the community, could take over was to get guns of their own from outside in the barrens.

It seems that Billy knew all about what life was like outside the POM colony. He knew all about the roving gangs of Communists which were run by Payers who raped and pillaged honest, God-fearing folks. He knew all about how most people were starving and crime and violence were the order of the day. He figured that in a few more years there would be hardly anybody left outside the POM colony and then the members of that community could come out and take the good land that was abandoned and have rich farms and lots to eat. They'd stay away from the cities, he said, because those were filled with pestilence and mutants from the nuclear wars. He said that you could tell the bombs had been used, because at night you could sometimes see the radioactive glow from over the mountains where Albuquerque had been.

Billy knew a lot about the outside world because he'd been listening very carefully when the preacher had told the congregation about how bad it was out there. Billy was very glad that the Payers who had come by the colony after the disaster had been chased away before they could infect the people with their Godless Communism.

By morning, they were all feeling rather uncomfortable from lack of sleep and sore muscles, though the young men were suffering far less than the others.

“All right,” Cal said when he had gathered them together after breakfast (leftovers and more potatoes).”I've given this a lot of thought. So long as I got the gun and the woman here, there ain't
much they can do except go along with whatever we want. Billy and I'll keep the fat old payer here... and the other guy, while Steve and Arnie go see if they can find a place to buy some guns and ammunition. The two of you should be able to take care of one old man between you. And if you ain't back by dark we'll bury one of these three and move to that first place we camped after we left town. If you ain't back by noon the next day we'll bury another one and if you ain't back by dark we'll bury the last one. You got that, mister?"

"Yeah, I got it. We should be back in plenty of time. Just be cool," Niall said.

"And if you bring anybody else back with you or anybody else shows up here the woman is the one I'll kill first." Cal was trembling again.

"Well guys, let’s get started. Natalie, Felipe, Jean, I'll see all of you in a couple of hours. Don’t worry about a thing. Felipe, you think Monzano is the closest town that probably has a store that sells guns?" Niall said turning to Felipe.

At Felipe’s nod, Niall turned and quickly started for the jeep. Arnie and Steve each were caught unaware by the sudden movement and had to hurry to catch up, even though Niall never went above a brisk walk.

Niall arrived at the jeep first and started to get into the driver's seat. Both Arnie and Steve yelled at him to stop, that they would be the driver. Then there was a five minute argument between the two of them, settled by Cal when he had Steve drive. Steve almost jumped into the driver's seat with a mixture of gloating and glee on his face at the prospect of being one up on Arnie and getting to play with the biggest toy he'd ever seen. Naturally, during the walk to camp all three of the young men who were walking had spent a considerable time looking back at the jeep and seeing how Felipe steered. It looked easy.

Niall gave some directions about which foot pedal made it go forward and which stopped it and how to start it and shift gears. After some jerky movements at first, Steve learned how to press the accelerator gently and they started back down the track to the road. There were enough near accidents on the way down the slope that it was a chastened Steve that carefully edged the jeep onto the road and proceeded at a moderate pace back the way the captives had come. Niall was emphasizing that Steve would need to stay to the right side of the road if they met a car coming the other way and asking him to practice using only half the road so they would be sure to miss the other car. Steve continued to drive pretty much down the middle of the road, since he didn't really expect to meet any other cars. When they came to the highway, the road was wider and the shoulder was not in disrepair, so Niall felt a little easier.

Then the first vehicle they met coming the other way was an 18 wheeler going about 70 miles an hour. Niall drove the rest of the way into Monzano after they got the jeep out of the ditch.
Chapter Forty: Going to Town

In which Niall, Steve, and Arnie go shopping.

Monzano seemed quiet, peaceful, even serene. There were only a few cars on the main street. The primary shopping center included a large sporting goods store so Niall headed for it but the sign on the door said the store wouldn't open until 10:00am.

“It's just as well they’re closed,” Niall said. “You guys need some new clothes. What you're wearing will sort of stand out. Let's see if we can't get you outfitted.”

Steve was enthusiastic and Arnie was accepting so it was agreed that would be a good way to spend some time before shopping for guns. They could see a clothing store from the sporting goods store so it was no trouble to park and walk over. There was a section of standard issue things, in white of course, and a larger section of luxury clothes, mostly cowboy style with a number of business suits and such. Niall suggested they get some of the white work clothes since they were rather sturdy. While they were at it he also had them try on some work boots. Those were an immediate hit. The clerk raised his eyebrows a few times at the boys' attitudes but seemed happy enough to outfit them. He asked if they were farmers and the boys admitted that they were.

“Yes, you don’t get calluses on your hands like those working in an office or clerking in a store,” the clerk commented.

The boys were suddenly self-conscious about their hands and quieted considerably.

Niall bought each of them a good hat and a leather belt, as well as getting some whites suitable for hard outdoor work and some work shoes for himself. The boys took their old clothes with them in plastic bags while Niall left his clothes at the store with a note to return them to the Payer School. Somehow the boys didn’t seem to notice that this would be an indication to the school as to where he was. Perhaps it was because of the excitement and pleasure in shopping for fine new clothes, better than any they could remember.

By the time they left the clothing store, the sun was getting pretty high (none of them had watches, the boys never had worn watches that they could remember and Niall’s had been taken during the search.) Niall wasn’t worried about time yet but he thought he should keep their time limit in mind just the same.

There was a fast food business nearby and Niall suggested that they get something to eat and, perhaps, something to take back to the others. The boys eagerly agreed and they walked over to the burger joint.

Niall led the way to the counter and asked Arnie what he would like. Arnie was almost speechless at the pictures of food and the gleaming, stainless steel kitchen equipment visible behind the counter. “I'll have a sandwich,” he finally got out. Steve quickly added, “Me, too.” Niall ordered three burgers with everything and three salads with blue cheese dressing. In a couple of minutes there were three trays in front of them and they were carrying them over to the drinks area. Niall suggested coffee with cream and sugar and the three men took a booth in the corner where they could see the jeep easily.
Niall took the first bite and soon the others were greasily grinning around huge mouthfuls. “This is great. I’ve never had anything like it. How do they make the bread so soft?” Steve said when he came up for air. Arnie gingerly tasted the coffee and made a face. “It smells a lot better than it tastes.”

“So go get some soda or ice water,” Niall grinned at him.

“Right. And I will,” Arnie said rising and turning toward the drinks machine.

“What do you think of the coffee?” Niall asked Steve.

Steve carefully brought the steaming drink to his mouth and sipped. His eyes widened and he took a larger taste. “That’s wonderful. I’ve never tasted anything like that before.” He started to take a deeper swallow but the heat was too much and he coughed in mid-swallow with the natural result that the coffee sprayed all over his food. Niall quickly handed over his own napkin and raised his voice to Arnie to bring some more napkins. By the time they had cleaned up, one of the girls who worked behind the counter was out with another burger and a fresh salad. She took away the debris of the previous meal and patted Steve on the shoulder with a grin.

As she walked away, Steve said, “I think I’m in love,” looking after her with longing in his eyes.

“What will all this cost you?” Arnie asked Niall.

“Oh, this is ordinary food. It doesn’t cost us anything. If we were eating in a fine restaurant they’d have to charge us, of course, but anybody can have regular food like this without paying.”

The young men looked at each other, then down at their food, then at each other again. Arnie shook his head. “That’s just impossible. They can’t afford to give away food like this. Besides, somebody’s paying those women back there who made this food. They aren’t working for free are they?”

“Oh they’re being paid, all right. They’re paid to help folks get enough food to eat. You boys look hungry to them so they didn’t want you to leave without a good meal under your belts,” Niall said casually.

“But who pays them?” Steve said “Why would anybody do that? They don’t even know us. Or do they know you?” Steve was suddenly suspicious.

“No, they don’t know me from Adam. I’ve never been to this town before. I’m a stranger here, too.”

“Well I think there’s something up. Nobody gives away food like this without some good reason and the only reason I can think of is it’s some kind of a trap. Do you suppose it’s drugged or poisoned, Arnie?”

“Well, I sure don’t feel drugged. I feel fine. Do you feel drugged? Besides, Niall here is eating the same food we are and he seems OK.”

Steve gradually settled down and even got more coffee, which he drank more carefully this time. Niall asked if it would be OK if he asked for some food to take with them so the others back at camp could have something besides potatoes and rabbit for lunch. Arnie said that would be OK so they left with a large sack full of hamburgers and some apples.

They only had to sit in the jeep for a few minutes before the sporting goods store opened and naturally, they were the only customers for a while. The two young men were wide-eyed at the
merchandise on display. A sales clerk was at their side almost immediately asking how she could serve them. Niall took the lead saying that he had been visiting his brother’s family back in the hills and thought it would be a good time to take his nephews shopping for some camping equipment and some hunting rifles.

The boys seemed to want everything and had to be reminded several times that there wasn’t room in the jeep for the entire contents of the store all at once. They were told that they could return to the store tomorrow if they found that they’d forgotten something that they just had to have to keep body and soul together. Niall recommended that they buy lanterns and a small portable stove with some fuel. They also bought a small, four-person tent that folded into a really rather small package and four bedrolls. Then they approached the gun counter. In racks behind the counter were scores of hunting rifles and shotguns. Under the glass of the counter top were row upon row of handguns. If the boys had been excited before they were now in heaven.

“What’s that tube on top of some of the guns?” Arnie whispered to Niall.

“That’s a telescopic sight that lets you see your target as if you were up close to it,” Niall said quietly.

“Let’s get two of those,” Arnie said with decision.

“We can have those sights mounted on almost any of the rifles,” Niall said. “Pick your guns and then we can shop for sights.”

“We need ammunition, too,” Steve said quickly. “Lots of it.”

“Well you have to practice if you are going to become good shots so we’ll get plenty,” Niall said thinking that the boys were not helping avoid suspicion.

After much consideration and many changes of minds the boys settled on two rifles which used the same kind of ammunition. Niall said that he thought he might as well get one also since he had left all his own guns back home in Virginia. So he picked another hunting rifle with telescopic sight.

The clerk asked for references for the party.

“References?” Arnie asked. “What do you need references for? My uncle has money. Isn’t that good enough for you?”

“Before I sell anyone a gun I have to be sure he won’t misuse it. Since I know that your uncle is going to give these guns to you, I have to know that you young men are responsible enough for me to trust with guns as well; otherwise I won’t sell guns to any of you. So who are your references? I warn you that all of them absolutely will be contacted and their reputations had better be good or their word will be disregarded.” The clerk was beginning to frown a little as she spoke.

“Look, these boys live back in the hills, you know, sort of away from civilization,” Niall pleaded. “I don’t think their folks even have a telephone and they sure don’t have a TV. Can’t you just trust me and sell the guns to me on my references? Then if I give them the guns any blame for their misuse will fall on me not on you.”

“Mister, that ain’t the way it works,” the clerk said, leaning on the counter. “They go back at least three or four steps if a gun is used in a crime or kills somebody by accident. If you gave these boys each a gun and one accidentally blew the other’s head off, it would be a couple of years before I was getting full pay again no matter how good your references are. You may be willing to risk your income
on some stranger’s judgment but I’m not. Now if you three got references and want to buy these guns
then tell me who they are and maybe, just maybe, if those references are really good and really
impressive, I might, possibly, sell you these guns. Otherwise you can forget it. What’s it going to be?”

“Okay, forget the guns,” Niall said,” We’ll just take the camping gear.”

“Wait a minute,” Steve almost yelled, grabbing Niall’s arm. “You promised we could get guns. At least
buy one.”

“Son,” the clerk said straightening up. “I don’t care who your references are, I won’t sell you a gun.
Now if you have everything else you came for, you can pay for that and I’ll get a hand truck to help
you get your stuff to your jeep.”

“Well, guys, that’s our deal,” Niall said shrugging. “Do you want to leave empty-handed or take this
stuff.”

“We’ll take the stuff,” Arnie said quickly before Steve could turn it down.

“Come over to the checkout counter,” she said. “This will only take a minute. Who is paying for these
things?”

“I am,” Niall said.

The clerk passed each of the items in front of a TV on the counter and in each case, asked Niall if he
wanted to buy the item she named at a price which she named and Niall replied, “I do.”

After a while Niall almost felt married. Arnie and Steve were watching in wonder and both jumped
when the TV said the total price and asked if Niall wanted that amount deducted from his account
and the ownership of the items transferred to himself. Niall said he did want the deduction and
transfer of ownership and the clerk also indicated agreement. The TV announced Niall’s remaining
account balance (still over $70,000) and the deal was done.

The clerk called a young man in from the back room, who brought a hand truck and the purchases
were in the jeep and ready to go in short order.

Niall drove toward the outskirts of town and stopped in the shade of a tree. “Look guys,” he said. “If
we try the same routine at the next place, we’re likely to have the same problem. How about if I go in
by myself next time and just buy one gun. There are several towns around here. I saw the names and
mileages on some of the road signs.”

“No you don’t,” Arnie said.” If we let you go in there alone, you can spill the beans and have us
followed. Where you go, we go.”

“Wait a minute, Arnie,” Steve said. “Niall has a point there. We can’t get references and if we’re with
him and try to buy several guns it looks like he’s buying them for us. So he has to look like he’s
buying them for himself and the only way he can to that is to seem to be alone.”

“So how do we keep him from having us followed?” Arnie said as if talking to a simpleton.

“It’s easy,” Steve explained. “One of us goes in as if shopping for something, whatever is near the
gun counter. Then Niall goes in and deals for the gun. Then the other one of us comes in and the first
one leaves without buying anything. We can hear what they’re saying and see what he’s doing the whole time and yet we won’t seem to be with him at all.”

With that arrangement finally agreed to, they headed for Torreon. Upon arrival, Niall pointed out that they needed gas, so he pulled into a gas station.

They decided that it would be best to separate and, keeping Niall in sight, wander around town as if they were not together. So while Niall pumped and bought the gas, the others sauntered down the street looking in the several stores. When they found a gun store, they could put their plan into operation. Since the town only had one real business street, they had no trouble finding a store that sold guns.

Steve entered first and went to the section where the fishing gear was located. After a few minutes Niall came in and went straight to the gun counter. The only clerk was discussing the best way to catch trout with Steve, but a boy of about 12 years who was reading a book in a chair near the front window of the store came over and asked Niall if he needed any help. Niall, remembering how helpful the boy in the airport had been, replied that he was on vacation and thought he would do some hunting but his own hunting gear was back in Virginia. He asked the boy if he had any recommendations for a deer rifle for hunting Western, mountain deer. The boy immediately launched into a discussion of the relative advantages of bolt action and lever action, of scope sights over good hunting technique, and of ammunition quality and striking power. Niall was rapidly in over his head and was reduced to asking questions that showed he really was no expert. The boy soon realized that Niall should be treated more like a beginner and suggested that he should use a low power scope and not shoot at anything more than 50 yards away. He also emphasized that since there were a lot of tourists in the woods, he should be sure to wear a bright orange vest and hat at all times.

By this time, Steve had decided to get some fish hooks, since they were in short supply back in the colony. He brought out a handful of silver coins that were in use as money back home and asked the clerk if he would accept them as a means of payment. The clerk asked what they were. Steve answered that they were one ounce silver dollars.

“Silver dollars? What are you, some kind of POM fanatic?” the clerk said with a shocked voice and literally drawing back from Steve as if Steve carried some disease.

Steve got an angry look on his face and spit out, “What’s the matter? Ain’t my money good enough for ya? It’s pure silver and rings true.”

“You can’t buy things here with that. Take them over to the jewelry store. Maybe if you give them to Gerardo he can make something out of them. Then when you have some real money you can come back and I’ll sell to you. But I’m not taking any of that POM off of you or anybody else and I never will.”

Steve said, “Have it your way,” turned and stomped angrily out of the store.

Arnie had gotten there in time to see the offer of silver coins and looked studiously at some pocket knives in a display case nearby. He never so much as looked up as Steve went by.

The clerk turned from Steve with a flushed face, said in passing to Arnie, “I’ll be with you in a moment, sir, right after I help this gentlemen,” with a nod toward Niall.

“I guess that guy has been back in the hills too long,” Niall said. “Sounds like he never heard of the transition.”
“Maybe,” the clerk replied with an exasperated shake of the head, “but maybe he was just trying to make trouble for me. If I accepted POM for payment that guy could say to my suppliers that I was cheating them out of their money by trading their goods for myself. Then when they stopped giving me things to sell he could try to get them to set him up in business here. There isn’t enough trade for two stores in this little town. I don’t make much as it is. I sure don’t want another business like mine.”

“But you have these beautiful mountains and the weather’s so pleasant. I’ve loved it here the last six months. You’d still have those things,” Niall said trying to mollify the clerk.

“My wife and daughter like to ride horses. Do you have any idea how expensive that is? It’s all I can do to pay the upkeep on those animals and for the occasional horse show. And then there’s the trailer and the SUV to pull it. It takes about all I can earn here just to break even.”

“Maybe I can help by buying a gun. This young man here has given me all sorts of good advice. He says this is the one I should get and about ten boxes of ammunition so I can practice for a while before I try to shoot a real deer.”

“I’ll need your reputation and several references. It will take about a day for me to talk to them all. Oh, and at least one has to be from this area.”

“Why do you need all those references and background checks?” Niall asked. “I’ll be careful.”

“I have to be confident that you’re good at being careful. If you’re the kind of guy that keeps having accidents, you’ll need to find someone else to sell you a gun because I can’t afford to take that kind of risk. It’s a big responsibility selling guns and I take it seriously because it’s the only way I can be sure to make money.”

“Okay, just curious,” Niall said holding up both hands in mock surrender and smiling. “You can feel free to go over my reputation all you like. I know a farmer reasonably well who’s from this area, Marty Martinez, perhaps you know him?”

“Oh, sure, he’s got a big farm North-west of here. I thought he became a payer, though.”

“Anything wrong with that?” Niall asked. “Does that mean he can’t be a reference for me?”

“Not at all. He’ll do fine. It’s just that I don’t know whether he can drop in for a chat. I might have to use the telephone to get in touch with him.”

“Jeeves, are you there?” Niall said toward the TV on the counter.

“Yes, sir. What can I do for you, sir?” the TV responded.

Arnie almost broke and ran at the TV talking to Niall but controlled himself visibly.

“Give this clerk anything he asks for about me for the purpose of my buying this hunting rifle here. Let him know anybody that knows me who might know something about whether I can be trusted with a gun.”

“Very good, sir. Right away, sir.”
“I think that will do it, sir. If you will come back tomorrow, I hope I can sell you this gun and the ammunition you want at that time,” the clerk said with a smile.

Niall thanked him and turned to leave.

A few minutes later he was back at the jeep with Steve not far behind.

“Are you out of your mind?” he said to Steve. “Were you trying to get us all in trouble back there? What’s the big idea of pulling out those coins? He’s going to remember you for weeks for that stunt. Don’t you understand that they don’t use physical object money any more? All the money is in computer accounts.”

Steve was still a little angry, “That money is perfectly good. That… that whatever he is was just being a snot because I took so long over a small sale like fishhooks. I saw the prices on them and they were just a few cents each. I had enough there for lots more than I wanted to buy. He was just being arrogant.”

“No, Steve,” Niall said, “He thought you were trying to get him in trouble with his suppliers, the people who gave him those fishhooks and guns and stuff to sell for them. He thought you were trying to trap him and get his business.”

“But it’s perfectly good money. We even copied the lady liberty on the coins.”

“Sure. They’re worth an ounce of silver but they aren’t money to these people. You have to remember that for the last 15 years or so they’ve been living with an entirely different way of doing business. For example, that shop owner doesn’t pay anyone for the goods he sells. And he doesn’t get any of my money when I buy something in his shop. He gets paid for the service he gives us, by people whose job it is to make sure he’s rewarded for being good to us. The people who make the things he sells are also rewarded by other people whose job it is to make sure they are rewarded for making useful things. In other words, if he trades you those fish hooks for those coins, then all the people who contributed to making those fish hooks wouldn’t be paid or at least perhaps not paid as much. So those fish hook makers would be less likely to give him their hooks to sell next time. He could put himself out of business by taking your money because he’d have no way to compensate all those other people who did things to get those hooks into his store for him to sell. Does all that make sense?”

“You mean that guy doesn’t own those fish hooks?” Steve asked incredulously.

“Well, in one sense he does and in another sense he doesn’t,” Niall said. “He didn’t buy them from the folks who made them. Those folks sent them to him so he could sell them. After all, if the people who made those hooks just kept them in a big box at their factory, then no one would use them and no one would get paid for making them. But if they give them to the owners of stores like this one here, then people will have a chance to buy them and thus get some good out of them. That way the hook makers deserve to get paid and will get paid both for making those hooks and for giving them to people who’ll sell them to folks like you and me who will get the pleasure of catching fish with them. So in one sense, this store owner doesn’t own the hooks, he’s just selling them for the real owners, the people who made them. But on the other hand, he does have possession of them and he can do with them what he wants. He controls them. He can decide to sell them or not just as he did in your case. So in that sense he does own them.”
Arnie was approaching with an angry look on his face. “Have you got no more sense than to wave your money around in town? Now the folks here will know we have real money and we’ll have bandits coming to steal it. You idiot, you could get us wiped out!”

“Oh, calm down. From what Niall says they don’t want our money anyway. You saw that clerk. He acted like I had some bad disease or something. He wouldn’t even touch my money. What makes you think they’d want it bad enough to risk getting shot?”

“Man, that’s real silver. Of course they want it. They aren’t crazy are they?”

“Maybe they are, Arnie. Niall says that they just give stuff to each other. I mean besides the food we got for lunch and the clothes. They even give things like guns and knives to each other.”

“What’s he talking about, Niall?”

“We were discussing why the clerk acted the way he did about being offered silver coins for the fish hooks. I was explaining how the store owner got the things he has for sale,” Niall said.

“We haven’t got time to shoot the breeze. We have to get on to more towns if we can get only one gun per store. It’s getting late.” Arnie shoved Steve toward the jeep and Niall quickly got in the driver’s seat and made ready to move on.

The sun still had a couple of hours to go before slipping behind the mountains when they left the third town and headed back to where they were supposed to meet the others. They had even more stuff in the Jeep now, as Niall had acquired more camping gear for the young men. As they approached the place where they would turn off the road onto the dirt track, Niall pulled over and asked Steve if he would drive.

“What for?” Steve asked.

“Well, Cal told you to drive and he expects to see you at the wheel when we get back. I don’t want him to get any ideas that something’s wrong and start shooting. You remember how nervous he was when we left, don’t you?”

“Oh, yeah. But I bet he’s calmed down quite a bit my now. I mean, we aren’t even close to sunset yet. We must have at least an hour to go.”

When they got to the turnoff Arnie said, “Stop! Stop right here! Something’s wrong.”

“What is it? What do you see?” Steve asked in a whisper.

“Several people have walked up the hill over our wheel tracks. None of those prints were made by us. Something’s going on here. Let’s put the jeep back down the road a ways and come back on foot through the woods.”

“Good idea, Arnie. Niall, how do you make this thing go backwards?”

“Please let me do it Steve. Backing up is a little tricky until you get the hang of it.”

“Oh, all right but go right where we tell you.”

“Sure, Steve. Where do you want to go?”
Arnie said, “Back about half a mile the trees come down close to the road. Let’s see if there’s a place it will fit in those trees.”

“Okay. I’ll just turn around then,” Niall said.

“No, don’t. I don’t want any more tracks here showing we came back this way. Just back up so you don’t have to get off the hard part of the road,” Arnie said.

“All right, you’re the boss.”

After maneuvering the jeep in amongst the trees and covering their tracks with some leaves and pine needles, the three left the road and circled around to come at the campsite from another direction than they had had left it. As they went over the ridge, Arnie said very quietly, “We should have changed back into our other clothes. These white things will show up much too easily, even after sunset.” But he kept going, motioning the others to stop and wait for him several times as they neared clearings. Finally they had a vantage point from which they could see the camp site. The lean-to was still in place but there were no people and no blankets and no camp fire. The pit in which they had maintained their fire had been filled in. There was no sign that anyone was around. Even the plastic bottles that had held their drinking water were gone.

Arnie motioned them back the way they had come. After moving about 50 yards to a clump of brush they huddled and discussed the situation in little more than whispers.

“It looks to me like they left and I bet they left as prisoners.” Arnie began.

“Why do you say that?” Niall asked rather surprised.

“They covered the old campfire,” Steve said. “If Cal were still in charge, they wouldn’t have covered the campfire where we expected to spend the night. There’s no point in digging a second campfire pit if you already have one. Also, there weren’t any improvements to the lean-to and no second lean-to. They’ve had all day with nothing to do but wait for us. They’d have improved the camp with that kind of time.”

“He’s right,” Arnie said. “They’d have made a second lean-to and gathered branches to sleep on and firewood, for goodness sake. But everything was gone or they hid it real good. I think they were caught by someone from home. Taken by surprise I’d say. I didn’t see any signs of a fight, did you, Steve?”

“No, it all looked pretty peaceful to me. Like they just up and walked away.”

“So what do we do now?” Niall asked. “Do we track them or go back to town for help or what?”

“Go back to town? Oh, you mean back to one of those places we went today. No we won’t go anywhere. I think from the tracks that it’s some of the mayor’s men who got ‘em. I think the only thing we can do is get more guns and slip in with them and get our guys armed well enough to overthrow the mayor.” Arnie was rather grim faced.

“Yeah,” Steve said rather enthusiastically. “Can you picture how they’ll sit up and take notice when we pick off a couple of guys with those telescope guns? They won’t know what hit ‘em.”
“Steve, you aren’t going to get anybody free of the Mayor by shooting a couple of his guards from two hundred yards away. Just cool it and let me think.”

“But Arnie, it’s going to be at least a couple of days before we can get more than a few guns. Can we wait that long?” Niall was rather worried about Natalie and the others.
Chapter Forty-One: Meet the Mayor

In which we see how the other half lives and Natalie saves a life, or two.

“I don’t think the mayor will want to kill your friends. He’ll want to question them first. And the woman will be all right, of course, as long as she’s willing to work,” Arnie said.

“What do you mean,” Niall asked, surprised. “Are they going to make her a slave?”

“Slave?” Steve laughed. “Women aren’t slaves. The mayor may even take her into his household like he did with Alfred’s wife. You remember, Arnie, how there was all that debate about who was going to get her after Alfred was executed.”

“Yeah, but the mayor was younger then and probably thought he was the next Brigham Young or something. I bet he knows better now after the fuss his wife made.”

Niall felt a little better after that exchange. If the captives were going to be physically unharmed for several days, at least that should give the authorities time to work out something to rescue them. So long as the boys didn’t have the guns and ammunition that they hoped to get from him, he still had considerable leverage with them, so he felt safe enough for the time being. He knew that Jeeves must know what he was doing and would know that he was no longer with the payer and the others. He, or it, would also know that the boys were not in the system and thus must be with some other group. It seemed obvious to Niall that the police must know what was going on. In fact, he couldn’t understand why they hadn’t appeared yet.

When the boys decided to establish another campsite several miles away from the abandoned camp, Niall didn’t try to talk them out of it.

“...But I tell you things are just fine in the U.S. There was no collapse after the transition,” Natalie said as earnestly as she could.

“Do you take me for a fool? We know better than that. My own parents’ town was invaded by a huge band of outlaws. They destroyed everything downtown and my parents barely escaped with their lives. My parents know from personal experience what it’s like outside,” Cal replied.

“Okay, so you tell me what life is like for us outsiders since you seem to know all about it.”

“Well I know that you and the others in your party are rich.”

“How do you know that?”

“It’s obvious. Look at your clothes, for instance. That dress you have on is very expensive. The seamstress who made it was very talented. Look how even the stitches are. Every one is the same size. And the seams are all very straight. Only a superb needlewoman could have done that. It must have taken days to make.”

“Then check your shoes. They’re made of fine leather that’s been expertly tanned to be so thin and flexible.”
Natalie sighed, “These shoes are not made of leather. They’re made of man-made materials. It’s some kind of plastic for the uppers and something else for the soles.”

“Sure, and they were put together by magic. No, those shoes were also made by expert cobblers. The seams there are too perfect to have been made by an ordinary man. The buckles are made of metal that must have been shaped by a jeweler to be so thin and uniform. You can’t even see the hammer marks.”

“These buckles are just for decoration. They don’t hold the shoe on my foot.”

“You see, you admit they’re the shoes of a woman of idleness and luxury.”

“They’re the shoes of anybody who wants them. They’re standard issue, right off the rack.”

“If that wasn’t enough, look at your hands.” Natalie had given up on the gloves, since they were quite soiled. Naturally, she washed her hands in the creek frequently. “Those hands never did dishes or washed clothes nor cooked nor did chores.” At this Natalie smiled. “Those hands are soft and without calluses. They are the hands of idleness. Only a rich woman could have hands like that. And the skin of your face never spent days working in the fields. It’s too perfect, too smooth, too pale to be anything but the skin of a woman pampered from birth.” Natalie was mentally comparing her complexion, exposed to the weather while she rode and went camping, with that of Leyden. “You can’t fool me. Your wealth stands out like a fire in the night.”

“Okay there’s no point in our arguing about that. What do you think life is like for ordinary people on the outside?”

“Well, I’m sure it’s a lot like our life here in the valley except that we’re a lot safer here. We keep out the roving bands of outlaws. Our women don’t have to fear being raped or sold into prostitution.”

“I’m surprised you didn’t accuse me of being a prostitute.”

“Ma’am, at first I thought you might be but when I realized how old you are and when you didn’t make any offers, I decided that you must not be.”

“Why, how kind of you. I’m flattered.”

“It’s nothing, ma’am.”

“Well, go on, what’s it really like out there?”

Cal looked at Natalie out of the corner of his eye as if he wasn’t sure whether she was making fun of him or not but continued with his description in any event.

“There are big cities that are crumbling into ruin, those that haven’t been bombed into radioactive rubble. We know that there’ve been wars because we can see that Albuquerque has a radioactive glow sometimes when the sky is right.”

“That’s the city lights, not radioactivity.”

“We’ve seen the planes go over headed that way. We know what they’re doing. Anyway, there’s still some industry somewhere because of the Jeep but it’s not like it was in the old days. And there’s
starvation lots of years because the gangs from the cities come out and steal from the farmers. There’s no oil, so what cars there are have to run on alcohol made from corn.”

“Well, you have me there. Some cars do run on vegetable oils.”

“See? And you thought I didn’t know what I was talking about.”

“Go on. What else do you know about my world?”

“We’re in the last of days. The end of the world is coming soon. The time of revelations is at hand. Of course I don’t know a lot about that. I don’t think Dad has calculated exactly what day it’s going to be but it’ll be sometime relatively soon, certainly within the next few years. I mean the wars and such prove that.”

“Do we still have TV and cell phones and computers?”

“Those were mostly the work of the devil. It’s just as well they were destroyed when the evil money came in.”

“What about the Payers? Felipe is a payer, you know.”

“The Payers are priests of Satan. They’re another reason we know that we’re at the end of time. They’re responsible for the destruction of the old ways.”

“You’re right about that, too. They have destroyed many of the old ways.”

“They can’t be trusted. They pretend to be humble and modest but really they’re devious and cruel. They practice strange rites by moonlight. If it wasn’t for my dad, they’d have visited us with plagues and disease and made our crops fail. His prayers and our faith in him have prevented their evil from touching us.”

“I guess you’re lucky to have him for your father. Does he say why the Payers care about your little community in the valley?”

“He says that we may be the last good people left on Earth while Satan reigns here. He says the Payers would give anything to destroy us.”

“Since you’re a beacon of light leading to the true faith who might lead others back to God if the Payers would only let them?”

“Pretty much, yeah. You do understand, then, why we have to be so careful with him?” Cal said, nodding toward where Felipe was tied.

“Oh yes, I understand why you’re so afraid of him. He’s a threat to your way of life.”

“Hush!” Cal held his finger before his lips and tensed, looking around the perimeter of their clearing. There was no sound so far as Natalie could tell though she listened closely.

“What is it?” Natalie asked and received a glare and a finger to the lips from Cal.

He slowly stood and started for the tent when a loud voice sounded, “Stay where you are. If you reach for your gun we’ll cut you down where you stand.”
Cal froze in position and slowly raised his hands above his shoulders.

Natalie muttered, “Rescued at last.” Then she saw several men dressed in what could only be crude uniforms coming out of the woods with Billy and Jean being dragged behind two of them. It was looking like a frying pan to fire situation.

The party was composed of about a dozen men, all bearded, and most of them armed with rifles, though one carried what looked like an assault rifle. They quickly searched the camp (which had little enough in it) and took Cal’s gun and knife. They also took the belt and wrist watch which Cal had taken from Felipe and used himself. Felipe was untied but treated rather roughly. When Natalie protested, she was told to shut up and that they knew how to treat a payer. For some reason, Jean looked a little embarrassed at that.

The party set off shortly through the woods carrying all the gear (mostly suitcases) that was found in the camp. Cal and Billy were required to carry both their own backpacks and those of Arnie and Steve. Two of the party flanked the payer but Jean and the rest rated only a single guard. Natalie was not required to carry anything.

They trudged on for a number of miles with Natalie complaining every now and then about wanting to rest or relieve herself since the men seemed to expect her to be frail that way and she was afraid that Felipe might not be up to the exertion. They stopped briefly at their own camp and loaded up their gear on a simple pull wagon with wooden wheels. It creaked and bounced but did the job. Natalie was fascinated to see that there was no metal involved in its construction.

By dusk Natalie was feeling quite tired and her pleas for rest were heartfelt. Her feet were sore and her back was sore and it seemed like she could hardly remember the last time she was able to stand on level ground. It was then that they came in view of lights in the distance.

The ridgeline they had been following continued upward but the path diverged down toward a cluster of houses, several of which had a soft flickering light coming through their windows.

“Home at last,” Natalie heard one of her - guides? rescuers? mutter.

“Hello the village! Fred Bascome and deputies returning.” The leader of their party cried out.

“Welcome, Fred,” came a voice from their left. “The Mayor’s expecting you. Go right on to the meeting house.”

“Thanks, Juan. Do you think we could eat something first?”

“Better not. Check in first and then, maybe. The Mayor’s kind of upset.”

“He’ll be even more upset when he finds out what’s happening.”

“What’s up? Outsiders coming?”

“Worse than that. You just keep out of sight and alert. We could have real trouble.”

“Damn.”
“Right you are.”

The party, its prisoners, and guests continued down the hill to the collection of houses where some skinny dogs and kids came out to meet them.

A rather tall man with the usual full beard came out on the front porch of the largest of the houses.

“What have you got there, Fred?”

“You, Honor, we caught two of the rebels and some outsiders they were dealing with.”

“I can see they’re outsiders. What kind of dealing?”

“Well, your Honor, from what one of the outsiders tells us they were dealing for guns to come back and attack us. Of course, they probably would’ve led a party of outsiders back as well to help their revolution.”

“No! I didn’t say that.” Jean was almost trembling and he pleaded. “There’s no attack planned.”

“Shut up, outsider,” the Mayor commanded and Jean’s escort grabbed his arm in a hard grip, at which Jean winced.

“What makes you think so, Fred?”

“Well, this outsider admitted that the other two of the rebels went off with another outsider to get guns. Since just four rebels with guns isn’t any threat to your Honor and they should know that, it’s obvious that they must have more help than just guns. Besides, why should they just give them guns? They’re bound to at least follow them to see what they can get.”

“You’re right, Fred. This is serious. You were right to bring your squad back with you rather than splitting your party. Take the rebels to the shed, lock them in, and post a guard. Bring the outsiders into the house.”

Billy and Cal were pushed toward a sizable shed beside the house and the outsiders were escorted into the house, their bags bringing up the rear.

“Okay, let’s see what we’ve got here. Is this the payer?”

“Yes, sir. You can see that he is dressed in all white clothing, he has no rings or other jewelry and he has no money.”

“Other than the all white clothes, is there nothing else?”

“This outsider said that the other man was a payer,” and Fred pointed at Jean. “He also is the one that told us that the other two rebels had gone with another outsider to get more guns.”

“Who are you?” the Mayor said to Jean.

“I’m just a hitchhiker that was given a ride by these people. I had nothing to do with them. It’s just a coincidence,” Jean said, earnestly pleading his case.
“What about her?” the Mayor asked jerking his thumb at Natalie.

“I don’t know. She was with the other two when they stopped for me. I guess she’s one of them.”

“Who are you, woman?” the Mayor asked Natalie sternly.

“I am Natalie Carraway. I’m in training to become a payer.”

This was met by a gasp from several of the deputies and a narrowing of the eyes by the Mayor.

“Then why are you wearing that ring? Payers aren’t supposed to have rings.”

“This is my wedding ring. My husband died several years ago,” Natalie said mentally crossing her fingers. “I wear it in memory of him. When I become a payer, I’ll give this ring to my daughter to keep in memory of her father.”

“Why aren’t you home with your family now?”

“Are you asking why I decided to become a payer?”

“No, but go ahead anyway. Tell us why you want to become a daughter of Satan.”

“The Payers are not in league with the devil. The Payers are good people who do good things. I am a good person so inasmuch as I no longer have responsibilities for my family and I didn’t want to be useless; I decided I should become a payer.”

“Where are they?” the door to the room crashed open and a tall, painfully thin man with a scraggly beard that was once light brown, but was now mostly white, burst into the room from the porch. “They told me we’ve captured a group of Payers that were trying to invade our valley.”

“Relax, preacher. We got one payer and one payer-in-training, that’s all.”

“Are you the hell spawn?” the preacher thundered in a voice that quavered just a little at the end as he faced Jean.

“I’m just a hitchhiker. I’m not a payer. I was just trying to get a ride.” Jean was whining by the end of his speech and the preacher almost visibly swelled.

“Trafficking with the Devil, that’s what you were doing.”

“No, he’s the payer. He’s the one,” Jean pleaded pointing at Felipe who was standing rather calmly between his guards, their hands now gripping his arms.

“Kill him! Kill him now!” the preacher stormed at Felipe.

“No! Let him be. He’s no threat now. He’s completely in our power. Preacher, you got to relax. Everything’s just fine.”

“But he’s a payer.”

“He’s just a man, preacher. He’s just flesh and blood. He can’t hurt us as long as we keep an eye on him.”
“Well, tie him up at least. Tie him to that chair.”

“Preacher, he’s old and tired and I think my daughter, pregnant as she is, could take him in a fair fight.”

“But his weapons. How do you know he ain’t armed?”

“He’s been searched by our deputies and he was searched by the rebels. If he had any weapons, we would’ve taken them off him by now. So relax and let me get on with this questioning.”

The flushed face of the preacher began to fade to its normal pallor with a few red blotches and he went around behind Felipe where he somehow felt safer.

“Okay, what’s you name again?”

“Natalie Carraway”

“Natalie, what are you doing coming to our valley?”

“We were curious to see the roadblock on the main road that your village set up. The other member of our party had been asking about the colony and Mr. Sanchez was kind enough to leave his usual route and drive near the roadblock. Of course, we never actually got that far since your young men stopped us.”

“I guess you realize that ain’t good enough. But I don’t hurt women if I can help it, so I won’t press you on it for now. Of course, if these other guys don’t tell me the truth, I may have to come back to you.”

The mayor turned toward Felipe. “Payer. Why are you here?”

“The lady has told you the truth, which you would not accept. If it will make you feel better, let me know what you want to believe and I will say that you are right.” Felipe smiled slightly and winked at Fred who stood beside the Mayor.

The Mayor hit him once across the face with the back of his fist. It knocked off the glasses Felipe wore, cutting the bridge of his nose in the process, and staggered him. He would have fallen, had the men on either side not held his arms.

“Just because you’re an old man doesn’t mean I’m going to take any insolence off you. I’ll know the truth when I hear it. Now spit it out.”

Felipe spit out some blood from his mouth onto the floor and began, “We are from the most powerful gang in the whole of New Mexico. Your colony is the last place in the State that we don’t control. We were sent on a scouting mission. When your young men captured us, it seemed a great opportunity to capture some of your people, the two who went with our friend, and to spy on your defenses. I am to report back by hidden radio.”

The grip on his arms got tighter as he went on and the young men of the guard began to look tense and finger their weapons. But the Mayor remained rock hard.

“Where is the radio?”
“Cal took it off me and Fred, here, took it from Cal. He has it on his wrist there.”

Fred looked at the wristwatch that he had placed on his own arm as if it were a snake. He quickly stripped it off and handed it to the Mayor.

“This don’t look like no radio to me. And don’t give me that Dick Tracey stuff about wrist radios. I seen cell phones. I even owned one back before the Fall. This don’t look like one of them.”

“That’s because you don’t have to press buttons any more. You just talk to it and it does what you tell it to do.”

“How do you turn it on?”

“It’s on all the time. It’s on right now.”

“Turn it off!”

The Mayor handed the “watch” to Felipe who couldn’t lift his hands to take it because of the men holding them.

“Let him turn it off.”

Felipe said, “It doesn’t turn off. It’s made to be on all day every day.”

“Who’s listening on the other end?”

“Nobody, so far as I know.”

“Well what good is it if nobody’s listening?”

“A computer is listening.”

“Don’t give me that shit. Computers don’t listen to radios. Besides, the computers are all gone.”

“Okay, then. It’s just a wristwatch. May I have it back now?”

“No!” yelled the preacher. “It may be a weapon. Don’t let him have it. Keep it away from him.”

The Mayor smiled and dropped the watch into his pocket. “Just to keep you happy, preacher.” Then, looking hard at Felipe, “Tell me why you came here.”

“Let’s see, where was I? Oh yes, while our confederate lures your two young men into a trap, we are to distract you into thinking we are weak and no threat to you.”

“I told you, Mayor. We got to kill them.”

“Not me. I ain’t one of them. I didn’t do nothing.” Jean was trembling with fear now.

“Shut up.”

“I didn’t.” Jean finished almost in a whisper.
“Go on, payer.”

“Well, we left a trail through the woods that anyone could follow, so when the rest of our gang comes they’ll have no trouble coming right here. We got lots more men than your pitiful dozen or so. Also, our guns are lots better. You won’t have a chance.”

“What are we gonna do?” from one of the men in the crowd.

“Shut up, everybody! This payer is lying through his teeth.”

“But isn’t what I said what you wanted me to say?” asked Felipe incredulously.

“Payer, I hit you once do you want another shot with my good hand?”

“No, I’m just pointing out that you can’t believe anything you get by torture. We victims of your torture will just keep saying things until you hear what you want to hear or we pass out. You’ll never be able to trust anything we say no matter what pain or stress you have us endure. You don’t even know whether killing us will make things better or worse for you. You don’t know whether you need us as hostages or not. You simply don’t have enough information and you can’t get it from us because you can’t trust what we say under any circumstances. You might as well let us all get a good night’s sleep. I’m sure your men could use the sleep because they’ve had a hard day in the woods.”

The Mayor just looked at Felipe and his eyes half closed. The room got quiet and stayed that way for several minutes. The deputies seemed afraid to attract the Mayor’s attention and the preacher seemed to alternate between a flush of anger and a pallor of sickly fear.

Then a woman’s anguished cry could be heard, a cry of deep and fearful pain.

“My daughter!” the Mayor said and turned quickly away from the frozen tableau to hurry from the room. They soon heard his footsteps thundering up the stairs to the second floor. Fred, in the Mayor’s absence said, “Put those bags down over by the table. Let’s check them for weapons again.”

That seemed to be something they could do to take their mind off the trouble upstairs and the possible trouble outside. They moved the several small suitcases to a large dining table. Though its surface gleamed with wax, it had clearly seen better days for it was scratched in several places and was a little wobbly.

The first suitcase was Jean’s and the clothing was examined with some wonder at the high quality. The underwear was especially noteworthy since the shorts had elastic waistbands. The socks were noted for being quite thin and having no seams at the toes. The shirts had buttons of sturdy yellow plastic, which impressed some. Most of the men had strings to tie to hold their shirts together and the seams were thick due to the thick thread that was used.

But the most impressive items were the toiletries. The can of shaving foam both frightened and humored them. It was frightening at first as it squirted out of the nozzle, but then they got over their fear and the scent that suffused from the soap made them laugh out loud. Jean showed them how he used the lather and then reached for the safety razor but his hands were grabbed and he was held back.

After some earnest explanations, Jean was allowed to draw the razor across his stubble to demonstrate that the razor was safe for him and the others. They were also amazed at how closely
the blade cut the hairs. They felt Jean’s face and swore that his skin was softer than a woman’s skin and they questioned his manhood. Jean flushed but was afraid to do anything about their rough teasing.

Then Fred said, “How come your clothes are the same color as hers if you’re just a hitchhiker? How come you’re wearing that yellow just like she has on?”

“Well, it’s cheaper that way. They only got couple of colors left, just white and yellow, so all the Payers wear white and everybody else wears yellow.”

Though Fred was not convinced, it sounded plausible. Sort of. Natalie was grinning as if she knew a great joke she wasn’t telling but Fred wasn’t sure he knew who the joke was on so he didn’t ask about it.

“Which bag is next?”

“This one. It’s the payer’s.”

Again the quality of the sewing and the fineness of the material were impressive but the elastic waistbands were old hat. However, Felipe had an electric razor which stole the show. At first they thought it might be a bomb or some other weapon. But Jean and Natalie offered to demonstrate it for them and it was small so they soon were turning it on and off to hear it buzz. Felipe even offered to let them shave him if they liked and they did. Into the midst of this near revelry the Mayor strode minutes later with a grim look on his face.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

“We’re just trying out the payer’s fancy razor.” Fred said somewhat embarrassed.

“We may have invaders coming into the valley right now and you’re trying out a razor. Want your corpse to look its best, I guess… First we’ve got to double the guard. Second, we have to notify every man we have to be ready for invasion. I don’t want any of them going off hunting tomorrow without permission. Third, we have to figure that they’re really after the mine. If things are as bad out there as it looks, that silver will draw them like… well, they’ll come for that if nothing else. We’ll use it as bait. When they come there, we’ll ambush them. But first we have to spot them coming in. They’ll have to have their main body approach by daylight but their scouts may have the nerve to come in by night. That’s OK. We’ll let them come. We want them to find the mine. That’s what they’re mostly looking for, anyway.”

“What about our farms? How are we going to protect them if we’re all up at the mine?”

“If we don’t beat this invasion and beat it bad, you won’t be able to protect your farms anyway. We’ll have to bring the women and kids all together where they can protect each other with the help of a few men. Gordon’s place is probably the best. It’s away from the mine and he’s got that big barn. Preacher, you’ll be in charge there. Fred, send two of your men out tonight to get the upper valley people down to Gordon’s. The three old guys can stay with the women but we’ll need the rest. We’ll meet them at Gordon’s place, let’s say about two hours after dawn. Pick them and get them started now.”

Fred saluted and left the room hurriedly.

“Now let’s see what’s in the rest of these suitcases. Open them up.”
The men quickly replaced Jean’s and Felipe’s suitcases on the table with the two bags that belonged to Natalie and opened them. Again the clothing impressed the men with its quality. The toiletries were even more impressive, with their colorful plastic containers. Nothing suspicious was found, however.

“Preacher, ask my wife to come to us if she’s not too busy with Rachel.”

“Right,” he said and left the room and his feet sounded rapidly on the stairs.

“If we need a hostage, the payer is our best bet so lock him up with Cal and Billy.”

As Felipe was hustled out of the room by his guards, the Mayor turned to Jean.

“You seem to be the most talkative one. We’ll take you with us. If we need a negotiator to go out in the open between us and the raiders, he’ll be the one. We can always shoot him if he tries to run.”

Jean turned a little pale and wet his lips during a weak smile.

“What’ll we do with the woman?”

“My wife can take care of her.”

“I can take care of whom?” came a strong voice from a strong looking woman of about 45, though her hair was heavily streaked with white and her skin was somewhat worn for a woman of that age.

“This woman’s an outsider, obviously. She says her name is Natalie. She also says she’s in training to be a payer. I don’t trust her at all, so watch her well. These are her things.”

“Where should I put her?”

“Use the guest room. Lord knows we haven’t any reason to expect guests.”

“The guest room? It’s full of junk.”

“Well, put her somewhere. Just don’t lose her.”

“Get your bags and come with me,” she said and turned to go.

Natalie looked at the Mayor steadily for a moment and then stepped forward to the table to repack her things. She wasted no time but showed no evidence of hurry and packed everything with care, though she shuddered at the prospect of wearing things the men had touched. Long before she had finished, the Mayor’s wife had returned and was impatiently waiting by the door to the hallway.

Natalie, screwing up her courage, took a bag in each hand and turned toward the door, moving with no hesitation but also not hurried in any way. She was looking her hostess in the eye. As she followed her up the stairs, there was another rending cry of agony from the floor above and the Mayor’s wife started and then hurried up the remaining stairs and almost ran down the hall toward the source of the sound.

Natalie hurried herself at that, and following, came upon the master bedroom which had as its center of attention a young woman who appeared to be in her late teens. She was lying on the bed with a twisted nightgown, her face pouring sweat and her face contorted in pain. She was obviously in labor.
and was having a hard time of it. Her face was grey even in the dim light of two lamps, which were
smoking slightly and smelled of hog fat.

An elderly man with sleeves rolled up above bloody hands and arms was attending her and didn’t
even look up when the two women entered the room. There was a younger nearly teen-aged girl
sitting on the other side of the bed, who strongly favored the woman in labor.

“Doctor, what happened?”

“I was trying to move the child into a better position but my attempts failed. I just can’t do it.”

“What can we do?”

“If we had a hospital, it would be no problem but under these conditions there’s nothing I can do.
Even if I had the anesthetics and the antibiotics, there isn’t enough light in here or anywhere in this
valley to operate. I couldn’t see what I was doing.”

Now that she could see the doctor’s face, Natalie could see that the old man was about on his last
legs as well.

“May I help?” Her words came as a surprise to both the doctor and the others.

The doctor squinted at her in the dim light and said,” I don’t know you. Who are you.”

“I am Natalie Carraway. I’m an outsider but I think I might be able to help the young lady here.”

The Mayor’s wife turned to her with a surprised but hopeful look on her face. “Can you help? What
can you do?”

“I’ve had some medical training when I was in the Army many years ago. Also I’m relatively fresh and
my hands are noticeably smaller than yours, doctor. Perhaps, under your direction, I can move the
child so it will present its head first rather than its rump.”

“ Well, I don’t know.”

“I also have some antiseptic wipes in my bag here, which should help.”

“Please let her try, Doctor. I don’t know what hope we have otherwise.”

“All right. We’ll try it,” He sighed.

“Doctor, ma’am, is there some hot water and soap so I can wash?”

“We got some hot water left over from supper but we ain’t got proper soap,” the lady of the house
confessed, her head drooping.

“I have some hand soap here as well so if you can show me to the hot water?”

“I’ll get it now. You just wait.” and she hurried out of the room.

“Doctor, what’s the position of the baby and the cord?”
“As far as I can tell, we’re okay with the cord. It’s about as simple as it can be. The baby’s on its back with both legs pulled up to its chest. Lying that way, it’s just too big for the passage.”

“Which way should I be trying to turn it after I push it in a ways?”

“I can’t be sure without a sonogram but from feeling from outside I think it would be best to move the hips up and to your right, her left of course. If you can get an arm between the last two fingers of your hand and try to guide the shoulder down while you push up with your thumb and index finger…”

“Here it is. Just let me pour this out the window, there now you can use this basin to wash. That was my grandmother’s basin. It’s over 150 years old.” Now that there was something to do she was talking almost compulsively.

Natalie had taken the soap from her bag and removed her blouse, retaining only her underwear. At this she drew a gasp from the other girl in the room but her mother quieted her with a stern glance and a finger to the lips as Natalie began to wash. The water wasn’t really hot but then, Natalie thought, the operating theatre was hardly sterile and she wondered whether the doctor had washed at all before setting to work. Having lathered and rinsed twice, she turned with both arms held up before her, not consciously imitating the doctor movies she had seen as a young woman.

“Shall I begin?” she said as she suppressed a tremble of fear.

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“I tell you Adam, she saved their lives. The doctor had given up and Rachel was about at the end of her strength. You’d have thought she did this sort of thing twice a week the way she just got right in there. It took several tries and she was really tired when she finished, but we have a fine grandson now.”

“How’s Rachel?”

A frown briefly crossed her face and her cheery mood was a bit forced but she was determined to be optimistic. “She’ll be just fine. She lost a lot of blood and she’s very tired but she’s past the worst of it. She had the baby at her breast when I left the room. I’ve got to go back. She’s very weak and I don’t trust Cindy to do for her.”

She turned and left the room.

The Mayor resumed his seat at the table and continued eating the boiled potatoes and milk that was his breakfast this morning. He still had an hour before he was to meet the others near the mine to set up the ambush. That would be the easy part. The hard part would be to be sure they got all the raiders before they could fight back. They only had 14 rifles and the one assault rifle and only a couple of hundred rounds of ammunition left. They couldn’t depend on some of it to fire, either. Some of the men had been very careless with how they had stored the cartridges. The bows they had been making were just not very good and the arrows weren’t very straight. He doubted that they would shoot even 100 yards. Most of the deer that they had taken without using the guns had been snared. But even that wasn’t working so well. The ropes they had made from vines kept falling apart and they still hadn’t been able to make decent rope from the cotton they grew.

Things were going downhill fast. Paint was needed on most of the houses and they had none. Losing a knife was an absolute disaster. The mine still had some silver but it took a huge investment in work
to get a tiny amount of silver. Many of the men would only work there if threatened. He couldn’t remember the last time he had seen someone wearing anything that wasn’t patched and he couldn’t remember what year it had been when he had given up on the last of his underwear. His head itched from lice and he was losing weight.

Each year he would pray for a better year next year but it never happened. Maybe it would be better to just give up and let the raiders kill them all. But he just couldn’t give up. He loved his wife, who had lost her beauty years ago from the hard work, and he loved his daughters and even his rebel son. Yes, admit it. His son was almost certainly one of the young rebels, perhaps even their leader, if history were any guide. Drinking the last of the milk from the bowl and rinsing the bowl from the bucket of water next to the sink, the Mayor picked up his gun and headed out to face what might be the last day of his life.

Fred met him just outside the door.

“Looks like everybody is moving. The women and kids should all be at Gordon’s place before noon, except your family, of course. Can we move Rachel? Oh, and congratulations on your grandson. They told me it’s a boy.”

“We’ve got to move her. This is the first place the raiders will come if they follow the road. I can’t believe they’d try to move a large body of men in any other way. The hills are just too difficult unless you know the trails.”

“What if Arnie and Steve show them one of the trails?”

“Then they’d use the North pass because that’s closest to the mine and avoids the main roadblock. Oh, any word from any of the lookouts or the guards at the roadblock?”

“No, nothing. Nobody’s seen a thing.”

“I hope that’s good news.”

“Yeah.”

“Preacher, did the Son of Satan disappear in a puff of smoke overnight?”

“No but he did snore a little. Scared me half to death when he first did it.”

“I’m leaving it up to you to move Rachel and the rest of the folks here to Gordon’s place. I’ll leave you Juan to help keep an eye on the payer. You can use Cal and Billy as porters to carry Rachel on a litter.”

“Doc looks exhausted. We might have to carry him, too.”

“Have the kids pull a wagon with all the potatoes we can move and take a couple of the milk cows as well. It should be easy enough to herd them along in front.”

“Damn it Arnold, I can’t do everything. We’ll just have to come back for the potatoes and the cows.”

“Okay, I guess you’re right. Get them when you can. I’ll try to get word to you as soon as I can after the fight’s over. Be sure you stay alert at Gordon’s because there may be stragglers from the main body that you’ll have to take care of.”
“Can you spare us a second gun?”

“No I can’t. We just barely have enough as it is and even then I’m counting on a couple of the guys to hit something with their arrows.”

“Arnold, I just want you to know that if anything happens, I really appreciate what you’ve done for us here in the Valley. Without your strength and taking over the way you did we wouldn’t have lasted even the first winter. You’ve been a true friend and father to us all.”

“Thanks, preacher. But if I don’t do the right thing today that won’t amount to a hill of beans.”
Chapter Forty-Two: And a Child Shall Lead Them

_In which Niall comes to the rescue, or is it Natalie?_

“Wake up Niall.”

“What?”

“I said, wake up. We have to get moving. It’s almost dawn.”

“Okay, Steve. Let me get my eyes open. Do we have any coffee?”

“Yes and I brought you a cup.”

“You’re a life saver. Give it to me.”

“It’s right over there. All you have to do is get out of that sleeping bag and it’s yours.”

Steve stepped back from Niall’s swinging arm, laughing.

“You’re a monster, a sadist… Okay, I’m getting up.” Niall unzipped the sleeping bag and pulled himself erect. He managed to struggle into his clothes without having to open his eyes very often. Then he staggered from the tent, his attention fixed on the steaming cup of coffee on the camp stool near the fire.

“Well if it isn’t Lazarus back from the grave. Want some breakfast? Better say yes it’s going to be a long day.”

“Arnie, how did you learn to cook so well?”

“It’s easy when you have all this gear. Man, I could live here forever. How many trout do you want?”

“Three’s plenty for me. Any biscuits?”

“Of course. We eat well this morning because it may be our last meal for quite a while.”

“Have you decided what we’re going to do?”

“Steve and I discussed it last night. As we see it, we have to go in quietly and capture the Mayor or some member of his family and try to work a trade.”

“What about this underground of rebels you were talking about?”

“There weren’t that many of us to begin with and with Cal and Billy in their hands they’ll know everybody in the band within a few hours.”

“So what can you do even if you spring ‘em?”
“We can leave, that’s what. The outside world is nothing like they said it was. They’ve been lying to us for years. If we can get the rest of our guys out, we can at least give them a better life even if we can’t convince everybody else.”

“What about my friends? How do they figure in this?”

“They’re not my problem. If they want to leave with us, I don’t mind but if the only way I can get my friends out is to leave them behind, then that’s what I’m going to do.”

“Is that food ready yet?” Steve yelled from the jeep where he was securing gear for travel.

“Yes. Come and get it or I’ll turn Niall loose on it.”

The three soon settled down to workmanlike eating, with the young men eating about twice as much as Niall. Finishing, they struck camp, loaded everything onto the jeep and departed about an hour after dawn. They drove for several miles with Steve at the wheel and finally chose a spot that allowed them to get the Jeep well off the road and hide it in the brush. Each of them carried a backpack, canteen, and a rifle.

“Niall, are there really cities bigger than Albuquerque?” Steve asked.

“Oh yes. Albuquerque’s really small as cities go. I’ll bet there are at least 50 cities in the country that are bigger.”

“I’m going to live in Albuquerque after we get done here.”

“You don’t have to decide now. We’ve got our whole lives before us. The sky’s the limit for us, Steve. I’m going to school. I’m getting an education. I want to go to the moon... or China, or someplace great!”

“I’m getting a fast car like those cars I played with when I was a kid.”

“You’re going to have to earn quite a lot of money to buy one, Steve. Maybe you’d better do like Arnie and go to school for a while first. It’ll make earning money lots easier if you have some skills and a reputation.”

“I bet girls like guys with fast cars. What do you think, Arnie?”

“All the girls I know just want somebody who can raise plenty of food. I don’t know what the outsider girls like.”

“From what I remember, Steve’s right. They do like guys with fast cars. I worked with a guy back in Virginia who had a fast car and he must have dated half a dozen girls in the couple of months that I knew him. Of course, he had a steady source of income and could take them out to nice restaurants and entertainment venues.”

“Yeah, you got to be rich to really attract the girls.”

“You’re too young to be a cynic, Arnie. You need more of Steve’s attitude while you’re young. There’s plenty of time to be cynical when you’re my age.”
They continued along a rather difficult trail for a time, avoiding the usual paths that the boys figured would be watched by the Mayor's men. It was just bad luck for Niall that he had an accident, slipping on a rock that turned under his foot, landing heavily and awkwardly, and breaking his ankle. After considering the situation for a time, the young men decided to push on without Niall. They promised to come back for him if they could and told him to get to water (being kind enough to point out that if he moved downhill he would eventually come to a stream) and wait. Then they went on.

Niall was alone, in pain, and already feeling cold and it was mid-morning. He decided to start for the water now because he wasn’t sure how long he would have the strength. He began crawling and soon realized that crawling was very hard on the knees for an old person. By then he was near some trees and detoured to look for sticks that might serve as crutches. He didn’t find anything that was really satisfactory but found it easier to hobble along in sort of a hop while clinging to a curved staff-like branch than to crawl.

After about an hour he realized he had no idea where the path was any more and began to just follow the easiest route that went downhill. Several times he had to go back uphill when he discovered that he was in a cul-de-sac of bushes or terrain too steep to negotiate without falling. His hands were becoming blistered and his good leg was trembling with fatigue. The ankle was significantly swollen now and the throbbing was almost too much for him so he found a reasonably level place and lay down with the hurting part higher than his waist.

Time passed very slowly.

Niall went back over in his mind how he had gotten in this situation. The repeated trips to gun shops over three days before he had managed to buy three guns and about 500 bullets, the trip to Albuquerque to prove to the boys that it wasn’t a radioactive shell of a city, the boys’ trip to a dentist who was horrified at the condition of their teeth and gums, everything that they had done in preparation for the rescue and now he himself needed rescue. At least if things got too bad, he could use the rifle on himself but that extremity was days away. He had some food in the pack and a sleeping bag and his canteen of water. He might even be able to last for a couple of weeks. But he’d never get back to civilization unless someone found him.

A strange but familiar noise awoke Niall from a light doze. Yes! It was a helicopter but would they see him?

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“You’ve got to get word to the Mayor. It’s his daughter. She’s got a bad fever. Doc says there’s nothing he can do. Please, Preacher, send word. Let Cindy go if you won’t send one of the men.”

“Ma’am, the Mayor told us to lie up quiet here so the raiders don’t find us. That’s why we got to do without fires on account of the smoke. Nobody likes these raw potatoes but we just got to live with it. Now your daughter has just got to live with that little fever for a while. If the Doc can’t help her, the Mayor can’t help her neither.”

“It’s not a little fever. It’s going to kill her if we don’t do something.”

“We have to wait and that’s final. Now you go tend your daughter and leave everything to me.”

“Come along, Mary, maybe I’ve got something in my bag that might help,” Natalie said and urged the Mayor’s wife away from the preacher. They went back into the house and up to the second floor, passing blankets and other signs that people had been sleeping on the floor. All the chairs were filled
with women and children. The children were fretful and complaining about having to stay inside and from time to time arguments and squabbles broke out among them. There were several babies and the smell in the house was pretty bad but water was in short supply since they only had the one well and the preacher had forbidden them to go to the creek.

Upstairs the situation was no better, only warmer. The stench was almost overpowering. There were blankets and clothes everywhere and many of the smaller children wore little or nothing. In the master bedroom the new mother was flushed and fretful. Her younger sister sat at her side with a pan of water and a cloth which she dipped in the water from time to time and placed on the forehead or neck of her patient in a futile effort to ease her suffering.

“It’s been a day and a half since she delivered and she’s getting worse rather than better. Please believe me that we do have medical care available on the outside. We have good doctors with plenty of medicines. There’s plenty of food and good, clean clothes to wear. You’ve seen my cosmetics. You know those aren’t from fifteen years ago. They’d be all dried up and useless if they were fifteen years old. You smelled the perfume. You used the soap. You know I’m right. We have to get your people to let us come in and help you all. We won’t take your land or make you do anything you don’t want to do.

Please, for her sake, you have to let us help.” Natalie was almost crying from frustration. Her face was smudged and dirty. Her hands hadn’t been washed in more than a day. She was still wearing the same underwear she had worn the day before. She felt miserable.

“I know. I believe you. We bin wrong all these years. I think I’ve known it for some time but I just couldn’t betray my husband by not supporting him. He was a rock when we needed it. We owe him loyalty. He’s done so much for us.” Tears slowly came down her cheeks as she looked at her daughter and thought how admitting being wrong all these years, about all the needless suffering because of his stubborn pride, was going to destroy the man her husband had been. The guilt and shame would be impossible for him to endure. But now she weighed the psychological death of her husband against the sure physical death of a young woman they had given life and her heart was torn within her.

“Cindy?”

“Yes, mama.”

“Cindy, I got to ask you to do something.”

“What’s that, mama?”

“I got to ask you to slip out and go get your father. He should be somewhere near the mine. You’re going to have to make him understand that Rebecca is dying and unless we let these outsiders go and get help for us, she and most likely her little baby are going to die. I shouldn’t ask you to do this, child. If there are raiders out there it could be horrible for you. I know they could force you to show them where we are and worse. But Natalie says there aren’t any raiders. Natalie says that it’s all nice outside and everybody has got what she’s got and more. You’ve seen her things. There’s no way those could have been made without factories and everything. Your daddy and the Preacher have been wrong all these years. So I got to ask you to do this, darling. Are you willing to try?”

“Oh mama, of course I am. Where are the men on watch?”
“I think if you go out the back like you were going to the outhouse with a chamber pot and then you slip around by that old cedar tree you can get to the path to the mine.”

“Sure, Mama. That’ll be easy. They’s expecting folks coming in not going out. I’ll be fine.”

“I snuck you a little extra potato out of the kitchen. You can eat that for lunch. Now go.”

“I’ll be back soon Mama, with Daddy. You just wait.” And off she went carrying what had once been a dish pan in its better days.

"Now all we can do is wait. I can’t leave Becca and you don’t know the way. It’s all up to Cindy now.

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Cindy was still close enough to being a tomboy to have every confidence in being able to get away from the farm unnoticed. She also was glad to get away from the stifling upstairs bedroom and the smell and the depressing feeling of not being able to help. As she trotted along the path that led toward the mine that was about five miles up the valley, she daydreamed about what it would be like outside. She thought of beautiful clothes, of food, of perfumes, and of boys who were clean-shaven and who smelled good. She thought of going places in cars though she didn’t really know for sure what that would be like. Then she realized that her father might be very angry with her for not obeying the Preacher.

She slowed her trot since she was getting tired anyway and began to think of how she might approach her father with some chance of not getting punished. Her father had always been rather gentle with her since she was the baby of the family and a girl but he had not “spared the rod” when he thought it necessary. She hated looking for a switch for her punishment, knowing that if the switch was not big enough she would get five extra swats from a switch her father picked.

Her slow jog deteriorated to a medium brisk walk.

Finally she decided to blame her mother for everything. She was acting on the strictest of orders. Her mother had required that she sneak away from the farm and carry this most important message to her father. But what was the message exactly? It would sound better if it sounded like she had memorized it. That way her father could hardly doubt that she was but a messenger and had not gone off on her own.

How would mother say it if it were a message for him word for word? “Becca dying. Get help.” No that was too brief. Mama would say a lot more than that. “Rebecca dying of fever. We must ask the outsiders for help.” No, that wouldn’t work. There had been several deaths that Cindy could remember in the Valley and they hadn’t asked the outsiders for anything then. So why should they now?

“Daddy, you’ve been wrong all these years…” No that would get her a slap across the face before she was told to get the switch. Maybe Natalie’s being here could help. Maybe she could be the key. Hostages! That might do it. They could trade Natalie for medical treatment for Becca. No that would require negotiating. There had to be some other way.

Lost in thought, she walked right past one of the guards who were on the lookout for the raiders. Of course he was asleep. He had been up for a long time for five days running. First there had been the boy’s rebellion. Then there was the posse to bring them back before they brought the outsiders down on them. Then when the boys were brought back, some of them at least, there was the doubled
guard duty and the rush to set up the ambush. And now he had been sitting here in this thicket for hours and there was nothing happening. As the day grew warm it was only natural that he would doze off.

“That’s it!” she exclaimed. The startled guard squeezed the trigger on his gun which fired a shot. That woke him up right and proper and almost scared Cindy to death. The shot also alerted the men ready for the ambush. So when Cindy came running down the path, terrified that the raiders were right behind her, there were several more shots as the now terrified men shot at their imaginations. Hearing the others shoot, those with guns cut loose as well. In short order over 75 shots were fired. Cindy was in hysterics lying on the ground with her arms wrapped around her head. Finally the Mayor was able to restore order. It was only then that the men heard the anguished wails of Cindy and realized that they might have just shot a woman or a child. Carefully, a couple of the braver men ventured through the brush quietly until they could see Cindy, whose tears had subsided to some degree as the quiet returned and she realized that she wasn’t shot and, better yet, there seemed to be no one chasing her.

“Cindy child, what are you doing here?” Fred exclaimed as he recognized the girl still lying on the road.

“I came to see Daddy,” Cindy wailed, filled with renewed fear of the punishment she expected.

“It’s Cindy, the Mayor’s daughter. I don’t see any raiders. Don’t nobody shoot. We’re coming in on the path. No shooting!”

Fred, with Cindy held behind him, cautiously walked through the trees, waving his right arm over his head. Several men came out of their hiding places and Cindy’s sobs grew in volume as she caught sight of her father standing with his arms crossed just ahead.

“Cindy, what are you doing here?”

“Daddy” she said still sobbing and ran to him and threw her arms around his waist. “Daddy, I was so scared. Somebody shot and I ran and then everybody was shooting at me. Oh, Daddy, I was so scared.”

“Well, of course you were. I think you scared about twenty men right here all by yourself,” he said looking around at the several embarrassed faces of those who had come out of hiding. “I think we’ve all had a good scare.”

”Even you, Daddy?“

”Even me. I thought my little girl had been shot. Do you have any idea how frightening that is to a daddy?”

“No, daddy. Is it as bad as being shot at by a bunch of men?”

“Oh it’s far worse than that. It’s just about as scary as anything can be. It just turns your insides to the biggest empty place in the world.”

“Well, then I’m going to have to scare you again, Daddy, because Rebecca’s dying. Doc says he can’t do anything more for her without medicine and Natalie used all her pills and Becca’s still hot as can be and she doesn’t talk sense any more and the water I use is all warm anyway and it smells really bad there, Daddy. And Mama sent me. She made me come.”
“I see. What do you think I should do, Cindy?” The mayor looked down at the daughter he had almost lost and thought about the daughter he was fast losing. He thought about how life in the Valley was getting more and more difficult to support. He thought about the lack of food and the lack of ammunition and the lack of medicine and all the things that were lost when the people of the Valley shut out the rest of the world.

His pride hurt. His chest hurt from unshed tears. He thought of John Wayne. John was always right. He never had to admit that he had messed up. He thought of Clint Eastwood. It didn’t help. The heroes always were right. They never had to stand up before people who had trusted them, who had placed their fate and future in the hands of the hero who had made the wrong decisions for all the right reasons.

He thought of Job in the Bible who had kept faith with God even when he lost everything. Well, he still had his faith in God, didn’t he? He was still a good man. A real hero does what has to be done no matter how embarrassing it is. No matter how ashamed he feels. Even if it costs him the love of the only woman he really loved. How could she respect him now? But look at Cindy. Her face is dirty and tear-stained. She almost died a few minutes ago because of me and my fear of the outsiders.

The Mayor turned to his men and said in a loud voice. “Everybody come on out. The ambush is over. The raiders ain’t coming. We’re all going home.”

The men came out from their various places of concealment and walked toward the Mayor.

“Mayor, what do you mean the raiders ain’t coming?”

“Fred, it’s been two days. They’ve had Cal and Arnie for three days. If they were coming they’d have been here by now. Let’s get the guards in and go get the women.”

Orders were given and the word was spread. The outlying scouts were called in and everybody headed for Gordon’s place.

As Cindy walked at her father’s side, her mood began to swing up again. The possibility of not being punished, which had seemed so improbable, suddenly seemed a near certainty. Her father was somber but he certainly didn’t seem angry at her, anyway. Her imagination even started toying with the idea that maybe if the outsiders did take care of Becca maybe, just maybe, they’d have a real dress for Cindy made like Natalie’s clothes were made.

They found the formerly sleepy guard hiding behind a tree. He almost shot at them and demanded the password. They yelled at him to stop being stupid and let them by because the whole thing was over. There weren’t any raiders.

“Fred, did you remember to get Jean?” the Mayor asked.

“Yes, I did, but when I got to where we’d tied him I found that he had escaped. There’s no telling where he is now.”

“Well, I guess it doesn’t matter any more. He’s pretty worthless either way.”

“What are we going to do with the payer?”
“I think we’ll take him to the roadblock and let him go. But first we’re going to ask him if he can get a real doctor for Rebecca. I don’t know what else we can do. At least we didn’t kill him. Good Lord, you don’t suppose the Preacher killed him do you?”

With a fresh worry on his mind, the Mayor lengthened his stride and Cindy had to skip sometimes to keep up. They were yelling for the Preacher as they approached Gordon’s place so the guards there were wide awake and welcomed them, asking how many of the raiders they had killed. It seems that the sound of the gunfire had been audible from Gordon’s and they had all been very worried.

The Mayor’s wife came running out of the house in tears (which none of the men had ever seen or ever expected to see) and threw herself into the Mayor’s arms hugging him tightly.

“Did I do good, Mama? I brought Daddy just like you wanted.”

“You did just fine, darling. I’m very proud of you.” Mary put an arm around her youngest and hugged her too.

“Mary. I need you and everybody else to hear what I’ve got to say so would you ask everybody to come outside, here?”

“Of course, darling. Everybody come on out. Come on. They’re all safe. They are all safe, aren’t they? There wasn’t anybody shot was there?”

“Yes, dear. We shot a bunch of trees but we didn’t hit anybody.”

“Mr. Mayor, welcome back. Did we defeat the raiders? Are they all dead?”

“Preacher, we’re all alive and we haven’t killed anybody. Nobody came. Now bring that payer out here along with Cal and Billy.”

“No raiders came? How do you know they aren’t coming?”

“Just get the payer and the boys out here. We need to talk.”

The men were joining their families in the front yard. Not that it was much of a yard, just a clearing in the woods that had some green stuff growing in various places. Some of the green really was grass but most of it was other things. Most of it didn’t have thorns, though so people found various places to sit or leaned on a convenient tree. The Mayor stood at the top of the steps on the front porch. When the payer, Cal, and Billy were all on the porch beside the Mayor he raised his hands and asked for quiet.

“Some of our people are not here as yet but they should be coming in soon. I’ve asked everyone to be here because we, not just me but we, need to make a decision. I have been your Mayor for the fifteen plus years we have been here in the Valley. It’s our home and we’ve defended it as best we could. We came here for refuge in a time of troubles. Those of us who are old enough to remember what it was like in the last days before we came here know that people were dying for lack of food and shelter. Here we made many of our own shelters and grew and hunted for our own food. We took care of each other in times of sickness and other troubles. We are a community.

But the times are changing. Many of the tools and assets we had when we arrived have worn out or been lost. I look around at us now and see that we are poorly dressed. I see that many of us are
gaunt from lack of food. I have wept at the funerals of my beloved friends who died for lack of medicines. I look at my own house, which should have been painted years ago, and I see rot and decay. I see my bathroom, which has been useless for years because we don’t have electricity. I use an outhouse and bathe in the kitchen because that’s where the hot water is. I don’t see so good any more because my glasses were broken years ago and we have no way to replace them.

When we first came here we were democratic. Things were voted on and decided by the whole community. As time went by I saw our needs and I wanted to force things to go well. So I tried to make people do what I thought was the right thing. After a while, there weren’t any more votes. I decided everything. I paid the guard and they did what I told them to do. When some folks objected to doing what I told them to do, I had to punish them to keep them safe. I was a father to them and I dared not spare the rod.

Naturally, I needed more money and I had to work the old silver mine to make sure I had enough. So I had to make people work in the mine. At first I tried paying them but it was costing more silver in wages that we could get out of the ore. So I found using mine work as a punishment convenient. That way I didn’t have to pay anything to get the silver. Of course I had to be sure then that there were enough crimes and criminals to keep the mine going.

People began to talk of leaving the Valley. Oh, I know they didn’t say these things to me but I heard enough of the rumors to know what they were thinking. I knew that wouldn’t be safe, so I asked the Preacher to mention how bad things were on the outside from time to time in his sermons to remind you all what we’d come to the Valley to escape. By then I had the only radio that was working because I had the last fuel for our generator, so I was the one who heard about the bad things happening out there. I didn’t mention the good things. Then, after a year or so I couldn’t use the radio anyway. But the Preacher and I could imagine what it must be like out there. We had both read science fiction stories as kids. It didn’t take much imagination to elaborate on some of those stories just a bit.

But finally, things have gotten so bad here that my own son has begun what I have been calling a rebellion against me. Some of his rebels have left the Valley despite my guards and two were brought back along with some outsiders. We have one of those outsiders here and another is with my sick daughter upstairs caring for her. That outsider saved my daughter’s life when Doc couldn’t, as Rebecca gave birth to my grandson. In other words, I owe an outsider for the lives of two members of my family.

Preacher and I have been telling you how bad Payers are. Preacher has been saying that the Payers are Sons of Satan. He has told you that Payers do vile things. But let’s ask two of our number who have actually spent some time with this payer what he did.

Cal, step up here.” Cal stepped forward beside the Mayor.

“Cal, how did you first meet this payer?”

“The boys and I were hiding near the road from the roadblock about three miles out and the outsiders drove up in their car.”

“What did you do?”

“Well, we had a gun that your son gave us and we pointed it at the outsiders and took them prisoner.”
“Did the payer fight back or do anything to resist?”

“No. Not that I recall. He didn’t do anything much. He even helped get food for supper and did most of the cooking.”

“While you had charge of him, before my guards got there and took over, did he try to teach you Communism or anything like that?”

“No he didn’t say anything like that. Of course he talked to Billy a lot more than he talked to me.”

“Then we’d better hear from Billy. Come on up, son.” Billy somewhat timidly came forward on the porch to stand beside Cal.

“Billy, when you were talking to the payer did he say anything out of line? Did he tell you anything about Communism?”

“No. Mostly we talked about what life was like on the outside. He had a lot of silly notions. He tried to tell me that they was all rich and nobody was hungry. He tried to tell me that Albuquerque wasn’t bombed and that there weren’t gangs of outlaws roaming the country. I had to straighten him out to let him know that I knew better and that he couldn’t fool me.”

“So you told him what it was really like outside?”

“Yes, sir. I told him what the preacher said. Was I wrong?”

“No, Billy. You did the right thing. It’s just that the preacher may have been a little mistaken about some things. Was the payer nice to you otherwise?”

“Yes, sir. He showed me several things in the woods that were good to eat and he taught me a couple of new snares. He was pretty nice otherwise.”

“Okay, boys, you can join the others now.” Cal and Billy somewhat eagerly left the porch and joined their families in the yard.

“Fred, come on up here. Fred, did the payer give you any trouble when you took him from Cal?”

“No sir. Not that I gave him a chance to. I had two of my best men guarding him.”

“Did he resist in any way? Did he try to slow you down or anything of that sort.”

“No, he just went right along. Of course, near the end he got a little winded and we had to let him rest some.”

“Did you at any time hear him talking on a radio or anything like that.”

“No sir. He said that watch was a radio but he didn’t have it on him so he couldn’t have used it anyway. I had it.”

“So as far as you know this payer has done nothing at all that would hurt any one of us.”

“I guess so. He certainly didn’t hurt anyone that I know of.”
“Preacher, your turn.” The preacher came up onto the porch. He was looking a little warily at the Mayor as if he didn’t quite know what to expect.

“Preacher, you’ve had the responsibility for guarding the payer for the last two days.”

“I done it, too. He hasn’t escaped and he hasn’t been able to hurt anybody.”

“So would you say that the payer has been rather quiet?”

“He just smiles at people. Maybe he talks to his guards a little. I know he played with some of the boys. But he didn’t hurt them none.”

“Thanks, Preacher. You’ve done a good job.” The Mayor shook hands with Preacher before gesturing that he should join those in the yard.

“Now I’d like you all to hear from the payer himself. Payer?”

“My name is Felipe Sanchez and I am from Albuquerque, born and raised.” Felipe stuck out his hand toward the Mayor and after a second’s hesitation, the Mayor took it.

“Payer, sorry, Felipe, what do you weigh?”

“Before I visited here I weighed about 210 but with all the exercise I’ve been getting, I would say I’m probably down a few pounds from that now.” And he patted his belly with a smile.

“You look pretty fat to us, Felipe. In fact, you’re about the fattest person we’ve seen in years. How did you get so fat?”

“Good food does that to me. People have been nice enough to offer me good food. What could I do? One hates to refuse hospitality, even when there’s a gun in the hand of one’s host.” Again Felipe had a broad smile on his face.

“Felipe, you told me a story about the outsiders when you first met me. Was it true?”

“Oh, no. It was mostly lies. But it was what you wanted to hear. Of course when you heard it you were still dissatisfied.”

“Yes, I was. It parroted back to me what I had told Preacher to say. It was obviously a lie and you didn’t even try to make me believe it. Would you tell us the truth now?”

“Happily and easily. What would you like me to talk about?”

“Are there armed gangs outside?”

“None that I ever heard of until I met your young men. They’re the first armed gangs I have ever known.”

“What about the gangs I heard about on the radio that invaded Columbus and other towns back at the money change?”
“Those gangs and the others that were causing trouble at the transition are all gone. Some left the country. Some were killed. Some spent time in prison and are now released. There haven’t been any such gangs for at least 14 years.”

“What about the cities? Have they been destroyed in war?”

“None of them have been destroyed or even successfully attacked. We still have enemies abroad but they dare not attack us because we would stop trading with them.”

“Is there plenty of food?”

“Oh, yes. We export much of the food we produce but there’s still more than enough for all our needs.”

“What about doctors and medicine?”

“There are lots of doctors and plenty of medicine.”

“Would any of the doctors be willing to come here and treat our ills?”

“I am sure they would. You see, they would be paid pretty well for it. Would you like me to ask some doctors to come? And food and clothes. Would you like me to ask people to bring you good food and clothes like mine?”

The crowd began to murmur at the prospect.

“He’s tempting you. He’s a Satan. Don’t trust him.” Preacher had been on his feet and he was struggling to get up the porch stairs yelling his warnings at the top of his piercing voice.

“Quiet, Preacher. Hush. If you want to talk against letting the outsiders come in you’ll get your chance. Just be patient.”

“But they’re lies. Don’t you see what he’s trying to do? He’s trying to get you to let the outsiders come in and change our ways.”

“Your Honor, he’s right you know. I am trying to get you to let us come in and if you do it will change your ways,” Felipe said with his smile still beaming.

“He admits it! He blatantly admits wanting to destroy us.”

“We don’t want to destroy you at all. That wouldn’t help us. We want to welcome you to our way of life. You have much to give us just as we have much to give you.”

“He even admits wanting to steal from us. You heard him. In his own words he admits wanting to take what we have.”

“Preacher, he didn’t say that. You know he didn’t mean it the way you say. Preacher, look around you at what we have and at what they have. What do we have that they would want? Preacher, we are dirt poor. You can’t get much poorer than we are. We have nothing for them to steal.”

"They want our women. They want to take our children and raise them to be godless heathens."
“Preacher, look at my wife and remember how Mrs. Carraway looks. She’s about ten years older than my wife. Do you really think their women with all their makeup and hair curling and pretty clothes are going to be less attractive to them than our women?”

The Mayor turned to Felipe and said “Will they really bring food and clothes and medicine?”

“I will personally pay them for having done so. I think they’ll come.”

“What would you do that for us? We took you prisoner. We threatened your very life. I personally hit you across the face. Why would you help me?”

“Because hurting you wouldn’t help me at all. Because hurting your family would hurt people that I don’t even know. Because your daughter loves you, so you must be a good man. There are lots more reasons but those should be ones you would understand.”

“Preacher, you can speak to the others and I’ll listen to everything you have to say. But as for me and my family, I’m going to ask the outsiders for help.”

The preacher mounted the steps quickly at first but as he neared the top he slowed.

He looked out at the people in the yard. He saw the hungry, dirty faces of the children. He saw the tattered, patched clothing of their parents. He saw the worry and fear on the faces of the women and the eagerness on the faces of some of the teenagers.

“You all want to let them in, don’t you? You want to give up. I might be able to scare you into keeping them out for a while longer but, in the end, you’re going to let them in, aren’t you.”

Several heads were nodding and Fred said, “Preacher, I’ve followed you and the Mayor for 15 years. I’ve given you the sweat of my brow and the blood from my veins. I even had a baby of mine die for lack of medicine. But look at us, Preacher. Look at what we’ve become. We can’t keep going like this. We’re headed to Hell as surely as the sparks fly upward. We’re making it right here by our fear and our distrust. Listening to the Mayor, I realized that we were treating strangers as if they were enemies even when they did nothing to us and even helped us. Nothing any of these outsiders did hurt any of us but we were ready to kill them. We almost killed one of our own in the woods a couple of hours ago just because we were afraid of outsiders we know nothing about.

Preacher, we have to do this. We have to find out what the world out there is really like because it can’t be any worse that the world we’re making right here. And if it’s what these outsiders, no these new friends say it is, then we can make a little bit of heaven right here instead. We got to try, Preacher, for our kids’ sakes if not for our own.”

“Then I have to do this thing with you. I can’t abandon you when you need the support of God the most. If you all must do this thing I won’t leave you.”

There was a general sigh and words like “good man”, “I knew he wouldn’t leave us”, and “God be praised” were heard around the yard. The Mayor once again shook Preacher’s hand and then hugged him in a bear hug. Fred was next and after a confused several minutes Cindy was heard to ask, “How are we going to do it? How are we going to tell the outsiders to come in?”

“I don’t know, Cindy,” the Mayor said.” I guess we’ll take him and Mrs. Carraway to the roadblock and let them go.”
“It won’t be that hard, Mayor.” Felipe said. “I think all you’ll have to do is wait a couple of hours.”

“What do you mean?”

“You remember that wrist watch that you took from me?”

“Yes, it’s been in my pocket.”

“Well it really is a radio and it really has been listening to everything you said and what the people around you have been saying. I would bet that by now there are several helicopters leaving Albuquerque for here with medical teams in them. I would also bet there are trucks in some of the small towns in the area which are being loaded with food, clothes, and, yes, even toys, and they’ll be at the roadblock in an hour or two.”

“The roadblock. Fred, is it still manned?”

“Not if my messenger got there by now.”

“Well, let’s get some guys down there to tear it down. We don’t want to keep the food or the toys out any longer than we have to.”

There was a general cheer from the children and some of the men and quite a number of the boys set out toward the roadblock.

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Niall struggled to move and then his ankle reminded him of why he was lying in such a strange position. The helicopter swept overhead and went on into the distance. The sounds of the birds and the occasional squirrel returned. Niall fell back, feeling worse than ever.

“You’re in quite a fix, aren’t you?”

“What? Where are you? Who are you?”

“Just a little bird.”

Am I hallucinating? What in the world is happening?

“Well actually, just a little flying machine. I’m about twenty feet over your head and a little to the West of you. Yes that’s me. I’m the hawk with its wings still spread. They don’t really fold, you see, and they have solar panels on the top so I can go for a long time without needing servicing.”

“What are you doing out here?”

“Just keeping an eye on you. We’ll have a couple of guys with you in about twenty minutes. We could have been sooner if you’d have gone someplace the helicopter could land. As it is, it’s been truck and back pack so you’ve had to wait.”

“You mean you’ve been watching me all this time?”

“Well, no, not all this time. Just the last half hour or so. The high flyer craft has been monitoring your position and when he reported the others had left you and you were moving very slowly, I was sent in
to find you. You do have a love of trees, don’t you? You would make it hard to spot you. Anyway, here I am and we have your position so the rescue team should be here shortly.”

“Do you know what’s happened to the others?”

“The two men you were with or are you talking about Felipe and…”

“I’m asking about Natalie and Jean and Felipe, yes. What’s happened to them?”

“They’re just fine as far as I can tell.”

“What are they doing?”

“Jean is taking a rather extended walk in the woods, going who knows where. He seems to be going in a rather large circle. I guess we ought to pick him up as well. Felipe is on a farm up the valley about five miles. He got the people to let us come in. Natalie is in the farm house, so I don’t know what she’s doing.”

“Is she all right?”

“As far as I know. Nobody’s said anything about her being hurt or anything.”

Niall felt a sudden wash of relief. He even forgot about his foot for a while. Natalie was all right. He was a little surprised at the strength of his feeling. He hadn’t realized that the level of his anxiety over her safety was so great. He began to reassess his relationship to Natalie.

Then he heard the purposeful tread of several feet in the woods above him and his rescuers were upon him.

“Okay, fella. Where’s it hurt?”

“It’s worst in my left ankle. I think that’s broken. The rest of me is just sore and tired. Sorry to get you out here like this. I didn’t break my ankle on purpose.”

“Ah, that’s what they all say. I think they do it on purpose, don’t you Bob?”

“Of course, they love to interrupt us right in the middle of a game. It would serve them right if we just left them out here in the woods on their own.”

“Tell you what I’ll do. If you go ahead and save my life this time I promise to mend my ways and never trouble you again.”

“They all say that, too.”
Chapter Forty-Three: Heroes?

In which we learn who the hero(es) were.

“I go to all that trouble and do all that work and break an ankle and you wind up being the heroine. It just ain’t fair. Not fair at all.”

"I forgive your ingratitude because we heroines are noble and self-sacrificing."

Natalie gave him a big hug and a small kiss on the cheek. Niall returned the hug and regretfully let her go. He was astonished that she had touched, even kissed him. Something had happened to Natalie. She was seriously changed and Niall was delighted.

“All right, tell me how you did it. Everybody I’ve heard from just said you’d saved lives and brought the people of the POM colony out practically on your back fighting off fierce POMists at every turn. What really happened?” Niall asked.

“What really happened is that a lot of poor scared people got brave enough to trust Felipe. He’s the real hero. He never lost his cool even when people were threatening to torture him to death. He just kept being cheerful and accepting their abuse as if it were okay. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“But what did you do? It’s you I want to hear about.”

“Okay, pushy,” and she stuck her tongue out at him. “I heroically allowed strange men to see my underwear and pushed around a baby trying to get born and gave away my aspirin. That’s what I did. Wasn’t I brave?”

“Somehow I think there must have been more to it than that.”

“Well, maybe there was, just a little. Really it all happened because the time was right. We just happened to show up in the wrong place at the right time. Of course, I suspect that Felipe may have been a plant.”

Niall’s old paranoia grabbed a double handful of his stomach at that. “What do you mean a plant?”

“I mean that not one person in a hundred is that cool when people are roughing them up and threatening their lives. Felipe played the POMists like a violin. He never made a misstep. I think they really would have tried some stronger questioning if he hadn’t said what he did. He took a blow to the head but nothing more than that and neither of the others of us was even threatened again. He talked to the crowd and to the preacher. I wonder what his name really is. Anyway he talked to the crowd in a way that allowed them to believe him rather than the man they had trusted for the last 15 years. Now how many 65-year-old men can do that? Not many. I think he was a plant.”

“Who planted him there?”

“The Payers, of course. No one else could do it. It had to be the Payers.”

“But why would they do such a thing?”
"Because they knew the people in that colony were suffering. They've been watching that colony for years. At first because they were afraid of their coming out and attacking the locals. Then because it looked like they were in trouble. But every time the Payers knocked on the door, so to speak, at the roadblock, it was slammed in their faces."

"Why didn't they just get the army to break in?"

"Who would pay for that? What good would it do anybody? If they didn't want the Payers, that was their business. Come on, Niall, you know this stuff."

"I guess they couldn't very well tell the army what to do anyway." Niall said with a shamefaced grin.

"Yes," she said and looked at him suspiciously out of the corner of her eye. "They watched the folks there from one of their high-altitude unmanned cameras and the colony never noticed it. But I think Felipe was asked to be close to that colony in case there was an opportunity to get in there. You'll notice that he didn't try to keep us away from the roadblock and he never made any effort to escape at all."

"Well neither did you, madam heroine."

"Listen, hombre, if I'm going to be a good payer I have to do what a good payer would do. If Felipe was going to stay and make no effort to get away it was obviously the thing to do. I just tried my best to follow his lead. Then, once we were in the valley and I saw how wretched they were, it just about broke my heart. I had to help however I could."

"What happened to Steve and Arnie? The last I saw of them they were on their way back to try to kidnap the Mayor."

"They didn't get the chance. By the time they got close to where the rest of us were, there were three helicopters and a bunch of small trucks in the valley and people were celebrating and eating. The Mayor and his whole family, even his son, were at Gordon's place waiting to see if Rebecca could be saved. They had her on oxygen and pumped full of antibiotics and were giving her blood and all sorts of things. They took her and her mother out on one of the choppers. I took care of the baby and Cindy. I think you're going to like Cindy."

"Who's Cindy?"

"She's the Mayor's youngest daughter. I think she had as much to do with getting them to allow us to come in as anybody. She's quite a girl."

"But what about Steve and Arnie?"

"Oh, yes. Well, the helicopters flew over them and they followed off toward where they were landing. When they got there, they saw that almost everybody they knew was there and they just walked up and started talking to their friends. It wasn't until later that people noticed that they had new guns. You should have seen their faces when they tried to show the others how good the guns were and they couldn't get them to shoot at all. I guess they didn't know that those guns were set to operate only when you are holding them."

"I didn't know about it either until I bought them. Each of the folks I bought a gun from kept assuring me that the rifle was my personal gun. I'm afraid that it wasn't until the second purchase that I figured
“Are you coming back to the school?”

“I think my sentence requires that.”

“Don’t you have any other reason for coming back?”

“Well, maybe one or two,” he said with a broad grin.

On the bus trip back to the school, Niall had a couple of hours to contemplate. He had just been through a rather harrowing experience. But now that it was over, he began to ask the questions of himself that he had been too distracted to think of at the time.

First, he thought, when you consider that Felipe had been in contact with the computer network the whole time of their capture, why hadn’t the police descended upon us within hours, if not minutes? They had certainly known about it. Why had they allowed the kidnapping to go on and on that way?

Second, when I was in the several towns with the boys, we were often in view of the Jeeves and he must have known that I was acting under duress. Why hadn’t they pounced on the unarmed kidnappers and freed me?

Third, when Felipe was being threatened with torture and death, even then the minions of the law sat on their hands and did nothing. Didn’t they care at all for Felipe and Natalie?

Fourth, and taking a much longer range point of view, they must have known that the children of the colony were suffering and in a couple of cases dying for want of medical treatment. Why hadn’t they come in then and saved them?

On the other hand, I’ve been afraid of an all-controlling State, of a computer system that forced everyone to do as their hidden masters commanded. This POM colony seemed to provide ample evidence that at least where they were concerned the computer system wasn’t being used to control. In fact, now that I consider it, the computer system didn’t try to control the colony even when a payer and Natalie were being threatened in the most direct and personal way. If there really was a secret cabal of Payers that controlled the whole nation, then they were either asleep most of the time or they were the most hands-off management team I can imagine.

Okay, perhaps I’m taking the wrong point of view. Let’s take the point of view of a policeman in one of those small towns. He would know that we had been captured and threatened. What should he do? Well, there was a payer there and everything that was said within his hearing could be heard. If Felipe had wanted the police to rush in and rescue him, he could have said so. Second, I doubt that the policeman would have been able to get there in less than 30 minutes or so even if he knew exactly where they were. No, wait. They did know exactly where Felipe’s wristwatch style contact was.

Well what would have happened if the sheriff and a posse had descended upon the party in the woods? They could have surrounded them and... well that could have led to shooting and who knew what would be the outcome of that? Also, Felipe didn’t seem to think he needed rescue. In fact, he must have been delighted when he was captured, both times. It was his chance to get into the
colony. But still, what about Natalie and Jean and me? Were we in danger? Sure we were. Would we have been in less danger if there’d been a SWAT team bearing down on our captors?

Consequences! I keep forgetting that the Payers pay for consequences. If I were a policeman, the worst thing that could happen would be for the victims of a kidnapping to be killed due to something I did. If I were to go barging in there to make an arrest, it wouldn’t matter whether I caught or killed the bad guys if the victims were killed or even badly wounded. Okay, so maybe the police were right to not come in right away with guns blazing. I have to admit that I wasn’t really in any danger from Steve and Arnie, except maybe when Steve was driving. I never asked for help. I really didn’t want them to stop us, because that might have made Cal shoot Natalie. I guess the police knew that also.

We weren’t able to buy guns until after the POM police had captured the others. Even then the guns they sold me could only be fired by me. I guess the police were right to not interfere with us.

But that situation in the colony still gnaws at me. Natalie was in danger and they did nothing. Well, they must have listened in but basically they did nothing. Okay, Felipe is in their hands because he wants to be and help is, say, an hour away. If they were to try to save Felipe by force, then the whole reason for his being there is forfeit. So they were letting Felipe play the hand as it was dealt. But Natalie didn’t volunteer for that mission and Jean certainly didn’t ask for it. He spent most of the time panicked. But was Natalie ever really threatened? Certainly when they appeared to be putting pressure on Natalie, Felipe diverted them and actually ended the questioning altogether. He took a shot to the head but all in all there was never any imminent danger to Natalie, I suppose.

And how did things work out? Well the POM colony is getting food and tools and improvements to most of their houses and the road is being improved. I suspect that most of the children will be leaving when they’re older. Of course everybody from the colony is doing what they want to do, whether staying or leaving. I guess it couldn’t have worked out much better.

I wonder what they’re going to do with Cal and Billy and the others. Will they imprison them or exile them? Let’s see. What would make the most money? I guess reforming them and having them become productive workers would make the most money. But how do you do that? Arnie wants to go to school so I guess I’d let him do that. Billy’s just a boy still, so he should probably go to school as well. Cal, well he’s older and he was sort of a ring-leader. But he was in a POM society from his point of view. Maybe in some other situation he wouldn’t have resorted to force. Maybe he should be allowed to go to school, too. Of course I’d want to keep an eye on him. What am I saying? The computer keeps its "eyes" on everybody. That would be easy. So if Cal is let off I can’t see why Steve wouldn’t be let off as well.

Natalie didn’t say anything about any of them being arrested. I think I’ll call Felipe and ask what was done with them.

Niall opened his phone and asked to talk to Felipe Sanchez. After a brief pause he was answered.

“Hello, Niall. How’s your foot?”

“Oh the foot is great, given that it’s broken. I can’t understand why it doesn’t hurt more. When I’ve had broken bones in the past they hurt lots more than this. Maybe this is one of the benefits of getting old.”

“More likely it’s a benefit of modern medicine. They have suppressed most of the pain signals just above the break so you only get about 10% of the sensation. That way, you still know if you’re abusing it and yet it doesn’t hurt much while it heals. Neat, no?”
“Very neat. Ah, I called to ask what’s going to be done with the four young men from the POM colony who kidnapped us. Do you have any idea?”

“Nothing, so far as I know. Neither Natalie nor I will press charges and I don’t think Jean wants any more to do with our criminal justice system than he has to. Why, were you thinking of pressing charges?”

“Well, no, but didn’t they violate the law?”

“Well, they did and they didn’t. You see, we were going into their territory. We were in their valley. They didn’t come out and grab us off the streets of Albuquerque.”

“What do you mean, their territory? This is all U.S.A isn’t it?”

“Sure it is. But they didn’t want to be a part of us and we didn’t have any objections. So, in effect, that land was not in our jurisdiction. They didn’t have to go to the U.N. or anything to be recognized as a separate nation because they really didn’t need to have relations with other nations. But they clearly didn’t want to be part of what we were doing, so they weren’t part of the U.S. either. In other words it was their land, not ours, so they could do whatever they wanted there.”

“You mean that if they had killed you and Natalie, that the police wouldn’t have interfered?”

“It wasn’t in their jurisdiction. We went there voluntarily and thereby had to accept their laws, informal as they are.”

“What about Arnie and Steve? They took me outside the colony to several towns that definitely were a part of the U.S.”

“Did they do anything illegal while there? Did they attempt to harm you in any way? Were you cooperating with them?”

“I see what you mean. While they were in the U.S. they were good boys so there was no law violation. And I guess that what the Mayor and the others did to you and Natalie was done in their country, so it didn’t violate any laws either.”

“Exactly. I went on their land voluntarily. It’s true that I didn’t expect what happened. I thought we’d just be warned off by the roadblock guards. But I got lucky.”

“Lucky? You call that good luck?”

“Sure. I have a lot of new friends now and people have been very complimentary to me for my handling of the situation. In fact I’ve been interviewed on several TV shows already. I’m famous for a few days.”

“All right. I’ll let you call it good luck if you must. Perhaps it was good luck in retrospect. But it sure seemed to me to be bad luck. I think. Of course… well never mind. Congratulations on your fame and popularity. I think you were already very popular with everybody who knew you but now lots more people know you.”

“Gracias, amigo. Is there anything else I can do for you?”
“I don’t think so. Thanks for setting me straight about the colony.”

“It was a pleasure as always to help new Payers.”

“Goodbye.”

“Adios.”

Niall closed his phone and sat staring out the window of the bus not really seeing the beautiful scenery outside the window. Well if there is a secret cabal, I don’t care. If they’ll allow a group of people to secede informally like that, just declare themselves out, then I guess they can’ t be oppressing many people. They let all that happen just because we were on their property. If what Felipe says is true, they wouldn’t have even gone in to arrest his murderer if someone had killed him. I don’t know if Felipe was a plant or not but he certainly was a volunteer if he was a plant.

I always thought I’d hate having a computer watching me all day every day. But it’s not half bad. It’s just a computer, it’s not a person. In some ways it’s like having a dog watch me and know about me. It doesn’t matter that he’s watching. Of course, the computer is a lot smarter than a dog in numerous ways. If I have trouble, there are lots of things the computer can do to help me.

I still don’t want to be a payer but I’ll finish out this course with the others. Serve my time, so to speak. I wonder how Natalie feels about me. I’m sure she likes me but does she care about me the way I’m coming to care about her? Once she becomes a payer will she have to stay single? Could I give up some luxuries to live with her at the standard level?

I think that would be easy. These last weeks have been rather pleasant living in the dorm or barracks. I guess it’s the people that make a place good to live in rather than the amenities.

At least now I don’t have to try to get my family out of the country.

The bus rolled to a stop and people began standing to retrieve their overhead luggage. This brought Niall out of his reverie. Well, here we are. I think I can begin a real life now. I think I can enter into this brave new world without too much paranoia.

Niall stepped off the bus into the bright New Mexico afternoon and, carrying his suitcase, entered his new life.

------------------The End - Or is it just the beginning?------------------