

Joan M. Newcomb's

## TAPESTRY OF TIME

Joan M. Newcomb is an internationally known novelist, spiritual teacher, and personal growth facilitator, who lives on an island in the Puget Sound, Washington State. *Tapestry of Time* is the first in a trilogy, along with *Transcending Time* and *Threads of Time*.

LuLu Press

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*Also by* **Joan M. Newcomb**

**Transcending Time  
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**TAPESTRY**

**OF**

**TIME**





TAPESTRY

OF

TIME

*A Novel by*

JOAN

M.

Newcomb

*Lulu Press*

SEATTLE

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**I**

**June 30, 1972  
Washington DC,**

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## TAPESTRY OF TIME

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### Chapter 1

June 30, 1972, Washington, DC

The sun was shining and he was on top of the world. Everything, absolutely everything was going his way. The moment Paul woke up he knew that June 30, 1972, was a day of historical significance.

Paul felt the excitement before he even opened his eyes. Something momentous was going to happen today; what was it? The clock read 6:59am. He watched the numbers flip over to 7:00am and the radio went on ["goo-ood morning, it's WDDC playing your favorite new songs of the seventies..."]. That was a first – he never woke up on time! In fact, he'd arrived late to every morning class his entire five years of college. He rolled out of bed and sank his feet into the avocado green, shag rug, scrunching it with his toes as he tried to figure out what was going on -- he had bees in his brain. Maybe he'd had too much coffee last night, staying up to write a paper?

Wait a minute -- all that was behind him. He'd already graduated. So what was today about? Oh, yeah. Paul stood and stretched his 6'4" frame, brushing the ceiling with his fingers. He had his first job interview -- with Zylcon. That must be it. It just must be nerves. Paul lumbered to the bathroom to shave and shower.

Standing in front of the bathroom mirror, Paul examined his carefully cultivated walrus mustache and mutton chop sideburns. Would they be too much for Mr. Zylcon? He'd gotten his hair trimmed the other day so it now slightly brushed his collar instead of grazing his shoulders. As he struggled to get a comb through the disorderly mop, he hoped it was short enough. He ran his hands through his thick, brown hair. It felt weird for it to be so short. But, hey, he was no longer a student. Today he would join the work force.

Fortunately, his mom had bought him a new three-piece suit and crisp, white shirt to wear to the interview. He had only one tie, a bright, red paisley -- was it too wild for a conservative, gray suit? Paul couldn't do anything about it now. He had to find his shoes.

Paul sifted through the dirty clothes; take out cartons and



newspapers that littered his cramped studio apartment. The place hadn't been picked up since he'd broken off with his first *real* girlfriend, back in April. (Okay, okay, so *she* was the one who said, "I think we're getting too serious, I want to date other people." But *he* was the one who said, "Does this mean we're breaking up?") He found his good shoes right where he'd left them a month ago -- under his graduation gown. He slipped them on and fumbled with the laces. What did it matter what his place looked like? No woman was going to see it any time soon. Paul walked out the apartment door to catch his bus without a backward glance.

He made it to Washington Circle just in time to get on the "K" Street bus. Hanging onto an overhead railing, Paul felt one of those minor tinges of regret that he hadn't gone to law school like his father had wanted. His sister, finishing her first year at Harvard Law, tooled around Cambridge in a bright red MG, courtesy of their old man. He shrugged it off. It didn't matter that he didn't have a car. When he got wheels, they'd be 100% his and not some payoff from Dad.

At Connecticut Avenue, Paul hopped off the bus and strolled two blocks to the office building that housed Zylcon Design, Inc. The air-conditioned lobby brought a welcome relief from the sweltering summer heat. He glanced at his watch. Another miracle -- he was five minutes early! Stepping on the elevator, he remembered the summers he spent interning at Uncle Stephen's firm in San Francisco. He had watched the applicants come and go from his uncle's office. Some had looked pale faced and anxious. Others had seemed cool, calm and collected. It hadn't taken Paul long to spot which applicants would be hired and which ones he'd never see again. Glancing at the elevator's mirrored walls, Paul fought the queasiness in his stomach and did his best to look like he had his act together. The doors opened and he passed a guy his age getting off as he got on. The guy had sunken eyes and ashen skin. *Far out*, thought Paul, *the job's still open*.

Emile Zylcon liked to interview the applicants himself, just like Uncle Stephen. Paul sat across from the elderly gentleman, trying to look relaxed and at ease.

"First graduating class of the University of Maryland's School of Architecture ... tenth in your class..." Zylcon said devoid of expression. Paul wondered if being tenth was a good thing or a bad thing. For Paul it meant he'd busted his butt studying harder during the last year than he had in his entire life.

"So you tutored Gregor's students, I see." The fellow looked up from Paul's resume and peered at him through his spectacles.

"Professor Danoff? Yes, yes I did, sir." Paul's tongue was sand paper.

"You must be a favorite of his, then. It is an honor he does not bestow upon many." Mr. Zylcon shuffled through Paul's papers and found a reference letter written by Professor Danoff. "Ahh." A smile creased the wrinkled face.

Paul inhaled deeply. His eyes focused on the wall behind Mr. Zylcon to a sepia photograph on the wall. Three college boys in suits and ties grinned broadly at the camera. One looked like a less wrinkled Emile Zylcon. The other, if you replaced the slicked black hair with a salt and pepper crew cut, looked a whole lot like Gregor Danoff. The third was tall with unruly, thick dark hair and looked familiar but he couldn't think why. Paul looked back to find Zylcon gazing at him intently.

"So you interned at Marbanks' Architects in San Francisco, I see. A rival firm." Mr. Zylcon murmured.

Paul felt a lead weight in the pit of his stomach. He hadn't known that his uncle and Zylcon were competitors. After all, Marbanks Architects was exclusively a West Coast firm. He began to worry that he wasn't going to get the job.

Mr. Zylcon's eyebrows shot up, as he looked at the title page of Paul's resume, and compared it to the section describing his internship. "Your name is Marbanks, also. Any relation?"

With a sinking heart, Paul replied, "Yes. Stephen Marbanks is my uncle."

He was stunned to see Zylcon's lips part to reveal thin, yellow teeth. "YOU are Stephen Marbanks' nephew? Does your uncle know you're applying here?"

Paul shook his head. "No, sir. He doesn't." Paul didn't mention that his uncle had offered him a job in San Francisco, which he hadn't followed up on. The West Coast seemed too far away from home and California in particular was a little too weird for Paul's tastes. Not to mention the fact his father would probably have disowned him completely. Charles Marbanks had not talked to his younger brother in decades.

Zylcon threw his head back and roared with laughter. "I'd like to see the look on that old coot's face when he finds out you've applied to work for us!"

A cold sweat began to creep up Paul's neck. He began to worry that

he *was* going to get the job. He respected and cared for his uncle, it hadn't occurred to him that he would offend his Uncle Stephen by applying somewhere else.

Zylcon quizzed Paul on several rudimentary aspects of planning and design, and asked him questions about how things were done in San Francisco. Having no idea where the interview was headed, Paul answered each inquiry as clearly and honestly as he could. Was Mr. Zylcon just being polite? Would his resume go in the trash the moment he walked out the door?

Then Mr. Zylcon stood up, so Paul did, too. They faced each other in silence for a few moments, Zylcon looking Paul up and down with an unreadable expression on his face. Then he reached out and shook Paul's hand. For a moment, Paul thought he was going to say, 'Thank you for your time, we'll be in touch.'

"Congratulations, Mr. Marbanks. You have the position. Take your papers down to personnel and they'll tell you how to proceed."

Paul could hardly believe his ears! He began pumping Mr. Zylcon's arm up and down. "Thank you, Mr. Zylcon, you won't regret this, I promise!" he babbled. The old man slipped his arm around Paul's shoulders and gently guided him to the door.

"I'm sure I won't, my boy. I'm sure I won't," he chuckled. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to make a call to California before the end of their business day."

Paul floated down the hallway to Personnel. They briefed him on his new job and told him to show up there at 8:00a.m. Monday morning. He practically danced to the elevators. His first interview and he aced it! Down in the lobby, he leaned against the cool marble walls, enjoying the air conditioning a few more moments before facing the muggy midday sun. Today had to be the best day of his entire life. Everything had flowed perfectly from the moment he'd woken up. From the alarm clock to the suit to the interview: what could happen to beat that?

A flash of gold hair appeared in the crowd outside the glass doors of the building. Paul found himself drawn outside. All previous events faded from his mind as he found himself following her. The intense sunlight made it hard to see. He only noticed her long golden mane, flowing and shimmering down her back. Moving closer he began to note other details. She was fairly tall and easy to see in the crowd of people. He decided she must be even more attractive from the front, for she turned a few heads as

she walked. Getting closer, Paul worried about his own appearance. A quick glance in the reflection of a store window confirmed that his unruly hair had stayed put, and his gray trousers weren't too wrinkled yet. He quickly straightened his tie, and looked up to see her just disappear around a building. Paul raced around the corner to catch up and slammed directly into her, nearly knocking her down.

"Ooof!" Paul sputtered, slightly winded by the collision. 'Oh, god,' he thought as panic spread through him. He caught her elbow to keep her from falling.

Feeling like a complete idiot, Paul blurted, "I'm so sorry, excuse me!"

The woman turned and a wave of shock crossed her face as she looked at Paul. Her crystal blue eyes widened as they stared at him. Her mouth parted as if to say something, but no words came out. Paul suddenly thought she knew him, but he couldn't recall ever meeting her before. He'd never seen anyone like her in his entire life. Her hair glistened in the sunlight like golden threads. Her skin was so pale he could see light blue veins in the arm he held. The few seconds they stared at each other in silence seemed like an eternity.

"I'm -- I'm sorry for running into you like that I, er, um." Paul's mind went blank. He couldn't think of anything else to say. He thrust his hand out to her and said, "Paul. Paul Marbanks. That's my name. I'm Paul."

She seemed older than he, but it was hard to tell. Heck, he was only 23 -- *everybody* was older than him. She wore a lime green pantsuit with a long zipper up the front. Her eyes scrutinized everything about him, and he had an eerie feeling she'd seen him before.

He thought of the few girls he'd dated in college and high school, which didn't take long. None of them looked like her. He then thought of the multitude of girls who'd turned him down for dates in the past, no resemblance there, either. Even if she'd changed her hair color (could a shade of gold like hers be real?) he would have remembered her. It was more than the hair. She *felt* different, except he wasn't touching her. Standing this close to her the energy felt ... different.

The shock dissolved and the woman gave him a brilliant smile. "Paul," she said, taking his hand. "My name is Moira." Her voice was low and melodious, and his heart contracted when she said his name.

As she shook his hand, Paul didn't want to let go. They stood there, Paul holding her hand and straining to think of something else to say. She

continued to smile, waiting for him to talk. No expression of surprise on her face, no starting the conversation herself, just ... an air of amused patience.

"I know it's early, but would you like to have some lunch?" Paul blurted, and started to shake her hand again, just to have some reason to keep holding it. "I know a little diner over on 'I' street..."

She laughed a musical, lilting laugh that mingled with the sunshine and precisely matched how he'd been feeling today. "I'd love to ... go with the flow." As they turned and walked toward "I" street she said, "Tell me something, Paul."

"What?" he asked.

"Do you go about bumping into women for lunch dates often? Or do you have other techniques?" Her hand slid into the crook of his arm as they waited for the traffic light to change.

It was his turn to laugh. And it surprised him, low and rumbling in his chest. He suddenly didn't feel like some wet-behind-the-ears kid fresh out of college. He felt like a man, wise yet ageless. Feeling light headed, he inhaled deeply.

Huddled in a tiny booth over soup and sandwiches, he wondered if there really was such a thing as love at first sight. He didn't know this woman, and yet she was so relaxed and friendly with him, it was as if he'd been with her forever. He found himself telling her his entire life story: his parents in Connecticut, his sister in Boston, the dogs they had when he was a child, and his allergy to rabbits. She listened, smiled, and took him in with those deep blue eyes. Then lunch ended, and he realized he knew nothing about her.

"Wait a minute!" he said, as they stood up. "Don't you want some coffee?" Then he wondered if she had any more time to spend with him -- they'd been together at least an hour. If she worked nearby she'd have to get back to her office ... maybe she didn't work, maybe she was a grad student?

"I'd love some, but not here." She leaned forward and whispered, "The coffee's terrible here."

He felt an overwhelming urge to kiss her on the spot, but she moved away before he could act on it.

"There's a coffee place across the street. They serve this Italian stuff - it's called espresso. You'll love it," she chuckled, and took his arm to steer him there.

He did love it. Yet once again, he found himself doing all the

talking. He still didn't know anything about her when the waiters shooed them out at 3 o'clock when they closed. Four hours. He'd been with her four hours. How could he make it last the rest of the day? What could he do to keep her with him longer?

She put her hand directly on his chest, and the panic drained out of him. He felt it run down his legs like an electrical current, and out his feet into the ground. He suddenly became heavier, like the earth's gravity had increased.

As if reading his thoughts, she said, "I have time, today. I'm between assignments." A statement of fact? An invitation? An answer to his prayers!

He sighed and relaxed for the first time since he saw her. "Then let me take you to one of the most beautiful places in DC." They hopped on the bus to Georgetown, where they got off at "M" Street, and walked up the tree-lined, narrow streets and tiny colonial row houses towards Dumbarton Oaks. Paul couldn't resist stopping every few yards to point out interesting details on buildings they passed.

"I'm sorry, I must sound like a history professor," he said when he realized what he'd been doing.

"Don't apologize," Moira squeezed his arm, "it's interesting. You're an architect; you can't help but notice the beauty in these structures. Although I'd imagine most architects nowadays are more into modern glass and steel constructions."

Paul stared at her. No one in his family except his uncle had ever understood his love of buildings. Past girlfriends had been bored senseless whenever he talked to them about his consuming passion.

"Well, I think modern design has its place, especially for downtown offices. But what really irks me is seeing a beautiful old mansion dwarfed by some newly built monstrosity. There has to be some way to bridge the gap between historic and present day architecture. I think it would be interesting to create new buildings that can blend with nearby older buildings, so that it's congruent with the overall view of the place." He searched her face for any hint that she was just humoring him.

Moira's voice was soft and sincere, "What a wonderful idea. To build with the atmosphere of the existing area in mind, to keep with the original intent and feel of a place -- not just plunk a new concrete box down in the middle of it."

That did it. Paul knew he was in love with this woman.

Moira looked at him thoughtfully. "You're thinking about creating buildings in harmony with the environment."

The top of Paul's head started tingling. "What an interesting way to put it," he said, a million ideas rushing into his mind. "You could stretch that to mean designing buildings with materials that recycle--" Feeling extremely dizzy, Paul abruptly stopped. His vision went blurry and he thought he might faint.

Moira put her cool hands on his face. Paul's sight returned to normal and he regained his balance.

"I'm sorry, it must be the heat..." Paul said, and frowned. "What were we talking about?"

"Buildings," Moira said absently, looking around. "Where are we going?"

"Just up here," Paul pointed up the block to the red brick walls of Dumbarton Oaks.

By the time they walked into the gardens, the heat and humidity forced Paul to remove his jacket, which he slung over his shoulder. He unbuttoned his collar and pulled his tie loose. He wanted to unbutton his vest as well, but thought it would be too much like undressing in front of Moira. He pulled a cotton handkerchief from his back pocket and blotted his damp forehead with it. Moira seemed unaffected by the temperature.

They found relief in the cool shade of majestic oak and chestnut trees. Only the vaguest of traffic sounds reminded them they were in the city and not out in Virginia somewhere. Standing there, so close to her, Paul's mind went blank. His warm brown eyes stared into Moira's deep blue pools. Crickets chirruped unseen in the grass. An insect droned around their heads and then faded away. Moira smiled at him. Without thinking, he leaned over and kissed her. Her lips were soft and cool and slightly salty. And, after the slightest hesitation, they melted into his. Joy surged through Paul's body and he tentatively reached out to embrace her. Moira stepped forward into his arms and their bodies magnetically bonded together. Now what? Paul wondered; this was a public place, he couldn't go any further than just kissing her. He could have stayed with her like that forever, if it hadn't been for the cacophony of giggles that erupted behind them. Looking up, they saw a gaggle of young school girls watching them.

Moira pulled back from him, out of his embrace. Paul panicked with the thought that she might fade into the bushes and disappear.

"No, wait," he said, grabbing her hand, "let's go somewhere more

private, where we can ... talk," although talking was the last thing on his mind.

She looked at the girls, and then at him, and nodded. "Okay."

They walked out of the gardens and to the street, a strained silence between them. Out of nowhere, a taxi appeared. Paul hailed it, and they got in.

"Where to?" asked the cabby with an enormous Afro.

Paul's throat went dry, but the words came out anyway "26th and H St., NW"

The energy in the cab was electric, as if the slightest movement would cause the vehicle to explode. Paul turned to Moira, who seemed to be sitting serenely looking out the window.

"I hope this is okay, going back to my place?" He asked, his heart beating so hard he thought it would jump out of his throat. My god, what was he doing?

Moira's gaze shifted from the passing scenery towards him. Unfathomable blue eyes seemed to be reading everything about him, yet betraying none of her thoughts.

Paul looked down at his hands. He was about to say 'I'm sorry, maybe this is a mistake...' when Moira reached out and slipped her hand into his, and squeezed. Paul looked up to see her smiling at him, a mischievous twinkle in her eye. Paul leaned over and kissed her again. This time she didn't hesitate, instead Paul sensed an opening from her, and he dove right in.

"Hey, hey man, not in my cab! Gonna have ta throw a bucket of water on y'all!" The cabby's head bobbed up and down in the front seat, silhouetted against the bright daylight on the windshield. He pulled up to the front of Paul's apartment building. "That'll be \$4.95."

Paul thrust a \$20 through the window. "Keep the change, man," he said as he ushered Moira out of the cab.

"Thanky very much, man." The cab driver replied, chuckling. "Happy honeymoon," he hollered as he took off into the stream of traffic in Washington Circle.

"So this is where you live?" Moira said, peering up at the building.

"Um, yes." Paul fumbled in his pocket for his keys. At that moment someone came out of the building, so he caught the door before it closed and



they went in to the elevators.

They got to the elevators just before the doors closed. There was an elderly lady already inside, her arms filled with shopping bags. She smiled sweetly at them. Paul gave her a strained grin in return. Moira beamed from her eyes. At the third floor, Paul stepped out, keys in hand.

"The place is a mess, I haven't had company in a while..." he began to say as they entered his apartment, when he felt a cool hand on his arm.

"It's okay, Paul." Moira whispered in his ear.

Desire overwhelmed reason, and Paul swiftly turned around and pulled her to him. Again she melted into his embrace as if she had always lived there. He kissed her as if it were the last breath he would ever take, and she received him in his entirety.

"Over here." He nodded his head toward the main room. The sofa bed was still out from the night before. A fleeting thought went through his head about what his tiny, disheveled place looked like, but she focused on only him and didn't seem to notice. They stood by the sofa bed long enough for him to drop his trousers, and for her to unzip the rest of her pantsuit. With a start, he noticed as it dropped to the floor, that she wore pantyhose but no underwear. If he wasn't aroused enough already, now he was ready to explode. She stepped out of her clothes and moved toward him, pressing her breasts into his chest.

"Mm." She rubbed her nipples over his curly, dark chest hair. Her hands slid around his back and into the elastic of his shorts. In one swift move they were on the floor around his ankles. Now, only the pantyhose between him and her, she rubbed her belly against him. His brain had turned to pudding and he put his hands on her shoulders to steady him.

"Let's lie down," he said huskily, and they fell in slow motion onto the bed.

Her legs wrapped around his body before he knew it. She was hot, and wet. He couldn't stop himself from plunging into her. "Oooooo" she cooed, deep within her throat. Paul opened his eyes to see Moira staring at him. It unnerved him -- she seemed to see directly into his soul. Such love poured out of her eyes, Paul almost cried. Moira lifted her head up and softly kissed his chin. Then a slight movement from the lower part of her reminded him what he was doing.

"Oh g-good golly, Miss Molly," he said, convulsing ... not so soon, not so fast! He could hear her laughing, but it sounded like miles away as his orgasm seemed to last forever. He moved and out and then he felt her grip

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on him tighten, her back arch, and she joined him in his climax. As he slowed, she forcefully thrust against him a little while longer, as she came. "Oh, oh, Pa-au-ul" she moaned softly in his ear. He lay there unable to move, his face pressed into her hair and neck, as he felt her finish

"Mm I too heaby for you?" he said, muffled by her hair, and started to shift off her.

"No, no don't move yet," she pleaded. "I like your weight on me." She kissed his neck. "I like to feel you in me." They lay quietly until Paul needed to move.

"Sorry," he said, as he slowly rolled off of her. He wanted to get a better view.

What a perfect body, he thought. I could be a leg man or a chest man and have everything I want. Her legs were long and lean, her breasts full and cushiony. Her shiny, golden hair cascaded off her shoulders in long tendrils that nearly reached her slender waist. Like most women he knew, she didn't shave. The hair under her arms was the same color as the neat little "V" lower down -- a lighter shade of gold (so the hair color must be real). She had the palest skin -- translucent, and not a mark anywhere, except tiny silver lines beneath her navel on the curve of her stomach. He had this urge to reach out and trace his fingers over them, but held back, not certain how to proceed.

Then he noticed her looking him over, too. Paul felt both self-conscious, and then grateful for all the sports he'd participated in while at school. He was in good shape, muscular but not bulky, with dark hair spread across his chest and covering his arms and legs. She surprised him by casually reaching out and running her fingers along his arm, chest and abdomen. Not as someone exploring another for the first time, more like someone rediscovering familiar territory. Her hands traveled up to his face, her fingers outlining the distinct line of his jaw, the strong chin, even the walrus mustache he had proudly cultivated during his college days. She ran her fingers through his thick curls, then looked directly into his eyes and chuckled.

"What is it?" he asked, slightly taken aback; she was so hard to figure out!

"Good golly, Miss Molly?" she said, a melodious chortle rising in her long, swan-like throat. "Good golly?" She rolled on her back, her laughter making her breasts jiggle.

"Well, it's hard to think at a time like that," he sputtered,

embarrassed and titillated by her at the same time. He wasn't very good at pillow talk. He wasn't sure whether they should get up and get dressed now, or if they should order a pizza, or how long she planned to stay here with him. He didn't want to say anything that would spoil this moment, because he wanted it to last as long as possible.

"You'll think of something better to say next time." She grinned.

Paul's heart leapt. She'd said, "*Next time*." Hot dog! Maybe she would spend the night! Maybe even the weekend! This *was* the greatest day of his entire life.

They did order pizza, as it turned out, and lived off of it and corn flakes with milk (the only things he had to eat in his kitchenette) for the next two days. Unlike the few other girls who'd ever visited his apartment, she didn't have any comments about his cramped living space or lack of furniture. He had the sofa bed and a dresser with a TV on it, not even a kitchen table or chairs. A "Summer of Love" poster hung on one wall, but that was it. Also, unlike the few other girls he'd ever been with (make that two), she had an appetite for lovemaking he could not have imagined in his wildest dreams. Sunday morning she slid into the shower behind him and did something standing up he didn't think possible to perform even lying down. His sophomore-year roommate dropped out to go to India, wrote him about a book, the *Kama Sutra* that told about stuff like this in it. He thought he'd fall over and drown. Needless to say, by Sunday afternoon, he wasn't sure he would ever be able to walk again.

Moirra stood naked at the window, peering through the drapes to the clear, sunny day outside. She turned toward Paul, flopped face up on the bed.

"You need some fresh air. Let's go for a walk," she said, not a suggestion but a command. She retrieved her pantsuit, unworn since Friday, put it on, minus the pantyhose, and turned to him. "Well?"

Paul looked up at her and, spurred by the fear she would leave without him, forced himself up and over to the dresser. He pulled out a pair of denim bell-bottoms and a tie-dye tee shirt.

"Okay, okay, let me find my shoes," he said, looking under the bed. "Where do you want to go?"

"It's a nice day," she said, "let's go down to the Potomac."

They went down to Virginia Avenue and crossed over to the

Watergate Buildings. The scorching heat rose from the pavement rippling the view ahead of them. Paul noticed the Howard Johnson's across the street and longed to stop in for a milkshake and grilled cheese sandwich, but continued to walk beside Moira down to Rock Creek Parkway instead. For the first time in three days he found himself having to make conversation again. She, of course, walked in blissful silence. Was she always like this? Did she always expect him to start the conversation?

He took a deep breath. Heart pounding, he asked her: "Do you believe in love at first sight?"

She chuckled and looked at him, her azure eyes piercing directly into him. "Are you sure you don't mean *lust* at first sight?" She asked him.

His gaze dropped to his shoes. God, he felt like a fool. He didn't know. Was this love? All he knew is he had never felt like this before. He wanted her with every fiber of his being. He wanted her never to leave his side. He felt lightheaded just being with her, as if she exuded an aura of helium. Was this lust? He decided to sidestep the subject.

"Do you have to go tomorrow?" he asked, wondering where she was going.

She slowed her footsteps and slipped her arm into his. "Well, actually, I have to go tonight," she said softly.

"*Tonight!*" he exclaimed, panic rising in him. "How soon tonight? I mean, where are you going anyway, why are you going?" As he asked, he realized they were the first questions he'd asked about her since he met her.

She patted his arm. "I have to go ... overseas, and I have to leave tonight."

"Why? Is it for your work, what kind of work do you do?" He couldn't believe it, but he seriously felt like crying. Man, he had it bad for her.

"I ... sort of work for ... an organization ... like the Red Cross." She groped for words as if trying to translate from another language. "I get sent on assignments ... I'm not medical personnel but more ... support. Anyway, I was between assignments when I met you. I wasn't sure even what I was doing in DC, of all places..." Her voice faded to a whisper, "maybe I was just here to meet you," she said, almost to herself.

"Such cute sideburns," she murmured, as her hand caressed his cheek. Then she held his face in her hands and looked him directly in the eye. "Listen, I have to go, but don't worry: *we will meet again*, okay? It'll be

okay, you'll be fine, you'll see me again," she said, soothingly as a mother to a small child.

He threw his arms around her and held her tightly to him. "Yeah, I understand. It's kind of ... a cosmic thing. Cosmic timing. I'll see you again, when you get back?" Cosmic timing, he sounded like his sophomore roommate. She embraced him; he again sensed tension draining from him, down his legs and into the ground. She had this, this *effect* on him. How did she do that? He felt relaxed in her embrace, as if time did not exist, or moved around him.

She pressed her face into his shoulder, but he could feel her smothering her laughter. Finally she looked up at him. "It *is* a cosmic thing, more than you'll ever know." Then she stood on her tiptoes and gave him a warm, lingering kiss. He started to kiss her back but she pulled away. "Actually, I should go now; I have to get ready."

"NOW?" he cried, feeling the wind knocked out of him. "You said this evening!" He felt her starting to step away from him, and he pulled her to him, pressing his body hard into hers. "Please! Wait! Not right now ... come back to my apartment. One last time..." he almost sobbed into her ear.

She held him silently for a long time, but he sensed her fighting tears herself. She stepped back, and shrugged her shoulders. "Oh, heck," she said. "Why not one more time. One for the road." With that they raced back to his place.

Paul made love with Moira slowly and tenderly, touching and exploring her, wanting to memorize every part of her, wanting it to last for as long as he could make it. At last, he fell asleep in her arms, his head resting on her soft, white breasts, oblivious to the tears streaming down her cheeks. Her face turned into the pillow to muffle her sobs. Finally, when his breathing had deepened into a low, rumbling snore, she kissed him gently on the cheek and let him go.

The next morning, sunlight streaming into his apartment woke him up. The bed was cold beside him, with no trace of her anywhere. She had vanished. He suddenly wondered if she had ever existed. Perhaps he could call the Red Cross about her, but no. It wasn't the Red Cross she'd said she worked for, but an organization *like* the Red Cross. Did she live in the DC area? It didn't sound like it, or else he could look her up in the phone book. And the realization hit him ...he didn't even know her last name.

ASSIGNMENT 276: WASHINGTON DC, 1972

Hello.

I can see the changes in motion from my presence at this time. I correctly limited my duration. I wish to thank you for your gift of an additional three days. Beloved, is my main lesson for this lifetime unconditional love? Is this why I have been given two Human Beings to know in this manner? I no longer doubt my responses or reactions. Thank you for your patience, this has been a long learning experience!

Response:

Dear One:

You are most correct and most welcome. Understand that in True Reality there is no time or space, therefore it has not taken you any length of time at all to learn your lessons. Go forward with our blessings.

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## Chapter 2

SEATTLE, 1980

Paul sipped coffee out of his Wet Whiskers mug and looked out his huge office windows at the ferryboats crossing Elliott Bay. He was quite pleased with himself. After eight years at Zylcon, Uncle Stephen had successfully wooed him to Marbanks, Inc. Paul kept running into him at various relatives' weddings. His uncle would drop large hints but never offer anything definite, probably because of their conversation at Paul's sister's wedding in Connecticut in December of '73. While going through the receiving line, his uncle had cleared his throat and asked him:

"So, Paul, why'd you go to the competition? You knew you could have come to work for me." His uncle didn't look at him, but stared straight ahead, as the line moved towards the bride and groom.

"Uncle Stephen, I don't know. I guess I just wanted to try it on my own. See if I could make it, you know, myself, and not as Stephen Marbanks' nephew." He hoped the old man understood.

"Ah, yes ... I see," his uncle had mumbled, but then they came up to Susan and Ron and the subject was dropped.

They didn't talk again until last September, when Uncle Stephen's youngest daughter Diane was married on Whidbey Island. Afterwards, Paul walked up to his uncle on at the reception hall's deck, overlooking Puget Sound.

"Beautiful place, isn't it, Paul?" his uncle remarked. "Can't see mountains like those in D.C.." He nodded towards the majestic range rising above the clouds.

"Yes, beautiful," Paul replied, "Are those the Rockies?"

"No, no -- those are the Cascades, and those behind us to the west are the Olympics. And if you look up north there," he gestured up the waterway towards a snow-covered mountain in the distance, "that's Mount Baker. And down that way..." He nodded southwards towards another snowcapped mountain "you can see Mount Rainier, and ... well, it's a bit too far to see Saint Helens." He squinted, shielding his eyes with his hand. "How'd you like to live around here?" he asked, with studied indifference.

"God," Paul, exclaimed, rolling his eyes dramatically, "I'd love it. It would be like I'd died and gone to summer camp," he joked. In truth, the tall evergreens and snow-dusted mountains did slightly remind him of summers

in New England when he was a child. He glanced sideways at his uncle -- they never seemed to have a conversation looking at each other. "You have something in mind?"

"Hm. Maybe." His uncle thrust his hands in his pockets and rocked back and forth on his heels. "Seattle is quite an up and coming city, you know, Paul. Quite a few buildings are under construction. That Selig fella has been buying up real estate and has some major plans ... the Board of Directors and I think that Seattle would be an optimum place for us to open a new branch. We have a capable administrator picked out to handle the office management, but he's just an MBA. We need someone with design experience, a senior level professional. We need a lead architect, someone young, enthusiastic, energetic, that can take on this project and really spearhead the operation ... quite an opportunity, my lad." He glanced at his nephew. "What do you think?"

Less than three months later, here Paul stood at his premium office window, heading up his own branch, with architects older than him as employees and earning more than he could have dreamed of. Yes, thought Paul as he sipped his coffee, today, April 28th, 1980, was a date of personal historical significance.

At that moment, a strange feeling ran through him. He looked out the window down toward the street below. Straining, he could just see the sidewalk in front of the building. A yellow-helmeted bike messenger got off her bicycle and entered the building. A few moments later, two kids rode up on a moped -- one jumped off as it was still moving, hopped onto her bike, and both kids sped away.

"Hey!" Paul said out loud, and then dashed out to his secretary's desk. "Some kids just took the messenger's bike from right in front of our building!"

"Goodness, Mr. Marbanks, are you sure?" his secretary exclaimed. "Does she know? -- She's right over there at the reception desk."

Paul looked across the room of cubicles and could just see the yellow helmet at the 14th floor receptionist's desk. She was obviously delivering the Southcenter plans to Saunders.

Paul strode across the room towards the figure in the yellow helmet, wearing a baggy yellow jacket and matching shorts. "Hey, hey--!" he called. "Your bike's been stolen!"

"What!?!!" Cried the girl, and she dashed out into the hallway.



Paul followed after her, but the hallway was empty -- the elevators had yet to reach the floor. She must have used the stairs. The elevator door opened and Paul got in, figuring to meet her in the lobby. When he got out, she was already there, sobbing to the security guard.

"My *bike*," she cried, "I still had deliveries -- they stole all my deliveries! What am I going to do?"

The security guard patted her on the shoulder and offered her a thick, crumpled, red handkerchief. "There, there, miss. The boss saw the whole thing, his secretary called the police, and they're on the phone right now. Why don't you speak to them and -- why, here's Mr. Marbanks now, he can most likely give them some kind of a description."

The girl described the bike and the contents that had been stolen; and Paul gave his account to them as well.

Paul hung up the phone and turned to the girl, who was facing away from him. She blew her nose in the security guard's handkerchief.

"Thank you," she said, returning the hankie. "I'd better go back to my work and tell them what happened."

"What direction are you going? Can I call you a cab?" The security guard asked.

"It's in the University District. It's okay, I was going to walk over to Third Avenue and take the bus."

"You don't have to do that," Paul said paternally. She seemed so forlorn; he felt compelled to help her. "I'll take you." He looked to the guard. "Joseph, tell my secretary to reschedule my afternoon appointments. I'm going to take this young lady back to her workplace." Before she could turn around to protest, he said, "I'll get my car from the basement parking and meet you outside in two minutes." He headed to the elevators without looking back.

He pulled his silver Honda Prelude up to the front door, and she got in.

"Where to?" he asked, as she buckled her seatbelt. She still wore the bulky bike helmet that covered most of her head and prevented him from getting a clear look at her face.

"45th and Roosevelt," she said in a resigned voice, her chin drooped to her chest. "I guess. They're going to fire me anyway."

"Well, maybe I can talk to them." He looked over at her and added wryly, "You know, it's not necessary to wear a helmet inside an automobile."

"What? Oh, silly me." She wrestled with the strap, and the helmet came off. From underneath it, tumbled a mane of shimmering, golden hair.

Paul almost ran a red light. "Oh my God. It's you, Moira!" He turned to look directly at her.

She looked just as he remembered, except different somehow. It had been eight years; he'd also changed since that time. She still had the same deep blue eyes and translucent skin. Except, instead of the piercing, all-knowing gaze, these eyes stared at him, like a deer caught in headlights.

"Yes, it's me. Moira," she echoed. They stared at each other until the car behind them honked because the light had turned green.

"Moira, don't you remember D.C., in '72? It's me, Paul." His hands gripped the steering wheel as he used all his concentration to stay on the road.

"Oh, yes, ... Paul," she said vaguely, "it's so nice to see you ... again."

*Dammit!* He pulled over to the side of the road to avoid having an accident. "Are you living in Seattle? Of course, what a question; you're working here. But I thought you worked for the Red Cross ... oh that doesn't matter now. It's just that I'm ... I'm so..." Words failed him, so he pulled her to him and kissed her.

She felt just the same ... almost electrifying to the touch. Her lips were soft and warm, a little hesitant at first, he'd surprised her, but then she relaxed and began to kiss back. He could not believe she was really there, in his arms.

"Hmmmm, nice," she said dreamily, her eyes closed. "That was nice..."

He caressed her hair. "Moira, you said we'd meet again, but I didn't think it would take so long."

Her eyes popped open. "I did? I said that?" She regained her composure; Paul could almost see the millions of thoughts racing through her head. She seemed to search for the right thing to say. "Um, I would love to catch up on old times," she said as if rehearsing a speech. "Let me just settle this business about my stolen bike and we can go somewhere for coffee."

"Great, great, wonderful!" Paul exclaimed.

They lapsed into silence for most of the drive to the U District. Paul's mind raced. She didn't remember him. Did his newly grown beard really change his appearance so much? Even so, their weekend together had obviously meant more to him than to her. He wondered if his memory of that time was even accurate. Had he romanticized it over the years? She had been more experienced than he, so perhaps it hadn't been that great for her. Maybe it *had* been just "lust at first sight", as she had teased him then. Maybe he hadn't the faintest idea what love was.

They pulled up to the address she had given him. AAA messengers occupied an old storefront and he could see her through the window talking with her boss. He could also see the conversation was not going very well. Her boss stood with his arms folded across his chest as she became more and emotional. Ten minutes later she came out.

Her eyes were red as she got into the car, but she didn't say anything.

"Should I go talk to them?" he offered, wanting to put his hand out, to touch her and comfort her.

She looked out the window, and shook her head. "No. I didn't like that job, anyway." She sniffled. She leaned her head back against the headrest and closed her eyes. "Would you mind just dropping me off at my place? I don't feel very much like coffee."

*Yes, I would mind ... very much. I've waited eight years to see you again; I don't want to lose this opportunity to be together!* Paul thought, but instead he said, "Sure, whatever you'd like. Where do you live?"

"Ballard. I'm house sitting. You can let me off at 8th and 60th." she said, her eyes still closed.

Paul's heart leapt, realizing that he lived near there! He headed west towards Ballard. Just as they crossed over Interstate 5, she reached out and touched his arm. He jumped as if he'd had an electrical shock.

"Wait, I've changed my mind -- there's a great coffee place just past of my place. It's called The Quicherie and it's got *the best* pastries and this Italian coffee -- "

"Espresso. I've heard of it," Paul interrupted, smiling at the memory of their first espresso together.

"Really? Nobody else has here. It's the best! I really like their lattes - - they make them with half and half." she went on enthusiastically, "There's

only a couple places around here that you can get espresso, but this is the only place you can get lattes without the foam!"

Paul smiled broadly. It occurred to him that she probably had said more words to him just then than she had during the entire weekend they spent together. "And where is this wonderful place?"

"On 85th." As she said it, Paul instantly had a picture in his head of where it was. He must have driven by it many times without noticing.

"Well, my lady, your wish is my command, my silver steed and I shall escort you to The Quicherie!" he announced, pleased to see he'd made her smile. Then he remembered a very important question he had to ask her.

"You know, I tried to get back in touch with you after we met in D.C., but I never learned your last name."

"Really?" she said, looking distracted, "Look, it's over there, and there's a parking space right up that side street!"

Paul swerved left without signaling and narrowly avoided getting plowed into by a metro bus.. He pulled into the parking space, but wasn't going to let the question drop.

"So, what *is* your last name, by the way?" he asked.

She looked at him for a long time, revealing nothing in her face. "Gottsdotter," she said abruptly, "it's Scandinavian."

Of course, Paul thought, with that hair, those eyes, her height. She could be a Viking princess - but an Irish first name?

"Moirra was from my mother's side of the family," she said.

The cafe was light and cozy, decorated in burgundy tile and blue floral print drapes. Besides pastry, they served about a dozen different kinds of quiche and several fancy salads. Paul realized he hadn't had lunch.

"Would you like to have something more substantial than just pastry?" *Say yes, a meal would mean we could talk longer*, he thought.

"Sure." To the woman behind the counter she said, "I'll have one of those spinach and feta things in filo dough," she pointed through the glass pastry case. "Could you warm it up? Thanks. Oh, and a single tall decaf breve with no foam."

Paul blinked at her. *A what?*

The woman behind the counter grinned, "I remember you! You want a tall latte, with a single shot of decaf espresso, with half and half and no milk foam. Got it. And for you, sir?"

"Uh, the quiche over there -- broccoli and cheddar with bacon? And, um, just a regular latte for me, thanks." Paul watched Moira, as she seemed to float across the room to a little table by the window. He hastily paid for the food and joined her.

"Feel better now?" he asked as he watched ecstatic bliss sweep across her face as she sipped the latte. He'd seen that expression on her before, but they hadn't been in a restaurant. He squirmed in his chair and tried to think of something else to say. Fortunately, she began talking.

"Much better, thanks. And thank you for being so kind to me. I don't know what I would have done today if you hadn't been there to help me." She smiled at him and it was as if the sun had come out.

"It's nothing, nothing, really," he mumbled. "But are you going to be all right? Do you need help finding another job?" He didn't know how he could help in that direction; he just wanted to do something to keep the conversation going, to keep her near him, to see her again.

Moira blinked at him, "Another job? No, I'll be fine."

"Can I lend you any money to tide you over? You can pay it back when you're able." He found himself reaching into his jacket pocket.

"No, no, I can't do that," she reached out to stop him, and her hand touched his. Again that pleasant, electrifying feeling ran between them. They looked at each other. *She feels it, too*, he thought.

"No, just a ride home will be fine," she said.

"Great, great!" he babbled, pleased to be able to help in any way. He jumped up, and then realized that they hadn't even begun to eat yet. "Uh, after we're done!" Paul abruptly sat down and felt his face flush. *What an idiot* he thought.

Moira shook with laughter, desperately trying to hold it in. She took a sip of her latte, and looked out the window.

"I'm sorry," they both said at the same time. Then they both laughed.

"I'm sorry for laughing at you," Moira said, "but you're ... such a funny man!" She beamed at him.

Paul felt warmth pass through him and his heart soared. "I'm sorry, too ... I mean, if it seems like I'm coming on too strong, it's just that..." he

paused, wondering how honest he should be. *Oh, well*, he thought. *Nothing ventured, nothing gained*. He took a deep breath and continued, "You made a very big impression on me eight years ago, and I've never forgotten you." He stopped there and stared intensely at her, hoping that she would understand beyond his words.

Moira swallowed, "I see." She looking down at her plate, "Eight years ago..." She toyed idly with her food, moving the flaky pastry around the plate with her fork.

"You don't remember me at all, do you?" Paul said quietly, beginning to doubt his own recollection.

"No, no, that's not it," Moira reached out and brushed his arm with her fingertips, "it's just that -- well, that was such a long time ago, wasn't it? You're probably a completely different person now, many things have happened to you...?"

"Well, yes, I'm older..." Paul paused, looking at her. "You seem just the same, only different, somehow..." Before he could fully formulate what he meant, Moira quickly stood up.

"Yes, exactly. Could you take me home now?" She seemed ready to sprint out of the cafe.

"Oh, sure, of course." He stuffed a final savory bite into his mouth and washed it down with the remainder of his latte, and followed Moira outside.

He drove her to 8th and 60th, and let her off. "Please, if you need anything, anything at all, please call me." He handed her his business card.

"Okay, sure, thanks. No, I mean, really, thank you, you've been very, very kind." Moira looked deeply into his eyes. Paul leaned over to kiss her again but she slipped out the door. "Good-bye!" She said, and hurried away.

He watched her go with a sinking heart. So close, and so far away, and now she'd disappeared somewhere into his own neighborhood. A dream he had held onto for nine years, slipping away. To distract himself, he went up to Safeway for a gallon of milk. Driving home, fighting the depression rising in him, he saw Moira ahead, walking towards his house. For an instant he thought she had turned into his driveway, but saw she was actually entering the house next to his. He remembered his neighbor's saying something about going to Europe. She was house sitting right next door!

She'd disappeared inside by the time he pulled up, and he resisted the urge to bound towards her house. *Give it time*, he said to himself, much against all his instincts, and he turned the key to his own front door.

Inside, Paul nervously pattered around, straightening up and viewing his abode through critical eyes. Not exactly a bachelor pad, nor quite a cozy home. The indoor plants were badly in need of water, the azaleas in the planters on the front porch were dead, and spiders had pretty decent residences in every ceiling corner. In the midst of these thoughts, he looked out the kitchen window and realized for the first time he could see directly into his neighbor's living room. The phone rang and he picked up the wall phone in the kitchen.

"Paul, dear, how are you doing?" His mother's voice came strong and clear across the lines, as if she were in the other room and not in Connecticut. "You're never home -- you really should get one of those new answering machines. I hear they do a very good job taking messages. Are you working too hard?"

His mother! "Ah, hi, Mom - I'm fine. Yes, I should get an answering machine and no, I'm not working too hard; I'm just trying to run a company and I haven't done it before." Paul caught a glimpse of Moira coming out of a room wearing nothing but a towel and disappearing into the bathroom. He almost dropped the phone. He barely heard the drone of his mother's voice as he flashed back to the last time he'd seen Moira in the shower. "Ahhh, what's that, Mom?" he asked slightly choking on the words.

"I *said* do you need anything? Is there anything I can send you?" His mother had yet to visit him in Seattle. Paul was sure she had visions of him sleeping on the floor and eating take-out food from cartons with plastic forks.

Without waiting for an answer his mother continued telling him about his younger sister, Susan's accomplishments -- she was completing the law degree *he* should have gone for. His father had never forgiven Paul for not going to law school, but becoming some "bum building drawer" like his father's punk kid brother. That "punk kid" was CEO of a multi-million dollar design corporation, while his father recovered from his second heart attack and retired from the Public Defender's office in Hartford on a government salary. *And* Susan was married to the nicest dentist and giving her a *second* grandchild already (due the week after her Bar exam -- they planned it that way). No direct comments to Paul, but between the lines Paul could hear his mother saying, why aren't you married? Why have you never been in a

relationship longer than a few dates? What are you doing on the *West* Coast, instead of someplace normal (closer to her)?

Paul couldn't explain to her why he'd stayed in the same studio apartment of his college days for the entire time he was in D.C., through each salary raise. He had kept hoping Moira would show up on his doorstep; reappear in his life as unexpectedly as she had vanished. He couldn't explain his habit of catching a glimpse of blonde hair in a crowd and following it for blocks only to have the head turn and not have it be the face he was looking for. How he only dated people that friends and coworkers set up for him and, as much as he tried, he couldn't really commit to staying with any of them. How even promising relationships ended because he accidentally called them "Moira" at the wrong moment, or they caught him following blondes with his eyes. There was one woman, Hannah, in D.C., that his mother had especially liked. Paul had worked very hard on staying involved with her. He finally confessed to Hannah about his weekend with Moira and his desperate need to see her again.

"Paul, your obsession is unhealthy," Hannah diagnosed after he had told her everything. She was getting her Ph.D. in psychology at Georgetown. "You had what amounted to an extended one-night stand with a complete stranger almost a decade ago. You have to let go of the past," she brushed her mousy brown hair out of her eyes, "and accept reality."

Instead, Paul accepted the job offer from his uncle, and left behind his studio, sub-leased to a student, not fully letting go of the hope of Moira looking him up there. His mother had cried for days.

At last she had to get off the phone because it was time for her to give Dad his medicine. Paul gratefully hung up with sincere promises to write her as soon as he could, and collapsed into a kitchen chair. A creamy beige Siamese leapt up on the table at that moment and began sashaying in front of his face, mournfully wailing for dinner.

"Hi, Percy I wondered where you were." Paul absently scratched behind the feline's ear. Percy had come with the house. The previous owners had been unable to take him to their new place, and unable to catch him to take him to the animal shelter. So Paul had inherited the feline, who had adopted him when it realized that Paul didn't know about dry cat food and only fed him the choice canned stuff. Percy (what a ridiculous name for a cat) was Paul's first cat, his family being dog people. Percy had been training him in the art of caring for a descendant of the Gods of Egypt. The specific list of rules went like this: One, cats may come and go as they please. Two, cats must sleep wherever they please, especially on newly changed



pillowcases and on baskets of freshly folded laundry. Three, cats come before newspapers (or will crush them as they leap onto your lap while you're reading). The list grew longer every day.

Paul opened the refrigerator to get a can of Shrimp Delight Dinner for the cat. The doorbell rang, and Paul left the pacing feline to see who it was.

Moira stared at him in consternation when Paul opened it. "You live here?!" Her newly washed hair cascaded down her bare shoulders like spun gold, creating a deepening wet stain on her T-shirt over her left breast.

"Yes," said Paul, wanting to say more, and having a hard time not focusing on her T-shirt. Percy gave a muarow in the kitchen.

"Is there a baby in there?" Moira asked.

"Just a big, fat, hairy one," Paul replied. Felines of the Siamese persuasion didn't really meow; they yowled like an infant.

Moira looked briefly past his shoulder and Paul was about to ask her in when she fixed her blue eyes on him, "I'm sorry to bother you, but I need help with fuses."

"What?" Paul wasn't sure he'd heard correctly.

Moira gave a little exasperated sigh, "I blew all the fuses in house, and I only have two replacements. Your house looks identical to mine, but I don't know if you have the same old fashioned wiring..."

"Oh, *fuses*. You know, I just updated to circuit breakers but I think I saw some old boxes in the laundry room. Come in while I find them." Paul stepped aside and went off through the kitchen to the laundry room, down the back stairs.

When he returned, a dusty box of glass fuses in hand, he found Moira in the kitchen with Percy.

"Hello, baby," she said, and made a purring noise in her throat. The cat rubbed back and forth across the front of Moira's jeans while talking to her in its own Siamese way. Paul wished he could trade bodies with the cat for that moment.

"Oh, really?" Moira murmured to it, and purred to it again. "You don't say?" She looked up at Paul. "So are you going to feed him?" she asked matter-of-factly, as if that's what Percy had been telling her.

"Dr. Doolittle, I presume?" quipped Paul, heading for the refrigerator and pulling out the can of Shrimp Delight.

"He likes it room temperature ... perhaps you could open a new can for him now, and let that sit out for tonight," Moira said, not understanding Paul's remark.

"His Highness has requested *room* temperature vittles, has he?" Paul said, putting on a snobbish accent, "Well, Sire, I shall comply." He left the cold can on the counter and reached for a new one in the cupboard. He studiously avoided looking at Moira while he did so, requiring every ounce of self-control he had not to throw the cat food aside, stride over to her, and have her right there on the table.

He opened a can of liver and gravy and emptied its entire contents onto a plate on the floor. Percy lunged for it like a puma upon its prey. "That will keep him busy." Paul said, and held up the fuses, "Want some help with these?"

"Oh, yes!" Moira said, and he followed her next door.

The house next door had the same layout as Paul's, except the laundry room was not connected by an indoor stairway. To reach the fuse box one had to go outside the kitchen door and down the stairs off the back porch.

"Must be fun doing your laundry in the rain." Paul commented, as they went into the dark, cobwebbed basement of the house.

"I don't know yet. I just began house-sitting." Moira said ambiguously. "Here's the fuse box."

Paul could barely see with only the light from the doorway. "Do you have a flashlight?"

"Um, no." Moira said. "Candles." She handed him a lit candle and Paul only vaguely wondered why he hadn't noticed it before as he used it to illuminate the box.

He whistled as he looked inside. "You must have had some power surge -- how did you manage to blow all the fuses at once? Couldn't have been something in the neighborhood -- my lights didn't even flicker!"

Moira didn't answer his question. "I appreciate your changing them. I'm, er, all thumbs around electrical things."

"It's pretty simple. Paul said kindly, "Here, you want to try?"

"Oh, no, no, no!" Moira stepped away, "no thanks!"

"Suit yourself," Paul turned back to the box. He screwed the last glass fuse into the box, and the laundry room lights went on.

"Great!" Moira clapped her hands in childlike glee. Paul instantly wanted to hug her.

"If you need anything else, or any help around this place -- you know where I am." Paul hesitated before returning to his house. *Do it now* a little voice in his head said.

"Do you have any plans for dinner?" he found himself asking. *Am I rushing things?* He wondered.

Moira looked surprise. "No -- I was about to go to Safeway and get some supplies."

Paul considered the Chinese restaurant within walking distance from his house. Home cooking was not his forte.

"I don't mind cooking." Moira said, "But the stove is on the fritz."

"Then we could use my kitchen," Paul offered, knowing his gas stove worked because he boiled water on it.

"Right then," she said, tugging his arm, "let's go shopping."

Walking through the aisles of Safeway, pushing the cart while Moira loaded it with something from practically every shelf, Paul felt like one of those old men, shuffling through the store with the cart while their blue-haired wives fetched boxes of dried prunes and tubes of denture cream. Grocery shopping was not one of his favorite pastimes. Then Moira squeezed his arm.

"This is so much *fun!*" she said. "I *love* grocery shopping."

Paul sensed a rush of adrenaline surge through his body. He suddenly *loved* grocery shopping, too. Now he felt like they were newlyweds, back from their honeymoon, stocking their first kitchen. *Let's buy the whole store!* He thought.

They came to the vegetable section and Moira began to pick out various things for inclusion in their cart. Not a one of them would have been found in a Safeway in D.C. or Connecticut.

"What are those?" Paul asked.

"This is bok choy, and that's jicama, and these are bean sprouts," she said. "Really, next time we should go to PCC. They've got a much better veggie section. Organic, too."

"PCC?" Paul echoed.

"Down by Greenlake. A Co-op grocery store, all organic, health food -- you know." She gravitated from the greens to the fruits. "I try to be careful what I eat. I mean, I can have a latte and a pastry sometimes, but in general I don't overload myself on food that's not natural."

So that's where she's been all these years, Paul thought to himself, on some vegetarian commune that doesn't have phones or postal service. Then he noticed the wine section.

"How about a nice Chablis or Riesling?" he asked, pushing the cart in that direction.

Moira followed him with a final bag of something called star fruit in it. "I don't know, what is it?" she asked, staring at the bottles as if they were from the moon.

"Wine, you don't know wine? That's okay, I'll educate you." He chose a nice light Chablis that could be chilled for dinner. "Where's the meat?" he asked, looking in the cart.

Moira looked in the cart, too, frowning. "I hadn't thought of meat." Then she muttered, "Go with the flow." Looking up she said, "I don't usually cook with meat. What goes good in stir fry?"

They compromised on jumbo prawns. Filet Mignon, *not* stir fried, would have been Paul's choice; he'd wanted something fancy. Moira wanted something practical and simple. Jumbo prawns weren't exactly simple, but would do in a stir-fry, and she was the one doing the cooking.

Back in his kitchen, as they were unloading the groceries, Paul asked Moira, "so, how do you do this stir fry stuff, anyway?"

"It's really easy. First you start the rice." Rice and a bouillon cube went into a pot with boiling water. "Then take a fry pan and some light oil," she pulled out the items she mentioned, "chop up some onion and fry it. And spices - have you any spices? Never mind, I bought some garlic and ginger." Her hands flew as she moved around the kitchen, producing a large sharp knife he'd never used before (a Christmas gift from his mother), a cutting board (from the same source), even a garlic press and a grater (he'd have sworn he didn't have those items). All the vegetables went in at different times, creating a medley of scents and colors. Lastly the jumbo prawns. Then she covered it and while it steamed in its own juices and discovered his stash of soy sauce packets left over from numerous take-out meals. "Perfect," she said, waving the handful at him.

Soon they were sitting down to one of the most delicious meals he'd ever had. Certainly the best ever created in this kitchen. Paul had pulled the

wine out of the freezer where he'd put it to speed up chilling. "Chablis pour vous, mademoiselle?" he asked, standing like a waiter beside her.

"Mais oui, monsieur, s'il vous plait, merci beaucoup," she replied in flawless French.

She speaks French, yet she doesn't know about wine. Yet another piece of her to puzzle about. Paul sat down and watched her take her first sip. He opened his mouth to ask her, but instead guffawed at the grimace on her face. "Wine is something that grows on you. The first sip can be a surprise, but you soon grow to enjoy it very much." He said, as her wide blue eyes stared at him while she tried to swallow.

He still meant to ask her about herself, but found himself going on about his work and regaling her with various anecdotes. He noticed her glass was half empty. "Would you like a refill?" he asked, leaning back towards the 'fridge to grab the bottle. When she didn't answer he looked over at her. Her head had dropped to her chest and her gentle breathing told him she was fast asleep.

He chuckled to himself, "Well, I haven't known anyone quite so unable to handle a drink." He went over to her and gently scooped her up in his arms. She seemed as light as a feather, which he found hard to believe given the way she'd packed away dinner before she'd had the wine. He considered carrying her next door. A spring downpour had started up outside, and Paul decided to let her sleep it off in his house. Fighting the urge to deposit her in his own bed, carried her out into the living room and laid her on the couch with a throw pillow under her head. Looking at her sleeping frame, he noticed she seemed more slender and angular than he remembered, although it was hard to tell with her clothes on. She definitely was more muscular -- probably from riding a bike all day. Her manner was different this time, as far as he could recall. She talked more, and offered her opinions more, but still revealed nothing about her background. He wondered what to do to make her more comfortable. His gallant side won out and he merely removed her Birkenstocks before covering her up with a quilt. She smiled, murmured something unintelligible, and curled up into a ball. Paul quietly tiptoed out of the room.

Percy had already devoured the prawns left on their plates and most of the rice. He fastidiously ignored the vegetables. Paul shooed him away and cleared the table. He looked at the wine bottle and the partial glasses and considered whether to finish the bottle himself. Nah, he had to work tomorrow. So he corked the bottle, dumped her glass in the sink, and went to the bedroom to finish his glass in front of Johnny Carson.

He woke with a start to the sound of a garbage truck rumbling down the street. Shaking off sleep he dashed to the kitchen, grabbed the trash bag without tying it, and raced outside. He was just in time to haul his metal barrel out to the curb before the truck pulled up to his house. Paul waved to the guys hanging off the back and stumbled back into the house. Then he smelled coffee. Like a bloodhound he followed the aroma into the kitchen, where Moira sat at the table grinning at him over a cup of java.

"You came barging through here for the trash and you didn't even see me!" She laughed at him. She still wore the sweatshirt and jeans from last night. Her feet were bare, and her hair sleep-tousled. She looked scrumptious.

Paul self-consciously realized he stood there in nothing but a pair of gray, stained, GWU gym shorts, badly in need of a shower. How much had he changed in ten years? He wondered. He was still in good shape from jogging around Greenlake. Maybe even in better shape now that the puppy fat was replaced by lean muscle. His hair was much shorter. No more muttonchops or walrus mustache; instead a neatly trimmed beard covered his face. She sipped her coffee and looked at him, but her eyes gave no indication of her thoughts.

"Today is trash day. I usually put it out the night before but I forgot." Paul grabbed a mug from the dish rack and poured himself a cup. He sat down on the other side of the kitchen table, glad that it covered up the part of him responding in rising interest to being close to Moira so early in the morning. Paul wondered how to walk past her to get to the shower without it being noticed. Abruptly, she stood up and, turning away from him, went to put her coffee mug in the sink.

"Sorry about conking out on you last night," Moira said, rinsing her mug. "I'm not used to wine...."

"Well, I'm glad to know it was the wine and not my conversation that made you pass out," Paul said, stepping to the doorway.

"You need to get ready for work," Moira said, "I'd better get back to my place."

"You're welcome to hang out here for as long as you want. I just need to take a shower." Paul said, glancing at the wall clock. He had to be at work by 8:30, but all he wanted to do was spend a leisurely morning with Moira.

"That's okay; I need to take a shower, too." Moira said. Paul suddenly recalled the shower they'd taken together in D.C.. Moira's mouth

dropped open and she sputtered, "At my house!" In a flash, she was out of the kitchen heading to the front door.

"Wait, Moira!" Paul caught up with her just as she got there.

Moira looked at him, her hand on the doorknob.

"I just wanted to thank you for dinner. Let me take you out next time, okay?" Paul rested his arm on the doorframe, wondering if he could kiss her good-bye -- and why not? She had certainly enjoyed the kiss he'd given her in the car yesterday. So he leaned over to her. At first their lips met awkwardly... but then Moira melted into him, much like their kisses of long ago.

When they finally broke apart he asked, "Are you sure you don't want to stay for breakfast?"

She gazed innocently up at him. He could see her nipples erect even beneath her sweatshirt. Oh god, he wanted breakfast -- and it wasn't cornflakes he wanted to eat.

Moira's cheeks reddened slightly, "Um, no, thanks -- you're going to be late for work as it is," she said, beginning to open the door.

"Well, I'll call you for dinner then?" Paul said, this time helping her push the door open.

"Yes, dinner would be nice," Moira smiled, a dazed look on her face as she stumbled out Paul's front door.

"I'll call you," Paul said, watching her walk across the lawn to her house. He shut the door and headed to the shower. Fully soaped up under hot, streaming water, he realized he didn't have her phone number. Damn! Then he grinned. A good excuse to show up on her front porch when he got home this evening. Paul began singing as he rinsed himself off and prepared for his day.

He managed to get to his staff meeting minutes before it began. LouAnn had been having a heart attack because there were innumerable details she'd wanted to go over with him. It pleased Paul to see that his secretary had abundantly supplied the group with coffee and donuts. This meeting would be gruelingly long and they'd need all the caffeine and sugar they could get. A new shopping center was going up south of town spurring additional building in the surrounding area. His firm seemed to be handling most of the accounts.

For the next several days Paul practically lived at the office. He was amazed at how much work he was able to accomplish while thinking of

Moira. While going over blueprints or dictating letters, part of his mind imagined their next meeting, whenever he could manage a moment to ask her out. He'd been leaving before sunrise every morning and returning late at night when all the lights were out in the house next door. Someone on staff brought in steamed vegetables from Pike Place Market for lunch one day and the aroma sparked the memory of the dinner she'd made him. On Friday evening Paul was the last to leave the office. Turning off the lights and locking the door Paul suddenly had a vivid memory of pressing his face into her soft hair. The aching loneliness welling up in him was almost too much.

Driving home in the evening drizzle, he wondered if it would be too late to ask her to dinner tonight. He'd never felt this way towards anyone else. It had been the same in D.C., the instant attraction and then never wanting to be separated from her. With other women it took time to get to know them, to decide if he really wanted to be with them. With Moira, whom he knew little about, he instantly wanted to be with her. He needed to be with her. Why was that? A flash of insight hit him as he turned onto his street. With other women he'd thought they didn't really understand him, or know who he was. Half the time they seemed to be relating to someone else -- a previous boyfriend, their father -- instead of Paul. With Moira, he felt instantly accepted and understood. From the first moment they'd met in D.C., he'd sensed it, a recognition, and an acknowledgment of who he really was inside.

Paul's stomach grumbled as he pulled his Prelude into the driveway. He realized he was starving. Over at Moira's house, the lights were on. He looked at his dark house, where Percy no doubt waited to be fed. Instead of walking towards his own home, however, he found himself going up the steps of Moira's front porch. He immediately felt incredibly foolish. What if she'd already eaten? What if she had guests? He lifted up his hand to press the buzzer when the door opened.

"Muoruow?" Percy gazed up at Paul with Moira standing behind him.

"Oh! Paul, I was just letting Percy out -- he heard you drive up." Moira wore a Mariners baseball shirt and jeans. She seemed a little flustered to see him.

Paul was momentarily tongue-tied. Then the most delicious aroma of Italian spices greeted him. "My god, that smells wonderful!" he exclaimed.



Moira's puzzled look dissolved into a broad smile, "It's my lasagna - have you eaten?"

He shook his head.

"Would you like some? I just finished eating, but I have plenty left."

Paul nodded. She stepped aside and he practically floated into the room. Paul found himself sitting at her kitchen table being served a large slice of lasagna, a hunk of garlic bread, and milk. He raised an eyebrow at the milk, but didn't say anything. He still had the wine from the other night at his place, but wanted Moira awake for this evening's conversation.

With his first exquisite bite, he decided that Moira's lasagna was now the second best meal he'd ever had in his life. He could definitely get used to this home-cooking stuff.

"I'm glad you like it," Moira said, sitting across from him. "It was fun to make."

Paul looked at her. Had he said anything?

"You know, Paul, cooking is a lot like building. Take this lasagna, for instance," Moira picked up his unused knife and gestured at his plate. "It's a construction of different building materials -- the pasta, the cheese, the red sauce, the spinach," she pointed out the different layers, "and the spices and specific ingredients are what makes this lasagna building different from another lasagna."

Paul stared at his meal. Cooking now held a new attraction for him. He glanced over at the pan on the counter. He could see the thing in his mind as a three dimensional plan for a subterranean parking lot.

Moira grinned, "Now, there are basic specifications that go into making lasagna, certain amounts for the pasta, etc. for the size pan you have, for instance. And then there are the temperature and time requirements for cooking it properly."

Paul glanced up from his food. "You sound like an architect."

"I'm teasing you." Moira smiled.

"Is that what I sound like?" Paul asked, embarrassed, "Maybe it wasn't the wine the other night, maybe I *bored* you to sleep!"

"Oh, no! No, you're not boring at all! I find you very ... interesting." Moira reached out and touched his hand for emphasis, then hastily pulled back. Paul felt a mild tingly sensation where her fingers had grazed his skin.

"No, I was just trying to use words that you'd understand." Moira leaned back and crossed her arms. She tilted her head and continued thoughtfully, "I like to cook because it's a fun way to manifest something to eat."

"What? You mean instead of sticking a TV dinner in the oven or getting take-out?" Paul asked, referring to his usual method of manifesting food.

Moira looked like she was about to say something, then shrugged her shoulders. "Something like that. Do you want some more?"

Paul calculated the calories in his head and decided he could since he'd skipped lunch that day. Maybe he'd take a run on the waterfront instead of lunch tomorrow as well. "Sure." He handed the plate to her. "So have you been looking for a new job?" he asked as she gave him another generous portion.

Moira shook her head. "No, I'm just waiting to see what I'm supposed to be doing."

"You mean, like for inspiration?" Paul dug gleefully into his second helping.

"Something like that," Moira said vaguely.

"Why were you working as a bike messenger anyway? The last time I saw you, you said you worked for the Red Cross."

Moira looked startled, "I did? I said that?"

"Well, not *the* Red Cross, it's an organization *like* the Red Cross." Paul wanted to ask her what the organization's name was, when Percy leapt on the table.

"No, no Percy! Off." Moira lifted the hefty feline up and placed him on her floor. "You'll get dinner soon, Paul's almost finished."

The sky outside the kitchen window had become a deep purple and stars were appearing. Paul regretfully knew he'd have to leave soon. They'd now shared two dinners together. Paul wanted more.

"Are you free tomorrow? Would you like to get together and do something?" Paul asked, hopefully.

Moira looked hesitant. "I guess so -- what?"

Paul thought quickly. Something that would take some time. Something that they could spend the whole day doing together. It was too

early in the year for hiking. "We could try cross-country skiing," he said, "I know some great places off I-90."

Moira's brow wrinkled. "I've never gone skiing before; I'm usually in cities."

She must have just moved here, Paul thought. "Well, cross-country is fairly easy and I'm a good teacher. How about it?"

Moira's face brightened. "I'd love to. That sounds fun."

Paul took Percy back to his place and gave him a plate of room temperature canned cat food. Tomorrow couldn't come soon enough for him.

Early Saturday morning they took off, with borrowed skis sticking out of the back of Paul's car. The world gleamed with sunlight and flowers were beginning to blossom. Paul wondered if they shouldn't be hiking instead. Half an hour out of Seattle, the Cascade Mountains still had enough snow on the ground for Paul to feel better about his idea. He exited off I-90 and onto a small side road. When it turned from pavement to gravel, Paul pulled over.

"This looks like a good spot," he said.

Moira had been very quiet on the ride up. Paul figured she just wasn't a morning person, or that perhaps she was nervous about cross-country skiing for the first time.

"It's really quite easy." Paul explained, helping her strap on her skis. He showed her how to walk-glide and some turning maneuvers. Whenever he looked over at her to see if she were following his instructions, she was always staring at him with her fathomless blue eyes. "Do you think you've got it?"

Moira nodded.

"Is this okay, what we're doing I mean?" Paul asked.

"Yes, oh, yes," Moira finally said, "I'm just ... a little distracted." She glanced off beyond Paul's shoulder. Paul turned around to see where she was looking. He could see Mount Rainier looming directly behind them, and beyond in the distance he could just make out the snowy peak of Mount St. Helens.

"Those are both great places for skiing and hiking, we could cross country there, too." Paul said, wondering if she had that thing for mountains that some people did.

Moira looked alarmed. "No! I'm too close already!"

Paul stared at her, "Too close?" Did she have some kind of mountain-phobia?

Instead of answering, Moira gripped her poles and took off into the trees. Paul took off after her, surprised at her speed and agility considering it was her first time on skis. It took him a few minutes to catch up with her as she glided into a clearing.

"Wait up!" Paul cried out, his breath rising up in little white wisps.

Moira stopped and turned around.

It was completely still. Paul's skis made a crunch-crunch sound as he came up to her. His cheeks were ice-cold, but the rest of his body steamed inside layers of wool and silk. "Are you sure you've never done this before?" he gasped.

Moira's face broke out into a wide grin. "No! It's wonderful!" she said ecstatically. She wasn't even breathing heavily.

"I'm glad you like it -- I thought you'd taken off because the mountains freaked you out or something." Paul wished he could figure this woman out.

Moira shook her head. "I love this place!" She looked up at the Douglas fir and the clear blue sky then back at Paul, "I love the mountains, I just shouldn't be here too long."

"What, are you allergic to snow?" Paul joked, now close enough to reach out and touch her, which he desperately wanted to do. All the skis and poles and layers of clothes were in the way. He should have suggested a walk along a Puget Sound beach.

Moira grinned again. "Where are we going?" she asked, gripping her poles.

"How about that way?" Paul suggested, pointing to a snowy trail into the woods.

"Betcha can't catch me!" Moira cried, zooming off ahead.

Paul groaned, she made him feel like an old man! He flexed his legs and pushed off after her.

This time it took him several minutes following her trail to find her. He came upon her sitting on the snowy front porch of an empty weekend cabin. She'd cleared a little area and taken off her skis. The sunlight glistened in her hair and her cheeks were lightly pink. She had unzipped her jacket and he could see her breasts lightly rise and fall inside her sweater as she breathed. Her eyes were closed and she smiled into the sun.

"Move over," Paul said, and flopped down next to her. "Are you *sure* you've never done this before?" Paul fumbled with his skis.

"There's lots of things I haven't done before that I'm capable of doing," Moira said. "Here, want some water?" She unclipped the canteen hanging from Paul's belt and offered it to him.

Paul took a long drink and handed it to her. "You must need some too."

Moira accepted it and took a modest sip. Paul watched her, feeling tiny muscles in his legs spasm from the recent exertion. Her stamina amazed him. Perhaps he should quit sitting at a desk designing buildings and try delivering packages by bicycle for a while. Sitting beside her, their shoulders almost touching, he noticed how comfortable and relaxed he was. He thought of how he'd felt coming up to her in the clearing, how he wanted her when he couldn't reach her. The closer he was to her physically, the calmer he became. He still wanted her, he was just less anxious about it. His mind drifted off to their time together in D.C., how he felt lying beside her just after making love.

Moira started choking. Paul's thoughts snapped back to the present and he began patting her hard on the back.

"Water -- went down the wrong way," Moira sputtered, her face a brilliant shade of red. She stood up. "Where should we go now?"

Paul thought about suggesting they try the door to the cabin to see if it were unlocked, but thought better of it. "Wherever we go, can we take it at a little slower pace?" he asked.

Moira laughed merrily, "okay. You can lead off this time."

They spent the better part of the day exploring the woods, stopping by a frozen creek for the small picnic lunch Paul had brought in his daypack. Paul found himself talking more and more about himself, and any answers she gave to questions he asked her always brought more questions to his mind.

In the car on the way back to Seattle, Paul asked her, "How long are you house-sitting for?"

"That's a good question." Moira said. "Only another week. I'm expecting to hear from the owners sometime soon."

"Where will you go when they return?"

Moira shrugged her shoulders. "Something will come up. It always does. I just ... go with the flow."

Paul smiled, remembering when he'd heard the phrase for the first time. "If you need it, I have a spare room," Paul offered, and then wondered if he'd been too forward.

Moira didn't respond at first, then said quietly, "Thanks. I'll keep that in mind."

When they got to Ballard it was early evening, and the streetlights were just coming on. Every muscle in Paul's body ached from the twelve-hour workout. As they pulled up to his house, he turned to Moira to ask her in for a nightcap. He opened his mouth to speak and gave an enormous yawn instead.

Moira grinned, "I think you'd better get some sleep. Thanks for today. I had a lot of fun." She was out the door before Paul could respond.

Sunday morning Paul had just pulled on jeans and a tee shirt when a car screeched to a halt in the street in front of the house.

"Percy!" He heard Moira cry from next door. He bolted outside to see Percy, limp on the neighbor's lawn, flung there by the impact of the car. Moira knelt beside him.

"I'm so sorry, mister," the teenage driver said tearfully, "I didn't see your cat, oh, did I k-kill it?"

A crowd had gathered around Moira and various neighbors were expressing their opinions. "Yep, it's dead, poor thing." "No hope, it's not breathing." But Moira's voice rose clear and strong above them. "Paul, call the vet. We have to get Percy there now."

Paul reassured the teenager that he wasn't angry with him and wouldn't call his parents, and went in to look up the home number of the vet. Percy had looked pretty dead to him, too. But he didn't want to upset Moira, and figured she'd take it better if the vet told her. She'd grown quite attached to the old pharaoh.

Someone had given her a towel, which she'd wrapped Percy in. They got in the car and drove to the Ballard Animal Hospital. When they arrived, the vet and his assistants were waiting for them.

"He was hit pretty bad," Paul began, as Moira took the toweled bundle into the examining room and lay it on the table. Then he stopped in astonishment as the bundle shook loose and Percy's head poked out. "Muurrow?" he asked.

"Well, not so bad, apparently," said the doctor kindly as he probed Percy's head and body. "He doesn't even seem to be in shock. No apparent broken bones. Still, I'd like to keep him overnight, to check for internal injuries."

Paul realized he was gaping in stunned silence. He snapped his jaw shut and nodded mechanically, got through the paperwork, then let Moira lead him out to the car.

"Give us a call in the morning, and we'll let you know when you can take him home," the nurse told them as they left.

"You know, I've always disliked the name Percy," Paul commented on the drive home, once he'd regained his faculties, "Perhaps I should rename him Lazarus."

Monday began another workweek as intense as the previous one. Paul felt glued to his desk. No sooner had he finished one insurmountable task than his secretary brought in another, even more demanding one. By midweek, Paul seriously considered trading in the leather sofa in his office for a sofa bed. Why bother going home when you needed to be back at work again before the engine had cooled on your car?

Just when he felt ready to implode, LouAnn appeared at his desk. "No, LouAnn, I'm not done with this report. Whatever you've got, it can wait until tomorrow." Paul said, not looking up.

"Mr. Marbanks, tomorrow is Saturday. And the client you're doing the report for just phoned in a whole new set of requirements. I told him you'd already gone home and would get him the revised statistics later next week." She gave a timid smile. "I hope I didn't overstep my authority."

Paul joyfully scooped up the papers on his desk and stuffed them in his in-box. "No, LouAnn, I am eternally grateful for your brilliant handling of the situation. What time is it?"

"Five-forty-five. I'm just leaving, and you should, too."

Paul looked up to see she had her coat on, and most of the office was dark. "Yes. I think I'll get an early start on the weekend -- for me."

As Paul drove home, he felt unusually excited. He hadn't had a chance to talk with Moira all week, but somehow he felt certain he'd have a chance to be with her tonight. As he pulled up to his house, he saw her sitting on his doorstep.

"Were you serious about your offer?" she asked him the moment he stepped out of the car.

"Yes," he said, wondering exactly what she meant.

Everything came out, one word tumbling after another. "Because it's them, they're back. I didn't expect them until Sunday. They said they've been trying to call me, but I haven't been home and their answering machine wasn't working. I didn't know how to work it, so I didn't reset it when the power went off. Anyway, I could stay there tonight, but I'm really not comfortable about it -- and so, well, if your spare room is available, can I bring my stuff over?" She paused for breath.

Paul was elated! The gods had answered his most fervent prayers! "Of course. Do you need help carrying anything?"

"No, it's all right here." Moira stepped aside to reveal a rolled up futon, a backpack, and a box.

"You travel light!" Paul chuckled as he picked up the futon and the backpack and escorted her into his house.

She disappeared into his spare room for about twenty minutes, and then emerged, looking bright but worried.

"You can stay here for as long as you like, you know," Paul said, "it's no trouble."

"That's not it." Moira said, "It's just not knowing what I'm supposed to be doing that's confusing. Usually I have a pretty clear idea but right now ... it's a blank."

Paul walked over to where she stood, "Then consider your time here as R and R."

She looked puzzled.

"Rest and relaxation -- a rest stop until you become clear again." Paul smiled at her. He felt blissfully happy just being beside her. To have her in his home filled him with joy.



She smiled up at him, and then her expression changed, but she lowered her face before he could read it. Without thinking, he put his arms around her, and she rested her face on his shoulder. "Are you okay?" he asked softly.

She sighed deeply. "I don't know. I -- I just ... like being here, I'm worried I'm liking it too much." She rubbed her face against his beard.

The radio softly played one of Heart's new hits, and Paul swayed her to the music.

"There's no such thing as liking too much," he whispered in her ear, and lightly kissing her.

She made a little noise in her throat and slid her arms around him, squeezing him tighter as he worked his way down her neck. Their long weekend together was as clear in his mind as if it were yesterday, and he remembered everything he did to every inch of her body. He intended to do it all again, beginning now.

"Let's finish dancing in my room," he suggested, as he swayed her out of the kitchen.

"Uh -- okay," Moira stuttered weakly, and allowed him to lead her to his bedroom.

Paul gently lay her on the water bed and undid the buttons of her flannel shirt. Her jeans slid off easily. He enjoyed the fact that she let him take his time -- their past lovemaking he remembered as frenzied and immediate. Maybe she knew then they only had a weekend, and now they had ... for as long as he could make it last. She wore a pink lace bra and matching panties.

"Started wearing underwear, I see," he observed wryly, as he began to undo the front of her bra. Her milky white breasts with light pink nipples tumbled out.

She gasped as he began to caress her nipples, making them harden into little pink bumps. He leaned over and placed his mouth on one, playing with it with his tongue. Her hands slid through his hair and held his head; he could hear her take a sharp breath with each flick of his tongue. No activity yet from the lower regions, which he decided to remedy right away. He gently ran his hand over her firm, flat -- almost concave -- stomach, and then down between her thighs. Careful to tease, rather than touch, he slowly stroked the inside of her thighs just shy of touching her panties and then away again. She writhed and moaned. He released her breast and began a series of little kisses down the center of her body, lightly tickling her with his

beard as he went. She was putty in his hands. In one swift motion he pulled her panties down below her knees and began nuzzling her curly-haired mound with his mouth. She cried out as he probed with tongue between her lips down there and began flicking her little bud rhythmically back and forth. Her tangy taste and smell reached him at once, making him aware how achingly hard he was.

He looked up at her and asked, "Are you ready?" He pulled off his shirt and pants as she weakly nodded yes. Her eyes widened as he pulled down his jockey shorts.

Paul grinned, "I'm very glad to see you." He lay on her, gently opened her legs and probed her wetness for an opening. He found it and squeezed himself in. Jeez she was tight! She made a little whimper.

"Are you all right?" he asked, and could feel her head nodding under his chin. So he slowly began to move in and out, feeling her tense and relax as he moved. Her knees came up and her pelvis rose to him, and soon they moved together; and the waterbed beneath them rocked in harmony as if they were swimming in an ocean of ecstasy. Her face lifted up and pressed into his neck and her hands gripped his shoulders. He couldn't hold off any longer, and plunged deeply into her, a low strangling noise emerging from his throat.

"Oh M-Moira!" He cried as he released himself into her. A little corner of his brain registered that he'd finally said the right name to the right woman, so he joyfully repeated it over and over until he finished. Afterwards he lay on top of her, staying in her, as she had always wanted before. He kissed her lightly on the cheek. "Oh, Moira, it's been so long, I've missed you so much." Then he noticed her shivering. "Are you cold? We can get under the quilt."

"Mmm-mm." she nodded, as he withdrew and peeled himself off her.

It amused him how jelly-like they both were, fumbling with the sheets, their awkwardness compounded by the motion of the waterbed. Finally, they were both under the covers, snuggled up together. Her body felt leaner than he remembered, and somehow smaller. She definitely hadn't been so tight a fit. He missed the curve of her belly, but hoped that perhaps it would emerge in a few weeks of eating the kinds of meals they'd been having. He only hoped his own belly wouldn't get larger at the same time! He reached behind himself and turned on the bedside lamp.

"What are you doing?" she asked as he lifted up the sheets and directed the lamp's light beneath.

"Taking a look at your tummy," he said. Her skin was still smooth and milky-white, but the tummy was flat as a board, and those interesting silver lines were gone. "Where are the lines?" he demanded, as if she'd hidden them somewhere.

"What lines?" she asked, puzzled.

"Oh, never mind," he said, leaning over to kiss her, "I probably just imagined them.

They spent the night together, nuzzling, kissing, and, when he was up to it, making the waterbed rock and roll. The first couple times Moira seemed hesitant and unsure, but by the third time she had gained confidence. During this third time, she gripped him with her thighs, dug her nails into his back and cried out so loudly he thought the neighbors might call the police. His own climax washed away that thought and he moaned almost as loudly as she had. Then, well and truly spent, he collapsed his full weight on her. He was glad she liked it, for he was unable to move.

"Let's stay this way forever," he said groggily. No response. He opened one eye and tried to focus on her. She stared at the ceiling, lips slightly parted, eyes brimming with tears.

"Hey, hey there, what's the matter? What's wrong?" He pulled himself up on his elbows and looked down at her.

She sniffled and hiccupped, "Nu-nothing's wrong, I - I don't know why I'm cry-crying, I j-just haven't ever felt this way before, I - I mean, that was won-wonderful, I ju-just never felt this way before."

"There, there," Paul said soothingly, reaching for a tissue from the box by the bed. He didn't have the faintest idea what she was talking about. It couldn't have been the orgasm; the last time they were together she'd come every time, and probably a few more times than he had. One thing he did know, however, was when women cried, they appreciated being handed a tissue and at least having you listen to them. Oh, and act like you understood. So Paul rolled off her, propped his head up with one hand, and waited attentively. Moira blew her nose and looked at him.

"What?" she asked, wiping her nose.

"Go on, talk," said Paul. "I can be at least as good a listener as you, you know. Anything you want to tell me, I'd be happy to hear it."

"Well, there really isn't anything else to say." Moira curled up into a ball and pulled the quilt under her chin. "I'm better now, thanks for the tissue." She stifled a yawn.

Well, that was easy, thought Paul. He leaned over to kiss her forehead.

"Maybe you just need some sleep," he said, glancing at his digital clock. "It's nearly 3:00 a.m."

"Hmmm, yes," Moira said, closing her eyes and smiling slightly. She was almost out.

Paul reached out and stroked her hair, and crooned the Heart song from the radio, modifying the words, "You're just an angel of the evening, baby." He saw her jaw go slack, her eyelids flutter and she was fast asleep. He turned off the light, but stayed awake for a long while, gazing at her sleeping figure bathed in moonlight. She was really here, in bed, beside him. Nine years of loneliness washed away from him. He should have been exhausted, considering the full day of exercise and an equally full night's workout. But being beside her energized him. Finally, as the birds began to chirrup the approaching dawn outside his window, his head sunk into his pillow and he began to snore deeply.

That weekend they went hiking in the Olympics and found some natural hot springs to soak in. They spent a delicious afternoon making love on the grass, then rolling into the steaming water until they were limp, then dragging themselves out into the chilly air and starting the routine over again. They seem to fit together in perfect harmony, being able to be together without overwhelming each other. They cooked a lot of meals together; Paul discovered his "inner chef". He loved just being near her, or knowing she was in the house, or puttering outside in the garden. He could go over his Architectural Records and product specifications in the living room, feeling comforted by the fact she was in the other room, meditating. She seemed to do a lot of meditating, but they never managed to talk about it.

The next week was like a honeymoon, except that Paul had to work. Unusual things happened during the seven days. Once, Paul noticed all his plants thriving, even the azaleas on the porch, which he could have sworn were dead. He decided Moira must be watering them regularly, and that she probably used fertilizer, although he hadn't seen any in the house.

Paul also found himself needing less and less sleep, but he dismissed it because being with Moira exhilarated him. He did go to his doctor on

Friday to see why he kept losing his equilibrium -- he kept getting dizzy, and bumping into things.

"Probably not enough sleep," his doctor concluded. "And your blood pressure is lower than it ever has been, although your heart rate is slightly elevated." He prescribed a mild sedative, but Paul avoided taking it.

By mid-May; the sun shone more but Paul noticed Moira seemed to be getting paler and more drawn. Her mood, usually cheerful, seemed pensive and worried, but she wouldn't talk about it. One evening, they were sitting together on the five pieces of board that constituted his kitchen porch, watching the sunset. He looked at her and marveled once again how much her hair looked just like sunlight. She faced into the sun, looking like some Scandinavian statue. Paul reflected on their three weeks together, and his heart welled up in his chest. He had never been so happy; he never wanted this to end. He reached his hand out and stroked her hair.

"I love you," he said simply.

She turned and looked at him for a long, long time. In a soft voice, tinged with sadness, she responded, "I love you, too," and leaned over and gently kissed him on the lips. They embraced and stayed that way, holding each other, until the sun set and it grew too cold to stay outside any longer.

That night, Paul made up his mind to ask her to marry him. Saturday morning over breakfast he casually suggested they go out to dinner that evening. He went out in the afternoon on the pretense of stopping to check something at the office. At work, he scanned through the yellow pages at listings for restaurants. Canlis? The Oyster Grotto? Rossilini's Other Place? Finally, the Oyster Grotto won out. It was his favorite place and he knew the chef. He called for reservations. Then he raced out to the jewelers, examining the diamond rings. He finally settled on a band of twisted yellow and white gold, with a modestly large diamond set in it. Reassured they could size it later, he left with the purchase burning a hole in the breast pocket of his jacket. The traffic home moved at a snail's pace, thanks to some event at the Seattle Center. He pulled up to the house, his heart beating in his throat. Percy met him at the front door, meowing loudly.

"Hungry, eh, fella? The mistress not fed you in the past ten minutes?" he chided as he opened the door. "Moira, I'm home," he called. No answer. Paul walked through the living room, glancing in the kitchen and then the bedroom. Mildly alarmed, he went back out to the living room, and then realized he hadn't checked the spare room. They had stored her futon and few belongings there when she'd first moved in, but Moira had

shared his bedroom from her first night in his house. Opening the door, he saw Moira sitting in the corner on a folding chair. She was deathly pale.

"Moira, Moira, are you all right?" Paul raced over to her. She didn't react at first, so he gently shook her. Moira's eyelids fluttered, and her head jerked back as she came out of trance. "Should I call a doctor?"

Moira shook her head, and stumbled over to the futon. "I just need to lie down," she said weakly. She curled up into the fetal position on the plain cotton mattress.

"What's wrong?" Paul asked, kneeling beside her. He felt her forehead, expecting a temperature. Instead, he found her to be icy cold. "Let me get you a blanket," Paul said, and retrieved one from their bedroom. He covered her with it and she gave him a faint smile as thanks.

"Oh, Paul, I feel so tired. So terribly, terribly tired." Moira's eyes brimmed with tears.

"Shh, shh," Paul crooned, stroking her forehead. "Just rest, I'll take care of everything." He sat with her a while until she fell asleep. Once her breathing deepened, Moira's face relaxed and her color returned somewhat. Paul got up and went out of the room.

With a heavy heart, Paul called the restaurant and canceled their reservations. Moira couldn't go out in her condition. He puttered around the kitchen but had no appetite for dinner. Finally, he sat in front of the television with a glass of wine, some humus and pita bread. Paul stared at the screen until bedtime. He checked on Moira in the spare room, but decided not to disturb her. For the first time in three weeks, Paul went to sleep in alone.

The next morning a thunderous boom rattling his windows jolted him awake. He leapt out of bed and ran outside. He could see no evidence of a storm, nor any sign of an explosion nearby. He went back into the house.

"Moira? Honey? Did you hear that sound?" He walked back into the bedroom and found the waterbed empty. Oh, that's right, she's sleeping in the spare room, Paul realized. He glanced at his bedside clock; it read 8:35am. Too early to get up on a Sunday morning, he thought. He had probably been dreaming, anyway. Paul went back to sleep for two hours.

A nightmare woke him up. The details of it faded quickly, leaving him with only a sick, fearful sensation in the pit of his stomach. Paul rose and took a hot shower, which restored his spirits. He padded out to the living room, still dripping and with a towel wrapped around him. He

automatically turned on the television as he passed it on his way to the kitchen for some coffee. When he came back out a short time later, he found the regular program interrupted by a Special Bulletin.

"... May 18th, 1980... Mount Saint Helens erupted at 8:32am PDT this morning ... we are bringing you live coverage from our News-copter..."

He pulled away from the TV. "Moir, honey, have you seen the news? My god, the volcano really erupted!" He stuck his head in the bedroom, and remembered again she was in the spare room. Paul opened the door and found the room empty. Completely empty. No futon, no boxes, no Moira. Just the blanket that he had covered her with the night before. The entire house turned out to be void of any trace of her. She had completely vanished from his life. Again.

Paul stumbled out to the living room and sunk into a chair. He buried his head into his hands and began to sob.

Paul fell into a deep depression. The only reminders of Moira's existence were the thriving plants and fully stocked kitchen. He tried calling the Bike Messenger service to try to get some information on a Moira Gottsdotter, but they had never heard of her. Had she been working under an assumed name? The only thing that kept him going was work. He threw himself into his job, assigning himself projects that he normally would have delegated to others. When he wasn't working, he slept. This was partly due to the fact he began to take his doctor's prescription and partly because he didn't want to do anything else. To be conscious was to miss Moira.

At work, LouAnn clucked and fussed around him like a mother hen. He plowed through the backlog of paperwork from his three weeks with Moira. He answered phone calls and looked at plans. Even though he kept himself busy, the week still passed with agonizing slowness and the weekend loomed ahead of him, a vast chasm of loneliness.

He got through the weekends by working. The firm had been considering a new project in Tacoma, so Paul took the half hour drive south to look at the site. On the way back home, a loud *woomf!* hit the car, making him swerve. He pulled over into the breakdown lane of Interstate 5 and looked behind him. In the distance he could see a giant black plume of ash shooting up into the air. The volcano had erupted a second time. He looked up into the sky and it appeared to be snowing. But the flakes didn't land on his windshield like wet snow. Soft, tiny gray flakes wafted down from the sky. It was ash from Mount Saint Helens. When the volcano erupted the

first time, Portland and then east of the mountains were covered in a thick coat of ash. This second eruption, a week later, brought a gentle dusting to Seattle.

Seeing the ash triggered something in him. When he got home, he went to the phone and called his buddy Michael Takatsuka, an architect from another Seattle firm. Michael and he were fast friends at GWU, but parted upon graduation. Paul wound up staying in D.C. with Zylcon, and Michael returned here to his hometown of Seattle. Paul looked him up when he first arrived in Seattle, and Michael and his wife Coral had taken him under their wing.

"Paul, old pal, how's it hangin'?" Michael's voice came cheerfully over the phone line. "Haven't heard from you in a month. Thought you'd dropped off the face of the earth. Hey, man, did you hear the mountain blew again?"

It suddenly occurred to Paul that, except for work, he had spent the past three weeks completely alone with Moira. Other than the first day, she hadn't even come to his office. None of his friends had met her. Had she been real, or a bizarre figment of his imagination?

"Sure did. I was driving back from Tacoma when it happened. Yeah, man, it kind of blows your mind, doesn't it? I have ash all over my car," Paul said. "Sorry I haven't kept in touch, I've been, well ... " Paul paused, he didn't really want to go into it on the phone. "Mike, are you free for lunch? I've really got to talk to someone."

"Uh, Paul, it's the afternoon. We already ate lunch." Michael said chuckled. "Why don't you come to dinner at our house tonight? Coral would love to see you, and Michelle's been asking where Uncle Paul is."

Michelle was Michael's daughter. Paul smiled thinking of the pudgy toddler, who had looked like a baby Buddha to him at first, complete with potbelly. The three year old had such an extensive vocabulary; Paul suspected she was extremely intelligent. Her parents knew she was a genius, of course, and enrolled her at the exclusive Japanese preschool recently written up in *The Seattle Times*, as well as having her take violin lessons. Paul was glad he was never at Michael's when it was time for Michelle to practice her music homework.

"I'd love it, man. What time do you eat?" A night with good and caring friends was just the thing Paul needed.

"Early. Coral has Michelle on this schedule, and we have to have our family dinner at 6 o'clock. I really have to bust my butt to get home on time



during the week." Michael chuckled, because he really loved his family, was *not* so hot on his job, and liked having an excuse to leave work early. It did mean, though, that he started his day at the office at 7:00am or earlier. "Hey, man, gotta go. I'll let Coral know you'll be there. She'll be real pleased to see you and to hear all you've been up to -- 'later, man."

"SIX o'clock. I'll be there." Paul hung up the phone. Yes, Coral *would* be real pleased to see him and hear all about Moira. Coral was kind of an Asian yenta, and had been his primary matchmaker since coming to Seattle. She was almost more concerned about his marital status than his mother.

The Takatsukas lived in a modest Craftsman style bungalow two blocks from Greenlake. The garden was immaculate, thanks to Coral's constant attention. Paul didn't know anything about gardening and marveled how Coral could fit so many plants into such a tiny yard, and yet still make it feel so spacious. Every time he visited she took him on a tour, pointing out new plants she had recently put in, which blended in so well with everything else that Paul really couldn't tell the difference. The ornamental plum tree was the centerpiece, and now in May it was full of delicate pink flowers. The grass surrounding it and filling the main part of the garden never seemed to be more than a couple inches tall; Paul suspected it was really some new kind of Astroturf. Rocks and shrubbery and flowers were all exactly placed with some inner meaning perhaps only Coral understood.

The inside of the house was as precise and as orderly as the outside. Mirrors and plants strategically placed throughout the house, and a large fish tank of puffy cheeked goldfish glowed in the living room. Paul was relieved whenever he discovered one of Michelle's toys in the seat cushions or under the sofa; the place was usually so immaculate he wasn't sure they really lived there.

They met him at the front door with a greeting fit for an emperor. Everyone gathered around and treated him with such loving concern that Paul felt better than he had in days. Little Michelle immediately commandeered him and took him to her room to see her collection of designer Barbie Dolls. Coral thanked him profusely; it was a lot easier to get dinner ready without the assistance of a three year old.

The dinner, of course, was superb. Grilled salmon in a light Teriyaki, lime scented rice, and snow peas, all arranged on the plate with an artistic flair. Looking down at it, Paul's heart contracted in pain. He hadn't

missed Moira for almost half an hour, but this home cooked dinner brought the waves of loneliness back to him.

"This dinner is delicious, Coral." Paul said, trying to distract himself. "Did you marinate the salmon first?"

Coral eyed him suspiciously, "Thank you, yes I did. When did you become so knowledgeable about cooking?" Coral didn't miss a thing. Paul's disinterest in the kitchen was legendary; previously he would have briefly complemented the dinner and then asked Michael about work. "Has someone been teaching you a thing or two?" she asked casually as she deboned Michelle's fish for her.

Paul looked down at the table for a long time. Then he took a deep breath, looked up and told them everything. Everything about Moira the first time he'd been with her, and the last three weeks. Well, *almost* everything -- Michelle was present, but he wouldn't have gone into the romantic details with Coral, either. Michael, maybe; they'd been thick as thieves in college. He did talk about his confusion and depression, and asked them for their advice.

"Wow, Paul, you got it pretty bad," said Michael when Paul finished. Then he turned to his wife. "How about the name of your friend, honey -- the one that helped you after Michelle was born?" He looked back at Paul. "You guys got Group Health, right? So do we. Coral knows someone over there who's a real good therapist. Got Coral back on track after her postpartum thing."

Coral had been watching Paul the whole time with a sort of half-smile on her face. It was as if he had supplied her with the missing piece to the puzzle of his social life.

"Oh, yes, Paul. Sonya Morgenstein. You should go see her." Coral got up and began looking in her purse for the woman's business card. She found it and handed it to him. "This woman is great, she saved my life! Or maybe my husband's life!" She looked over at Michael and squeezed his hand.

Michael affectionately squeezed back. "That's for sure. You were ready to kill me over every little thing!" Michael looked at Paul. "Call this lady, Paul. It can't hurt, and certainly could help."

Paul stuck the business card in his breast pocket, promising them he'd call in the morning. The rest of the conversation turned to more general topics, and the evening was mostly a pleasant and nurturing one for Paul. Every once in a while, Michael and Coral's interaction would stingingly

remind him of Moira and himself. There was one moment where he drifted off into a fantasy that he and Moira were living happily ever after, with a pudgy little toddler named Paula. But Coral whisked Michelle off to bed, and Michael broke him out of it, by pulling his attention to Michael's new toy: a Tandy computer. He told Paul that by the end of the decade everybody would have one, and no desk in any office would be without one. Paul listened absently, calculating how much Michael had spent on this toy versus the Marbank Architects' operating budget and decided the idea was rather far-fetched. At last it was time to go, and Paul politely thanked them again for their hospitality. He received warm hugs from the both of them and returned to his starving cat and very empty house.

He called Sonya Morgenstein the next day and got an appointment for the following week. It turned out that she was indeed a lifesaver, and got directly down to the business of saving his. He saw her once a week for about six months, and slowly his heart and spirit healed.

Under her guidance, he was able to return his main focus back to his work, and find solace in it. He led the company into a major period of growth and economic gain. Sonya encouraged him to become a Big Brother again, something he'd found rewarding in college. Toward the end of his time seeing her, he started dating again. No blondes, though; he'd sworn off them forever. Finally the day came for their last session. He reaffirmed some agreements he'd made to take care of himself, and promised to call her if he needed to. Then he went out to continue rebuilding his life on his own.

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## Assignment 1: Seattle, 1980

Hello.

My first solo assignment has not gone as effortlessly as I'd hoped. I made several mistakes that I plan to work on with the Teachers. I know my main action is to be reaction, and my main responsibility is to respond. However, I am not sure that my reactions and responses were appropriate. Looking back at the assignment, I have two major concerns: have I negatively impacted Nature and Mankind? If so, perhaps I should consider terminating this vehicle and retrain for one less challenging. Advise, please.

Response:

Dear One:

All has proceeded according to the Infinite plan. Have you made mistakes, or have you created marvelous learning experiences? What have you learned, my child? What is negativity but the opposite of positivity? There is no right or wrong, just what has occurred. Do not judge yourself so harshly! In your attempt to be neutral, you have avoided seeing your most important life's lessons. Do not consider termination; it impacts two vehicles. You will shortly understand our meaning. Work with the Teachers regarding neutrality and affinity. Your next assignment awaits you.

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## Chapter 3

### INDIA

October 1989

In the fall of 1989, Paul was in the midst of a staff meeting when he got a call from his Uncle Stephen in their San Francisco office. He looked around the table at his staff busily munching biscotti and sipping lattes freshly brought up from the Buzz espresso cart in the lobby. He turned to his new head architect, Michael and said, "Well, Mr. Takatsuka, I must leave the bridge to you. Starfleet Command is on the phone and I should take it in my office."

"Aye, aye, Captain," Michael said, saluting him. Paul and Michael had been avid Trekkies during their college years. After hiring him away from Marbanks' competitor, they'd been using Star Trek lingo to refer to the company and its operation. Paul was drawn more and more into the administrative side and needing to leave the creative decisions up to Michael, his "Number One". Uncle Stephen's office naturally was Starfleet Command, since on the TV series Star Fleet was also headquartered in San Francisco.

"Carry on," said Paul to his crew, using his best Captain Jean Luc Picard voice.

"Paul, you have to come to San Francisco. I'm booked for a flight to India next week, and I've slipped a disc. You're the only one in the company who can substitute for me." Uncle Stephen's voice sounded convincingly urgent.

*The "only person", yeah, right,* thought Paul. *More like the only convenient* person in the company, since everyone in the San Francisco branch probably has tickets to the World Series. He wondered if his Uncle had really slipped a disc. He knew the company was making strides with their international connections; he hadn't realized India was one of their contacts.

"What's happening in India?" Paul asked, stalling an answer to his uncle's request.

"Chakawarti and Sons is building a development outside Delhi and we won the bid. Mr. Chakawarti was in the Bay area last month to discuss the project with me, and I agreed to fly to India to view the site and finalize the contract."

*Last month. Before the A's won the Pennant, thought Paul. Paul heard office noises in the background while his uncle spoke. He slipped a disc and he's at work?*

"And, Paul, they require a visa and shots to go to India. We're working on getting your visa through the consulate here, and I took the liberty of calling your doctor up there about the shots. You have an appointment for noon today for the first series and next Monday for the second. That should give you plenty of time to catch the shuttle down here. You're booked on Alaska Airlines leaving at 2:00 pm this coming Monday, the sixteenth. I trust your passport is up to date." His uncle could tell Paul was hesitating. "There'll be a big bonus in it for you," he added.

He had pushed all of Paul's buttons. Of course his passport was up to date. He'd gone with Maggie on their honeymoon to St. Lucia in the Caribbean. As he thought about Maggie a wave of guilt swept over him. She was short and had black curly hair. A doctor who, when her biological clock went off, switched her specialty to pediatrics. He'd met her in the Harborview hospital emergency room when he'd taken the boy he was Big Brother to had gotten hit over the eye with a baseball. She'd watched him interact with the kid, decided he was father material, and asked him out. She was so unlike Moira that he decided it would be healthy to say yes. When she asked him to marry her a year later, he decided it would be healthy to say yes to that, too. Anything to force himself to accept reality. Then followed five agonizing years of Maggie trying to get pregnant. A year and a half of sex by the calendar and temperature taking, followed by a horrendous period of hormone shots and in vitro fertilization. Poor Maggie, torn by pain and disappointment, the hormone shots making her completely wacko with continual PMS. Paul became more moody and withdrawn. Finally, as they each approached their fortieth birthdays, Paul decided to put them both out of their miseries. He gently explained to Maggie that she was a wonderful woman and deserved to have a child, but not with him. She deserved to have someone love her for the unique and wonderful things about her, and not be married to someone who chose her in the first place because she was the opposite of the woman he truly loved. (This did not go over well). She kicked him out of their Lake Washington house, kept the Pathfinder, got a restraining order, sold all his belongings and sued him for every dime he was worth. All he had left now that the divorce was finalizing was a ten-year-old Honda Prelude and the little house in Ballard that he'd kept as a rental. Not much to show for a forty-one year old man.

So of course, the bonus enticed him. And maybe a trip to India would be good experience in international relations, since Paul was

beginning to lead the Seattle office in that direction himself.

"Yes, Uncle, I'll do it," Paul found himself saying into the phone. Seven days later he was on a southbound flight with an arm sore from inoculations and his passport in his side pocket.

The details were pretty simple; his uncle had worked them out the month before when Mr. Chakawarti had visited. But there were subtle points. It turned out that Mr. Chakawarti was a family man. Uncle Stephen had shrewdly guessed that he would respond more favorably to Marbanks' brilliant nephew and president of the Seattle branch replacing him than to someone lower down the ranks in the San Francisco office. His uncle had indeed slipped a disc but coped very well being wheel chaired around by a buxom redheaded nurse. Still, the old codger *did* have World Series tickets and was taking his nurse there the following afternoon, about the same time Paul would be flying off to India.

The next day Paul returned to the San Francisco International Airport. After checking in, he went straight to his gate. They were already boarding his flight, so Paul went directly on. The plane was full; people were stuffed in like sardines. He was grateful that his uncle had reserved first class. Paul decided to immerse himself in the glossy airline magazine to see what movies he would watch during the flight.

Snatches of a conversation wafted up from the coach section behind him. "Do y'all mind if ah have this aisle seat? Ah need to stretch mah legs." A man said with a Texan drawl.

"No, that's fine with me," a woman's pleasant voice replied.

Paul froze. That voice -- he knew that voice! He tried to twist in his seat to see the speaker, but people putting baggage in overhead bins blocked his view.

It had to be her. It couldn't be her. Paul began to use the deep breathing techniques Sonya Morgenstein had taught him years ago in order to control panic attacks (which usually just came whenever he glimpsed blondes in crowds; this was the first time he'd hallucinated a voice). He stared down at his magazine. His eyes blurred and he couldn't focus on anything, but Paul just pretended to read while he breathed in - *one - two - three*, and out - *one - two - three - four*. In - *one - two - three*, out - *one - two - three - four*. Breathing wasn't helping. A drink? They hadn't taken off yet; the flight attendants weren't going to serve anything when they were busy telling people how to buckle their seat belts. Paul's stomach started to somersault. Airsickness pills! He had some extra-strength ones in the carry-

on bag at his feet! Paul dived forward and rammed his head into the back of the seat in front of him as he reached into his bag.

The expiration date on the package was the year before, but he didn't care. Paul swallowed the pills without water and just the thought of taking them relaxed him before the drug could kicked in. He dozed into thoughtless oblivion before the plane even left the US mainland.

He woke up just as they were landing in Hong Kong. The First Class flight attendant smiled at him cheerily. "Glad to see you're awake. I was a little worried when you didn't wake up for lunch, *or* dinner!" she said as she made sure everyone's seat backs were upright and tray tables closed. "You must have really needed the rest."

"Ah, yes, must have," said Paul, sitting up. It must have been a dream. He breathed a sigh of relief.

His stopover in Hong Kong was a little under two hours. He stayed in the transit passenger holding area, catching up on the paperwork he had intended to do on the plane. He was absorbed in the stats regarding the Chakawarti project when he heard a woman's deep but melodious laugh. Paul's head jerked up just in time to see a golden-haired woman disappearing, he thought, through the departure gate. He dropped the plans to the floor, papers scattering everywhere, and raced to the gate.

The agent at the gate stopped him. "I'm sorry sir, we're not ready to begin boarding yet."

Shaking, Paul returned to his bags and began picking up the papers he'd spilled. This could not be possible. Not on both planes. This was a completely different flight. He must be having some kind of mental breakdown.

Moments after he'd gotten the plans back into his briefcase, they began boarding his flight. He followed the stream of passengers like a zombie, and kept his head down as he got on the plane. He managed to find his seat and stow his baggage without having to look up once.

They began the meal service shortly after takeoff, which effectively diverted Paul's thoughts about Moira. He hadn't eaten since leaving San Francisco seventeen hours ago. For the first time in his life, airplane food tasted wonderful. His mood immediately improved when drinks were offered, and he settled in with a scotch to watch the movie without headphones. It was about some cantankerous old lady being driven around by a long-suffering chauffeur.

Halfway through Paul realized he had to piss like a bandit, and if he



didn't get up soon --

"Oh, no sir, please remain seated until the seat belt sign goes off," the Flight Attendant said firmly. "We're encountering turbulence, but should be through it shortly."

Paul went back to watching the movie, gritting his teeth. In two eternities' times ten, the seat belt sign dinged and went off. Seven people immediately lined up in front of the first class toilets. Screw it, thought Paul, and he headed towards coach.

Fourteen miles of crying babies and legs sticking into the aisles, he finally reached the middle of the plane. All these toilets were occupied, too. He plowed onward; sweat beginning to stand out on his forehead. Did anybody just have a Coke bottle? Ah, he saw someone leave a stall at the back of the plane and he broke into a trot. From behind the corner a ten-year-old kid walked straight into it.

"You look like you're in pain," an amused voice came from behind him.

He turned and there she was. He wasn't hallucinating. There was Moira standing in the aisle behind him.

A door opened. "Quick, go in there before you explode!" chuckled Moira as she pushed him in there.

He stood in shock for several minutes. When he finally came out there were ten people in line. An unpleasant man glared and barely waited for him to leave before pushing his way past him.

Moira was nowhere to be seen. He *must* be hallucinating. Was this a psychotic episode?

"Barbecued chicken or beef cannelloni?" A flight attendant asked somewhere back in coach.

"I've special-requested vegetarian." Her voice wafted down the aisle.

The food and beverage carts blocked his way so Paul headed down the opposite aisle. He circled through the galley at the back of the plane and spied Moira sitting several rows up. Across the aisle from her he spied a miserable businessman sitting next to a woman holding a crying infant on her lap. Paul went up to him.

"You look like you could use a break," Paul said, affably. "Would you like to exchange seats with me?"

The man eyed him suspiciously. "Why, where are you sitting?"

"Seat 4B," Paul said, without saying why. "You can leave your dinner here. They're serving lobster tail with filet mignon and champagne up in First Class."

The man broke out into a huge grin. "Well, sure you can have my seat. I don't care why; just take it!" The guy pulled his bag out from under the seat in front of him headed up the aisle. "Enjoy the cannelloni!"

Paul took his place by the infant, now peacefully breast-feeding. He could retrieve his stuff later in the flight.

"Pretty swift negotiating."

He looked over to see Moira grinning at him.

"Hiya, handsome -- long time no see," she said playfully.

A surge of anger rose in Paul. You'd better believe it. It's been almost nine years. He wanted to shake her and kiss her at the same time. Instead, he simply said, "Hi, Moira. It has been a long time." He looked to see if she had changed. Little tiny laugh lines had formed around her eyes, but that was all.

"Nice beard," she said.

Paul frowned. He'd had this beard the last time he saw her. He'd deliberately kept it, even though Maggie had hated it. He hadn't understood why until now. He'd wanted to remain recognizable to Moira if he ever saw her again. Nine years had changed him a little, slight flecks of gray were forming at his temples, and his stomach wasn't as firm as it could be. He regretted losing his gym membership in the divorce.

"Going to India?" he asked, praying that she wasn't going to stay with the flight, which continued on to London.

She smiled, a broad, heart-warming smile. "Yes."

"Staying there long?" he asked, feeling his pulse beginning to race.

She paused. Then she said, "I'm transitioning assignments, so I'll have a little layover time in Delhi, yes." She grinned from ear to ear.

Paul struggled to recall his itinerary. "I'm here ... about five days ..."

He reached into his jacket pocket to find his ticket.

"I think I can manage five days," she said.

At midnight New Delhi time they landed at Palim Airport. As he disembarked, Paul felt a blast of warm air. The whole countryside was tinged in moonlight, and there was an eye-watering odor he couldn't

identify.

"Cow dung patties, they burn it for fuel." Moira whispered behind him.

Paul walked down the steps into another world. Fortunately, they both only had carry-on luggage, so were among the first to arrive at immigration. Immigration officials wearing gray jackets over saris perfunctorily checked his passport and asked the basic questions.

"How long on you planning on staying in India, Mr. Marbanks?" A well rounded woman with pudgy fingers and dozens of silver bangle bracelets flipped through his passport.

"Five days." Paul tried gazing over at Moira talking with the next agent over.

"Ah-cha. Business, or pleasure?" Her bangles jingled as she stamped his passport.

"A little of both," said Paul, barely concealing his excitement.

"Welcome to India, Mr. Marbanks," she handed his passport to him, "we hope you enjoy your stay. Namaste." The agent turned her attention to the next person in line.

Paul wandered out from the customs area to look for Moira amongst a sea of black-haired people. Voices yelling -- calling people, selling things, asking for alms -- it didn't seem to matter that it was the middle of the night. Paul spotted a blond head sticking out of the crowd at the taxi stand near the entrance.

As he approached, he could see Moira chatting in Hindi with the little cab driver sporting a large, elegantly combed beard and an oversized turban. He looked like a dark version of Yosemite Sam. They seemed to reach some agreement, and he took her compact suitcase and put in the back of the black and yellow cab.

Moira looked up as if she'd known Paul was coming, and waved.

"Where are you staying?" she called over the crowd.

"I have no idea!" he called back, reaching for his itinerary again.

She chattered to the cabby and ended the sentence with "Ashoka Hotel."

They got in the cab and as it tore off into the stream of humans on bicycles and buses and cows, Paul glanced at his itinerary. He had a suite at the Ashoka.

"How did you know?" Paul asked, incredulous.

"Madame Zola knows all, sees all." Moira wiggled her eyebrows. She rested her head on his shoulder. "I'm so glad to see you again."

Paul looked out the window, as the countryside whizzed by. Water buffalo with enormously swollen stomachs lolled in murky gullies. Modern apartment buildings stood alongside little mud huts. Suddenly he was in a different world with the woman he loved more than anything next to him. The one who had abandoned him - twice - without a word, or a trace. Yet here she sat beside him as if she had just seen him a week ago. He closed his eyes. The cabdriver put on the radio and a high-pitched nasal wailing assaulted his ears. He turned to Moira and opened his mouth to speak. 'Why? Why did you leave me? Where the hell have you been?' he wanted to say. Instead, he found himself pressing his face into Moira's hair. She put her arms around him, and he felt the years drain away again. All his rage, all his depression, flowed out of him. How did she do that? How could she make the years evaporate and leave him feeling as if they'd been together always? There were too many things happening at once for him to process everything. All his confused feelings about Moira mixed up with all the overwhelming sensations of India. He'd sweated through his shirt and through his jacket in the heat. If it was this hot at night, what was it like in the daytime? The odors were fascinating, or delicious, or revolting. The cab itself had a mixture of scents: hot, unwashed plastic, the remnants of previous passengers with bathing habits differing from Paul's, the delicate aroma of sandalwood - or was that a stick of incense on the dashboard? And the strong, spicy-sweet cologne that made Paul slightly queasy must be coming from the cab driver himself.

Along the way they passed a temple glowing in the light of street lamps swarming with insects. The cab raced by it at full speed, but the driver took his hands off the wheel, turned to the temple and bowed as he went by, then grabbed the wheel and kept driving.

"That was a Sikh temple - the religion Mr. Singh, our driver, belongs to. That's why he bowed." Moira whispered into Paul's ear.

"I see. Pretty religious fellow," Paul said through gritted teeth, his white knuckled hands gripping the seat.

They arrived at the Ashoka, a magnificent red sandstone building surrounded by immaculate greenery. The monsoons had just passed through Delhi and all the vegetation seemed very lush and green in contrast to the ever-present yellow dust on everything else. The moment Paul and Moira got out of the cab, children, mostly barefoot young boys, mobbed

them. *What are they doing up so late at night?*

"Baksheesh Mem-Sahib, Baksheesh Sahib!" the boys cried, waving their cupped hands in front of them.

"Watch your wallet," said Moira, gripping her purse, "No baksheesh, no baksheesh, chalo - jaldi!" She waved her hand at them dismissively.

Paul already had his hand on his wallet to pay the cab driver, but he felt little fingers reaching for it as well, he whirled around but was unable to identify who it was in the mass of boys.

The cab driver gave Paul a price for the cab fare, and Paul automatically started reaching for the rupees in his wallet. Moira spun around and began arguing with the cab driver in Hindi, hotly debating the price he quoted and finally leaning into the cab to prove that the meter was broken.

The cab driver went through a charade of emotions ranging from indignant, insulted, and angry finally to mournfully resigned. These tourists are bleeding me, his expression seemed to say. But with the smaller amount of rupees in his hand, he broke into a wide, brown stained toothy smile, clasped his hands prayer-like in front of him and made slight bows to Paul and to Moira. Before he got into his cab he shot Moira a smiling look, almost shaking his finger as if to say to her "ah, you are one savvy haggler, Mem-Sahib."

Paul turned back to Moira and found her standing protectively over their luggage, gesturing for a bellboy, who had been languidly observing the scene with an amused air. The front doorman appeared at that moment also, a short fellow in a fancy turban and elegant uniform with gold braid on the shoulders and sleeves, and a broad sash around his waist. He grandly motioned for the bellboy, who hopped to it when he saw his boss. Then the doorman opened the door and stood smartly at attention as Paul and Moira entered. Paul had the feeling that the doorman expected a tip for simply opening the door and getting the bellboy to do his job.

The interior of the Ashoka was a lavish mixture of marble, silk, and velvet, with magnificent oriental carpets adorning the floors. Behind the front desk were several women whose elegant red and gold saris swished about as they walked from one place to another.

In the elevator up to their suite Paul was very aware of Moira standing beside him, her hand resting gently on his arm. He always had a tingling sensation standing beside her, as if she emitted some low-voltage electricity. He also noticed the bellboy, standing with his face intently

staring at the floor numbers. He wished the elevator were empty save for him and Moira, and that it was stuck between floors.

They arrived at their floor and followed the bellboy down the lushly carpeted hallway to their suite. The boy unlocked their door with a flourish and wheeled the baggage cart into a sitting area with furniture made of beautifully carved wood inlaid with ivory. Large brass spittoons held giant palms on either side of the enormous picture window. Moira went over and looked out through the gauzy drapes at the view of Delhi - a mixture of high rise buildings and empirical British architecture as well as domes and spiral towers.

The bellboy made a great show of opening the double doors to reveal the bedroom area with the king-sized bed covered with a brightly colored, intricately embroidered bedspread inset with tiny mirrors. On top of the bed were assorted stuffed pillows embroidered with tassels and more mirrors. The bellboy opened a door off the bedroom to indicate the bathroom and then walked up to Paul with an ingratiating smile. He tipped him and the boy bowed with great ceremony while stuffing the money in his pocket, then backed out the door and was gone.

They were alone. Paul glanced at his watch. It was now 3:45am, Delhi time. His meeting with Mr. Chakawarti was not until the following morning, his uncle having allotted a days' rest to adjust to the jet lag. What now?

There were so many questions to ask, so many things he wanted to tell her, but he had a strong fear that this might be their only time together. Who knows? She could disappear if he fell asleep. So he walked over to her at the window and kissed her -- a kiss that erased the time they'd been apart, that evaporated the years of loneliness and resentment, replacing them with inner calmness and acceptance. It felt like all time stopped moving and the only thing that would ever exist was now. She slipped her arms around his waist.

He kissed her again inside the bedroom. She caressed his back, sending shivers up his spine. Her hands found their way inside his shirt and slid around to the front to feel the hair on his chest. Her fingernails lightly rasped against his nipples and he found his whole body temperature rising. Trembling, he led her to the bed and carefully lay her down. He stood over her, taking in her appearance. She wore a white cotton blouse and a short, blue skirt with white stockings. He could see the outline of her bra through the blouse, her nipples hard and erect.

"Nice look," he muttered as he fumbled with her buttons. He opened

the blouse and admired her.

Moirá's fingers went to his neck and swiftly undid his tie. "Nice look yourself," she said.

She gasped as Paul slipped her breasts out of her bra and began to suck her brownish-pink nipples. She pressed her face into his hair. Meanwhile he slid his hands up her skirt and did his best to pull down those white pantyhose. She laughed and helped him by unzipping her skirt and Paul pulled both of them down. He pressed his face into her little curly V and said, to it as much as to her, "you smell wonderful." She giggled, but Paul couldn't hear it as her thighs were now around his ears.

His hands gripped her buttocks as he used his tongue to work miracles inside her. She writhed and moaned and pressed herself into his face. Then his hands reached up to her breasts and she started crying out. She called his name over and over. When she had finished coming, he lifted his face up.

"I'm very glad to see you!" he grinned.

She laughed her melodic laugh and pulled him up onto the bed. She unbuckled his belt, unzipped his pants, and reached in to pull out her prize. She leaned forward and began to kiss his abdomen and inner thighs, studiously avoiding his achingly erect fellow. Paul groaned in agony as she took his balls into her mouth and began to gently suck them. When his brain truly had drained out of his ears, she moved up to the shaft itself. With little tiny flicks of the tongue she worked her way up from the base to the head, and little tongue flicks around the rim. She paused for a brief moment that seemed like a lifetime to Paul, and then placed both her lips on the head and slowly drew him into her mouth. She seemed to take him all the way into her throat, and then her tongue and mouth sealed around his entire member and she began suck him with strong pulling motions from her tongue. Paul felt his teeth fall out and his fingers and toes curl into little balls, as he lay helpless on the bed. Then, when he knew he was about to have a brain hemorrhage, she began to quickly nurse him in and out of her mouth, clamping her lips over her teeth as she moved. That did it; Paul choked out her name and the name of his Maker, and nearly passed out as he exploded into her.

"That was fantastic." He kissed her on top of her head.

"You weren't half bad yourself, lover boy," she chortled, her face pressed into his chest. "Did I ever mention that you smell like apricots here?"

"Don't think so. Nope, neither in DC or Seattle do I recall you ever

saying that," he said, smiling into her hair.

She looked up at him, an unreadable expression on her face. Her hand stroked his beard, and then his chest. Then she seemed to gather her thoughts together and cheerfully asked, "Well then, what are you doing in India?"

"I could ask you the same question, Moira," he said sincerely, his hand resting on her smooth hip. He noted with some pleasure that she had her little tummy again, with its intriguing silver lines. Yummy tummy, he thought, and slid his hand down to rest on its cushiony comfort. He looked up at her face, which held a bemused smile.

"I'm here on business, of course. I have a meeting with a Mr. Chakawarti of Chakawarti & Sons tomorrow morning; about a project my firm is collaborating on with his office. I have no idea how long it will last. Some time after that, we'll be going out to his proposed building site, and then meeting again to work out a contract. I'm hoping the process won't take the whole five days. I'd like a chance to do a little sightseeing." Paul suddenly realized that all the sights he wanted to see were here in this room.

She laughed that unique laugh and ran her hands through his hair. "I'd love to do some sightseeing," she said. "And I'd love to sleep, too," she added, "I've been going nonstop since San Francisco, and, unlike some people, I didn't get a nap on the plane."

Paul noticed she had little purple veins in her eyelids, and small dark circles under her eyes. Her head nestled in the crook of his arm. He leaned down and softly kissed both eyes. "Sweet dreams, my love," he said, huskily.

"Night, night sweetums," she said drowsily, snuggling into him, and drifted off to sleep.

He lay for a while staring at the ceiling. His body was fatigued, but his eyes could tell it was morning. Pale pink light streamed in through the windows, and the street was getting noisy. He didn't want to sleep because he wanted her to be there when he woke. Perhaps if he held her tightly in his arms, he could get just a *little* shut-eye. He snuggled down and wrapped both arms around her, her face burrowed into the hollow of his neck. Soon he snored loudly over her head, and she smiled in her sleep.

When Paul woke, orange-red sunlight filled the room. His watch told him it was late afternoon. Moira snuggled against him. He gingerly extricated himself and dashed to use the bathroom. He finished quickly,



wanting to get right back to her. What if she vanished before he returned?

But she was still asleep, her hair spread out behind her like gold-spun threads, the sunlight catching it and filling it with orange-red glitter. Her face looked soft and angelic, with long light-colored eyelashes resting on pale pink cheeks. Rosy lips were slightly parted and she seemed to be whispering in her sleep. In getting out of bed, Paul had pushed the bed sheets down, and they were below her waist. She lay on her side, her breasts spilling onto the sheets, the nipples large and relaxed. Her slender waist gently expanded and contracted with her breathing, making her breasts ever so slightly jiggle. Below her abdomen, curly golden hairs peeked out beneath the sheets, which covered her shapely legs. Paul felt both horny and famished at the same time. Her eyelids fluttered and then opened, blue eyes gazing at him. She surveyed his naked body with the same hunger and smiled at his hardened and erect penis.

"Mm-mm. Come to mama, sweetheart," she said, kicking off the covers.

Paul's little head won over his hungry stomach, and he came to mama in one joyous bound.

Only moments later they were both satiated, all the pillows were on the floor, and all the covers were there too. Paul lay on her, trying to stay in for as long as possible, while she stroked his hair and gave his ear and side of his face little kisses. When he finally had to slide out, she whispered, "hungry?"

"Did my rumbling tummy give me away?" he asked, his stomach adding its emphasis.

"Uh-huh," she said. "Me too. Let's go check out the food in this joint." She started to wiggle out from under him.

"Wait, wait," Paul said, painfully getting up. "I have to take a shower." He rolled off the bed and lumbered toward the shower.

"Me too, me too!" she cried, leaping up and scampering after him.

So dinner was postponed while they enjoyed a steamy, soapy shower. Fortunately, Moira did nothing that would precipitate their drowning this time, and they were able to emerge clean and fresh-smelling, ready to dress for dinner.

The restaurant at the Ashoka had everything you'd expect from a five-star hotel: cloth table linens, crystal glasses, ornate silver. The menus were in large leather folders, with gold tassels separating the pages. Paul

reached for his water glass as he studied the menu. Moira stopped him.

"Not a good idea, unless you want Mr. Chakawarti to meet with you in the bathroom," she cautioned. "After the monsoon season it's especially easy to get a case of 'Delhi Belly'. I'd avoid drinking unboiled water and anything with ice in it."

They ordered tea, which was surprisingly refreshing considering how hot the day still was. Moira ordered Tandoori chicken, then went on to request dahl and biriyani and pullao and chappati. Paul didn't know or care what this stuff was, as long as it was edible and arrived soon. The dishes did appear with amazing speed. Flat tortilla-like things that were slightly puffy. Lentils and rice and chicken and probably lamb. A curry with peas and potatoes and carrots.

"Don't drink any tea until you're finished," Moira cautioned as Paul began eating.

As the first flames hit his tongue and ran down his throat, Paul ignored her warning and reached for his cup.

"No, really. Let your mouth get used to the spiciness. If you keep drinking, it'll keep tasting hot," Moira insisted.

So Paul heeded her advice and eventually the flames died down, and he began to notice the intricate flavors of the feast before him. There were even little raisins in the curry, he hadn't noticed before. He used bites of chapatti - flat bread - to help separate the flavors, and a dollop of yogurt on things to cut their hotness. As the plate cleared, he started downing the tea. A couple bites more, the flames returned. Ah, she had been right, he realized.

They both were stuffed and so refused dessert and took walk around the grounds. It was a clear evening; the stars were magnificent. It was still warm, but not so sweltering as it had been earlier. Clay pots with etched designs lined the walkway through the gardens. Paul was wondering about them when suddenly they all lit up with electric lights inside shining through the slitted openings.

"Those are dawali lamps," Moira noted, "for their annual Festival of Light, happening this month."

"Have you been here before?" asked Paul, amazed that he got a direct question out of his mouth to her, and curious to see if she'd answer it.

"Oh..." she hesitated, thinking of the right words to say, "no, not really."

"Not really, what is that supposed to mean?" Paul asked. "But how do you know the language? How do you know so much about the culture?"

Moira grew very quiet and part of Paul wanted to retract the question, but part of him wanted to push forward. Instead, he waited patiently; they continued to walk, arm in arm. They came to a stop in front of a tree, seven feet tall, covered from roots to its top with long, broad leaves. She turned to him, put her arms around him and looked him directly in the eyes.

"I can't explain to you why I know what I know. Maybe some day I can; I hope to. But right now ..." She shook her head, looking down for a moment. Then, looking directly into his eyes again, "I will never lie to you, I will answer your questions as honestly as I can, but there are some things I'm ... not at liberty to answer. Can you understand this?"

*Maybe she works for the CIA,* thought Paul with trepidation. At the same time relief filled him. He kissed her forehead, and said, "I can't understand but I can accept. Is it kind of like your organization's Prime Directive?"

Her face lit up with a smile. "You do understand!" she cried, hugging him close to her.

He chuckled, "Well, now I have another question for you," his tone switched to mock seriousness, "I know you may not be able to answer it, but try."

She looked at him, puzzled, "What?"

He nodded his head towards the tree they were standing beside. "What is this thing? It looks to me like one of those tree-beings of 'Lord of the Rings.'"

She scrutinized the tree. "I never thought of Ents like that: it's an avocado tree, but" she grinned, "don't ask me how I know."

They walked on, with her pointing out other plants on the way. Paul particularly liked the row of Mimosa trees, with their feathery soft pink flowers. *We have trees like that in Seattle,* he thought. He decided to try another question.

"You said you were transitioning assignments. When I first met you, you said you were in between assignments. Is this the same thing?" Paul asked, feeling her stiffen. He'd asked too much.

She gulped. "No, it isn't. I'm still ... on assignment right now, but I know it's ending. I know I have to stay here for a certain amount of time."

The last time ... I mean, in DC... oh, it's too complicated. I really, really can't ... " her voice trailed off, sounding genuinely torn.

"That's okay, I understand, sort of ... "Paul patted her hand on his arm. "I'll try not to ask too much."

She leaned her head against his shoulder. "Thank you."

Paul stopped and pressed his face into her hair. "I love you, Moira. More than anything on earth," he said fervently. He surprised himself by adding, "and I'll accept any time we have here together, whenever we have it together."

Moira held him tightly with her face hidden in his chest. From the little movements of her shoulders, he could tell she was crying. He held her and rocked her.

He went on, "I was so broken-hearted each time you left me, especially so the last time. But now ... " he searched for the words to describe his feelings. "If we have to part this time, I think I'll be able to handle it." But as he said it, it didn't feel right. "No, I mean, I won't be happy about it, but I know I'll survive." There, that's what he meant.

As Moira looked up at him, Paul felt a twinge of pain to see the deep, deep sorrow in her eyes. "I never left you because I wanted to, but because I had to. And when we part this time, I won't be happy, either. But I'll survive, too. The hope of seeing you again will keep me going."

Then Paul's eyes filled with tears. They stood there, clinging to each other, willing the moment to last forever.

Paul awakened the next morning with the phone ringing. He thought it was his wake-up call from the front desk, but it turned out to be Mr. Chakawarti's secretary.

"Good morning, Mr. Marbanks. Mr. Chakawarti called to tell you that he is sending a car for you and Mrs. Marbanks." The lilting Indian voice came across the receiver.

"Car for me and who?" he echoed, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. "Oh, Mrs. Marbanks. How did he know about Mrs. Marbanks?"

"Oh, Mr. Chakawarti knows everything," her voice was irritatingly cheerful. "He is a very, very well informed man. He says to tell you that Mrs. Marbanks is welcome to sit in on the meeting, or she may use the car and driver to see our most beautiful sights in Delhi. The car will be at your

hotel in approximately 45 minutes."

Forty-five minutes? Paul glanced at his watch. It was 7:30am.

"Uh, thank you. We'll be there," Paul said and quickly got off the phone.

He patted Moira's sleeping rump. "Wake up, sleepyhead. We have to be downstairs in forty-five minutes." He swung out of bed and headed to the bathroom.

Moira's voice came from underneath her pillow. "Why?" she asked plaintively.

"Mr. Chakawarti expects both of us," he called from the shower. If she asked anything else, he couldn't hear -- he had shampoo in his ears.

Moira didn't have to use words to express what she thought of having to get up. She walked into the bathroom and flushed the toilet. After Paul stopped screaming and the water temperature stabilized, she climbed in as Paul finished. He kissed her, his wet beard dribbling little cold drops on her, so she wriggled under the main stream of warm water. He playfully grabbed her buttocks, and drew her close.

"We don't have time," she protested.

"Yeah, you're right. I'll take a rain check." He patted her butt. "Hold that thought," he told her, and got out, leaving her to wash her hair.

Clean but still damp-haired, they met Mr. Chakawarti's driver in the Ashoka's lobby. The fellow bowed slightly.

"Mr. and Mrs. Marbanks, I'm Rajinder, Mr. Chakawarti's personal driver. I will be having the pleasure of driving you to your wishes." His head tilted from side to side as he talked.

Paul noticed Moira start at being called Mrs. Marbanks, grateful that she didn't say anything. As she climbed into the car, she whispered to him "Moira Marbanks?"

He cocked an eye at her. "Paul Gottsdotter?"

She looked at him, and put her hand to his cheek. "Paul Godson."

The driver launched into a monologue about the beautiful sights of the city, so Paul pondered her comment in silence. They passed pitiful-looking Himalayan black bears, dancing upright on swollen hind feet, being hit with a stick if they made a mistake. People with missing or deformed limbs sat on the sidewalk calling for baksheesh. There were bullock carts going five miles an hour, blocking the traffic, and emaciated white Brahmin

bulls wandering wherever they pleased. They passed one in the street that had been dead quite a while.

"Excuse me," Paul interrupted the driver. "Why hasn't somebody removed that dead cow?"

"Cow is sacred, holy animal. They may go wherever they please. When truck -- bam, hits Cow! Cow is very holy, we cannot touch." The driver said in punctuated sentences as he wove in and out of traffic.

They passed a long hedgerow that several men were facing, their dhotis -- baggy white loincloths -- hitched up one leg. Moira averted her twinkling eyes, but Paul stared -- he'd only seen men pissing outdoors on camping trips.

The office building of Chakawarti and Sons was large and white, with tinted windows. Inside it had an open-roofed atrium, filled with a great pond and all manner of plants. Fish flitted beneath lotus pads, and there floated four black swans. Mr. Chakawarti's administrative assistant, a serious young man whose thick glasses made his eyes look unusually large, met Paul and Moira. The swans, he explained, were new. At first there were geese, but then Mr. Chakawarti had added giant turtles. One by one the geese disappeared, and so did all the fish. Finally, Mr. Chakawarti removed the turtles and replaced the fish. The geese had been too noisy before their demise, so he added swans instead. The executive offices and conference rooms were on the far side of the pond.

Mr. Chakawarti appeared from behind a large, polished teak door. He was about five feet tall, quite rotund, wearing a Nehru jacket and cotton trousers with sandals. He walked towards Paul with his hands extended in welcome.

"I am so pleased to meet you, dear boy. And I am so sorry to hear about the devastation in San Francisco. I have been unable to get a telephone call through to your dear Uncle, but we received a telegram this morning saying all is well."

Paul stared at the old gentleman. "I beg your pardon? What happened in San Francisco?"

"Did you not hear? Oh, my goodness, you must have entirely missed it during your flight. The earthquake, my dear boy, the earthquake. Shook the baseball stadium, broke one of your bridges, and an overpass completely collapsed. Completely. I am surprised they did not contact you at your hotel." He gestured towards the doors to his office. "If you would like to attempt a telephone call, please use the one in my private office."

Paul hurried into the office and tried calling San Francisco. "All phone lines are busy," the operator said. After the fifth try, Paul put down the receiver and joined the others.

"You are having no luck, eh what?" Mr. Chakawarti, "Well, as I was telling your lovely wife here, your uncle assured me in the telegram that negotiations can continue without pause. He said that your Seattle office would be able to fill in if the San Francisco office were unable to."

Paul wondered how Michael and the others would take that news when they were already booked for the next five years with local projects. But he said, "Of course, of course, my office would be happy to fill in, but let us both hope that the San Francisco branch has not been too affected by this ... " Paul searched for a neutral word to cover his anxiety. "situation. Shall we begin our meeting?"

Mr. Chakawarti's five sons, taller and more slender versions of himself, met them in the conference room. They all sat around a large teak table, while a woman in a pale blue, cotton dress and pants, a silk scarf slung across her neck, with the ends hanging down her back, poured tea for them all. As they sipped their tea, Mr. Chakawarti recounted his meeting with Stephen Marbanks. Several points he made were not what Uncle Stephen had told Paul, and Paul said so. Deadline dates, job specifics and even set fees were completely altered in favor of Chakawarti's company. Mr. Chakawarti brushed his comments aside and continued talking. Moira sat up a little straighter, but said nothing. His secretary sat at the end of the table typing the meeting notes into a computer. His administrative assistant came and left at varying intervals, obviously keeping track of other business in the outer office. When the older gentleman finished his monologue, he nodded to Paul. Paul took a deep breath and repeated his comments; Mr. Chakawarti nodded his head non-committally. The secretary was not typing Paul's comments. One of the sons leaned over and said something in Hindi into Mr. Chakawarti's ears. Mr. Chakawarti nodded to his secretary and she typed something into the laptop.

The morning went on this way, with Paul getting more and more frustrated, as the talks all wove into Mr. Chakawarti's version of the truth. Then it was time for lunch, and they all stood up. Mr. Chakawarti smiled at Moira and said, "I hope we were not too boring to you with all this business talk."

Moira leveled her gaze at him. Her reply to him was in fluent Hindi, causing a shock wave through Mr. Chakawarti and the others. Mr. Chakawarti recovered himself and said, "I must apologize for my son's " he

emphasized, "rudeness. We did not know that Mr. Marbanks possessed himself such a talented wife."

One of his sons whispered something else. Moira responded directly to him in another language, and then directly to Mr. Chakawarti in a third. Paul stood by her side, dumb-founded.

"Urdu and Sanskrit. I am most impressed," Mr. Chakawarti said. "Of course, you have no need to worry about the use of Sanskrit," Mr. Chakawarti assured them, "it is quite a dead language and none of my sons have mastered it."

"Except for the National Anthem, I hope?" Moira said.

"But of course, of course." Then with the seasoned skill of the most tactful ambassador, Mr. Chakawarti led them into another topic of conversation and another room for lunch. They dined on samosas, little triangular pastries filled with curried lentils, and a delicious coconut soup.

Paul found himself able to respond to Mr. Chakawarti's questions on various subjects with some degree of intelligence. Little got by the old fellow, and he quizzed Paul to see how he stacked up against his Uncle Stephen. Satisfied, he turned to Moira and offered amusing anecdotes on his various grandchildren and how his wife and daughters were such devoted mothers. In addition, his daughters each had their Ph.D.s; one was an engineer for Boeing in Kansas and the other was a university professor in southern California, but both made their family their top priority. Paul glanced sideways to check Moira's reaction to this. Moira responded that she knew that Indian women did indeed seem to be superb mothers. How impressed she was that Indira Ghandi had been able to make such a sizable contribution to world history while managing to remain a devoted mother and grandmother. She had been a mother to all India, Moira noted. Mr. Chakawarti gave her a Cheshire cat smile and segued the conversation into art and literature.

After lunch all the Chakawarti sons disappeared, leaving Mr. Chakawarti alone with Paul and Moira. His secretary handed Mr. Chakawarti a copy of the meeting's minutes, which he glanced over. Mr. Chakawarti handed them back to her. "Make a copy of these for Mr. Marbanks to take back to his hotel, please." Then he turned to Paul and heartily thumped him on the back. "Well, that was not so difficult a morning, eh what? And tomorrow we shall see the property. I'll send my driver for you at the same time." The secretary returned with the copy, which Mr. Chakawarti handed to Paul. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to go into another meeting, but please let my driver show you the beautiful



sights of the city. If you have not had the opportunity to see Old Delhi, you really should do so, it positively reeks of history." He smiled at Moira, "It was most fascinating to meet you Mrs. Marbanks. I hope you will enjoy your stay. You simply must visit the Chandi Chowk Bazaar; it is my wife's most favorite shopping area."

Moira beamed a smile at him that took him slightly aback. "Oh, it was a pleasure to meet you Mr. Chakawarti, and most educational. I learned so much about your country's art and literature."

"Thank you for your kind offer of your driver," said Paul, "but I'll have to decline the tour today. I'm anxious to get back to the hotel and contact my uncle." He shook hands with the older gentleman. "We look forward to seeing you tomorrow," Paul emphasized the 'we', as Mr. Chakawarti had pointedly not invited Moira for the following day. Paul had enough knowledge and expertise to assess the building site and ask the right questions, but he knew Moira's help would get him the real answers.

On the way back, the driver took the scenic route via buildings that were a collage of mud huts built up against Moghul ruins. There were modern-looking houses and apartments a block away from Imperial Palaces that displayed the grand English Colonial architecture and design at its best. Paul marveled that, even today, India was a country of such stark contrasts. On the street there were well-dressed people standing beside people in rags. Mercedes-Benzes drove past bicycle cabs. The caste system seemed still to be evident, birth still defining much about who one was, rather than education or economic status.

Moira and Paul talked little during the ride back to the hotel. Paul didn't want to say much about the meeting in front of Mr. Chakawarti's driver. Moira looked out the window, absorbing all the passing sights and sounds. She seemed to be taking pictures with her eyelids, as they kept flickering. Paul figured it must be the light and made a mental note that they both needed sunglasses.

When they arrived at the Ashoka, Paul checked the front desk for messages. Finding none, they went to the elevators.

"So what were Chakawarti's sons saying during our meeting today?" Paul asked as the elevator doors closed. He was dying to know.

"Oh, just derogatory comments about me," Moira said, vaguely.

Paul felt a flush of defensiveness. "What sort of comments?"

"Oh, Paul, this is India. Women don't have the same equality as in the States." Moira wasn't in the least bit offended. "They were

uncomfortable with my energetic presence, and made comments to make themselves feel more powerful." She looked at Paul with a twinkle in her eye. "Didn't work though, did it?"

The twinkle diffused Paul's anger as the doors opened at their floor. "It certainly did not." he chuckled as they went to their suite.

Inside, Paul headed for the phone by the bed and Moira sat in the nearest chair and began meditating. Paul dialed the San Francisco office.

"You have reached Marbanks Architects. Our office hours are from 8:30 am to 5:30pm. If you know the extension of the person whom you wish to dial..."

Paul hung up. "Moira, what time is it on the West Coast right now?"

Without opening her eyes, she said, "It's about thirteen and a half hours earlier. So it's about one thirty in the morning."

That meant they had to wait until nine pm to call his uncle at home before he left for the office. Six hours to kill. Paul stood up, went to the window and looked down at the street below. There were taxis and also auto rickshaws at the curb.

"Moira, how'd you like to check out Chandi Chowk?"

"Fine with me." Moira bent over and touched the floor by her feet.

They chose an auto rickshaw, a three-wheeled scooter with room for two passengers on the back. As soon as they took off, Paul regretted his choice. The driver was insanely fearless. He cut off buses and swerved around bullock carts, all at what seemed like 100 MPH. Whenever a traffic light forced him to stop, they were invariably right beside or behind a truck laden with rotting fruit and emitting black billows of exhaust. Then there were the potholes. He'd scarcely noticed them on the way in from the airport, but the black-and-orange cab they'd been in had shock absorbers, which this vehicle did not. By the time they'd arrived at Chandi Chowk in Old Delhi, Paul thought he seriously needed a chiropractor and a neck brace.

Chandi Chowk was an open air bazaar with a million little shops, selling everything from sandals to silks, food to books. Paul kept finding things he wanted to buy to give to Moira, but each time she stopped him.

"I don't want any things, Paul. It's too hard to travel as often as I do with things." Moira seemed distracted.

As they walked along the street outside the bazaar, a group of women approached them, one very pregnant and in great pain. They pulled

on Paul's arm and chattered at him, using a little broken English and another language. They were asking for rupees so they could see a doctor.

Paul said to Moira, "We should give them some money. It's obvious she needs a doctor."

Moira shot Paul an exasperated look, and then began addressing the women in their language, which turned out to be Urdu. She gestured towards Paul and the expressions on the women's faces turned from urgency and pain to ones of surprise and then smiles. Moira reached for Paul's hands and started to push them towards the pregnant woman, but her friends pulled her back and instead they clasped their hands, prayer style and backed off. Moira said something else and they disappeared into the crowd.

"What was that all about?" asked Paul, totally mystified.

"Well, you were right. They were asking for money for their friend to see the doctor. I told them you were a doctor and would be glad to examine their friend for free. When they protested, I offered to share a cab with them to the hospital, and that's when they started thanking us and backing off." Moira smiled at Paul. "You were being had, darling."

Paul's forehead wrinkled in confusion, totally thrown for a loop. This was definitely not Seattle.

"No, it's not Seattle," Moira chuckled, and took his arm. "I'm tired of shopping. Let's go get some dinner."

They hailed a black-and-orange taxi, and went to a cafe in the Santushi Shopping Center, which turned out to be two blocks from the hotel.

"If I'd known this were here, I'd have suggested *walking* instead of hiring that scooter cab," muttered Paul, rubbing his neck. Several hours of jostling through traffic, and then several hours of being jostled by people in marketplaces, had gotten to him. Also the incessant cries of "baksheesh, baksheesh" from beggars (some hideously deformed) had worn his nerves thin. Moira had explained to him that they were professional beggars, being born into the beggar caste, and that most were purposely mutilated at birth to enhance their earning capabilities. He was having a hard time understanding India.

They sat down to jasmine tea and a delicious meal he couldn't pronounce. The hot tea restored him, and the restaurant fans cooled his sweat soaked-shirt. Again there were chapatis and rice and curry, mango chutney and yogurt sauce with mint. The food definitely improved his spirits. He looked at Moira, matter-of-factly nibbling on a chapati and

looking indifferently around the marketplace, as if she'd lived there all her life. It added to his sense of unreality. Was he really in this strange, foreign place? Was she really here in front of him? He reached forward and touched her arm, just to make sure.

She smiled at him. "You know, Paul, after this meal we really should walk back to the hotel so you can take a nap. It's now five thirty in the morning your time, and you've been going for almost twelve hours nonstop."

Ah, that explained his intense fatigue. But Moira looked radiant and tireless.

"What's your secret, Moira? Why aren't you as exhausted as I am?" Paul asked.

Moira shrugged her shoulders. "I do get tired, but not often. Maybe it's because I meditate." She gave him an impish smile to imply she wasn't entirely serious.

Perhaps that was it. Perhaps her meditation was what made her seem so serene and effortless most of the time. Maybe that was why she was so different from anybody he'd ever known.

Paul took a sip of tea. "Moira, what was your impression of today's meeting?"

"What do you mean, exactly?" Moira's blue eyes were unreadable.

"Well, it was just so bizarre! I haven't ever had a business meeting like it before. And those minutes! I looked them over in the car and they only show Chakawarti's statements. It was as if I wasn't there. What was the point?" Paul swatted a fly away from his food. "I mean, the most important thing in a meeting is clear communication, especially if there's a language difference. This is supposed to be a cooperative project, after all. We *both* want it to be a success. I just don't understand their behavior."

Moira smiled. "Some of today was due to Mr. Chakawarti's personality, but a lot of the confusion you're experiencing is due to cultural differences."

Paul wrinkled his forehead. "Cultural differences?"

"You know, like with the Japanese. Besides their overt politeness and precise attention to detail, there's a myriad of unspoken expectations based on thousands of years of Japanese culture. A similar thing is going on here, Paul. You have to suspend your own judgments in order to deal with them clearly. Do you follow me?"

Paul shook his head. "I wish Michael were here. Not that he could help me with understanding India, but he's been the one to handle any negotiations we've had so far with Asians in Seattle. I feel like a fish out of water. I haven't done anything like this, and I have no idea how to proceed." Paul thought he saw a flicker of surprise flash through Moira's eyes, but when he looked again they were as unreadable as ever.

"I'll try to help in whatever way I can." Moira squeezed Paul's hand. "What else do you have to do here?"

Paul smiled his thanks. "Tomorrow we'll meet Chakawarti at the building site. That reminds me, I need to go over the preliminary design plans when we get back to the hotel. We still have to negotiate details on the final working drawings -- God knows how long that will take if today's meeting was any indication of how things get done in this part of the world."

Moira laughed. "Well, I can offer some advice on how to handle tomorrow, if you'd like to hear it."

"Please."

"Release your expectations of how business is supposed to be conducted. As you've already noticed, the way things are done in Seattle is completely different from the way things are done in Delhi."

Paul nodded. "Anything else?"

A Mona Lisa smile traced across her lips. "Just ... go with the flow."

Paul pounced on the phrase. "Go with the flow! You've said that before. What do you mean?"

Moira stared down at her hands. "I asked a teacher of mine, a long time ago, how to handle unexpected situations. And my teacher told me, 'go with the flow.'" Moira looked up into Paul's eyes. "Don't resist what's coming at you. Respond to what is going on, but don't create friction with your own actions. Do you understand?"

The heat was getting to Paul and he was quite dizzy. "I think so."

Moira reached across the table and touched his forehead with her finger. The dizziness faded. "Eat your dinner; it will help your body feel better."

They finished their meal with a discussion of various places to sightsee in the coming days, if Paul's work finished by tomorrow as he anticipated it would. There were a few sights around Delhi that Paul wanted to see, simply because of the historic architecture. Moira also suggested the

Taj Mahal, which would be a day trip as it was a hundred miles outside of Delhi. With those possibilities in their minds, they returned to the hotel.

The walk had done Paul some good, and he was quite relaxed when they got to their room. The air conditioning was a welcome treat. Paul decided to take a nap above the sheets with his clothes on, with the provision that Moira wake him in two hours to call his uncle. Moira sat in the chair in the living area and closed her eyes to meditate, and Paul closed his eyes in the bedroom and was out within seconds.

At 7:45am PST, Paul tried his uncle's home number in Palo Alto. His Aunt Susan answered.

"Oh Paul, how are you? It's been too long!" Aunt Susan greeted him. "Good heavens, Stephen hasn't lived here for six months. The old coot left me for some legal secretary, although I heard she's dumped him now. She must be smarter than the other ones," Aunt Susan quipped.

"Aunt Susan, I'm so sorry to hear that. I had no idea." Paul said. Uncle Stephen had told no one in the family that he and Aunt Susan were split up.

"You sweetheart, there's nothing to be sorry about. I'm having the time of my life. As for Stephen, I'm sorry to say, he is your uncle after all, but good riddance to bad rubbish. He gave me a gift by leaving me, he really did." It was true, Aunt Susan sounded happier than she had in all the years Paul had known her. "Sorry I can't help you out with finding him -- I have no idea where he is or who he's living with now. Why don't you try your Seattle office, if you can't get through down here?"

Paul took some time to collect himself after talking to his aunt. He looked at his watch. It was forty-five minutes until either West Coast office opened for the day. He hadn't considered that his uncle would ever leave Aunt Susan. He looked over at Moira, who sat peacefully with her eyes closed, a slight smile to her lips. How casually people took their marriages, it seemed. Here he was, halfway around the world with the woman he loved and wanted to be with more than anyone or anything else. He couldn't imagine why someone wouldn't value their marriage. Then, the image of Maggie hit him square between the eyes and he sank his head into his hands. He'd forgotten Maggie. He got up and took a long, hot shower.

Still dripping and wrapped in a terry bathrobe, he dialed Seattle.

"Good morning, Marbanks Architects." A familiar voice came over the receiver.

Paul struggled to recall the new receptionist's name. "Alice! Hi, it's

Paul. Is Michael in?"

"Oh, Mr. Marbanks, are you okay??? We didn't know if you made it out of San Francisco before the earthquake!" Alice exclaimed over the line. "Francis told everybody it was just about the time your plane took off!"

Paul had been so preoccupied with meeting Moira again that he'd completely forgotten to check in at the office. If he had, he'd have known about the earthquake right away. He should talk to Francis, his administrative assistant. But Michael was the one left in charge, and would be the one to receive any direct communication from San Francisco.

"I'm in Delhi. I didn't even know about the 'quake until this morning." Paul said into the phone.

"Well, we are so glad you're okay," said Alice, speaking as if she'd told the office already. Considering how loud her voice could be at times, she probably already had by answering his phone call. "I'll put you on to Mr. Takatsuka. Hold, please."

"Paul! Man, it's so good to hear your voice. We didn't know if you'd made it out of there or not." Michael's voice came strongly over the line.

"I'm fine. But I can't get a line into San Francisco. Have you heard from Star Fleet?" Paul asked.

"Oh, yes. The Admiral is alive and kicking. The baseball stadium he was in got pretty shook up, but nothing can kill that old buzzard." Michael laughed. "Their office building got a little damaged. They're still assessing it. And it messed up the computer system bad, man. Totally screwed everything."

"What about their backup?" Paul automatically asked. Backing up the day's data was a closing ritual for every Seattle employee.

"Well, Steve baby doesn't run as tight a ship as you do. Seems his administrative assistant was new and not entirely computer literate. She maybe did back up once a month, and the rest of the office staff varied with how often they did it. Stephen's main files are a disaster, as far as they can tell. Each time they start to look into it, the power goes down. It's bad news."

Paul whistled. "Well, I won't tell Mr. Chakawarti that. So how is communication between the branches going?"

"It's touch and go. Sometimes they can call out, but we can't ever get a line in. Several employees who live in the suburbs have been e-mailing us from their homes. We've taken on a lot of their projects. It's a bitch, man."

He could hear Michael sipping his coffee.

"Well, keep me informed. Oh, and the next time you get through to Star Fleet, have the Admiral contact me at the hotel. Anything else, Number One?" Paul asked.

"Nah, nothing that can't wait until you get back. Enjoy India man, work on your tan. Find a guru." Michael chuckled.

"Well, I found someone else, but I'll fill you in when I get back." Paul smiled.

"I can hardly wait. Take care, okay? Francis wants to talk to you." Michael transferred the phone over.

"Mr. Marbanks? Thank goodness you're all right. I realize I should have contacted the hotel in New Delhi, but I didn't think of it. I kept trying to contact the airlines in San Francisco and didn't get anywhere." Francis sounded relieved.

"I'm fine, Francis. Sorry I didn't contact you -- I've been busy. How is everything going?" Paul asked with concern.

"Like clockwork, Mr. Marbanks. I just wanted to tell you that I'm going to change your airline reservation to a direct flight back to Seattle. The Bay Area is still having aftershocks."

"Good thinking, ensign."

Francis laughed. "Well, um, aye, aye Captain," she said gamely. Francis was a Masterpiece Theater fan herself; the Star Trek jargon went right over her head.

"See you soon." Paul hung up the phone.

Moira opened her eyes and stretched. She bent forward and touched her hands to the floor, then sat back up and waved at Paul who sat on the edge of the bed in the other room.

"How are things?" she walked over to him.

"Oh, not as bad as I feared. It sounds like Star Fl -- I mean, the San Francisco office is in kind of a mess, but no one was hurt, thank God. Since I can't get hold of them directly, I asked Michael to have them contact me here. I'm afraid that means no sightseeing for today, at least. I'll be hanging around here until tomorrow morning."

Moira sat down near him. "That's fine with me." She hesitated, "I didn't know Michael worked with you now."



Paul was surprised. He hadn't known she knew who Michael was.

"Well, I'm assuming he was your college buddy who lived in Seattle. But I think the last time we were together he worked for someone else. Am I right?"

"Yes. Michael's a good friend, and my Number One at the company. It was strange you never met him when we lived together." Paul's stomach had butterflies thinking about then.

"Well, we were pretty wrapped up in each other." Moira grinned and lay back on the bed. She propped her head up with her hand. "You've changed a lot over time," she mused.

Paul looked at her, "Ripened like a fine wine? Or aged like cheese?" He grinned.

"Oh, you were such a cutie in DC." Moira smiled as if it were yesterday "A young hunk. So -- buff." She reached out and touched his arm. "In Seattle," she screwed up her face as if trying to remember, "you were still a hunk but more ... of a person, I think. I mean, you were a more full person, you know what I mean?"

"I think so," Paul didn't really understand but he loved hearing Moira talk about him. "And what am I now, a flabby old man?" he teased.

She laughed, slipped her hand under his robe and caressed his stomach. "Hardly. I love your stomach. It's not as rock hard as it used to be, but it's not a potbelly, either. It's," she rolled over and kissed it through his robe, "soft and fuzzy and I like it."

Paul sensed his interest rising, but he wanted to keep talking. It seemed like so many of their potential conversations were sidetracked by intense lovemaking. He wanted to get to know this woman that he felt so bonded with. "And who do you like best, the cute hunk, the more full person or the soft and fuzzy guy?"

She laughed, "Well, you were really something in Los--" she stuttered, "I mean last night." She reached up and touched his cheek, "last night you were really something. But I love you each time, so it's hard to favor one time more than the other."

Paul reached out and stroked her golden hair. "And I've loved you from the moment I first set eyes on you."

"Nah, you didn't. It was lust at first sight. Simple, college-boy lust," she teased.

"No, Moira," Paul held her head between his hands, "I remember." He gently kissed her forehead.

She cuddled up against him, playing with the front of his robe, softly fingering his chest hair. "I do, too."

He held her in his arms, enjoying the gentle arousal he was feeling. He kissed the top of her head. "Moira, do you remember us saying something about cosmic timing?"

"Like it was yesterday," she grinned, rubbing her chin against his shoulder.

"Well, do you think that Fate, or the Universe, or whatever, will ultimately allow us to be together?"

"We're together now," she observed.

"No, I mean that we'll be able to be together for -- I don't know if I'd say forever, but -- yeah, I'd like it to be forever." Paul's heart beat a little harder.

She rolled over and looked him in the eyes. "I don't know what the Universe has planned for us. It's always a surprise to me. I do know I can't go back to Seattle when you're scheduled to, though."

Paul's heart sank; that was what he'd been hoping.

"Well, then, I'll just have to accept being with you now." He kissed her on the lips. "And pray for the future."

Rajinder picked them up early the next morning and drove them out through the suburbs to the building site. The houses and paved roads gave way to fields and dusty lanes, mud hut villages with dung fires burning, emaciated goats and muddy pigs chased by toddlers naked from the waist down.

Mr. Chakawarti and his sons were waiting for them by a large field bordered by tall trees and a stream. He welcomed Paul and Moira warmly and led them on a walk around the site. He explained to Paul that the stream only existed at this time of year, after the monsoons. By December or January it would return to a dusty gully. Paul asked perfunctory questions and received an education about building in India, glad that he wasn't a contractor. Paul and Mr. Chakawarti stood out in the middle of the field looking at the plans, while the others took refuge in the shade of the trees. It was a productive morning. By the time the inspection was over they had

decided to divert the stream away from the parking area into a small lake behind the building. An outdoor sitting area and extra windows for the lower floor restaurant near the lake were added to the plans as well. It turned out that Mr. Chakawarti's nephew was a landscape designer, and they decided to hire him to landscape the area. Before the sun had reached its midpoint in the sky, they were on their way back to Chakawarti and Son's offices.

They finalized the contract over lunch and made some alterations to the previous days' minutes as Paul pointed out the several discrepancies in them. Moira had little to say or do, but it seemed that her mere presence kept their hosts well-behaved. By two o'clock that afternoon, Paul's business was done. He had two days left in India before his flight back to Seattle.

Rajinder cheerfully took them on a driving tour of both old and New Delhi. Weaving in and out of traffic, dodging those ubiquitous bullock carts and bicycle cabs, he gave a little narrative on the history as well as the interesting sights. It turned out that there have been many Delhis. With each successive ruler an old one was abandoned and a new one built, sometimes in a different location, sometimes on top of the old city, so there were many layers of history. Paul's face was glued to the window. American cities were infants compared to Delhi; even Washington, D.C. didn't have the same depth of past. It was so different from anything he'd ever seen or experienced. He glanced over at Moira several times. Most of the time she had her eyes closed, meditating. When her eyes were open, she seemed to be looking beyond all the people and animals and things. He wondered what she was seeing, and how it differed from what he saw. The driver pulled up to Lodi Gardens and Tombs and parked the car.

"Very, very beautiful place," Rajinder said, "you simply must take a little walk. I will be waiting here when you return." He shoed them toward the place, and went to join some people he knew in the shade of a young banyan tree.

At the entrance to the gardens, there was a young man with a large cooler cart on wheels. "Pani Wallah, Pani Wallah," he cried.

"He's saying 'Water Seller, Water Seller'." Moira translated for Paul. "That certainly doesn't look like water." Moira said to the Pani Wallah, looking at his cart.

The very dark fellow flashed white teeth. "Yes, Mem-Sahib. I am selling bottled water, very cold, very delicious." He held up two bottles of mineral water with ice dripping off them.

Paul reached into his pocket for some rupees, but Moira stayed his hand. "Have you any cola or orange soda?"

"Certainly, Mem-Sahib." He pulled out a bottle of each.

Moira turned to Paul and said, "I highly recommend a brand name soda with a cap that looks factory sealed."

Recalling the bit about water at their first dinner, Paul took her suggestion quickly. They both purchased sodas and went in through the red-bricked walls to the Lodi Gardens.

"They tend to make their own mineral water, or get it from the black market. You'd find that it would be less pure than water from a tap on the street," Moira said, taking a sip of her soda from a paper straw.

Paul nodded and looked back at the Pani Wallah. "He's darker than most of the people around here. Is he Indian, or from some place else?"

"His accent was from Madras." Moira said, absently. "That's down south towards the tip of the continent. People are fairer around here in the north, and get progressively browner as you get closer to the equator. Well, you'd find that anywhere -- Africa, as well."

The Lodi gardens were well kept, with vast stretches of extremely short green grass bordered by neat rows of marigolds. There were people sitting on the grass having picnics here and there, and a group of school children in white shirts and blue shorts or skirts over by some leaning date palms. Several were laughing excitedly under one tree; a schoolboy had climbed halfway up and triumphantly waved his arm in a cast over his head.

"Look at that boy with the broken arm!" Moira said, "What would his mother say if she saw him climbing that way?"

Paul had to laugh, "Moira, I've never heard you sound so maternal!" She sounded so like his own mother, or his sister talking about her own kids.

Moira glanced sharply at him, and then grinned. "It looks like boys will be boys, no matter where in the world you are!"

They walked to Mohammed Shah's tomb, which Paul recalled from his reading as a prototype of later Moghul tombs. With its octagonal form, sloping buttresses and projecting eaves, he could see in its style the design that would eventually develop into the Taj Mahal. He was absorbed in thought, studying its lines and noting the design of the brick, when he realized Moira was standing beside him, softly laughing.

"Sorry," he said. "It's the architect in me."

"I know. But check this out." Moira grabbed him by the arm and led him, not up the stairs into the main part of the tomb, but down through the darkened tunnel beneath it.

A few yards into the tunnel, they no longer had the daylight behind them and Paul could see nothing but blackness.

"Listen," whispered Moira.

Paul strained his ears, but detected nothing. Then a slight wind blew through the place, and there was a rustling over his head. Leaves? he thought, but nothing could grow in this darkness. Then a few squeaks made the hairs on the back of his neck stand up.

"Bats!" Paul croaked.

"Run!" Moira let go of his hand, and took off into the darkness.

Paul froze for a millisecond, but the rustling of wings jolted him into movement. He raced after her footsteps, with the image of thousands of bats chasing him. Moments later they were both out in the glaring sunshine again, and less than a dozen winged rodents followed them out of the tomb.

Moira held her sides, laughing. Paul looked at her indignantly.

"That was *not* funny!" Paul said hotly. "I nearly wet my pants in there." But Moira was so helpless with laughter that Paul had to join her. He gathered her into his arms and kissed her, her lips slightly salty from perspiration. He noticed how pale she was. They had been in Delhi for three days, and Paul already sported a tan. Moira, who had been going around in sleeveless dresses and no suntan lotion that Paul had noticed, remained translucent -- although her cheeks were slightly flushed from laughing. If her hair hadn't been golden, and her eyes not blue, Paul would have suspected she an albino. She looked up into his brown eyes.

"I love you." She smiled a contented smile.

He rested his forehead against hers. "I love you," he said, huskily, "with all my heart and soul."

Rajinder took them the long route back to their hotel, so it was dark by the time they arrived. He was on loan to them for the next two days, so they decided to take a side trip to Agra the next day. One couldn't visit India without seeing the Taj Mahal.

They left at dawn the next morning, with box lunches as the drive was going to take several hours. It was a long, dusty drive, and Paul was

grateful to be in an air-conditioned car as opposed to one of the rickety tin buses that lumbered by with people hanging out the windows. It must be like an oven inside one of those, thought Paul. The traffic was heavy the entire way. Their car was one of the swiftest vehicles on the road, most people being on bicycle or bullock cart; even the buses were making a top speed of only 35 miles an hour. But the trucks came zooming by at nearly a hundred miles per hour, creating several hair-raising incidents

"I think the truck drivers must get paid by how quickly they deliver their goods, not how far they travel," Moira commented, after one close call that nearly drove them off the road.

"They drive like they're on drugs." Paul muttered.

"Oh, they probably are." Moira said, matter-of-factly.

They arrived in the city of Agra around noon. The city itself, with its crowded alleys and crazed rickshaw riders, looked like an extension of Delhi. They drove through without stopping, munching on their box lunches. The road to the Taj Mahal passed a golf course and many imposing hotels. Rajinder dropped them off at the main gate and drove away to find a petrol station.

Paul and Moira followed the crowd through the main gate's red sandstone arches and stopped to get oriented inside. There was a large pond with white marbled lotus fountains dotting its placid water. Past a white stone bench, steps went down to a long, slender canal flanked by cypress trees that led directly to the base of the Taj Mahal itself. It was a majestic sight, with its central white dome flanked by smaller domes and minarets, all standing out starkly against the clear blue sky. Paul walked towards it as if drawn by its spell, not noticing the ornamental gardens on either side. It seemed to be pure white until he got closer and noticed the elaborate pattern of white and dark marble around its many arches. He ascended the steps, pausing to notice the semiprecious stones inlaid in the walls. Running his hand over the cool marble, he felt its delicate ridges and outlines. He found himself at one of the doorways into the tomb, surrounded by people removing their sandals. Paul looked around for Moira. She was halfway up the stairs behind him helping a small, bent woman whose white sari sash covered her gray-white hair, scale the steps. She looked up and waved. It took a few minutes for her to catch up to him, while guards in khaki uniforms kept gesturing for him to remove his loafers.

"Thank you, my dear. I am most grateful for your kind assistance," the elderly woman said in a well-bred English accent.

"Oh, it was nothing. Thank you for your charming story." Moira smiled and half bowed.

Then the woman disappeared into the crowd and Moira joined Paul.

"A missionary from Lucknow," Moira explained to Paul. "She's lived here sixty years, but she's originally from Brighton. Oh, don't leave your shoes here -- they mightn't be here when you come out." She picked Paul's expensive loafers up from the ground and stashed them in a plastic shopping bag she'd had wadded in her pocket. She slipped off her chappel sandals and added them to the bag. Barefoot, they both wandered into the tomb.

It was dark and cool inside, even in the swarm of people. The ceilings gracefully curved upwards under the soaring marble dome, with light filtering in from finely cut marble screens. A tour guide demonstrated the echo in this high chamber, his voice going round and round and fading into the air. Paul wanted to stand there and study its lines and arches forever. He moved from one side to another, noticing how the view changed with each different angle. Finally he felt Moira's hand slip into his.

"I'd like to see the Red Fort before we head back." she whispered.

Reluctantly, Paul left with her, realizing that one day wasn't long enough for him to absorb the beauty of the place. He would have liked to see its exterior in the morning light, and wished he could stay to see the sunset. But the Red Fort would be another visual feast, so they slipped their shoes back on and went to find Rajinder.

Their well-rested chauffeur (they found him sleeping in the car with the motor running to power the air conditioning) was only too pleased to drive them up the road along the river to the Red Fort. A sprawling, sandstone structure of many turrets and domes and stairs, it was quite a climb to get inside. By this time of day, Paul wasn't that interested in architecture, but more in enjoying wandering the ruins hand in hand with Moira.

Paul took Moira's hands. "If you can't come home with me, then I'll stay here with you. My visa is good for fifteen days. If you need to stay longer, I'll extend it."

Moira shook her head. "How about your work, Paul? Won't they need you back in the States?"

"Well, they're managing now, they can manage a bit longer. What are your plans after Delhi?"

Holding his hand, Moira went towards the edge of the Fort. "Well, I

was thinking it might be a nice break to go up to Srinager." She looked over at him. "That's in Kashmir, the foothills of the Himalayas. So it's cooler up there than here." She grinned. "I'm thinking of renting a houseboat. Or maybe I'll go over to Bombay. I really miss the ocean." Her voice trailed off as they came to a slit in the wall. Through it they could see the Yamuna River and, farther down, the Taj Mahal.

"Did you know there could have been two Taj Mahals?" Moira traced her fingers over the reddish stone wall.

"No, I didn't." The view distracted Paul from their other conversation.

"Well, the Shah Jahan built the white Taj Mahal as a resting place for his wife, and nearly bankrupted his Shahdom or whatever you call it. It's been described as the most extravagant monument ever built for love." She grinned at Paul. "Then he began to build an identical one, only in black marble, for himself. His son had him imprisoned here for the rest of his life, looking out at the tomb of his beloved."

They came to a secluded grassy nook and sat down for a rest. The sun beat mercilessly down on them and Paul considered the possibility of both of them coming down with heat stroke.

"'Mad dogs and Englishmen go out in the midday sun'." Moira brushed a strand of hair from her eyes. She'd braided her hair into one thick braid and pinned it up to get it off her neck. Sweat glistened on her white shoulders.

"Well, I'm not English and it's not noon anymore but I know what you mean." Paul said. "I wonder if we should go check out one of the restaurants in those hotels, just to get out of the sun."

"You know, we have the driver until tomorrow. We could check into one of those hotels and see the Taj Mahal again at dawn, before going back up to Delhi." Moira leaned back on her elbows in the grass.

"We don't have a change of clothes." Paul did not like the idea of having to wear the sweat-soaked clothes he had on for the rest of the afternoon, much less having to put them back on tomorrow.

"Oh, we can give them to the Dhobi Wallah at the hotel, and they can have them back to us freshly laundered in the morning," Moira said, brightly. "Who needs clothes in the hotel room."

"Dhobi Wallah -- is that laundry service? What a brilliant idea! What are we waiting for?" Paul wondered if old Rajinder had used up his



tank of gas running the air conditioner while he waited for them. They headed back down towards the car.

Rajinder was happy to drive them to a hotel for the night. It turned out he had family in Agra that he could stay with until the morning.

Paul chose the hotel with the most elegant exterior. It was fashioned after the Red Fort, with thick vines creeping down the brickwork of its facade. It turned out to be the most expensive of all the five-star hotels there, but Paul didn't care. If he couldn't buy Moira anything, at least he could give her the gift of a night in the best hotel in Agra.

"I reserved us the Moghul Chamber Exclusive," Paul told her as he walked away from the front desk. "It has the best view in the hotel."

"Well, let's go and peel out of these clothes. How about room service for dinner?" Moira took his arm as they entered the elevator.

"I'll give you room service." Paul said under his breath and they got on the elevator with a group of Japanese tourists.

Their room turned out to be a suite grand enough for the Shah Jahan himself, with a huge picture window overlooking the Taj and the Yamuna behind it. An overstuffed couch with silk cushions sat facing it, and Paul plopped himself down.

"I'm getting old," he groaned. "Every muscle in my body aches."

Moira came up behind him and kneaded his shoulders. "Well, you can call the concierge to send up a masseuse if you'd like," she said. "This place has everything you could dream of -- they're giving elephant and camel rides around the grounds, and they even have an in-house astrologer."

"Mmm. Forget the masseuse, nothing could feel as good as what you're doing to me right now." Paul turned his head he could look up at her. "We could have our astrological charts done. We could see if we're star-crossed or soul mates or whatever."

Moira hesitated for a moment, and smiled down at him. "We don't need any charts to tell us that." She leaned down and kissed him. "Why don't we give our clothes to the Dhobi Wallah and go check out the Jacuzzi tub in the bathroom?"

With their clothes on the way to the laundry, Paul and Moira relaxed in a bathroom that was as regal as the suite itself. There were gold fixtures and pink tiles, plush burgundy towels, and a spa bathtub that looked like it could seat eight.

"You could swim in here." Paul plunged in. Moira slipped in beside him.

"Ooh. Nice and hot. Let's not do the air jets -- it makes the temperature drop." She lay back into the steaming bath.

Paul admired the way her breasts floated, nipples barely peeking out of the water. He noticed by the faucet a little wicker basket with complimentary shampoo and also a tiny bottle of bubble bath. He reached over and grabbed the bubble bath.

"No air jets, yes bubbles!" he exclaimed, and emptied the contents under the running water.

"Paul!" she squealed, "I think that stuff's concentrated!" A huge volume of foam appeared.

Soon white bubbles covered the whole surface of the tub six inches thick. Paul regretted adding the stuff; he couldn't see Moira's body in the water any more. Obliging, she sat up, bubbles sliding off her wet skin, and slid over to him.

"Mm." She rubbed her body against his firmness. "I didn't think you could do that in hot water. Or is it cold water?"

"Moira, you could raise the dead in any temperature." Paul sputtered over the bubbles.

He slipped his arms around her and drew her close. The action squished the foam between them and set off little bubbles floating through the air. She giggled and buried her face in his neck. He had bubbles stuck to his beard, and made a mental note to shave the damn thing off. Then Moira massaged his shoulder blades with her fingertips, each touch releasing little knots of tension from his tight muscles.

"Ahh, ahh," Paul moaned, torn between wanting to melt into the water and wanting to rise and take action. Her hands moved down to his lower back, where he hadn't even known he was tight. It felt odd to have all the muscles in his lower body relax -- except the six-inch one. She gripped his buttocks and kneaded them, but then her fingers crept around to the crack between them. That was invitation enough.

Paul grabbed Moira's waist and lifted her out of the water. She slid up the front of his body until her breasts were in his face.

"Dinner!" He ravenously began to suck one breast and then the other. Her hands clutched his shoulders for support, while her legs gripped his torso. She made little cooing sounds in her throat. He could feel her

crotch, hot and wet, pressing against him, pushing into him as he stimulated her nipples with his hard tongue. She cried out with pleasure when he lowered her down on him. As entered her, her muscles gripped him, as if pulling him in. There was no stopping her then; she began to pulsate against him, driving herself into him over and over again. Paul found himself pinned against the edge of the tub while she satisfied her raging desire. As she began to climax, Paul felt himself drawn with her, his own passion surging as hers erupted. A few final thrusts and he joined her in ecstasy. A shuddering moment of paralysis; total release; and then they both melted into the steaming, sudsy water.

The sun was beginning to set when they came out of the bathroom wrapped in thick, burgundy bath towels. Through the picture windows they could see the white surface of the Taj Mahal tinged in pink. Even the air was a hazy pink, blurring the outlines of things. They sat on the couch, watching the colors change as the sun went down.

"You know, I've loved you from the moment I first saw you crossing the street in D.C. From before I'd even seen your face." Paul smiled at the memory.

"For me, it was my first kiss." Moira smiled nostalgically, also.

"Our first kiss? In Dumbarton Oaks?" Paul tried to recall Moira's reaction to his kissing her then.

Moira giggled girlishly. "It was a very good kiss."

Paul's heart contracted. He found himself asking, "Why me?"

"Why you what?" Moira nuzzled against him.

"Why me of all the men in the world?" He did not want to use a lot of words.

"Why me of all the women in the world?" He could feel her eyeing him quizzically.

"Why you? Moira, you are unlike any other woman I have ever met. It would be impossible not to fall in love with you. But me," Paul shrugged his shoulders. "I'm just a regular guy. Nothing special. Why would a woman like you even give me a second glance?"

Moira's jaw dropped open. "Paul, what a question!" She sat up straight. "You are not a regular guy to me." Her gaze took in all of him. "Besides being strong and tall and dashing handsome" -- she smiled at the way she'd made him squirm -- "you are kind, and gentle, and big-hearted." Paul started to turn his head away in embarrassment, but she took his chin in

her hand and made him look at her. "And the most wonderful lover." She softly kissed his lips. "You are definitely special." She kissed him again. "I love being with you. I love how I feel beside you. I love your energy." She looked towards the now bluish-purple Taj Mahal. "You are the only man I have ever loved and ever will love," she whispered as if confessing a deep, dark secret.

Paul wrapped his strong arms around her and kissed the top of her head. "And you are the only woman I have ever loved and ever will love," he vowed to her.

They had requested an early wake-up call, because Paul wanted to see the Taj Mahal one more time when it opened at 6:00am. There was one little problem: the Dhobi Wallah wouldn't be returning their clothes until 8:00am.

"We could wear the bed sheets," Moira joked. "If you wrap them the right way, they look like a traditional Indian woman's sari or man's dhoti."

Paul shook his head. "I don't think so. I could just see the whole thing dropping around my ankles if I so much as sneezed."

Moira gave him an admiring look. "Ooo. I'd like to see *that*."

"I'd like to see *you* wrapped up in one of these." He got out of bed and headed towards the bathroom. "But seriously, could you call the Concierge and see what they can do about getting our clothes? I want to get to the Taj as early as possible."

"Can do," he heard her say as he shut the bathroom door behind himself.

Paul took a little longer with his morning ablutions as he had decided to use the complimentary plastic razor and shaving cream. Halfway through, he wondered if he should have warned Moira that he was going to shave off his beard. Then he wondered if he should at least have warned her that he was going to take so long in the bathroom. With his face half bare and half covered with shaving cream, he stuck his head out of the bathroom to tell her what he was doing. The room was empty.

"Moira?" He stepped into the room. Then he heard the door handle move and, being undressed, he stepped back behind the bathroom door, peeking out through the crack.

Moira came in, dressed in a pure gold sari and carrying some clothing. She was stunningly beautiful. The little gold shirt came down just

below her breasts, baring her midriff, and her hips and legs were swaddled in yards and yards of shimmering spun gold, with one end swept up and over her shoulder. Her hair was in a thick braid down her back, and he noticed the color blended with her sari. Paul wanted to say something as she hadn't noticed him, but words wouldn't come out of his mouth. He noticed he was dripping shaving cream down his front onto the floor, so he ducked back into the bathroom and finished shaving as quickly as possible.

When he came out, he was surprised to see Moira sitting on the couch wrapped in the burgundy towel from last night. What had happened to the sari?

She looked up at him in surprise. "Your face! It's naked!"

Paul instinctively touched his own face. "Oh, uh, sorry -- I should have warned you. I just couldn't stand it anymore, with the heat and all. Does it look okay?"

"It looks very sexy." She walked over to him and touched his face. "I like it."

"Uh, speaking of naked -- " Paul began, looking down at her towel.

"Oh, our clothes aren't here yet. The concierge said he couldn't reach the Dhobi Wallah, but I managed to get him to send up these clothes from the gift shop in the lobby. It's not open yet, but they got these especially."

Paul looked down at the matching T shirt and shorts with the logo of the hotel on them. Two sets -- one for him and one for her. "Uh, they sent these up? But what about the sari?"

Moira gave him a shocked look. "What?"

In his head Paul heard Moira's voice from the other day, 'I will never lie to you, I will answer your questions as honestly as I can, but there are some things I'm ... not at liberty to answer'. Well, she'd better answer this question.

"I saw you come into the room wearing a sari, a gold sari. It looked exquisite -- where is it?" Paul demanded, looking around.

Moira looked around the room, not so much for the sari as for an answer. Then she looked back at him. "Are you sure you saw me wearing a sari?"

As she asked, doubt entered Paul's mind. "Well, yes, I think so." Or had it been some kind of vision? "I mean, I stuck my head out of the bathroom to tell you I was shaving off my beard. You weren't there, and

then you came into the room wearing a sari. I'm sure I saw it, I mean, if I didn't see it, what did I see?" Now he was beginning to babble and doubt his sanity at the same time.

Moira reached up and smoothed his forehead and temple. The motion cleared away his concern for his sanity as well, and he felt oddly at peace inside, as if he'd accept any answer from her, however strange. Maybe he just dreamed her in a sari. Maybe she was wearing a sari and it disappeared. She smiled at him. "Maybe you saw me and maybe you didn't," she said softly. "Does it matter?" Suddenly it didn't matter. It was just one of those mysteries about her that wasn't going to be answered, right away at least; one of those incidents with her that wasn't going to be explained. He had to file it in his mind under "acceptance", and let it go.

They both dressed in the tee shirts and shorts and got ready to go to the Taj Mahal.

"We look like the Bobsey Twins," Paul teased.

Moira responded, "Or Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum."

When they got there, the gates had just opened and there were very few people about. It was magical, wandering through the gardens in the early morning mist. The Taj gave off a rosy aura as the first morning rays gently touched it.

Paul whispered to Moira, "This is Islamic, isn't it? So do they call their early morning prayers from those minarets?"

Moira shook her head. "The Taj Mahal can't be used as a mosque; it doesn't face Mecca."

Going inside was a completely different experience from the day before. With the building nearly empty, it was easier to study its graceful symmetry and beautiful inlaid patterns without any jostling or pushing. This time they were able to explore the other areas inside including the tombs of Shah Jahan and his wife in the basement (as opposed to the false tombs in the main chamber). They found they were unable to go up any of the minarets, for bats congested the stairways. Paul and Moira wandered out onto the marble platform and around behind the Taj for a view of the Yamuna River. The atmosphere was one of total serenity, total peace.

Something happened to Paul as he stood there next to Moira at the base of the Taj Mahal, watching the Yamuna River and the countryside beyond slowly awaken in growing sunlight. It was hard to put into words; it was more of a spiritual feeling. He didn't think of it as enlightenment, for he didn't feel lighter. Quite the opposite: he felt more solid and more real.

Perhaps it was an awakening, as he did feel fully awake and alert to his surroundings. It was as if he became aware of everything at once. The world around him seemed vibrantly alive -- even the trees and the marble beneath him. All things seemed clear and sharply defined. It wasn't the light; they were standing in the shadows and the mist was still rolling off the river. It seemed like more of an internal focus. He turned and looked at Moira, who simply stood there, with a slight smile on her lips, taking in the beauty of it all. She was there, really there. She was real. None of this was an illusion; it was all really happening. His whole body felt alive, as if he could feel every nerve ending, every molecule tingling. His bare feet were firm against the marble floor; he felt connected to it. He opened his mouth to speak, and then he felt light-headed, so much so that he thought he was going to fall over. Then Moira turned and put her hand on his shoulder, which immediately steadied him.

"Too much of a good thing, huh?" she asked, breaking the spell.

"Uh, yeah. You know, I just realized we skipped breakfast. Maybe I just need something to eat."

It was time to go. They returned to the hotel to pick up their clothes, grab a bite, and check out. There was much more to see in Agra, but Paul sensed the need to return to Delhi, so they hit the road.

It seemed to take more time going back to Delhi than it did coming to Agra. Perhaps the sights were no longer new. Paul's thoughts weren't on the countryside now; they were on work. More importantly, how to reschedule his work so that he could remain in India with Moira, for however long she was going to be there. After a while he had to give it up, because there were just so many conversations he could have in his head with Uncle Stephen, Michael and Francis. He couldn't predict how the office was doing in his absence, or what plans his Uncle had in mind for him. So he turned to Moira and asked her to elaborate on her ideas where to go next.

"Well, I'd like to take the train. It would be fun to try traveling by train in this country," she mused. "I'd really like to see Bombay, and the ocean, but the mountains are looking more and more appealing."

"You said something about a houseboat?"

"Yes, in Srinager, you can rent these beautiful houseboats to stay on Lake Dal, where they have the most wonderful floating gardens. But further north, there's this village called Pahalgam, and you can camp and go hiking..." her voice trailed away. "Remember hiking in the Olympics?"

Paul suddenly saw the mountain hot springs where they'd spent a

leisurely afternoon. "Oh, yes, oh yes I do," he smiled nostalgically.

"So I don't have any firm plans yet. Maybe all the houseboats are booked; maybe the weather is too cold in October up there. I'm not going to make any decisions until you leave town."

"Well, I may not leave town," Paul said. "I'm going to see if I can wrangle a few extra days out of this trip. How long are you planning to be in India?"

Moira's smile brightened at the thought of Paul staying on then faded with his last question, shrugged her shoulders. "I don't really know."

"Would you be open to coming back to Seattle with me when you're done here?" A little seed of anxiety grew in his stomach. *Don't say no!*

Moira looked at him directly. Her eyes were bottomless pools. "There's nothing I would like to do more in the whole world than to go back to Seattle with you. But I'm afraid I'll probably be assigned somewhere else."

"Then do you have an address, some way I can keep in touch with you?" Paul fought to keep some future connection to her, and to the way he felt right now. "An APO, even a work number?"

She tenderly touched his newly shaven cheek. "Oh, Paul. All I can tell you is that you will meet me again, but that I can't stay in contact with you after we leave India."

"Are you married?" Paul bluntly grasped for a reason he could understand.

Her eyes widened in surprise and Paul immediately felt guilty for even suggesting it. Of course she wouldn't be married. She had many secrets to her, but none of them seemed dishonest. Besides, he didn't even want to consider that she could be married to anyone other than him. She shook her head no in response to his question, but it wasn't necessary.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I-- I guess I'll have to accept what little time I can have with you here, and have faith that we'll be together in the future." Paul's shoulders slumped.

She slid across the seat and rested against him. He put his arm around her and kissed the top of her head. Well, he had her now, and probably for another week or two, if he could swing it. Instead of torturing himself with visions of returning alone to the States, he decided to concentrate on enjoying his time with her now, at this moment.

They arrived in at the Ashoka in Delhi shortly before lunch. Paul



found a stack of messages waiting for him at the front desk: several from Michael, several from Francis, one from Mr. Chakawarti, and about fifty from Uncle Stephen. He heaved a deep sigh and went up to the room to return their calls.

"You have reached Marbanks Architects. Our office hours are from 8:30 am to 5:30pm. If you know the extension of the person whom you wish to dial..."

"Shit. What time is it in San Francisco?" He started to hang up the phone.

"Hello, hello?" A voice cut in on the answering machine.

"Oh, hello. This is Paul Marbanks of the Seattle office, and I'm calling from India, so I have no idea what time it is there."

"Oh, hi, Paul. I'm Bob Seller, I met you before you left." Bob was one of Stephen's right hand men. "It's about eleven thirty at night here. I'm pulling an all-nighter trying to get caught up with the mess around here. You know, Stephen's in the hospital."

"No! I didn't, what happened? Was it the quake?" Paul exclaimed.

"Nah, it's surgery on his disc. But he's laid up there and we're all, well, running around like chickens with our heads cut off. We've had to send work up to Seattle, you know."

"Oh, yes, Michael said that would probably happen." Paul saw his extended stay in India evaporating. "Well, is there anything you can tell me regarding why my Uncle has left about fifty messages for me?"

The man chuckled, "Fifty sounds about par for Stephen. He probably wants to get you back here as soon as possible so he can send even more work up to Seattle."

"Is that necessary, or will you guys be able to handle things for a week or so?" Paul hoped he could postpone his own work that long.

"Ahhh, I can't say. I'm just digging out of the piles of paperwork on my own desk, and trying to reconstruct my hard drive. Sorry I can't help you."

"That's all right. I'll call Seattle. I hope I can get my Number One, er, main architect at home, and not at work."

"Good luck. Seattle's probably even busier than we are, since you guys are handling your own stuff and our extra stuff as well," Bob said, and they hung up.

Coral answered the phone when Paul called.

"Sorry to call so late, Coral. I hope I'm not waking you up. Is Michael there? I'm returning his calls."

"Oh, Paul, he's downstairs at the computer. He'll be so glad to hear from you!" He heard Coral put the phone down and then call down to her husband.

"Paul!" Michael came on the line. "Any way you can cut your trip short?"

Paul was taken aback. "Well, my flight leaves tomorrow. How much shorter do you want it?" Paul suddenly feared he'd have to leave that night.

"Nah, I guess that's soon enough. We're sinking, man. We need you bad. I'm an architect, not an administrator. I can't handle this shit. We have all these jobs coming in from California. At first they were only sending the international stuff. I can handle the international. But now we have this California stuff. There are only two guys in the office who know the building codes and regulations in California, and they're so busy answering everybody else's questions, they can't do their own work. It's a zoo." Michael stopped to take a breath.

"Okay, Michael, here's what you do. Until I get back, postpone all jobs that can wait a week, but make our own clients the priority. As far as California is concerned, I'm sure the clients there can understand the impact of the earthquake. But if there is stuff from there that can't wait, pull the California guys off their own projects; reassign the projects if you have to, and have them act as full-time consultants. How's that?"

"Perfect, man, just perfect," Michael sounded relieved.

"Now, I have messages here from Francis. Is she calling about the same thing? Do you know?"

"Probably. No, wait; she wanted to remind you something about your airline ticket. I can't remember what it is. Better call the airline, because she changed it, right?" Michael said.

"To Seattle instead of San Francisco, that's right. Oh, I'll bet that changes my departure time. Well, I know my next call. Hang in there, Number One. I'll be back soon," Paul assured him, and put the receiver down.

Moira lay on the bed opposite him, watching him with a sad smile on her face.

Paul looked at her and sighed. "Well, I guess it's just not meant to be." He couldn't face another phone call at that moment. He crawled across the bed and rested his face in her stomach. She stroked his hair. The phone rang.

"I'll get it." She picked up the receiver. "Hello, yes, er, this is Mrs. Marbanks. Oh, Mrs. Chakawarti, how lovely to speak to you. Yes, dinner tonight? I'm sure that would be delightful. I'll talk to my ... husband. Yes, we just got back from Agra... Oh, it was magnificent. Thank you for the generous loan of your driver... Yes, we just picked up our messages and there's one here from your husband...? Oh, he was calling about dinner so there's no need to call back... Yes, you'll send Rajinder at 6:30? Thank you, we're looking forward to it. We'll see you tonight." She hung up the phone. "Paul, we're going to have a home-cooked Indian dinner at the Chakawarti's."

"Great," grumbled Paul, his face still in her stomach. He wanted to hide there and hope that all the business troubles would magically disappear.

"Paul. Call the airlines. It would help to know exactly how much time we have left together so we can spend it enjoyably, and not moping." Moira sounded gentle, but firm.

Like a schoolboy ordered to do homework, Paul pulled himself up, grabbed his ticket from his jacket pocket, and called the local number printed on it.

"Hello, I'd like to confirm my flight out from Delhi to Seattle tomorrow morning. Paul Marbanks... Yes, it was changed from San Francisco to Seattle. Does that change the departure time?... Oh, one thirty. One thirty in the afternoon?... What? One thirty in the morning? What time do I have to be at the airport?... Two hours for international travel? Are there any other flights? Only 11:55pm tonight or tomorrow night? No, no I guess not." Paul hung up the phone.

Moira sighed and crossed her arms across her chest. "One thirty in the morning, huh? I should have known."

Paul looked at her. "Any way we could skip the Chakawarti's?"

Moira shook her head. "I wouldn't recommend it. That would be extremely rude, after they've loaned us their driver for most of our trip. Let's just get you packed, and make the best of it. We have six, no five hours before Rajinder picks us up."

Paul was in shock. He thought he'd have one more day with Moira,

but now it was a just few more hours. He felt like a man given a five to live. How do you make the most of five hours, without obsessing about the hours to come after that?

Moira put her arms around him and held him.

"How can I do this, Moira? How can I get on a plane and leave you behind?" His voice filled with agony.

Moira said nothing, but began to gently rock him, and gave his head little kisses. Paul complied for a little while, but then rose up with all his strength. He pushed her down onto the bed and rolled on top of her. He kissed her hard and full on the mouth. He found her yielding and open to him. All his frustration, all his anxiety came erupting to the surface, and he poured it into crude kisses and groping. Moira received his tormented passion willingly, seeming not to absorb his pain and rage, but letting it pass through her. Amazingly, his roughness aroused her quickly, and she came the moment he entered her. Her rapturous cries surprisingly soothed his own anguish, and he found in his own orgasm an emotional release. They lay quietly for a while, Moira shivering under him with little spasms as she finished.

"Are ... you okay?" Paul worried that he'd hurt her in some way.

"No, no, just ... aftershocks." Moira whispered blissfully.

Paul propped himself up on his elbows and looked down at her. Her cheeks were glowing and a rosy pink flush spread across her chest. "I was afraid I was being too rough."

"God, no. That was -- mind-blowing. The earth moved," she laughed weakly. "What a going-away gift to give a girl."

"Well, I'll see if I can give you a few more. Heck, we have hours until dinner!" Paul lay down beside her.

"If I survive until dinner. I don't know if I could handle any more 'little deaths' like the last one." Moira laughed, curling up next to him.

"But what a way to go." Paul kissed her.

The Chakawarti's lived in the exclusive section of Haus Kaus. It was an enclave of large houses, each surrounded by six foot brick walls. A *chowkidar*, security guard, met them at the gate. The house was white stucco, with pink trim and a pink tile roof. A small pond crossed by bridge was

beside the patio. The sweeper bearer met them at the door, and showed them in to the main room where Sahib Chakawarti and Mem Sahib were sitting.

"Ah, Mr. and Mrs. Marbanks, I am so pleased you are able to come to our humble home," Mr. Chakawarti said. "I understand that you have a departing flight very early tomorrow morning, so I will make sure that Rajinder takes you back to your hotel with good timing." He shook Paul's hand warmly. "May I present to you Mrs. Anjuli Chakawarti, my wife?"

Mrs. Chakawarti was a foot shorter than her husband, and a foot wider, too. "We are so terribly pleased to have you both here. My husband has been telling me all about you. Especially you, Mrs. Marbanks, you have made quite an impression on him."

"Please, call me Moira," Moira shook her hand warmly. "What a lovely home you have here. Is this where you raised your sons?"

"And are still raising them," Mrs. Chakawarti replied. "Besides the boys you already met who are in business with their father, and our daughters in the United States, we have six other children still in school. Let me present them." She clapped her hands and the sweeper bearer appeared. "Tell the Ayah to show in the children."

A capable, middle-aged woman in a white sari appeared. There were six children ranging from four to fourteen following her. All were clean and neatly dressed. The boys wore blue shorts or trousers, depending on their age, with white button-up shirts. The girls had on tight cotton leggings under knee-length cotton dresses with three quarter-length sleeves, each with a light, gauzy scarf across her neck. They bowed politely and, given permission to play outside, scampered away with the Ayah hurrying after them. Mr. Chakawarti took Paul aside to show him the books in his library, while Moira joined Mrs. Chakawarti at the window, watching the children play.

"Quite a handful," Moira observed.

Mrs. Chakawarti laughed. "Oh, yes, my children have a lot of spunk. This is the fourth Ayah they've been through this year. They just wear them out, my dear."

Paul stood by Mr. Chakawarti while he showed off his extensive library, straining to hear what Moira and Mrs. Chakawarti were talking about in the other room. It seemed to be child rearing. Paul wanted to know what Moira knew or thought on the subject far more than he wanted to hear about Mr. Chakawarti's complete works and first editions. Then another

servant, the Bearer (apparently a step up from the sweeper bearer) appeared and relayed the message that Cook announced dinner was served.

The Chakawartis and Paul and Moira went into the dining room, where the table was set for eight. The younger children had already finished their tea, really an early dinner, and were being sent off to bed. The ones older than ten were permitted to dine with the guests.

Dinner was an amazing experience. Dish after dish was set upon the table, a mingling of scents and visual delights. The children dutifully spoke when spoken to, showing off a remarkable amount of knowledge in response to their parents' specific questions. Paul asked a question directly to the oldest daughter, who blushed and looked down, while her brother piped up an answer. The parents seemed pleased. Moira complimented Mrs. Chakawarti on the menu, and she flushed with pride.

Paul looked at the Indian family, and everything seemed so... *orderly*. All the children well-behaved, each one having their place in the family and acting within expectations. The parents were appropriately proud, and the children appropriately happy. He thought of his own childhood, where his father dominated the dinner table, firing questions to the kids to see if they were listening. His sister Susan always knew the answers, and Paul was always daydreaming. He looked at Moira. What would it have been like, if they had been together all this time? Would they have six children? Would they be happy?

He caught himself on that last train of thought. Six children?!?! What a ridiculous idea. Then Mr. Chakawarti caught his attention with questions about business, and Paul pushed the thought away.

The evening ended very pleasantly, with Paul realizing that the dinner had been an astute political move. He had unconsciously said several complimentary things about his uncle and the business, and could see Mr. Chakawarti now considered Marbanks Architects a solid associate to his company.

As Rajinder drove them to the hotel, Paul asked Moira a question.

"When I used the rest room by the front door, I noticed it had an extra door to the outside itself. Why is that?" He was so tired, having been up before dawn and with the drive back from Agra (not to mention the afternoon's exercise) he couldn't believe he was even interested.

"Oh, that's from the days when the Untouchables cleaned the toilets. The Untouchable caste couldn't enter through the front door and interact with the other servants, so they had to have separate doors for the toilets. I

think." Moira said

They got to the hotel in time for Paul to pick up his bags and catch a cab to the airport. He quickly dismissed the thought of having Moira come with him to see him off. He didn't like the idea of leaving her in the airport at one-thirty in the morning. They stood on the steps of the Ashoka to say good-bye.

Paul thought his heart would break. He could not be doing this, and yet he was. He was the one who was leaving now, not her. He had so much he wanted to say; where could he begin?

"I hate leaving you like this. We're just getting to know each other again. I wish there were some way we could have a normal relationship." Paul stopped himself in frustration.

"I wish we could, too, Paul darling. It just doesn't seem meant to be." Moira's eyes echoed his own pain.

"I remember my Aunt Susan telling me once that life doesn't happen according to our personal plan; that a power greater than ourselves calls the shots. At the time I was still living in D.C. and very anti-religious, so I dismissed what she said as being 'Californian,'" Paul's smile was more like a grimace. "Maybe India has gotten to me, but I'm beginning to understand what she meant. Do you think some higher power is behind all this, and that the timing of us being together is out of our hands?"

Moira smiled at him. "I know that all things occur according to a higher plan, which I'm not always aware of. And I accept that, if we are meant to be together, we will be together. Unfortunately, neither you nor I get to control the timing."

The cab driver coughed noisily and looked at his watch.

"Well, I guess this is good-bye," Paul felt his heart sinking in despair.

"Until we meet again." Moira kissed him.

*Until we meet again. Until we meet again. Until we meet again.* The words echoed in his head all the way to the airport.

ASSIGNMENT 328: SAN FRANCISCO/NEW DELHI, 1989

Hello!

Thank you for this assignment. I am so grateful for this experience! Now I see that my previous 'overstays' were all part of the Infinite Plan. I wish I had known how to compensate for the imbalance in Nature before. I am learning and understanding Unconditional Love and Acceptance. I await my next assignment.

Response:

Dear One:

You are most welcome. Be aware of time and space when dealing with linear Human Beings. Their bodies do not adjust to change as rapidly as yours. Sometimes Nature's imbalance does not require compensation, although it was beneficial during this instance. Go in peace.

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## Chapter 4

SEATTLE 1990/ ADAM

Back in Seattle after the Loma Prieta earthquake, Paul threw himself into his work. He busied himself and the firm with reviewing all the designs they had pending, as well as anything built within the last ten years that might need structural review. In the midst of all this, Michael came to see him.

"Paul, gotta talk, man." Michael said, as he walked into Paul's office.

"Sure, sure." Paul said, closing the cover of the report he'd been studying. "What's on your mind?"

"Gotta hire another architect." Michael stated. "Got one in mind, as a matter of fact. Talked to him while you were helping out Star Fleet."

Paul raised his eyebrows.

"This guy is brilliant, just brilliant. He's been working in Miami, but he's anxious to relocate. Name's Adam Paulson, young guy, glowing resume, glowing references." Michael tapped his fingers on Paul's desk. "Gotta have him. With all this earthquake update stuff we need more help."

The name sounded familiar, but Paul couldn't place it. "Miami? Does he know anything about Northwest architecture, building codes, earthquake safety?"

Michael put a folder in front of Paul. "The dude's resume. He got his BA at the University of Washington, and got his master's at UCLA. Think about it. Let me know." He stood up.

Paul mustered his best British accent. "I most certainly will, Number One. Dismissed."

So Marbanks hired a new architect, whom Paul didn't manage to see right away as he kept getting called to California to help his uncle with business down there. He wasn't happy about it, but he thought he owed his uncle for giving him the opportunity to go to India. It was some time before Paul caught a glimpse of the new guy, through the open door of his office, sitting at his drafting table. Two things caught his attention. First, many people seemed to come and go from his office, just to chat. The guy didn't seem to talk much himself, but listened intently to what everyone said. It was a wonder he could get any work done with so many interruptions. Second, beautiful sketches and colored drawings of buildings adorned his

office wall. Paul wanted to get a closer look at them.

One day Francis came into Paul's office.

"Francis, what do you think of that new guy, what's-his-name?" Paul asked her.

"Adam? He's wonderful. Everybody loves him. He's so easy to talk to," she gushed, obviously quite taken with him.

"But do you know anything about him?" pressed Paul.

"Well, he doesn't drive -- that's his bike by the reception desk. He arrives very early -- before I do, anyway; he never seems to eat lunch, and he leaves very late. So I guess he doesn't have a girlfriend," Francis said wistfully. Francis was as old as Paul, married with three teenagers, but she could still dream. Like Paul, who could only dream.

Paul glanced over towards the new guy's office. "I think I'll go say hello." He got up and went through the maze of cubicles to the other side of the room, stopping a few feet from his destination. Through the open door he could see clearly the pictures on the wall. Each one had a bold signature: A. Paulson. Adam clearly was an architect in the old fashioned sense -- one who took artistic pride in his work. Most of the newer architects Paul had encountered were more preoccupied with pushing their projects to completion. They were the ones huddled around the office PC's that had the computer-aided design programs. Paul didn't think much of computerized plans -- they lacked feeling and depth. The buildings in Adam's pictures were breathtakingly beautiful, and the sketches were so intriguing Paul made a mental note to study them later on.

"Knock, knock." Paul said, standing in the doorway.

"Nobody ever knocks. Come in," Adam did not look up. About twenty-five years old, he wore jeans and a blue shirt, no tie. He had thick, brown hair and was a little taller than Paul. He finished ruling his line on the paper, put his pencil down and looked up. "Can I help you?" Intense brown eyes gazed at him expectantly.

Paul stared at him. He looked so familiar, but he couldn't place where. He reached out his hand. "Hi, Paul Marbanks, Sorry it's taken so long for me to see you. I just wanted to say, welcome on board."

A strong hand gripped his, and a funny feeling came over Paul as Adam shook his hand. "Pleased to meet you, Mr. Marbanks. Thanks for hiring me."

"Call me Paul. Oh, don't thank me, thank Number One, uh Michael."

Paul said, nodding his head in the direction of Michael's office. "He's the one who recommended you, quite highly, I might add."

"Ah," Adam said.

Paul stood there, uncertain what to say next. He wanted to fill in the silence with a lot of talking, and realized why so many people visited this guy's office -- he was a born listener. Paul cleared his throat. "Ahem. I like to get to know the fellows that work for me, and wonder if you're free for dinner?"

Adam raised his eyebrows. "When? I kind of wanted to work late tonight to finish this phase of the Siegl project." He glanced at his drafting table.

"Adam, this isn't Microsoft," Paul chided. "We do let our employees go home at night. But I have some business to finish, too. So how about right from work, say at 7:00?"

Adam seemed to like this idea, and nodded. "O. K. See you then."

Paul walked back to his office, racking his brain for where he'd seen this kid before. Brown hair, brown eyes, tall... could fit any number of people. He traveled back to people he'd known in his younger days. For starters there was the kid next door when he was in nursery school in Connecticut. He had brown hair and brown eyes -- everybody had thought they were brothers they looked so alike. But that guy would have to be almost forty-two, Paul's own age, by now. In college he was a Big Brother to a boy with brown hair and brown eyes, but the guy was fifteen in '68, so that ruled him out. The kid he was Big Brother to back when he met Maggie in '82, no couldn't be, that boy was only 12 then, way too young. Paul stared out the window at the ferries going across the Sound. Interesting how all those kids seemed so much alike, but at so many different decades and ages. What were their names? He suddenly couldn't remember. Paul felt a pang of regret that he hadn't kept in touch with either of them. The phone interrupted his reverie and he promptly returned to the business at hand.

Seven o'clock rolled around and Paul flicked off his office light switch. He walked through the darkened cubicles to the only office that still had its light on.

"Knock knock," he said, outside the open door. Paul heard a low chuckle inside.

"Uno segundo, por favor," the young man's voice called out in perfect Spanish.

He was in Miami; he's probably bilingual, thought Paul.

Adam appeared in the doorway. He wore an Eddie Bauer™ windbreaker and had a bicycle helmet in one hand, a large portfolio case in the other. "Hokay, boss, we can go."

Paul smiled at the portfolio. "Get much wind resistance riding a bike with that thing?" he asked, wryly.

Adam grinned, "It takes practice."

"Well, you don't need to navigate Seattle streets tonight with that thing. I have a bike rack on my car, and you can throw the portfolio and the helmet in the back seat." Paul and Adam walked towards the elevators.

They went to Hiram's at the Ballard Locks, where the appetizers were the only thing interrupting Paul telling Adam everything about himself, as Adam intently listened. When the main course arrived, Paul stopped himself.

"Here I am talking all about me, and I asked you here to learn about you." The waiter placed identical platters of surf and turf in front of them. Noticing the guy only had ice water in front of him, he went on, "Here, let me buy you a beer."

Adam murmured that he really didn't drink, but Paul was too busy asking the waiter for "Dos Cervezas, por favor," using his best seventh grade Spanish, figuring Adam would appreciate Mexican beer.

When the beer arrived, Adam eyed it dubiously. Paul lifted the bottle up, ignoring the glass, "To your successful future at Marbanks Architects."

Adam followed suit, and had a swig of beer. A curious look passed over his face as he swallowed.

They both dug into their dinners, and Paul found himself talking non-stop between bites of steak and lobster. He'd finished it before he realized Adam hadn't said a word in the past half hour. Paul looked up to see Adam's head drooping over an untouched plate, gently snoring.

Paul chuckled to himself. "Well, you're only the second person I have known to have that reaction. I hope you wake up in less than fourteen hours."

He called the waiter for the check and a doggy bag for Adam's dinner, and tried to rouse the fellow without any luck. The waiter had to help Paul get Adam to the car and, not knowing where the man lived, Paul

drove him to his house in Ballard.

Percy leapt on him as Paul tried to get out of the car. He obviously thought the doggy bag was for him. "No, no, old fella," he said to the cat. "This is for guests." He unlocked the door and fed the cat before going out to the car for Adam. With considerable effort he managed to get the deadweight inside and flopped face first on the couch, where Adam began snoring in earnest. Paul covered him with a spare quilt, and headed to bed himself.

The next morning, Paul came into the living room and started at seeing Adam sitting in a chair by the window meditating -- the exact place that Moira had liked to sit and meditate. Damn. Paul forced down feelings that he didn't want to remember and, in a strained jovial tone said, "Good morning! Did you sleep well?"

Adam opened his eyes and grinned sheepishly at Paul. "Sorry to conk out on you; I'm really not much of a drinker."

"That's an understatement," Paul said, wryly. "Do you want some coffee?" Then a thought occurred to him. "You know, I have an espresso machine, I could make us lattes."

Adam responded enthusiastically, "Great, I could really use one. I feel like my head's a used vacuum bag."

Sitting in the kitchen, sipping the latte, Adam looked around and said, "Nice place you have here."

Paul raised an eyebrow. Of course, to a twenty-five year old, this would seem like a palace. It didn't compare to the Lake Washington house, though. Paul joined him at the table with his own double tall, double strong espresso.

"Thanks. I'm trying to decide whether to sell it or rent it. I'm looking for another place." Uncle Stephen's bonus for the India job had been sizable, and the extra work the company had taken on while the San Francisco office coped with the aftermath of their quake was helping Paul pull out of the financial hole left by his divorce.

Adam nodded. "I might be interested. In renting, I mean. No way could I buy."

Knowing the twenty-five year old's salary, Paul understood. He liked the idea of holding on to the place for a while, although he no longer had the need to retain the address. Being the one to say good-bye to Moira in India had freed him from a certain level of anxiety that he'd experienced

for years. He no longer needed things to stay the same, to have ties to the past, in order to hope to see her again. If he could meet her on a plane to India, he could run into her anywhere. It was preordained; she had said so. He would see her again, so he didn't have to do anything to force it happening. He just liked the house for the memories it held.

"Well, I'll let you know when I find something." Paul put his empty mug in the sink.

Adam finished his latte. "What are you looking for? In a place, I mean."

"A house on the water. Out of the city. I've checked Bainbridge Island, but the prices are a bit steep. I'm checking out Colvos Island this weekend." Paul pulled on his jacket.

"Colvos? That's a great place. I've biked it. It's very peaceful, and not as crowded as Bainbridge. Still has its small-town feel." Adam placed his mug in the sink.

Paul looked at Adam. He liked this guy. He had a good gut feeling about him. Michael had planned to go house-hunting with Paul this weekend but had to cancel because Michelle had a rehearsal of the Nutcracker Suite with the Pacific Northwest Ballet. House-hunting by himself was a drag because there was no one to bounce his impressions off afterwards.

"Would you like to come with me? " Paul asked. "I'll be driving, not cycling."

Adam paused a moment, considering. Slowly he answered, "Sure, it'd be fun to check out the beaches."

"Great, great. Hey, can I give you a lift home? Figure you'd like to change before you go to the office." Paul smiled.

Adam looked at his rumpled, slept-in clothing and grinned. "Think so? Well, I don't need a ride. We're in Ballard, right?" Adam peered out the window at the flat landscape filled with neat little bungalows and postage stamp lawns. "I live down near 1st and Greenwood in Fremont. I can bike it in five minutes. But I'd better take off now. We've a staff meeting at 9:00am, don't we?"

"Yes, but you have my permission to be late," Paul said, paternally.

"Thanks, boss." Adam put on his helmet and headed out the door.

Paul got to the office and met with Michael about the day's schedule,

and then they both went to the conference room so they could have first pick of the fruit and muffins. Paul missed the Danish, but the Buzz Inn had gotten health conscious and discontinued anything with a high fat content. Adam amazed him by walking in a few minutes later, hair still damp and one pant leg rolled up to the calf.

"You must go 70 miles an hour on that bike to get here so fast!" Paul exclaimed.

Adam grinned and reached for a muffin. "I'll never tell."

Michael laughed. "You young guys have no fear. I bet you're also into that new snowboarding fad."

Adam shook his head. "Cross-country. A guy could break his neck with that other stuff."

The conversation ended there as the other staff members began arriving and Francis began handing out agendas. During the meeting Paul noticed how different Adam was from the other architects. Most had their ego invested in their personal projects and there was a lot of jockeying for attention. Adam said little, and listened a lot. Whenever a new idea was called for, he had one to offer, but didn't put any energy into whether his idea would be chosen or not. Each person brought with him or her something unique that enhanced the group as a whole. When Michael had come on board, he had given the company a boost with his enthusiasm and sense of humor. People responded by being more creative. Now Adam was here, Paul sensed stability, with people feeling more comfortable taking risks. He noticed more cooperation in the group, and better communication. People tended to hash things out right away instead of letting them fester. Adam seemed to contribute to that, since people tested out their ideas with him first, before bringing it to the group. Paul wondered how many peoples' secrets hid behind those dark brown eyes.

The meeting passed quickly, and so did the rest of the week. Late Friday afternoon Paul stuck his head into Adam's office.

"Pick you up about 8:00am tomorrow?" Paul hoped it wouldn't be too early for him.

Adam, bent over some drawings, did not look up. "That's fine, it's not too early."

Adam's reply startled Paul. Had he implied his thoughts by the tone in his voice? "Uh, what's your address, Adam?" Paul remembered to ask.

Adam looked up and brushed the hair out of his eyes. "First and

Greenwood. It's just a block up from the canal in Fremont, at the base of Phinney Ridge. It's a group house -- a big blue house. Has a van in front of it."

"Great. I'll be there. Eight sharp. Be there or be square." As he left, he could hear Adam chuckling at his comment.

Adam was waiting for him on the steps of the house when Paul pulled up the next morning. He climbed in the car and they headed to the West Seattle ferry terminal for Colvos. Paul tried out his ideas of the pros and cons of Colvos living on the way there.

"It's farther to drive than the downtown Colman Dock, but less ferry time than riding to Bainbridge Island. The boats are smaller than the Bainbridge boats but they have far less traffic." Paul thought aloud.

"There's a passenger ferry directly from Colvos to downtown." Adam looked at the ferry schedule. "It's not that far a walk from the waterfront to our office."

Paul chuckled, thinking of the 15-year age difference between them. A young guy who bicycles everywhere would consider a ten-block walk uphill as 'not far'.

Adam turned his brown eyes on him, "It'd be a good workout, I think."

*Does this guy read minds?* Paul decided to redirect the conversation.

"Is that why you don't own a car?" asked Paul, "I mean, because you like the workout?"

Adam did a little drum rhythm on the dashboard. "Nope. Cars and me just don't go together."

"Why?" Paul was curious.

"Oh, every car I tried had electrical problems. It wasn't the car; it was me. Even if I try borrowing a friend's car, it ends up with electrical problems. I can't even wear a battery-operated wristwatch. Just weird, I guess." Adam looked out the window, noticing everything that happened on the streets they passed by.

Paul glanced at Adam's wrist. He had on a simple, old-fashioned wind-up style watch. By this time they were coming up to Lincoln Park where there was already a line for the ferry.

"Ferry lines. That's not a plus." Paul muttered.

"Depends on how you use your time. It could be good place to catch



up on paperwork, or read," Adam suggested. "Just compare commuting by ferry to commuting across Lake Washington. You can either drive in a traffic jam, or you can wait in line. And you can't get out to use the bathroom or have a coffee on the floating bridge."

Having spent several years in Eastside commuter traffic when he lived with Maggie, Paul found Colvos growing more and more attractive. The line moved quickly and they got on the ferry without too much delay.

It was a short but scenic ferry ride to Colvos. Halfway across you could see a perfect view of Mt. Rainier to the south, and, to the north, almost clear up the sound to Whidbey Island. Behind them the majestic Cascade Mountains loomed over West Seattle. Ahead in the distance were the snow-capped Olympics. It reminded Paul of the view from Whidbey Island the first time he visited the Northwest. The Colvos ferry dock was much smaller and less crowded than Bainbridge's. They took the one main road up the hill towards town. Paul immediately noticed the abundance of trees and wide-open fields. They passed cottages with goats in their pastures, old farmhouses surrounded by fruit trees, and several llama farms. Paul had picked up a real estate listing the last time he and Michael had checked out the island. Michael had recommended Colvos because he had relatives there, and had fond memories of summers picking strawberries and winters getting their Christmas trees there. The problem was, the addresses were hard to find, and hardly any of the properties had "For Sale" signs to distinguish themselves by. By lunchtime they'd managed to see only two places and Paul was thoroughly frustrated.

"We need a break. Let's grab a bite to eat," Adam said. "I'm starving."

They drove up the main road to the town of Colvos. There were no stoplights on whole island, just a four-way stop in the center of town. It had one movie theater, one bowling alley and two grocery stores. Adam showed Paul a little place that served old-fashioned malted milkshakes and good-sized hamburgers with homemade fries.

"This is a good place to refuel." Adam sank his teeth into his garden burger slathered with onions and mushrooms.

Paul smiled, wistfully thinking of those yesteryears when he was constantly hungry and didn't have to worry about cholesterol or calories. He ate his grilled chicken sandwich and studied the map on the back of the real estate listing.

"It's been a no-go so far today," he said between bites. "Where do

you suggest we look now?"

Adam finished his burger and made quick work of his huge basket of curly fries. He licked his fingers and picked up the map.

"Here," he said, pointing the northwest side of the island. "The west side is more peaceful than the side that faces West Seattle and Federal Way. It's less populated and the Westside passage has less boat traffic. Since you'll be commuting to Seattle, you probably don't want to be too far down the island, I guess. Are there any listings for this area?"

As it turned out, there were several, so they finished their lunch and set out again. The first house had a tiny lot and the present owners were engaged in a property dispute with their next-door neighbor. The second had a beautiful site but a funky building. Both Paul and Adam looked at it with their trained architects' eyes.

"This place should be condemned." Adam pointed at its lack of foundation and sagging floor. "The next windstorm will send it into the Sound."

Paul agreed. "I wonder what this place is like as a potential building site?" he wondered.

A glance at the paperwork left by the realtor immediately answered that question. Everything about it was against code, but was grandfathered in. If they tore the house down, they could never build on the lot. The house itself was not worth renovating.

The third property was a dream house. It had been a country retreat for one of the leading Seattle families back in the 20's. It had a sturdy stone foundation, and was built of old growth timber impossible to get nowadays. It had been modestly renovated; the front porch extended into a large deck, and a second floor with picture windows had been added. The renovations had been carefully done to blend with the original design and feel of the place. Both Paul and Adam found themselves sitting on the steps of the deck, staring at the water, not wanting to leave.

"This is it," said Paul. "How much?"

Adam looked at the listing. "\$325,000.00"

"Shit." Paul's heart sank.

"Too much, huh?" asked Adam. The twenty-five-year-old had no concept of real estate prices.

Just then they heard a little voice calling to them from the beach.

"Halloo? Halloo?"

Down on the beach a little old lady in a pale purple jogging suit and visor came strolling towards them. A very wet and sandy cocker spaniel followed at her heels.

"Are you two boys looking to buy this old place?" she asked, sweetly.

"I'd like to," said Paul, "but the price is a bit steep."

"Oh, this is a lovely, lovely house. I used to play here when I was a child." She rested at the bottom of the steps, catching her breath. "The McLaren's owned it. Oh, they were such nice people. Mr. McLaren was a banker, you know." She started climbing the stairs. "Mrs. McLaren gave such wonderful parties, and they used to hang those Chinese lanterns all over the trees down to the boat dock. Oh, that's not there any more. It fell apart during the quake of '64." She came right up the stairs and sat between the two men. "Now, let me tell you this." She patted Paul on the knee. "This place has stood empty for the last year and a half. I bet you could buy it for a song."

Paul smiled, completely charmed by her -- the grandmother he'd never had. "Why has it been empty so long?"

"Oh, the death, my dear, the death! They say it was murder, but I don't believe it. It was the nicest couple you've ever met, except they were from California." This time she was patting Adam's knee, to make sure they both were paying attention. "He had a drinking problem and went missing. He washed up on the beach a week later. They said she pushed him off his boat and swam back to shore. But I think that's a load of hogwash. He used to go out by himself and drink himself silly. One time he lost both his oars, and my husband had to row out and tow him in. And my husband is seventy-nine years old." She leaned over and looked Paul right in the eyes. "I think this time he lost his oars and tried to swim back himself. People just thought she did it because she didn't get hysterical at the news he was dead." She shook her head. "I think she took it calmly because she knew the drink was going to get him one day, one way or the other. So she'd been prepared for it, you know?"

"Did she go to jail?" asked Adam, thoroughly interested.

"Oh, no, no, no. Nothing of the kind. No charges, 'accidental death' the coroner's report read. But this is a small island and rumors hold more weight than truth. She just packed up and went back to wherever it was, someplace in California. And it's been on the market ever since." The lady

struggled to get up, so Paul rose and assisted her. She steadied herself on his arm, and patted his hand. "You seem like such a nice boy. You really should go see my good friend Beulah; she's a realtor. She'll take good care of you. Oh yes, yes, Nanna," she said to her dog, who was jumping about, "let's go home."

The little dog bounded down the stairs and over to a path into the woods. She stood there barking.

"That's a shortcut to my house. You can see it up there on the bluff." She pointed to a little white cottage with red trim and gingerbread siding. "We could be neighbors!" She smiled at him again. "Well, good-bye. It was nice visiting with you." She slowly made her way down the steps. At the bottom she stopped and looked up at them. "Oh, tell Beulah I sent you. Aggie Nelson. Good luck!" she called and went into the woods.

"What a sweet old lady." Paul stuck his hands in his pockets and jingled his change.

"Hmm." said Adam. "Believe in ghosts?"

Paul laughed. "No, of course not. Do you?"

"Oh, sure. But there aren't any here. The guy's gone. He was ready to go." Adam stood up. "Want to go see Beulah?"

"Sure, if she'd given me Beulah's last name." Paul replied, not quite getting Adam's comment about the dead man.

"Let's go to the nearest place in town and ask." Adam suggested.

They trekked back up the fifty steps to Paul's car parked on the road and headed back to town. By now it was getting late in the day, and Paul doubted that any real estate office would be open. But the local bookstore was, so they decided to ask there.

"Oh, you mean Beulah Parks. Oh yes, her office is just up across the street." The tall, thin woman with wire rimmed glasses pointed in the correct direction. "She may still be there. I usually see her walking home, and she hasn't come by yet."

*Love these small towns,* thought Paul, as he thanked her. Leaving their car parked outside the bookstore, Paul and Adam walked two blocks over to Beulah Park's office in a small old wooden building. Inside, a large woman with purple hair sat behind a desk full of papers.

"Can I help you gentlemen?" she asked, not moving from her seat.

"Yes, are you Beulah Parks? Aggie Nelson suggested we come to see

you." Paul stepped in and extended his hand.

"Oh, Aggie, what a dear. I bet you were looking at the McLaren house. She wants that place occupied so badly." Beulah gave his hand a firm shake.

"I'm Paul Marbanks and this is my associate Adam Paulson."

"My goodness, I would have sworn you were brothers. I mean, you have such similar coloring. Cousins perhaps?" Beulah raised her eyebrows.

Paul glanced at Adam, who stared straight ahead, face betraying nothing.

"Really? No one's said that before. Adam is a new architect in my company." Paul explained. "I just asked him to come along for the ride."

Adam shook the woman's hand.

"Ah, what company is that Mr. ah -- oh! Marbanks, of Marbanks Architects?" Beulah fingered a large beaded necklace around her neck.

"Yes," Paul said, "you've heard of us?"

"Why, I've been in real estate for 45 years, I remember the first building in Seattle that Marbanks designed up here." She smiled. "Are you from California?" she asked, innocently.

"No, I've lived in Seattle for almost ten years, and originally I'm from Connecticut." Paul wasn't sure if she was relieved or disappointed. Disappointed, most likely. Californians paid more for real estate here. Paul went on, "Yes, I'm quite interested in the McLaren place, but I think the price is too high." He decided either he could have the place, or he couldn't. He didn't want to waste a lot of time pussy-footing around.

"Oh, I like a man who is direct," Beulah said, coquettishly. "Let me look in the book." She rummaged among the papers on her desk and produced a big black binder. Inside were pages of listings and pages of photographs. She flipped to the page that had the McLaren house photograph on it.

"Hmmm. \$325. Marked down from \$375. Of course, the mortgage is only ... " She stopped herself and looked up, "How much are you willing to spend?"

Paul again decided to be blunt. He was in no mood for negotiations at this time of the afternoon. "\$250,000.00" He said. "The seller may be interested in taking it. I see the mortgage is \$200,000.00"

Beulah paused, trying to size him up.

"I don't own my company." Paul said, trying to help her with her assessment of him (and his bank account). "Stephen Marbanks is my uncle."

"I see. Well, I'll call the listing agent and see what I can do. Here's my card, by the way." She handed him her card.

"And here's mine." Paul reached in his wallet and handed his to her.

"Are there any other places you'd be willing to consider?" she asked. "Do you want a copy of the listings?"

"Not at this moment, thanks. I've looked here and on Bainbridge, and this is the first place I've really liked. I want to wait and see if I can have this place, before considering any more." Paul looked over at Adam, studying the ferry schedule posted on her wall. "We've been here since early this morning, and we're both bushed."

"Oh, yes, oh yes. I understand completely." Beulah gushed. "There's a ferry in twenty-five minutes. You should make it if you leave now." She rose and extended her hand to Paul. "So nice to meet you. I'll call Thea right away and see if her client will accept two-fifty. I'll call you as soon as I hear something."

Paul thanked her, and he and Adam walked back to the car.

"You might be getting the Ballard house sooner than you think." Paul remarked on the way back to the ferry.

"Yeah? I think so, too," Adam agreed. "I have a good feeling about this place."

Adam's feeling turned out to be correct. The trustee was eager to sell, as several relatives of the dead man wanted their share of his estate. He and the woman hadn't been married, and she had disappeared instead of returning to California. Paul told Adam these details at one of their daily morning 'latte meetings' which had replaced his morning coffee with Michael. Michael's daughter had skating lessons in the mornings now and Adam never ate lunch, so Paul and Michael usually walked to the Pike Place Market for a bite. Between his two friends, and the bounty of work, Paul's life felt pretty full.

"She didn't do it." Adam blew the foam off his latte. Paul had the impression he disliked having milk foam on his lattes. "Kill him, I mean. He drowned of his own accord."

"The murder at the Colvos house? How do you know?" Paul leaned against Adam's office door. They alternated offices for their morning ritual, though it was becoming rarer to meet at Adam's. People lined up early to

talk to Adam and Paul felt pushed out of the way. "Do you mind?" Paul said to the new office clerk hovering behind him. He rarely used his authority, but she annoyed him. "We're having a meeting!"

The office clerk looked mournfully up at Paul. "My boyfriend broke up with me," she sniffed tearfully.

Adam stepped forward and offered her a tissue from the box on his filing cabinet. "There, there," he said. "Come see me in an hour." She gratefully accepted the tissue and hurried away.

"What is this? A design firm or a therapist's office? How do you get any work done?" Paul demanded.

Adam cracked a smile. "Oh, they don't stay long. They just dump and go back to work feeling better. Doesn't bug me; I don't take it on."

"If I had people dumping problems on me all day it would drive me up the wall." Paul exclaimed. "How do you manage it?"

"Simple." Adam took a final swig of his latte and pitched the empty cup into the wastepaper basket across the room. "Right where you're standing is an invisible recycling chute."

"What?" Paul looked down at his feet. "You're joking."

"Oh, no. You can't see it, but you can feel it. If you stand right there, and people don't seem to come in any closer, you can dump all you want, and it just goes into the earth and gets recycled." Adam sat on his stool, arms folded, studying Paul for his reaction.

"Doesn't all that negative energy pollute?" Paul surprised himself by taking this seriously.

"No -- it's more fertilizer than nuclear waste," Adam said, solemnly.

Paul decided he was joking and laughed loudly. "Well, whatever works. See you later." He started to go, and stopped. "Oh, Adam. Thanks for coming out to Colvos with me."

"No problema, señor." Adam, already pouring over a new set of plans, didn't look up.

Paul had the annual Christmas party that year at his new home on Colvos. People carpooled because of the ferry and the lack of parking on the road. The steep walk down to his house had a sturdy railing to hold on to.

"Man, this must have been a bitch to move into, all your furniture

down these stairs?" Michael, one of the first guests to arrive, had said.

"And what about your groceries? You probably never want to buy more than one or two bags!" Coral said, coming in behind her husband.

Paul smiled, "Coral, I'm a bachelor; I never have more than one or two bags of groceries. And in answer to your question, my friend, you can drive on the beach at low tide. The movers just backed right up to the deck, smooth as, er, silk," Paul said, remembering Coral was present.

The other guests began arriving and the caterers were buzzing about. Paul saw Adam walking down the stairs with his bike slung over his shoulder.

"You biked here? Why didn't you carpool?" Paul exclaimed.

"I never carpool. Didn't want to leave the bike on the road. Too many parked cars. I was worried they'd knock it over in the dark. Hope you don't mind if I leave it here." Adam leaned his bike against the side of the house.

"No problemo!" Paul ushered him and the others who had arrived into the house.

The party was a grand success. The Christmas cheer flowed unsparingly, and all the designated drivers gathered around the non-alcoholic punch bowl with Adam. Paul noticed the several unmarried female employees approaching Adam throughout the evening to dance, or go out on the deck to talk. Adam was firm, but polite with each of them, more comfortable in a group than one-on-one with any of them. The more eggnog Paul consumed, the more he wondered about Adam's lack of interest in the opposite sex.

Late in the evening, he cornered Adam alone in the hallway outside the upstairs bathroom.

"Listen, Adam, I want to tell you that I consider you a friend of mine." Paul began off, very seriously. Adam blinked at him. The fellow looked pale and tired. "And I just want to let you know that you can tell me anything, and I will accept it. Anything about yourself. All right? I won't judge you, and I'll respect your privacy."

Adam initially looked alarmed, then relaxed. "I'm not gay, Paul." Adam stated.

"Well, if you were ..." Paul went on, not entirely convinced.

"No, Paul. I'm not gay. I'm not anything." Adam put his hand on



Paul's shoulder. Slightly taller than Paul, and of equal build, his face and Paul's were about six inches away from each other. "I chose not to have personal -- uh - intimate relationships with any one. It's not my thing. It's not what I'm here for."

Paul found it hard to believe that any twenty-five year old would willingly choose not to have, or at least pursue, intimate relations. Maybe it was this AIDS thing? Paul hadn't had to deal with the safe sex issue. Since Maggie, the only woman he'd been with was Moira, and the only woman he ever intended to be with was Moira. A glimmer of a doubt ran through the back of his mind whether or not Moira had similar monogamous intentions, but he let it go. Maybe kids in their twenties are choosing not to have relationships rather than deal with AIDS, Paul thought. Or maybe Adam was gay and he simply didn't want it to get around the company. That didn't entirely make sense, as there were a few openly gay employees, with their same-sex partners listed as family members on their insurance forms. There didn't seem to be any reason to hide it. Paul suddenly got the strong impression that this was none of his business, and immediately backed off.

"Sorry, Adam, I didn't mean to pry. No offense."

"None taken." Adam shrugged.

They stood in silence for a moment. Adam ran his hand through his hair, and looked around. They were still alone.

"Uh, Paul -- are you?"

"What?" said Paul, confused.

"You know -- gay." Adam's stuck his hands in his pockets and shifted from one foot to the other.

Paul gawked at him. Then he realized, just as he'd never seen Adam with any woman or showing any interest in women, Adam hadn't seen him interested in women, either. His face turned beet red and he sputtered a little on his reply.

"No, c-certainly not." Paul said, wondering how he'd justify the comment.

"I mean, I heard you used to be married, but that doesn't mean anything." Adam looked at his feet.

Paul leaned against the wall. "No. It's just ... there was, is, only one woman in my life. It wasn't my wife -- that was a mistake." A twinge of guilt ran through Paul when he thought of Maggie. "I only get to see this woman once every few years ... it's never planned, it just happens. I never

know when, or if, I'll see her again." Paul rubbed his eyes.

Adam shifted and stepped back. "Uh, that's okay. You don't have to tell me if you don't want to."

"No, no. I don't mind. The only other person at the company who knows is Michael. My family doesn't even know. But I don't mind if you know." Paul opened his eyes and looked at Adam. "I'd like to tell you. You're my friend. I met this woman right out of college. It was love at first sight. But we only had a weekend together, and when she left I had no way of finding her. I met her again here in Seattle right after I moved here, in 1980. We spent three weeks together. I was about to ask her to marry me when she vanished. I mean, really vanished. Without a trace." Paul ran his hands through his hair. It was so difficult trying to explain such a complicated relationship. "I found her again on a plane to India -- a month or so before you were hired. We only had five days together this last time. This time I had to leave her to come back and sort out the mess at Marbanks because of the earthquake. I've accepted that we may never be able to spend a lot of time together, so I resolved that each time I meet her, I'm just going to focus on the moment and try to live it to the fullest."

Paul laughed at himself. "Listen to me. I sound like a beer commercial. I mean, I desperately want to spend the rest of my life with her. I want to settle down and have kids with her. I want to know everything about her and have her know everything about me. But that hasn't happened, and doesn't look like it ever will. So I'll simply accept and treasure what ever moments Fate or the Universe allows us to spend together." Paul finished. He heard some voices calling up the stairs and almost replied when he saw Adam's face.

Tears were trickling down Adam's cheeks. Paul had never seen the guy express much of any emotion except amusement before. He really must have struck a chord. Maybe that's why the kid doesn't date. He fell in love once himself and hasn't gotten over it.

Paul patted him on the back. "Hey, my story wasn't meant to be a tear-jerker," he gently joked.

Adam sniffed and wiped his tears with his sleeve. "Well, it was." He turned to Paul and hugged him.

Paul felt a shock at first, being embraced by someone his own size. Being from the East Coast, hugging even friends did not come naturally. But as he held the guy, he felt that magnetic feeling of energy draining away from him. It was like hugging a taller, more solid version of Moira. Did all

meditators feel this way?

Abruptly, Adam released him and stepped back. "I gotta go. It's late."

"Sure, let's go check the ferry schedule." Paul said, and they went down to the kitchen.

They found the house deserted. Paul realized the voices he'd heard while he'd been talking to Adam were the last guests calling their good-byes. The kitchen clock read 1:06am. The ferry schedule on the wall showed the last boat leaving the island on a weekend at 1:05am. The next boat didn't sail until 4:30.

"I guess you're my guest for the night, Adam," Paul said. "And you didn't even have anything to drink this time."

Adam shot him a glance. "Maybe I should have. At first I thought everyone had left because someone saw us hugging up stairs."

Paul and Adam looked at each other with broad grins on their faces. Paul wanted to talk to Adam some more, to try to draw out of him what had made him decide to forego relationships but exhaustion overcame him. Paul just wanted to crawl upstairs to bed.

"You do that, Paul. I'll crash on this couch." Adam grabbed a cushion and his coat and heading for the couch. "Percy has enough food to survive until tomorrow." Adam had inherited Percy with Paul's house.

"Do what?" asked Paul.

"Crawl upstairs to bed. See ya in the morning." Adam lay down.

Paul walked upstairs instead of crawled, wondering if his thoughts were just especially easy to read, or if he unconsciously spoke things out loud as he thought them. He found an extra blanket in the closet and took it down to Adam. The kid was already asleep, softly snoring. Paul looked at him and wondered why he felt so strongly connected with this guy. Several people had said they looked like brothers. Perhaps that was it. Adam seemed like family to him; perhaps he was the kid brother he'd always wanted. Paul tenderly tucked him in and went upstairs.

## Chapter 5

LOS ANGELES, 1994

In January of 1994, Paul received an urgent call from his uncle.

"I need your help with the negotiations with the Japanese." Uncle Stephen got right to the point. "You're the only one in our company who can deal with these people. These talks were supposed to be completed by Christmas and it's now halfway through January."

Little did his uncle know that Paul's main success with the Asian community was in the hiring of his college friend Michael. Michael had relatives everywhere, on the West Coast and throughout Asia, not just Japan but in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Korea, you name it. It seemed he came from a prolific family noted for immigrating to new places and quickly taking over the local economy. His sister Tamiko had actually left the U. S. in the late sixties as a protest over the Vietnam War. She'd returned to Japan where she quickly rose in an electronics company as an executive foreign liaison officer. Quite a feat, considering she had been a native-born American and had to learn Japanese as a second language. Through her, Michael had contact with the rest of their father's family. She'd made it her business to look up the relatives his father had left behind when he came to the U. S. in the thirties. These contacts had led her to her present job, as well as to her present spouse (who was some very distant cousin to some very distant cousin on their mother's side). Michael steered Paul through the Seattle negotiations with Asian clients. Besides English and Japanese Michael also spoke Korean, Mandarin, and a little Taiwanese as well.

Paul didn't go into all this, but simply agreed to help his uncle any way he could, and found himself on the Alaskan Airlines shuttle to LAX that afternoon. His uncle met him at the airport in an aging, bright red Porsche, all that his ex-wife had left him in their divorce settlement. The car was built for midgets, which he and his uncle were not, nor were the three guys squashed into the back seat, their ears between their knees. Paul and his uncle folded themselves into the front seats and took off directly for the Los Angeles Hyatt Regency.

"Paul, this is my negotiating team, Curly, Moe and Larry," his uncle said as they got on the freeway.

"Steinberg, Milton, and Franc, esquires." One of the men extended his hand. "Attorneys at law."

Paul twisted around and shook hands with him, and waved at the others to spare them the contortions it would take to shake hands with him.

"I'm grateful you could make it, Paul; these negotiations have been

hell." His uncle swerved in and out of traffic. "I don't know whether it's the old man himself, or their lawyers, or their translator -- who's got legs that start at her ears, by the way. They've been stonewalling us for weeks now, and we have to wrap this up in the next two days or the deal's through. All the permits will have to be reapplied for, the construction team is scheduled at another site, everything." His uncle cursed a car he was busy cutting off.

"What's the main sticking point?" Paul braced himself as his uncle careened down the freeway off-ramp.

"Oh, earthquake safety. It always is. I tell them, this city has codes, and we can't build here without the most up to date safety precautions. It's a moot point. But still, they quibble." Stephen Marbanks shook his head.

"Bunch of stone-faces, too. Can't read a thing. Except for the translator, but who's looking at her face?" he guffawed. "Here we are."

They pulled up to the Hyatt Regency, and everyone piled out of the small car like clowns at a circus. Stephen handed his keys to the valet. At the glass elevators on the far side of the atrium, Stephen could see a dozen Japanese men in dark business suits surrounding a tall woman in a yellow jacket, black skirt and black pumps. She was turned away from him; her long, blonde hair hung in a single braid down her back.

*Oh no, don't think it.* Paul looked down at his feet as they walked through the entrance doors. His old obsession with blonde Moira look-alikes rose up. Paul pulled his attention back to the present and realized his uncle had said something to him. They were getting closer to the group by the elevator.

"Look, see the group getting into the elevator? That's Nishikawa, the old guy, and his advisors. The tall guy is their head lawyer and well, the blonde is the translator. Check those gams," his uncle, the epitome of a mid-life crisis, leered. His behavior had deteriorated since he'd left Paul's aunt. Now he no longer even *pretended* to be constrained.

Paul looked up to see them all get in the elevator. The blonde still faced the other way. His uncle suggested they wait for the next elevator so they could discuss strategy when the tall man made some comment in Japanese and the whole group erupted in laughter. As the door closed, Paul heard the melodious tones of Moira's voice rise above the rest.

He froze. It had been over four years. As much as he wanted to race up the stairs to meet her elevator, he wanted to run out the front door and back to the airport. He did neither. He followed his uncle like an automaton to the elevators, nodding at seemingly appropriate moments. Whatever his uncle said, Paul couldn't hear it. By the time they got to the right floor and approached the open doors to the conference room, Paul felt dizzy and realized he hadn't been breathing. Inhaling deeply, he followed his uncle

into the room.

"Gentlemen, I'd like you to meet our most capable executive, my nephew Paul Marbanks. Paul, this is Mr. Nishikawa and his associates, and you know," his uncle gestured to their side of the room, "our lawyers Steinberg, Milton and Franc."

Paul nodded in the appropriate directions, but he wasn't seeing anything. His whole attention was to the blonde figure at the end of the room looking down at a stack of papers. There was a silence until Mr. Nishikawa coughed loudly.

Moira's head popped up, startled, and she stood and made a series of half-bows to Mr. Nishikawa, rattling off a string of excuses in Japanese. Mr. Nishikawa smiled and absolved her, and then pointed at Paul.

"Who he?" asked Mr. Nishikawa, as Stephen Marbanks' flourishing introduction had completely gone over his head.

Moira stared at Paul; deep shock spread over her face. Pale and drawn, she looked very much like she had just before she'd left him in Seattle. Was she ill?

Moira cleared her throat and again responded in Japanese, her sentence this time ending in "Paul-ah Marbanks-ah."

Immediately, the dozen Asians all smiled at Paul, heads bobbing up and down and making sounds of approval. Mr. Nishikawa stepped forward and, with great ceremony, proffered his hand to Paul and said a long Japanese sentence.

Moira translated, "Mr. Nishikawa is very pleased to meet one of Marbanks' executives ... and he hopes that now the negotiations will come to a ... successful conclusion."

Paul took the hand and shook it with formality, and said, "Mr. Nishikawa, I am very honored to meet you, and I promise you that I will direct all my efforts to reaching a ... harmonious contract between our companies."

Moira smiled slightly and translated for Paul. Mr. Nishikawa looked very pleased, and they all took their seats and got down to business.

For the next three excruciating hours, Paul needed to focus on the work at hand when all he wanted to do was stare at Moira. He succeeded by not looking at her at all during most of the meeting. The negotiations had so far taken almost a month, when they'd originally been expected to last five days. The shrewd and intuitive Mr. Nishikawa had the best lawyer in the Western Hemisphere. None of the usual wheeling and dealing could be done here, which is why Marbanks Architects had failed so far. Finally, Paul decided to risk his own job and override his uncle on some key points, thinking that Stephen wouldn't take him on in public. The points were

important to Nishikawa, having to do with aesthetics rather than structural design and actually quite minor to Marbanks. Only his uncle's stubborn and miserly ego had prevented any compromise. It wasn't important enough to lose this whole multi-million dollar deal and potentially billions of dollars of future business with Nishikawa Industries, as well.

The risk paid off, and moments later everybody shook hands, although Paul could feel his uncle seething. Mr. Nishikawa walked up to Stephen and shook his hand.

"Mr. Nishikawa says he is so impressed with your nephew he is considering hiring your firm to design his downtown Los Angeles office park." Moira echoed Nishikawa.

Dollar signs appeared in Uncle Stephen's eyes and a big grin spread across his face. "You got yourself a deal, you old coot." Uncle Stephen crowed enthusiastically, and then turned to Moira and said, "Tell him that without the 'old coot' bit, okay, sweet cheeks?"

Moira ignored the remark and, while translating for him, grew extremely pale and began shaking. She looked faint.

"Moira," Paul said sharply, "are you all right?"

"Who the heck is Moira?" his uncle said.

At that moment Moira swooned. Paul bounded across the room to catch her. The Japanese surrounded her making clucking noises.

"I'm fine, I'm just very, very tired..." Moira said, weakly.

"We were just going to go for a celebration dinner, we'll need your services as translator --" Stephen Marbanks began, but Paul cut him off.

"This woman is obviously ill, and needs to see a doctor." Paul held Moira in his arms, poised to protect her like a bodyguard.

"Just ... to my apartment, I just need to lie down." Moira said softly, struggling to stand on her own.

"Perhaps you'd better take her in the Porsche," said Stephen, tossing the claim check for his car over to Paul. "We can use Mr. Nishikawa's limo that we're paying for." The three lawyers looked noticeably relieved that they wouldn't have to imitate sardines that evening. "Just bring the car back here when you're done." He turned to the rest of them. "Gentlemen, shall we indulge in one of the city's excellent restaurants? Our treat, Mr. Nishikawa." He bowed, western style, to the old gentleman, and all the Asian's heads bobbed up and down.

Paul led Moira away from the conference rooms to the elevator. He pressed the button and they waited for it to arrive.

"Do you have a car here?" Paul asked, assuming she must have driven.

Moira shook her head, "No, I don't drive."

Paul stared at her, realizing that she'd never driven during any of the times he'd been with her. More facts about her to add to the mystery: she spoke Japanese, Hindi, French, and she didn't drive.

They got in the elevator and the doors closed. After a short silence, Paul said, "So, long time no see."

"How long has it been?" Moira asked, steadying herself against the elevator wall.

Paul stared at her in surprise. He could tell her the exact number of days and estimate the minutes. Instead, he merely said, "A little over four years."

"Only that long?" She looked at him, eyes filled with sorrow.

Grief welled up in Paul's throat. He wanted to know what had happened after India, but she looked so deathly pale he instead gently asked, "You really are quite ill, aren't you?"

She shook her head, "Not ill, exactly, just -- drained. This meeting was only supposed to take two weeks and I've been here over a month."

Moira lived in a neighborhood north of the city. On the way there, Moira was so quiet that Paul glanced over several times to see if she was still breathing. With her eyes closed and her head tilted back against the headrest, she seemed to be in a deep trance. When they arrived, Paul had to help her out of the passenger seat. He walked her to the front door, with a firm grip on her arm as she weaved and her legs buckled. A bystander would have probably thought she was drunk. Paul worried that she was suffering from more than mere exhaustion.

Moira started to weep helplessly, "I'm so sorry about Seattle!" She began to fall over. Instinctively, Paul stepped forward and caught her.

"Seattle? That was so long ago! We talked about that in India, remember? It's all right, Moira, it's all right," he crooned and stroked her hair.

She went limp against him. He felt the oddest sensation -- unlike embracing her before when he'd strongly felt gravity draining all the tension out of him. This time he felt energy coming out of his body and into hers. He could almost feel her being recharged by it as they stood quietly in front of her building. After a minute or so, she stepped back, her color returned and her eyes shining brightly.

"Thanks," she said, and smiled her sun-radiant smile. Reaching into her purse, she pulled out her apartment key. "Would you like to come in? We could catch up on old times."

Paul gave a short laugh. He never could figure her out. "Of course."

The older apartment building had narrow and dark hallways. She came to her apartment door and put the key in the lock when the door



opened.

"Hola, señora! Buenas noches! El niño esta durmiendo. Se porto' como un ángel!" A very broad Mexican woman greeted Moira with open arms.

"Buena noches, Abuelita!" Moira hugged her. "Muchas gracias - tu eres ungel!"

Abuelita gave Paul a big smile. "Buenos noches, señor."

Paul nodded and smiled back. What was this about a niño? Who was this woman?

Moira introduced him in Spanish, and Paul obviously couldn't follow the conversation, his seventh grade Spanish being too rusty. Moira seemed to be assuring Abuelita that Paul was a gentleman and an old friend. Abuelita seemed to size Paul up and decided it was safe to leave them unchaperoned. The two women laughed, embraced, and Moira slipped some money into the woman's hand as she walked out the door.

"Muchas gracias, muchas gracias!" Abuelita called, waddling into the hall.

"De nada, Abuelita, buenas noches!" Moira responded, closing the door.

Paul looked around the apartment. Sparsely decorated, it seemed like the furniture came rented with the apartment. There was almost no indication that anyone lived here, except, Paul saw with a jolt, some children's toys on the floor and a couple of childish drawings in the kitchen, stuck to the refrigerator door.

Paul's mouth went dry. "You have a child?"

Moira nodded. "He's almost five. I should go check on him. I'll be right back." She disappeared into the hallway.

Paul looked down at the toys. Adolescent mutant karate armadillos or something. He walked into the kitchen and looked at the three pictures on the refrigerator door. One had of two stick figures with big smiles. A preschool teacher had written on the bottom "My Mom and Me." Another had a house with a large tree in front of it; Paul was impressed by the rudimentary grasp of perspective. The other was a Christmas tree with colorful thumbprints as ornaments. The child had signed his own name, but it wasn't in a straight line and the letters weren't in order. Paul tried to decipher the scrawls. One looked like a D, N - no, was it an M? A, and another --

"He's asleep. He's a very good sleeper." Moira reappeared. She stood by Paul in front of the refrigerator. "And an artist too, you can see," she said proudly, as if they were sketches by Leonardo Da Vinci.

Paul stared at the pictures. Where's the father? He wanted to ask.

Why isn't he here? Why are you here, in this dingy little apartment? Boys need fresh air and sunshine, not the smog and cement of L.A. He wanted to gather them both up in his arms and take them to Colvos.

Moira broke the silence. "Oh, look. Abuelita always makes a big pot of coffee." She went over to the coffee maker on the counter. "Do you want a cup? It's only regular but it's as strong as espresso, knowing Abuelita." She offered the pot of thick, black liquid.

Paul accepted the coffee with a liberal dose of milk, and sat on the sofa in the living room. Moira still looked very tired, yet with a pale glow about her. She kicked off her shoes and sat on the far end of the sofa, hugging a cushion.

She smiled at him, saying nothing. Paul stared into his coffee cup. Five years old, the child is almost five. That would mean in October of '89 he would have been less than a year. What kind of mother leaves her baby to go gallivanting to India? Too many thoughts spun around in Paul's head.

She reached out and caressed his smooth, clean-shaven cheek. "No more beard."

Paul stiffened at her touch. He'd shaved his beard off in India. She should have remembered that. Part of him wanted to leap up and pace the floor, interrogating her until she answered all his questions. Part of him wanted to embrace her and push all thoughts out of his head. Then he remembered India, and her promise to be honest with him, but answer only what she could answer. "I will never lie to you, I will answer your questions as honestly as I can, but there are some things I'm ... not at liberty to answer." Tormenting himself with questions that she couldn't -- or wouldn't -- answer wasted time and emotional energy. He relaxed and smiled at her. He could, however, ask questions. Did he really want to know the answers? No, he didn't want to know anything about the boy's father, or her marriage to him. Paul felt jealousy rise towards a man he'd never met. And he didn't even want to know where the boy was when they were in India together. He wanted to keep that memory separate in his mind. He noticed her looking at him expectantly. Obviously she was back to not initiating conversations again.

The words came out of his mouth before he knew he'd thought them.

"Come back to Seattle with me," he said simply. Not a question, a request.

She gasped. A myriad of emotions passed over her face. Paul immediately felt guilty. Here she was exhausted and probably ill, and he hits her with this. But at the same time, he needed to press his case.

"You're almost done with this job. Tomorrow we'll finalize the contract and you'll be free. This is no place for a little boy to grow up, Moira.

I have a really nice house, a beautiful house, on Colvos Island, it's on the beach -- you can see whales and seals from my deck! I could put up a rope swing over the water ... I hear the schools are excellent ... it's just a wonderful, small town atmosphere -- an ideal place to raise a child. Moira, please come back to Seattle with me. I love you and want to be with you. I'd make a good father, I know I would." Paul babbled, and wouldn't have stopped except Moira placed her hand gently on his lips.

She said nothing, but her lips were parted and eyes so full of longing. She took a deep breath and opened her mouth, hesitated, then said, "Let me sleep on it."

At least it wasn't a no! Paul slipped his arm around her waist and they kissed. In his arms she felt delicate and fragile, thinner than before. He wished to be very gentle with her and yet he was frenzied inside, he wanted her so badly. He felt the familiar feeling of being magnetically connected to the earth and all the tension, pain and loneliness drained out of him. The cell-phone in his pocket started ringing.

Did his uncle want the Porsche back? "Paul Marbanks," he answered the phone.

"Paul, sorry to bug you so late, but I'm working late at a project and Michael is at his daughter's recital."

"Adam!" Paul exclaimed, "Don't you ever go home? Percy must be starving!"

"Nah, he has plenty of food. Plus that cat is fat." Adam said in all seriousness.

Paul glanced over at Moira, watching him intently. He covered the receiver and whispered, "It's business. Adam Paulson, one of my architects in Seattle."

A flicker of emotion ran across Moira's face and then disappeared. Paul turned his attention back to Adam, who had some technical questions about a project Paul had turned over to him when he went to L.A.

"Thanks, Paul -- sorry if I interrupted something." Adam said as they finished.

"That's okay." Paul responded, "I'm just visiting with ... an old friend."

"Her? You're with her?" Adam sounded astonished.

"Yes. Moira." Paul smiled over at her.

After a stunned silence, Adam said, "Well, tell her Adam says hi."

"Sure will. See you in a couple days." Paul looked over at Moira, "Adam says hi," he said, disconnecting from the call.

Moira raised an eyebrow. "He does? Well, Moira says hi, too." She cocked her head to one side. "What is this Adam guy like, and why does he

feed Percy?"

Paul leaned back against the sofa and wondered how to explain all the passing years to her. "I moved out of the Ballard place and Adam inherited Percy." He started with the easy stuff. "Adam is ... well, he's a brilliant young architect, I'd guess he's not quite thirty years old. He's been with the company for four years." He smiled over at Moira, who had a puzzled expression on her face. Paul went on, "He's a friend of mine, a good friend. It's hard to explain, but we just hit it off. Some people think we're so alike that we could be brothers. But that's not it. We look alike, similar coloring and height. But he's quiet, and introspective, and a great listener. Oh, he meditates like you do. He bicycles everywhere - says he doesn't drive a car because they have electrical problems on him." He stopped when he saw Moira smiling the sweetest smile at him.

Without speaking, she stood and took his hands and led him towards her bedroom. At her son's door she paused. Paul could see a tiny figure covered with a Mutant Armadillo sleeping bag as a quilt. She carefully closed his door, and took Paul into her room. Inside they embraced. Paul held her for a long, long time. It was the most amazing feeling, like making love without moving. He could just feel emotional energy pulsating between them, as if he were breathing her into him and breathing out into her. Finally they turned their mouths to each other and kissed. The electricity from her mouth rippled through his whole body. She swiftly undid the buttons of his shirt and slipped it off him, smoothing her hands over his shoulders, arms and back, then slid them around his waist and up through the hairs covering his abdomen and chest and her fingertips grazed his nipples. He pulled up her blouse and pulled her bra down so her breasts tumbled out. He cupped his hands under them and rubbed her nipples with his thumbs. He felt her knees buckle and he grabbed her buttocks with one hand and pulled her close to him. She held on to his shoulders and rubbed her breasts against his chest; as he lifted up her skirt and ran his hand into her nylons, pulling them down to reach her panties. She gasped as he slid his hand into them to finger her wetness. He slid two fingers into her and pressed his palm against her clitoris. She buried her face in his neck and moaned as she moved her pelvis into his hand. She slid one hand down to his belt buckle and fumbled it open, still gyrating into his hand. She managed to free his trousers so they slid down around his ankles. He found himself half leaning, half sitting on her dresser as she pulled one leg out of her stockings and mounted him. His head fell back against the mirror to steady himself as she pushed against him. He heard her moaning in her throat and felt her urgency rise. Then she arched her back and opened her mouth -- but stopped her voice. She had a long, soundless orgasm.

Through half closed eyes, Paul saw her head tilted back and her breasts rising up to him and falling back, rising up and falling back. He gripped her buttocks with both hands and pushed himself as deeply into her as he could. He strangled his cry in his throat, choking as he tried to silence his own coming. He convulsed into her, for what seemed like the longest climax in history. When done, he rested his head on her shoulder, breathing heavily.

Moira held him and kissed his cheek. "Wow. I'm glad we didn't wake my kid," she whispered.

Paul laughed weakly. "I'm glad I didn't have a stroke. I thought you were suffering from exhaustion. God help me if you had been in peak condition, I'd have died." He shifted his weight painfully. "I think I'm sitting on your hairbrush."

Moira laughed softly, "No, you're not -- I knocked it on the floor with my knee."

"Whatever it is, it's prickly." Paul reached around and pulled out an Armadillo action figure.

Moira muffled her hysterics with her hand while Paul attempted to stand up. He worried that he'd seriously pulled some muscles in his legs. Moira pulled him over to the bed and he fell on it like a tree. She helped him off with the few remaining clothes he had on, and took the rest of her own off, also. They snuggled under the sheets.

Resting her head against his shoulder, she asked, drowsily, "Refresh my memory -- how many times have we been together?"

He looked back at her, frowning slightly. "This is our fourth time together. The first time was a weekend in DC in '71 ... then we were together for three weeks in Seattle in 1980." Her face didn't register anything but he could tell she was thinking. "And in '89 we spent five days in India."

"Mm. Tell me everything you can remember about us. Start with our first meeting." She yawned.

Then Paul began to softly tell her every detail he had etched into his memory about that time, until he could tell by her breathing she was fast asleep. Curiosity overcame him and he lifted up the covers for a quick peek at her naked body. He reached over to turn on the bedside lamp.

She looked thin, but still had the same breathtakingly beautiful body. And she still had that yummy little tummy. He directed the light to examine her more carefully. The little silver lines were gone, and there were purple ones instead. Something in the back of his head tried to tell him what they meant, but he couldn't think what. His head felt as if it weighed a hundred pounds, as the strain of the day began to hit him. He reached behind and turned off the light. Then he curled up around her, chin over her head, and slipped into a deeply peaceful sleep.

Some hours later, Paul woke with a draft on his back. He turned around and saw a small figure silhouetted in the doorway. Alarmed, Paul pulled up the bed sheets to cover his nude backside. The little boy walked over to him.

"Who are you?" he asked, rubbing an eye with his fist. He had on Armadillo pajamas.

"I'm Paul. I'm a ... er, a friend of your mother's," Paul said awkwardly.

The little guy nodded his head. "Hi." He began to climb into the bed.

"Hey, I don't think you should do this!" said Paul, intensely aware that he was undressed. He held on tightly to the covers so they wouldn't be pulled off.

The child ignored him, and clambered over him to get to his mom. He slithered under the sheets beside her, and patted her face. "Mom! Mom, you gotta wake up."

Moira lifted up her head. "What is it, sweetie?" she said sleepily.

"It's time. We gotta go." The child said, but instead of trying to pull his mother up, he curled up next to her.

"Okay," his mother said, and put her arms around him.

Paul coughed.

Moira's eyes flew open. "Oh my God, Paul, you're really here!" She sat up in bed, her child clinging to her. "Quickly," she said to the boy, "we have to help him, he can't do it on his own!"

*What the !?* Paul found himself being embraced by both Moira and her child. The little boy reached around Paul's shoulders and gave him little reassuring pats on the back. Paul felt uncomfortable, with Moira on the other side, pressing her breasts into his arm as she held him. He heard a rumbling, a muffled roar. The floor beneath them lurched, and they went up in the air. Instead of coming right down, they stayed suspended above the bed.

"Keep holding on," Moira said, to her son or to him, Paul wasn't sure. "Concentrate."

The room around them began to move in slow motion. Paul watched as walls began to wave in and out, and up and down. Bits of the ceiling started to break, and the dresser fell over. But he couldn't hear any of it, or feel any of it either. The ceiling gradually began to collapse and the floors above fell into the apartment. It seemed as if Paul's molecules were being separated somehow, and it seemed as if both Moira and her son were lifting him through the rubble and destruction. He floated outside. His bare feet touched pavement, and he found himself standing out on the street.

Alone, by his uncle's Porsche, stark naked and holding his cell-phone. The apartment building in front of him was flattened.

Paul couldn't recall much of what had happened right after the earthquake. He must have called 911 on his cell phone. He remembered a firefighter giving him a yellow raincoat to wear. He remembered being kept from running back into the building, and forced into the ambulance. The hospital kept him only a short time, then released him. How he got back to his uncle's hotel wearing only the raincoat, that he didn't remember. His uncle wasn't there -- he'd suffered a concussion, and was in a hospital across town. The hotel had experienced only minor damage. Paul did remember the hours spent sitting in the hotel room, still in the raincoat, watching the news, calling phone number after phone number. No bodies found in the wreckage of the apartment building matched Moira or her son. One body did match the description of Abuelita.

Unable to work, Paul returned to Seattle. Michael flew down to finish the contract details with the Japanese, so an interpreter was no longer needed.

A shattered, broken man, Paul isolated himself at his place on Colvos. He ate little, slept less, yet rarely got out of bed. He didn't know how long he'd been like that when one day the lights went on in his room and the curtains were drawn back. Paul shielded his eyes from the blinding sunlight. A man's silhouette stood over him.

"Come on," said Adam. "You're getting up and getting dressed."

Amazingly strong arms lifted Paul out of bed and walked him to the bathroom. They held him under the shower and washed his hair. They sat him on the toilet seat by the sink and supervised brushing his teeth. They pulled a sweatshirt over his head and jogging pants up around his waist and guided him downstairs. In the kitchen, strong hands steadied his own as he sipped a cup of coffee.

"You have to eat." Adam commanded.

"I'm not hungry," whined Paul, although his stomach churned for want of food. Paul felt a spoon go in his mouth. "Yuck, what is this?" he mumbled.

"Applesauce. From what I can tell, you haven't eaten in several days. I wanted to start you slow," Adam said.

Paul obediently swallowed the applesauce, which to him tasted like cardboard. After several bites, Adam handed him a piece of dry toast, which he mouthed a little. Adam helped him over to the couch by the window, so Paul could sit in the sunshine. Adam sat by him, and put his arm around his

shoulders and patted his back reassuringly. That did it; Paul spasmed away from him. He choked out an agonized cry.

"Th-they're dead. Sh-she's gone, she's gone, she's gone," Paul wailed. He wrapped his arms across his chest and rocked back and forth as he mournfully keened.

Adam, extremely shaken by Paul's grief, leaned forward and held him tightly. Paul wanted to pull away from him, but Adam had a vise-like grip on him. Slowly, Paul noticed himself calming down inside, and his breathing returned to normal. He rested his head on Adam's shoulder.

When he was calm, Adam said to him, firmly, "They're not. Gone, I mean."

Paul shook his head. "I saw it. The building was flattened. No one in that ground floor apartment could have survived."

"You did," Adam observed.

"Because of them. They became angels and carried me out. But they were angels, you see. Angels. So they had to be d-dead." The grief welled up in him again.

"No, no," hushed Adam, "they never found the bodies."

"So what happened to them?" Paul sounded like a child wondering where the tooth fairy had taken his tooth.

Adam's dark brown eyes looked into Paul's own. "They disappeared."

A little light went off in Paul's head. The madness of grief slowly transformed into an insane joy. Of course! He thought hysterically, they disappeared. How logical. Why hadn't he thought of it? She always disappeared, always vanished without a trace. The joy transmuted into agonizing despair. They disappeared! And he was alone.

Adam held him through all these transitions. When Paul began to sink again, Adam shook him gently. "Okay, get up now. We're going to take a walk on the beach."

Adam stayed with Paul for the next several days, making sure he ate, and bathed, and slept. He took him out for walks on the beach and, when it rained, he read to him. Any novel pulled down from the bookshelf. When Paul seemed to be functioning a little better, he left and returned every few days or so. He slowly assisted Paul with returning to the world of the living.



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ASSIGNMENT 109: LOS ANGELES, 1994

Hello.

I am extremely confused and distraught. Have I not committed the greatest error one could commit? We are not to reveal ourselves in any way. We are not to directly involve ourselves in any way. We are not to consciously impact or manipulate Nature and Mankind. This is more than I am capable of handling. I wish to terminate this instrument. A chaperone can take my place. I am not learning. Advise, please.

Response:

Dear One:

You are resisting your strongest lesson. Immediately work with the Teachers on self-forgiveness. Suggest that you review Body Awareness. You are never given more than you can handle. Termination refused. Chaperones will not be beneficial for several more growth cycles. Suggestion to remain discorporate for a cycle. You are learning despite yourself.

## Chapter 6

SEATTLE, 1995

In January of 1995 things were finally settling down at Marbanks Architects. It had been a frenzied two years since the Northridge earthquake. Adding to the activity of expanded international relations, the decision had come from High Command at "Star Fleet" to open a branch in Portland.

"Would have done it long ago, Paul, but I didn't have another nephew," Stephen joked. He had no sons and none of his daughters were speaking to him since his divorce from their mother.

There had been a lot of heated discussions over who would take the helm of the new Portland office. Paul pushed for Michael, but he didn't want to leave Seattle and, more importantly, didn't want to move into the administrative side of the business.

"Dammit, Paul, I'm an architect, not an administrator," said Michael in his best imitation of Star Trek's 'Bones' McCoy, "So were you, if you recall. Don't you miss the creative aspect?"

Paul had to admit he didn't enjoy the paper pushing, but there was creativity in getting an organization of individuals to work together as a productive and harmonious unit. Setting up a balance of structure to get things done and space so things could develop was very creative.

Paul and Stephen together worked on the evolution of the Portland branch. It became a real family enterprise when Stephen hired Paul's sister Susan to help with the legal aspects. She practiced corporate law but intended to transition into teaching. With her growing family (she had four children now) she wanted the stability and manageable hours of a professor's schedule. However, it looked more like Stephen would offer her the position of administrator, and hire a head architect from within the company. Stephen had his eye on Adam Paulson.

"If we can't hire another Marbanks as head architect, we can at least hire someone who looks like one," Stephen cracked.

"What do you mean?" Paul asked.

"He's the spitting image of your dad at that age," Stephen replied. Then he eyed Paul and nudged him with his elbow. "Had any little mistakes when you were in high school, Paul?"

Paul, who had not lost his virginity until his twenty-first birthday (although not for lack of trying), shook his head. "Not that I know of," he

grinned.

One afternoon a month later Paul and his sister were sitting in the Portland office surrounded by crates and new furniture, the table in front of them covered with resumes and legal forms. Stephen had gone to the airport to pick up Adam, whom he had lured down from Seattle on the pretense of assisting with hiring for the new branch. In truth, he intended to spring the job offer on him that night. Paul preferred a more direct and open approach, but it was Stephen's call.

"So, does this guy really look like Dad when he was young?" Susan asked, taking a swig of raspberry Talking Rain. Younger than Paul by three years, she resembled their mother's side of the family. She had wavy black hair, blue eyes with green flecks, and a face full of freckles. Even now, she looked like his teenage kid sister in braces, except for the laugh lines and a few gray hairs.

"Well, I wasn't born when dad was thirty, so I couldn't say," Paul smiled.

"Don't you remember mom and dad's wedding photo on the mantle in the living room? He was about thirty then."

Paul hadn't been home in several years, and had no recollection of any photo. His lack of regular attendance at family gatherings was a bone of contention between him and his sister so he didn't say anything. He just shrugged his shoulders instead.

"Uncle Stephen says you probably fooled around when you were in high school," his sister grinned.

Paul looked up sharply, "Well, Adam was born in Alaska, so I guess it could have been Uncle Stephen who fooled around. At least he was on the West Coast; we were in Connecticut." They both looked knowingly at each other. Paul wondered if that possibly could be true, but dismissed it instantly.

They started sorting the papers on the desk into organized piles before getting ready to meet Stephen and Adam and go to the restaurant. A question popped out of Paul's mouth before he thought of it.

"What are those purple lines on a woman's stomach?" he asked.

Susan stared at her big brother. "Paul, you are such a bachelor. You mean you don't know?"

Paul shook his head sheepishly.

"Well, you get stretch marks anywhere you gain weight. On a woman's stomach it's usually because of pregnancy. Took me years to get rid of mine." She retrieved a file off the floor.

"So they go away?" he asked.

"No, not completely. They shrink and become thin silver lines, if you exercise and lose weight. Why are you so interested? Are you dating a single mother?" she eyed him inquisitively.

Paul ignored the question as he was trying to figure something out. "So they're silver after they're purple and they don't go away?" Just then the intercom buzzed.

Stephen's voice came clearly across the speaker, "Chow time, boys and girls. Come and get it."

Susan gave an exasperated hiss. "Goodness, he sounds like Dad calling my kids in for dinner. How old does he think we are?"

Paul chuckled at Stephen's unique ability to annoy practically everybody. They pulled on their raincoats and went downstairs. Stephen stood on the sidewalk with Adam, try to regal him with some story while Adam intently listened. In Seattle, Adam had earned the nickname "Mr. Spock" for his talent at hiding his feelings. He probably thought Stephen was a boring old fool, but no one would be able to read it on his face.

"Ah, Susan, meet one of the bright young stars of our company, Adam Paulson." Stephen introduced them. "Paul has been hiding him from me in Seattle. I wouldn't have discovered him if I hadn't been working up here in Portland these past few months."

That wasn't entirely accurate. Adam had a tendency to stay in the background. He let his work speak for itself, without having his signature splashed all over the place. Paul doubted that Adam would accept Stephen's offer tonight; Adam clearly shunned leadership positions, not because he wasn't qualified but because he disliked the spotlight that accompanied it.

Susan stepped forward and shook Adam's hand. She looked him up and down with amazement. "My goodness, Uncle Stephen, you're absolutely right!" she exclaimed. "Adam, you're the spitting image of my father Charles. You don't by any chance have relatives in Connecticut?"

Adam's eyes shifted from her to Paul and back again. "I'm not sure," he said hesitantly. "Pleased to meet you, by the way."

"Oh, forgive my rudeness, I'm very pleased to meet you, too." She shook her head, "I just can't get over it; you look just like Dad."

Paul decided to step in and help his friend. "Well, we could be related to any number of people, you know," he said to his sister, and Stephen, too. "Who knows what our last name was before Great-Grandpapa came through Ellis Island." The Marbanks were 3/4 Scots Irish, but the surname Marbanks came from Stephen and Charles's grandfather when he emigrated Wales in the early 1900's. He had never bothered to tell his only son their real surname before dying in the flu epidemic in New York at the end of World War I. He had told his bride, but their grandmother wasn't able to faithfully reproduce it in her own broad Scots accent.

Susan accepted the answer and dropped the subject in favor of deciding on which restaurant to go to for dinner. They chose McCormick and Schmick's, which was nearby. When they all sat down, Stephen insisted on ordering wine and making sure everyone had a full cup. Paul struggled to keep a straight face. He could just imagine the outcome if Adam took a sip of the wine. It would certainly help him avoid turning down Stephen's offer.

"A toast!" proclaimed Stephen, holding his glass high. "To the success of the Portland office!"

Everyone obediently raised their glasses and took sips. That is, Susan took a sip, Paul a swallow, Stephen downed his glass, and Adam looked like he sipped his wine, but the level in his glass remained unchanged when it returned to the table. Paul noted this with interest, curious to see how the rest of the evening would turn out.

Adam surprised Paul by initiating the conversation at the beginning of the dinner. It was quite unlike him. Normally he would have simply listened and responded to questions.

"So, Susan, I hear your family is in Ann Arbor. How has it been for you putting in the time here getting the Portland office started?" Adam inquired politely.

This set Susan off. Neither Stephen, estranged from his family, nor Paul who had none, even considered that Susan might miss her husband and four children. She told Adam everything. Apparently she called them every night. Her eldest had received acceptance letters from several universities and couldn't decide which college to choose. Her fifteen-year-old daughter Olivia dated a boy her parents didn't like, and their twelve-year-old twins hated school. Her husband was managing very capably, but Susan was guilt-ridden that she wasn't home fixing everything. On the other hand, she loved Portland, and its rain versus the snow in Michigan, and thought that many of the family's difficulties might be solved if they relocated here. One

of their eldest's possible schools was the University of Washington in Seattle. Also, Olivia would have to break up with the boyfriend from Hell, and the twins could go to a local private school with far more reasonable tuition than the one they attended in Ann Arbor.

Amazing, thought Paul. This is why Adam still had a parade of people, especially women, come through his office each day. Besides being able to draw his sister's life story out of her with one question, Adam had also effectively redirected the spotlight off himself

Suddenly Stephen offered Susan the administrative position. Susan was flabbergasted, which Paul found hard to believe, and told Stephen she'd have to talk it over with her husband. This caused Stephen to go on for the next half hour selling the job to her, trying to get her to agree on the spot. He would have made a great salesperson; he followed the cardinal rule of not letting the customer leave the store without having made the decision to buy. Paul glanced at Adam out of the corner of his eye, quietly enjoying his dinner.

"So, Mr. Spock, how's the Enterprise been without me?" Paul asked sotto voce so as not to attract Stephen's attention.

"Fine, Captain. Although we've been considering calling ourselves Deep Space Nine." Adam grinned. The younger architects weren't into the Next Generation as Paul and Michael were. "Only they don't call me Mr. Spock. The call me Odo."

"I always thought of you as Data, myself." Paul said, affectionately.

Adam chuckled. "My mom used to call me Pinocchio, because she could always tell if I lied."

Paul was again surprised. Adam had never talked of his family. Paul wanted to ask him about his father, when Stephen interjected.

"So, Adam, I've heard good things about you from my nephew. You've been with our company for nearly six years now, in fact you're a little older than Paul was when he took over Seattle. How do you feel about taking the reigns of your own branch office?" Stephen took a swig of wine. "Portland needs a head architect."

"What about Michael? He's far more qualified than me," Adam countered.

"Michael's not interested," Stephen said bluntly. "Wants to stay in Seattle. What about you?" Their desserts were in front of them and Stephen didn't want to waste any time. Susan had used all her skills as a lawyer to

avoid giving an answer to Stephen before talking to her husband. If her family hadn't been attending the twin's basketball game, Stephen would have made Susan call him during dinner. She didn't tell Stephen that her husband always carried a cell phone.

Adam stared at Stephen intently with an unreadable expression on his face.

Finally Stephen blurted out, "Well, what is it, man? Do you have to call your husband, too? Or your wife, or your mother?" That broke the tension and everybody laughed, even Susan.

"No, I'm not married. But I do need time to think about it," Adam said, sincerely. "I will seriously consider your offer. Give me a week, unless you have someone else on your list you'd rather talk to."

Stephen almost continued persuading, but for some reason thought better of it. He finished his fifth glass of wine. "I'm disappointed in you people. I had hoped this would be a celebration dinner."

"Ah, well, you can think of this as a pre-celebration dinner, Uncle," Paul said to mollify him. "And when we do celebrate, we can order champagne."

This seemed to placate the old man and they were able to finish their dessert. Too drunk to make it back on his own, Susan drove their uncle to his hotel. Paul took Adam to the Susan's rented condo. Paul stayed with her during the week, saving the three-hour commute to Colvos for the weekends.

"Quite an amazing performance tonight, Adam," Paul said on the drive there.

Adam looked at Paul questioningly.

"I mean, how you managed to keep my uncle off your back for almost the entire evening, and then were able to get him to wait a week for your answer. That's pretty unheard of."

Adam smiled, "I probably could come up with an answer in twenty-four hours, but I said a week in case he tried to talk me down."

Laughing, Paul went on, "so, what do you think of his offer? Even though I like you in Seattle, this is a great career opportunity."

Adam sighed. "I don't know. Up to now I've been pretty sure about where I'm at, and why I'm here. I have to check out whether it's time to move or not."

"Check out," echoed Paul, "how do you mean?"

Adam hesitated before answering. "By meditating on it."

Usually Paul would have let the subject drop right there, but he found himself pushing it. "So, kind of checking out your own gut feelings?" Something Paul did frequently.

"There's a little more to it than that." Adam chose his words carefully, as if trying to put a complicated idea into simple sentences. "I believe that everyone has a purpose here, both something to learn and something to fulfill. Everything I do is directed towards my purpose, and I view everything as a learning experience. I'm very clear about my purpose in Seattle. I just don't know if I can fulfill the same thing in Portland or not." He ran his hand through his hair and continued, more to himself than to Paul, "Maybe I can ... it's close enough. Then maybe not ... I've got to ask..." his voice trailed off.

Paul interrupted his thoughts, "Ask who?"

"God," Adam said.

The answer stunned Paul. He thought he knew Adam pretty well, but had no inkling that Adam had any religious inclinations.

"Not religious, spiritual." Adam said, in that eerie way he had of speaking to Paul's thoughts.

"What do you mean, spiritual?" Paul felt way out of his league in following this topic.

Adam seemed to feel the same way. In a patient tone, as if explaining the facts of life to a three year old too, he said. "I believe we are spirit, we have bodies. These bodies are our vehicles for a lifetime. We use it to manifest Spirit, our spiritual creativity, and to learn lessons we could not otherwise learn without a physical body."

"Manifest spirit, what do you mean? What sort of lessons?" Paul reluctantly asked, overwhelmingly curious, in spite of himself.

Adam grew silent. Then he said, "It's different for different people. People manifest in different ways, and people have different lessons to learn. For me, I manifest by doing what I do, and I learn from interacting with others."

This only added to Paul's curiosity, but he decided to try a different tack. "So what have you been doing and learning in Seattle?"

Adam exhaled loudly, not wanting to discuss it. Clenching his jaw a



little, he answered, "I've been contributing to the stability around me, while assisting with change, and I've been learning about..." he paused, "feelings."

Paul could clearly see the accuracy of Adam's assessment, except for the last part. "Feelings, Mr. Spock?" hoping humor would draw more out of him.

It worked, and Adam gave a little laugh. "It's not that I don't have feelings, or don't understand them, but it is a challenge accepting them." Then he said, more to himself, "being human is very difficult, with all these emotions."

He sounded so like Spock that Paul had to laugh. "I agree, being human is very difficult. I think it's especially hard on men, if you grew up in my generation, and somewhat your generation, too. We were raised not to have feelings, or at least not strong ones. And now we're supposed to be sensitive males of the '90's."

Adam seemed relieved. "Yeah, sensitive males of the '90's," he echoed.

By that time they were at Susan's small, two-bedroom condo near Washington Park, so the topic ended there. Paul used the second bedroom, and Adam planned to crash on the sofa bed. Adam would spend the next couple days helping them out, and then ride back to Seattle with Paul. They usually left the office early on Fridays so Paul could beat the rush hour traffic and Susan could catch the afternoon flight back to Michigan for the weekend.

While Paul waited for Susan to return, Adam pulled a chair into the corner and sat down to meditate. Paul fixed himself a cup of coffee in the kitchen, remembering how it felt to have Moira in the other room meditating while at the house they had shared. It had been a comforting feeling, and he felt that way now, with Adam in the other room. A stab of pain replaced the pleasant memory as he recalled the last time he saw Moira: the recurring vision of the building collapsing with Moira possibly in it. He looked into the blackness of his cup, being drawn into the mire of what-ifs and what could have been, when Adam's voice pulled him out of it.

"Paul?" Adam said, still sitting in the corner with his eyes closed.

Paul smiled sadly, Moira used to do that -- talk to him with her eyes closed, still meditating. "Yes, Adam?"

"I forgot to tell you, but I have to go out of town the end of this week. Could you feed Percy for me? I have Alice doing it now, but she and her boyfriend are going skiing this weekend."

"Sure, Adam, I'd be glad to." Paul took a sip of his coffee. Adam had this habit of working practically nonstop for six months and then suddenly taking time off. Sometimes for simply a long weekend, sometimes for a couple weeks. He never said where he went, Paul assumed he hiked or camped by himself. He always left looking like death warmed over and returned looking rejuvenated and alive. Not a schedule Paul would have adopted -- he preferred his forty- or fifty-hour weeks and solid weekends to recover. Maybe he'd just learned to pace himself more sensibly than the younger man.

Just then the door opened and Susan stormed in.

"Heyzeus God, Uncle Stephen can be the most pompous ass-" She stopped when she saw Adam in the corner with his eyes closed. "Oh, excuse me, I didn't see --" she whispered.

"It's okay." Adam stretched and bent over to touch the floor. He stood up. "I'm done. Where's the bathroom?"

Paul pointed the way and Adam disappeared. "What about Uncle Stephen?" grinned Paul, pouring his sister a cup of coffee.

"Oh, he kept bombarding me in the car on the way to the hotel. He just wanted someone to say yes to him tonight. Then he propositioned the front desk receptionist at the hotel. I was so embarrassed! Oh, thanks." She gratefully accepted the offered cup. "I had too much wine tonight myself, I should have done what Adam did. He's a really clever guy." She took a sip of coffee and sighed.

"What did Adam do?" said Paul, puzzled.

"Oh, didn't you notice? He pretended to drink and didn't! And then Uncle Stephen would keep refilling everyone's wine glass, and when he began to notice Adam wasn't drinking his, Adam switched glasses with Stephen. Every time our dear sweet uncle finished a glass, Adam would lift his own up, pretend to drink it, then put it down right by him, and move Uncle Stephen's glass to near his own plate. Uncle Stephen drank out of two wine glasses all night long!"

They both looked in the direction of the bathroom door and at each other. His sister went on.

"He sure has Uncle Stephen's number. The way he handled him tonight was brilliant. I hope he considers the offer, it would be fun to work with him."

Paul looked at his sister. "So you're probably going to accept?"

Susan turned serious. "Probably. But there is a lot more to consider besides Ron and the kids. I mean, Ron would have to relocate his practice and the kids would need new schools. I probably will continue to commute between here and Michigan until the school year's over. But ... well there's Mom and Dad to consider, and you."

"Go on." Paul said.

"Well, I think Dad would forgive me for working with Uncle Stephen, they've come to a grudging reconciliation over the years. But ...Dad isn't doing very well, Paul. You should go see him. I don't think he's going to last another year. If Dad goes, what about Mom? Michigan is a lot closer to Connecticut than Oregon, I don't know if this is the right time to move so far away." She gazed off into the distance.

"Well, we'd both be out here, maybe Mom could move here to be near to us," Paul said.

Susan looked at Paul, "Well, now, that's another thing. Do you want me to be so near to you? I mean, you've been out here isolating yourself from the family for quite a while now. Would you be comfortable having us so near by? And me working in the same business?"

"Susan! How could you even wonder such a thing!" Paul protested. "I'd love to have you guys near by. I've wanted to have you and the kids up to my place on Colvos ever since I bought it. It's a great place for kids, right on the beach. I just haven't offered because every time I talk to you, it sounds like you have the next two years booked with activities and trips to Europe. And what's this about isolating?"

"When you came back from L.A., you didn't answer any of my phone calls or letters for almost six months, and when you did, you were very... short." Susan's face clouded, and then Adam appeared, so she masked it with a cheery smile. "I just thought you probably were so busy with your business and your life that you didn't have time for your family."

"Susan, I'm sorry, I --" Paul took a deep breath, "I lost someone in L.A. ... I think she may have died in the earthquake, but I haven't been able to find out for sure."

Susan stared blankly at him and then glanced at Adam.

"It's okay, Adam knows, in fact he's the one who got me on my feet again. But I was pretty non-functioning for those six months, and barely functioning until, well, just a little while ago, when we started working on this Portland opening." Paul nodded at Adam, who took a seat at the kitchen counter with. Adam just watched Paul intensely.

Susan put her hand on her brother's arm. "Oh, Paul, I'm so sorry, why didn't you tell me?" she said softly.

Paul put his hand over hers, "I'll tell you now, if you'd like to know." She nodded, so he went on. "I've known her off and on for ... a long time. Her name was, is, Moira," he corrected himself. "I met her in D.C. when I finished school. We were only together a weekend back then, but I could never get her out of my mind. Then, about nine years later, I ran into her in Seattle and we ... we lived together for about three weeks. But those three weeks were the happiest in my entire life. I almost asked her to marry me when she, ah, disappeared without a trace."

Susan gasped, "Without a trace?"

"I don't think I had her correct last name, because the place she had worked for when I met her had no record of her. Anyway, I did my best to forget her, and that's why I married Maggie. She was as unlike Moira as night and day. Unfortunately, that's why Maggie and I didn't work out." Paul paused for a moment, looking down. "I just couldn't love her, the way I love Moira," he murmured. Then he straightened up and continued, "I met Moira again, when I went to India for Uncle Stephen in '89."

"Did she explain to you why she left?" Susan demanded.

"No, uh, not really," Paul stuttered. "But she did explain that there were things she couldn't tell me at the time, that she may be able to tell me later. More importantly, I could accept the relationship as it is, was, whatever. I mean, I know I love Moira, and that she's the only woman I will ever love, and that circumstances beyond our control keep us from being together the way I'd like us to be together. So I had to let go of what I'd like and accept what I can have. I, we, made a commitment to fully be together whenever we were, are, able to be together, and to be as honest with each other as we are able to be. We were together five days and then I had to leave to get back to the company." Paul shrugged his shoulders.

Susan stared, as if seeing her brother in a new light. Pieces of a puzzle finally fitted, and she could understand the whole picture.

"I always wondered why you never settled down and had a family. Now I can see why, because this woman you love would never stay put long enough to settle down with you." Susan said.

Adam looked at Paul for a response.

"Through no fault of her own. I feel like she has some other job, that whatever she's doing is just a cover." Paul said, defensively.

"Like she's a spy or something? Come on, Paul. This isn't the cold war!" exclaimed Susan.

"No, but every time I see her she's doing something completely different and unrelated from the last time. For instance, in Los Angeles, she translated for a Japanese group Uncle Stephen worked with." Paul explained.

"That's how you met her the last time?" Susan asked.

"Yes. We were together only one night." Paul looked out the window, his voice deepening. "I asked her to come back to Seattle, to live with me on Colvos. She - she said she'd sleep on it." Paul stopped, his throat tightening.

"Oh, God, Paul, and then the earthquake! What happened?" Susan gripped her coffee cup so hard her knuckles were white.

Paul spoke slowly. "There's something I haven't mentioned yet. This time she had a child with her, a little boy. I barely saw him but, "he took a deep breath and looked at the ceiling, "I just know I could have loved him as if he were my own, simply because he was Moira's son. That's why I asked her, not just because I couldn't stand the thought of being apart from her, I'd accepted that in India. I couldn't accept that that little boy wouldn't have a father, and would have to grow up moving from one place to another. I wanted to give him, and Moira, a sense of permanence, that someone would be there for him. I just ... really wanted them to be in my life."

Susan had tears in her eyes. "Oh, Paul, did the little boy die, too?"

"I don't know. The strangest thing happened to me that night. I dreamed they both embraced me when the earthquake happened and lifted me out of the collapsing building to the road outside. The firefighters found me standing on the street, with the building flattened in front of me."

Susan patted Paul's arm.

Paul squeezed her hand. "They never found the bodies, Susan. Moira and her son disappeared without a trace. Again." He reached over to his sister and hugged her. "So there's hope," he told her, comfortingly. "There's hope I might meet them again, and maybe this time..." he heard a sniff from the other side of the counter and looked up.

Adam sat there, his face down turned, with tears running down his cheeks. His shoulders were motionless. He gave no other indication that he was crying, which stunned Paul. He'd seen Adam show such strong feelings only once before.

"Sorry, Paul" sniffled Adam, "I didn't mean to interrupt ... I just never heard the whole story before."

"That's all right," said Paul, "I didn't really want to talk about it before. It was too painful." With that, Paul put his arms around Adam and held him tight.

"Life is difficult, isn't it?" Paul chuckled. "So much to learn about feelings. So much to learn about love."

Paul could feel the tension in Adam, so he concentrated on helping Adam release the way Paul had been able to release, the one time he and Adam had hugged, and the way he always could release when Moira held him. He sensed the tenseness drain off of Adam's shoulders and down his legs and into the floor. Adam let go and stepped back, looking at Paul in surprise.

"You grounded me. How did you learn to do that?" he asked.

"From you." Paul said. And Moira, he thought. He hoped he could introduce them the next time he saw her. Adam and Moira were so similar in many ways; they would really like each other.

The next few days flew by, with Susan agreeing to become the administrator of the new Portland office, and Adam accepting the head architect position, beginning the following month, after he returned from his trip. Paul, finished with his part in the project, gave his heartiest congratulations to his sister and his best friend, and went back to Seattle.

Adam took off the last weekend in January. Paul kept his promise to feed Percy in Ballard as Adam hadn't made arrangements to move to Portland yet. He returned home to Colvos early that evening after his first day of cat sitting. Paul had just sat down in the living room when a big woompf moved through the house, like someone had slammed all the doors at once. His heart froze. Then a smaller woompf sent him out the door to the deck. Surrounded by tall trees, a beach at high tide in front of him and a steep hill behind him, he didn't know what to do. He turned around and went back in the house. A few minutes later, the phone rang.

"Did you feel that?" Michael's excited voice came over the line. "Did you feel that? I haven't felt that since I was a kid, in '64. Did you feel that?"

"Yes," Paul said, his own voice surprising him by its calmness. "An earthquake."

The next day Paul got all the details. The Seattle area had indeed experienced an earthquake. Only a magnitude 5 on the Richter scale, small by Californian standards, but the largest the Northwest had felt since 1964. The epicenter had been at Point Robinson, on the tip of Maury Island, near Colvos.

At work on Monday the entire city buzzed about the quake, including Marbanks Architects. Like other Seattle companies, the office went through the paces on earthquake preparedness. Although the Point Robinson tremor didn't come close to the quake in '64, it awakened the entire area to the probability that a much larger quake might happen in the near future. Paul called a staff meeting to brainstorm how to handle the situation if the "big one" actually occurred. Emergency supplies and additional first aid kits were ordered. The building manager notified the firm that a maintenance team would be making the rounds to secure standing bookshelves to the walls and make other minor adjustments. When the meeting broke up Michael and Paul remained behind talking.

"The manager didn't mention if his maintenance team had inspected for damage from this earthquake, did he?" Michael asked Paul.

"This building is fine," Adam's voice said.

The two looked up to see Adam standing in the doorway.

"Adam!" Paul exclaimed, "you weren't due back until Tuesday. Did you cut your trip short because of the 'quake? You didn't have to; it wasn't serious."

"I never should have left." Adam brushed the comment aside. "I have too much work to do here."

With that, Adam went into his office and buried himself in his work. At the end of the day, he called Stephen and declined the promotion. He told Stephen that he wasn't ready for such a big step, but not to rule him out completely in the future. Both Paul and Michael tried to talk to him about it, and Susan called him up to get him to reconsider, but to no avail. An architect from one of the California offices landed the job.

April came, and with it relief from the gray and rainy Seattle winter. The sun began to shine again; the trees flowered. People strapped on their roller blades and hit the streets in helmets and knee pads. The atmosphere around the office became festive, as if good weather outside changed the

atmosphere inside into a company picnic.

Paul, however, found himself battling depression. Something about April, not just the weather but also the month, triggered him. The three weeks he and Moira had lived together were in April, so the time brought up many memories. He had to work extra hard to keep his mind on his job and to keep his thoughts positive. After one grueling day, his mood getting the better of him, he did what the rest of the office did: he went to see Adam.

"Is the doctor in?" Paul asked, sticking his head in the door.

"Depends on what kind of doctor," Adam answered. "Or who. Is it Bones, Dr. Beverly Crusher, Dr. Julian Bashir, or am I a holographic Doctor?"

"Wasn't there another one?" Paul frowned to remember.

"Dr. Kate Pulaski? But she was only on Next Generation for one season -- she doesn't count," Adam said. "What's up, Doc?"

Paul came in and sat down. "I have the blues. You want to blow this joint and grab a bite to eat?"

"Don't you want to talk to the Doctor about it?" Adam said, doing an amazing imitation of Voyager's holographic physician. Paul didn't get it, as he'd yet to catch the newest Star Trek series that had only began mid-season.

"No, not really. I want to get past it. I'm in the mood for Mexican," Paul said.

They settled on the Guadalajara Restaurant in West Seattle, because Paul knew the owners and thought they served the largest portions in town. Once there and settled into the brightly colored, overstuffed booths, Paul ordered a Margarita Grande. Adam ordered a coke.

"So it's a Margarita Grande kind of blues?" Adam gently probed.

"Oh, it's just springtime. I hate springtime." Paul downed his drink and ordered another.

Adam watched, and waited.

"Oh, no, don't do that." Paul pointed at Adam's face. "I said I don't want to talk about it. Don't pull it out of me." He gulped his next drink. "But let's not talk about work, either. Let's talk about you. I still don't understand; why didn't you go for that Portland job?"

"I like my house in Ballard and it's too far to commute by bicycle?" Adam joked.

"Not into a daily or weekly STP, eh?" said Paul, referring to the



Seattle to Portland bicycle marathon. "Why did your mother used to call you Pinocchio?"

Adam raised his eyebrows. "Good memory, Captain. I believe I've only mentioned that once."

"Well, that's all I know about your childhood. What was your family like? Where did you grow up and go to school, who was your best friend as a kid?" Paul enjoyed finally getting the questions out.

Adam examined his fajita burrito, and toyed with his rice before answering. "I moved a lot when I was a kid. It was mostly my mother and me... but when I grew older ... there were other people. I had a couple of Big Brothers. My best friend, well, I didn't really have any -- I was a weird kid. Oh, except in nursery school. I used to hang out with this kid who lived next door. We liked to peek into his baby sister's diapers to see whether she had a wiener or not."

Paul started coughing hysterically, and Adam patted him hard on the back. When his came voice back, he said, "Good God, I thought I was the only kid who used to do that to his sister."

Adam eyed him knowingly. "Well, it wasn't my sister, it was the kid next door. And, I never peeked at her in the shower when she was a teenager."

Paul stared at Adam through blurry eyes. "How the heck do you do that? Read my mind?" The margaritas were catching up with him.

Adam reached over and touched his hand. "Paul, haven't you had enough? You're going to have to drive home, unless you want a lift on the back of my bike."

Paul propped his head up with his hand. "S'okay, boss."

They finished as much of the meal as they were able, and the rest went into Styrofoam containers. When it came time to stand up to leave, Adam saw that Paul clearly couldn't drive. Adam paid for both of them and helped Paul out to his car.

"Can't do it, man. You've gotta." Paul leaned against the hood of his car.

"Christ, Paul, I can't drive. We'd better leave the car here and get you a cab." Adam looked down California Avenue.

"No, no, nope, nope nope." Paul said, flopping his hand towards Adam. "You can do it. It's an automatic. Try it, you'll like it."

Adam took the key and looked at it. Then looked at Paul's brand new, green and tan Ford Explorer 'Eddie Bauer Edition'. Then looked at Paul. Then looked at the sky.

"Okay, I'll try it. Get in." He helped Paul into the passenger seat and fumbled with the belt.

Adam hopped into the driver's seat and stared at the console.

"Key goes in here." Paul pointed to the ignition.

"Oh, okay." Adam stuck the key in the ignition. Nothing happened.

"You have to turn it." Paul coached.

Adam closed his eyes and pursed his lips. Then he relaxed and appeared to be meditating.

"Gonna levitate us there?" asked Paul. "What time's the next ferry? Or don't we need one?" He dissolved into helpless giggles.

Adam opened his eyes and started the car. Like an automaton, he turned on the signal and edged into traffic. He made his way down California Avenue going ten miles an hour. When he reached Fauntleroy Way, he found the signals no longer worked, so he opened the window and used hand signals. He went down Fauntleroy way at seven miles an hour, cars honking behind him. By the time he arrived at the line of cars waiting for the ferry, the headlights no longer worked.

"Paul, we're in trouble," Adam said. But Paul was fast asleep.

The ferry line moved just slowly enough for Adam not to have to stop. The ferry was loading by the time he got onto the dock, so he reached into Paul's glove compartment and pulled out the commuter books, one car-and-driver ticket, one passenger. He handed it to the ticket taker and coasted onto the ferry before turning off the car.

"That's not going to start again by itself," muttered Adam, to himself as Paul snored. He closed his eyes and meditated for most of the 15-minute ride over. Just as the ferry engines cut so the boat could maneuver into the dock, Adam hopped out and found a ferry worker.

"My car won't start. The engine is dead. Can I get a jump?" Adam asked.

The ferry worker was a tad disgruntled, but couldn't do anything about it -- the car had to be unloaded from the ferry somehow. When the boat docked, they unloaded everyone and then drove a little tractor with a large tire in front of it onto the ferry. It pushed Paul's car off the boat and

over to the side of the dock, where they used another machine to charge the battery. It took a while, but the car did get started.

As Adam drove off the dock, topping maybe 15 miles an hour, a dockworker yelled after him, "You'll never get it charged if you don't go faster!" but Adam couldn't hear him.

The ten-minute drive to Paul's house took a half an hour. The winding road off the main highway presented Adam's greatest challenge. A bicycle is a completely different width than a Ford Explorer, and somehow the roads looked a lot narrower to Adam.

After parking the vehicle in the carport at the road, Adam unloaded Paul and propped his snoring frame against the hood of the Explorer. He looked at the fifty steps down to Paul's house.

"Oh, fuck this," Adam spat, and then looked up and down the road. Not a soul in sight. He lifted Paul up in his arms, as if he were as light as a feather. Then, instead of gingerly stepping down to the wooden stairway, he stepped out -- into thin air. He and Paul gently floated to the bottom of the stairway. Adam propped Paul against the door to open it. "That wasn't so bad, was it?" he said to Paul, who was drooling.

Up the hill, Aggie Nelson fell off her stool by the kitchen window.

Paul awoke about noon the next day with a massive headache. Face down in his bed and still fully clothed from the night before, he felt like a sack of dirty laundry.

"Shoot me, shoot me now," he said, paraphrasing Daffy Duck.

"How about a shot of espresso, instead?" Adam asked, sitting in a chair by the window. Paul turned a bloodshot, bleary eye at him.

"Thanks for taking off my shoes," he croaked.

"Don't mention it." Adam cracked a smile. "Least I could do."

Paul tried raising himself up on shaking arms. He felt every one of his nearly forty-seven years, plus a couple of decades more. He had to make it to the bathroom; he was going to be sick. Adam swiftly picked him up with a strong, sure grip. He practically swung Paul off the bed and the few yards into the bathroom, depositing him in front of the toilet. Then Adam left to go downstairs to the kitchen, while Paul tried to recall the remains of a Mexican dinner from his stomach.

Paul crawled back to bed and Adam reappeared, offering a small glass.

"What is this?" said Paul, expecting coffee.

"It's a beverage made from the finest Floridian fruit. I believe it's known in the regional vernacular as 'orange juice'," Adam said wryly, and then his tone became more paternal. "I thought you could use some vitamin C instead of caffeine."

Paul sipped the juice. Adam was right; his body responded favorably to the nutrients. "Thanks, Adam. You're a good daddy."

Adam's face went blank, and then he got it. He sat on the edge of the bed and patted Paul's knee.

"Well, you're a good boy, Paul," he replied in kind. "Oh, I thought I'd let you know that I called the office for you and told them you were under the weather."

"What?" Paul sat up, and then looked at the clock. "Jeez, it's almost one o'clock in the afternoon. Oh, God. I was out for fourteen hours!" He ran his hand over his face. "Guess I can't handle drink any more than you can," he groaned. "Wait a minute! How did I get here? Where's the Explorer?" He tried getting out of bed and then sat down again.

"It's in the carport. I drove you here."

Paul's jaw dropped to the floor. "You drove? Is my car okay?"

"Well, the battery is dead, or maybe it needs fuses. I have a guy looking at it right now. Aggie Nelson's nephew. Told you I was bad on car's electrical systems." Adam grinned.

In fact, Adam had spent the morning talking to old Aggie Nelson, convincing her that she had not seen what she had seen. She turned out to be quite easy to convince -- she had been worried she'd be carted off to the Island Nursing Home and heavily medicated. She'd volunteered her nephew, a well-known backyard mechanic on the island, to perform the delicate surgery required to resuscitate Paul's Explorer.

Paul attempted getting up again, and succeeded on the second try. He shuffled to the chest of drawers and stared at it. Then he shook his head, and shuffled towards the shower and stared at it. Adam, who'd been watching all this in silent amusement, stood up and handed him the towel hanging over the bathroom door.

"Do you need any help?" He hid a smile.

"No, no, no." Paul shook his head vigorously, more to clear it than to indicate a negative response. He took the proffered towel.

"Well, then, I'll be downstairs." Adam turned to go. "Don't forget to take off your clothes before you shower," he called over his shoulder as he left the room.

Paul managed to have most of his clothes off when he got in the shower. It took a few minutes under the current of steaming water for him to realize he still had his socks on.

"Damn!" He tried to pull them off. Finally he gave up and concentrated on trying to open the shampoo. Since he had hair all over his body, he decided to use shampoo everywhere instead of soap. By the time he rinsed off, he'd run out of hot water. He leaped out not quite fast enough to avoid being blasted by the icy flow as he reached for the faucet to turn it off. That woke him up.

Adam's face reappeared around the door as Paul, wrapped in a towel, tried to peel off his wet, clinging socks. He grinned.

"I thought I told you to take off your clothes before you got in that shower!"

"I remembered most of them." Paul said, struggling with the last sock. He took it off and threw it at Adam.

Adam ducked. "Hey, is that any way to treat your Good Samaritan? And I had your car fixed, too."

"It's fixed? That was fast." Paul went past him to the chest of drawers.

"Just a couple of fuses and the battery needed charging. He has some gismo hooked to it to keep it charged. He said to put it in Aggie's mailbox when we're done." Adam headed back to the kitchen. "Lunch is ready, if you want it."

A few minutes later, Paul came trotting downstairs, freshly shaved and looking like a regular human being in jeans and a denim shirt and bare feet. Adam had set the dining room table with two place settings; each had a plate with a turkey sandwich on whole wheat and a tall glass of milk.

"No peanut butter and jelly?" asked Paul facetiously, as the scene reminded him of his childhood. He never sat at the dining room table except for dinner parties. He ate lunch either on the couch in front of the TV or standing by the kitchen counter. And he rarely drank milk, except on cereal.

"Do you want soup?" Adam asked from the kitchen.

"No, Mom, this is fine." Paul sat down and dug in. His appetite had returned with a vengeance.

Adam brought in a bag of tortilla chips and joined him at lunch. Both men were quiet as they concentrated on their food. When they were down to the chips, Paul looked up and noticed Adam lost in thought.

"What?" Paul asked, munching on a chip.

Adam played with a tortilla chip, breaking it into a little pile of pieces before answering.

"I have to pick up my mother from the airport." He glanced at the clock on the wall.

"On your bike?" Paul envisioned an old lady clutching a suitcase on the back of Adam's 18-speed bicycle.

"No, no, I'll get a cab, or take an airport shuttle. I just forgot it was today." He picked up the pieces of the chip and nibbled them.

"Oh, Adam, don't do that, I'll be happy to drive you," Paul offered, "What time is she due in?"

Adam shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "I knew you were going to say that. I'm not sure if I want you to." He stared down at his plate. Then he seemed to make up his mind. "Okay. Thanks. It'll save me time."

"Why wouldn't you want me to? Do you want to protect me from her?" joked Paul, imagining some overbearing Auntie Mame character storming off the airplane.

"No, that's not it," Adam said, "It's an awful lot of trouble, the ferry and all, and your hangover."

"Nonsense, you're my friend and I feel fine." Paul stood up and took the dishes to the sink. "When do we leave?"

"She gets in at 4:30, so we'd better make the 2:45 ferry; the 3:35 is too late." Adam said.

"Good God, man, you sure wait until the last minute. It's nearly 2:30 right now!" Paul looked at the microwave's clock. He raced back upstairs for his wallet and shoes.

Adam stood by the front door with Paul's jacket and keys as he came back down.

"Thanks, I appreciate this," Adam said as he handed Paul the keys.

But his eyes were wary as he said it.

Paul didn't notice as he grabbed the keys and they raced up to the car. Precious minutes were wasted, as they tried to figure out how to remove the charger on the battery without getting electrocuted. They made the ferry in the nick of time; they were the last ones on.

On the ferry they stayed in the car. Adam stared out the window at the bright sunny day, with cotton ball clouds dotting the sky. Sailboats were out in full force; their colorful sails made a patchwork quilt over the Puget Sound's dark blue water. A freighter from Tacoma lumbered by. Adam's sharp eyes spotted a group of Hansen's porpoises, looking like small Orcas, off of Blake Island to the north. The ferry headed east and the hills of West Seattle loomed before them, with the tip of a black skyscraper (known locally as the 'box the Space Needle came in') peeking over from downtown. Paul gazed at Adam, wondering about his mother, and his enigmatic past. Would she be like Adam, quiet and offering few clues about herself, or would she be the opposite -- gregarious to the point of being overbearing? Paul guessed the latter. He could almost see Adam as a child becoming quiet and withdrawn to balance an outgoing and overly social mother. Then it occurred to him that perhaps Adam wanted him to meet her. After all, he had stayed overnight with him when he really didn't have to; Paul had recovered from the only two other hangovers in his life just fine by himself. And he waited until the last minute to ask, without lining up any alternate transportation. Paul wondered if it were true that Adam had forgotten. The closer he felt to Adam, the more he realized how much he didn't know about him. They hadn't spoken a word to each other by the time they'd reached the mainland.

Adam grew more and more withdrawn as they neared the airport. Paul wanted to ask questions, but each one he ventured received a monosyllabic answer. Sea-Tac airport was a mercifully short ride from West Seattle.

"Which airline?" asked Paul as they came to the parking lot, "Where is she coming in from?"

"Southwest. Oh, uh, she was helping out in a daycare in Oklahoma ... she's coming out from Oklahoma." Adam replied as they crossed the sky bridge.

"Is that where she lives?" Paul asked as they got on the escalator.

Adam shook his head. "No, she travels a lot."

"So you don't get to see her very often." Paul noted, knowing this

must be true. In the years he'd been with the firm, Paul had never heard of Adam's mother visiting before.

"We like to get together whenever we're in the same time period -- I mean, zone ... part of the country. Um, sometimes I see her, but she hasn't been to Seattle since I've been here." They went through the security x-rays and waited for the subway shuttle. Adam began to look visibly nervous, and he stuck his hands in his pocket.

Paul wondered if Adam's nervousness had to do with his relationship with his mother, or with Paul's presence. Adam, being so very private, perhaps felt uncomfortable with Paul there.

"Adam, is it okay for me to be here, or should I meet you back at the car?" Paul asked as the subway approached.

Adam looked directly at him. "If you weren't supposed to be here, you wouldn't be here," he said. The doors opened and a mass of people unloaded, separating the two men. An equal mass of people streamed onto the train so Paul and Adam ended up at different sides of the compartment. They made eye contact once, and then Adam turned away, staring out the front of the train at the track ahead. The female voice on the speaker read off the stops in several languages. No one got off at the second stop, but the entire crowd unloaded at the third, with Adam in the front.

"I'll meet you at the gate," he called to Paul, and headed up the escalator.

Paul followed the herd up the escalator and they dispersed to their various gates. He walked down the hall to the gate Adam had mentioned. The plane had arrived early and was already unloading. He saw Adam towards the front of the waiting crowd as the passengers came out of the gate. Still several yards away, he saw Adam wave. Paul looked at the deplaning passengers and saw a whitish-blond head appear. Before his brain could register his feelings, his heartbeat accelerated. He moved faster through the swarm of people to get a better view. It was Moira, walking towards someone with her arms outstretched. Too many people were in the way to see who she was reaching for; then through a break in the crowd Paul saw Moira walk straight up to Adam and throw her arms around him! Paul came to a stop next to a pillar ten feet away, shaking and dizzy. Blood rushed into his head and his temples pounded. He grabbed the pillar to keep himself from falling over.

Moira and Adam stood there, holding each other and talking, their faces close together. Moira smiled and stroked his hair. She looked the same



as ever from where he stood, dressed in a teal raincoat and boots. Paul sensed a surge of jealousy erupting through him. Was she seeing Adam now? Then, just as suddenly, total shock replaced the jealousy. She had silver hair, with just a few golden strands. They held each other affectionately, but not as lovers. The truth hit him like a baseball to the head. Moira was Adam's mother.

Adam said something to Moira and her expression turned to one of surprise. She looked over in Paul's direction, and saw him there against the pillar. She stared at him, still holding Adam. Adam, with one arm around her waist, and the other carrying her baggage, steered her towards Paul.

"Paul, this is my mother, Moira." Adam said, aware the introduction was unnecessary.

Moira's eyes shone brightly, as she released Adam and went to Paul. She put her hands to his face and looked into his eyes.

"Oh, Paul, it is so good to see you again!" she exclaimed with delight.

Paul tentatively put his hands out to touch her, uncertain that she was really there. He felt her arm, and then looked at her hair. It was so unreal; it was so impossible. It had only been two years, yet she seemed at least ten or fifteen years older. Where was her little boy? He could only be about seven. Was Adam his older brother? Paul looked over at Adam for answers, but only saw the man watching both of them with those dark brown eyes, his face unreadable. He turned back to Moira, slipped his arms around her, bent his head into her shoulder, and began to weep. She held him and rocked him, saying soothing words into his ears. Finally, puffy eyed and nose dripping, he came up for air.

"Moira, I am so confused. What's happened to you? What's happening here?" Paul's voice quavered.

Moira motioned him to an empty area of seats and they sat down. She began to say something but Adam interrupted.

"Mom, don't," he said, his tone urgent.

"Adam, I have to. What else can I do? This wouldn't be happening if he weren't supposed to know," Moira said to her son as she held Paul's hands.

"It's not supposed to be happening." Adam hissed, looking around as if someone were watching. "I manipulated it."

Moira smiled, "That may be, Adam, but it's still happening. Even though you manipulated it, he still wouldn't be here without free will, and

these entire circumstances would never have occurred if they weren't supposed to. Haven't you learned anything during your time here?"

"Then what's the point of the rules?" demanded Adam. "Why have any guidelines at all?"

Moira looked compassionate and accepting. "Our teachers would not agree with me, but they haven't spent as much time in the field as I have. Maybe this is unique to the human experience. I believe there are guidelines to help us keep our focus, but everyone who takes a human body has free will. And even with free will, even with all these billions of souls in bodies operating from their choices, everything happens in complete agreement with the Universe. This is all supposed to happen."

Paul lost it. "Excuse me. Would someone please explain to me, in English, just what in God's name is going on?" His head felt ready to explode.

Moira and Adam immediately turned their attention to him. Adam sat down on the chair behind him with Moira in front holding both his hands. Paul sensed an immediate stability when Adam sat down. Between the two of them, there seemed a vortex of sanity, where all the chaos came to a stop, and Paul could see things clearly. All the facts were in front of him. It still didn't make any sense, but he didn't feel like he was falling apart anymore.

"There, does that feel better?" Moira asked. Paul nodded, so she went on. "I am going to have to explain things to you a little at a time. You will need time to understand this. I will explain to you only what you ask me, because in your asking you will be indicating to me what you are ready to know. Are you following me?" She spoke clearly and simply, and kept her focus steadily on his face. Paul nodded again. Then she looked around her, as if assessing the situation. "All right. What is it you want to know first?"

Paul stared at her. He wanted to know everything. Everything from beginning to end, right now. Instead, he asked, "What happened to your hair?" He touched the tresses cascading over her shoulders.

She smiled and looked down at his hand on her hair. "I went gray. It happens, you know."

"But two years ago, your hair was completely golden. Was it the trauma of the earthquake?"

Her eyes changed and became serious. She shook her head. Very slowly, choosing each word carefully, she answered him. "Two years ago to

me, my hair was still this color."

"To me," he echoed. A wave of apprehension grew in him as he asked, "How many years ago, to you, did the building collapse on you?"

She saw he was beginning to get. She looked at Adam as if he held the answer, and looked back at Paul. "I think that was about twenty-five or twenty-six years ago, to me."

The wave crashed in Paul's head and his vision went white. He felt Adam's hands on his shoulders and Moira squeezing his arm and holding his face.

"Paul, Paul," she called to him. "Okay, that's enough. Adam, let's get him walking to clear his head." They stood Paul up. "I'm sorry, Paul, I'll try to answer things more slowly from now on."

Adam muttered, "I told you so," as he held onto Paul's arm and hoisted his mother's bag onto his other shoulder.

They walked him past the escalators to the elevator. Paul leaned against a wall, took a deep breath and asked, "How can it be that I saw you only two years ago in Los Angeles, and you are telling me it was twenty-five years ago to you? I don't get it."

"Oh, shit," said Adam.

"Quiet!" snapped his mother. The elevator doors closed. Moira held Paul gently by the arm, and Paul felt comforted by her touch. Instead of answering him, Moira asked, "Paul, are you going to be able to drive? Because you know Adam and I can't, so you're either going to have to drive us, or leave your car here and take a cab."

"I can drive," piped up Adam. His mother shot him a look. "I did it last night," Adam said, defensively.

"And what happened to the car?" she asked.

"Oh, the battery died and it needed some new fuses. But it got him home." Adam nodded to Paul. Moira looked at her son questioningly. "I think he was getting ready for this growth period." Adam explained. "He just didn't know it yet."

They stepped out of the elevator. Moira looked back at Paul.

Paul felt somewhat steadier, and he realized he didn't want the answer to his last question just yet. "I can drive. Where are we going?"

Moira and Adam looked at each other. They seemed to be having a conversation without using words. The shuttle arrived and they boarded it.

"Ballard," Moira said.

Of course, she would stay with her son at his place in Ballard. Perfectly logical, she'd come to visit Adam. But Paul still felt a twinge in his heart as if he were somehow being rejected. Didn't she always immediately go with him each time they met? Wasn't he always her first priority, as she was always his?

She smiled at him and patted his arm, "Paul, don't be so silly. We have to get Adam back to Ballard; he hasn't had a change of clothes since yesterday morning. Besides, I'd like to see the old place again." A flurry of eye contact and non-verbal communication occurred between her and Adam. "Then I can go home with you."

While Paul's heart soared at this, his thoughts were racing ahead of him. Why was he letting this happen? Why didn't he just start running in the opposite direction? She'll spend a wonderful weekend with him, get all his hopes up, and then she'll vanish, leaving behind more questions than she answered. Somewhere in the back of his mind a little voice chanted, '*acceptance, acceptance*' and gave him an inner calmness and the strength to go forward when his body wanted to bolt and run.

At his car in the parking lot, Moira touched Paul's hand and said, "Let me sit in the back with Adam on the way there. Since I'm going home with you, I'll have plenty of time to chat with you, but less time to catch up with Adam."

In the car driving to Ballard, Paul felt he was in some weird foreign film with no sound and no subtitles. Adam and Moira sat in the back staring at each other, occasionally saying a word, such as "yes," or "I see," but mostly communicating in silence. Sometimes Paul could feel what they were talking about, like when it was about him, but many times he had no clue. They had some language all their own that he was no part of. It was a lot like being in a car with hearing-impaired people, except with no observable signing. He glanced in the mirror at them. Adam looked nothing like his usual self. Animated and smiling, his eyes danced in reflection of his mother's. He looked more like her than Paul could ever have guessed. So many things were making sense. All their similarities. And then their differences. Adam had consistently been in Seattle for over five years now. Moira seemed to stay nowhere longer than three weeks. She had gold hair and white skin -- even in India, she'd remained translucently pale. Adam had dark brown hair but never seemed to tan or freckle (but then Seattleites don't tan, they rust, Paul remembered with a chuckle). Moira gazed lovingly into Adam's eyes, an expression Paul had only seen before directed at himself. Still slender-

waisted and long-legged, still with that mane of hair, but now shimmering with silver. Her face had barely aged, save for the laugh lines at the eyes. She seemed to be listening to Adam tell her all about himself and his life here, although Adam hadn't uttered a word. Then it seemed as if the mute conversation shifted to what Moira had been doing, and she gripped Adam's hands, her face contorted first in anguish and then in resignation. Adam's gaze remained steady on her, strong and comforting at the same time. Something disturbing had happened to her, and Adam seemed to be consoling her.

Paul kept his eyes on the road for the remainder of the drive to Ballard, feeling a strong need to respect their privacy. When they arrived at the old place, he got out and opened the car door for Moira, and suddenly felt awkward. A mother visiting her son's home, yet this was the home they had shared, albeit briefly. Moira stood by Paul for a moment, looking at the place nostalgically. Adam walked up and unlocked the door.

"Oh, Adam, the azaleas are doing beautifully," Moira's exclaimed.

Paul realized with a start that he'd never noticed that the old azaleas that were once half dead in pots on the porch were now gigantic flowering bushes on either side of the steps. Adam must have planted them there five years ago. Even so, their growth rate astounded him. Could azaleas grow to that size in five years?

Adam opened the door and an elderly Siamese came running out.

"Percy!" Moira cried, and the cat leapt into her arms. "How's my baby?" she purred. "Oh, Adam, you're taking good care of him." Her eyes beamed at her son.

Adam shrugged, "He's been taking good care of me."

They walked inside, and Moira looked around. Far more spartan than when Paul had lived there, it had the same furniture, as Paul had purchased everything new for the Colvos house. Adam never seemed to buy anything, certainly not a car nor furniture. Paul wondered what he did with his salary, and guessed he probably had a massive investment portfolio. It startled Paul when Moira walked straight into Adam's bedroom, and Adam, too, as he hurried in after her.

"Mom, I haven't picked up in there," he said as he went in. Silence followed, then a little giggle from Moira, and an astonished "What?!?" from Adam. They both came out, Moira with a huge grin on her face and Adam looking down, avoiding Paul's puzzled stare.

Paul wondered when the next ferry left as Moira turned to Adam.

"Honey, we should go now if we're going to make the next ferry," she said. *How did she know what time it's due?* "I'll call you tomorrow and we can have lunch together."

"Fine, Mom. You and -- Paul take care." He hugged his mother. Then he leveled his brown eyes on Paul with mock severity, "and you, stay away from Margarita Grande."

Moira frowned. "He's been hanging out with some woman named Big Margarita?"

Both Paul and Adam laughed, breaking up much of the tension that had hung between them for most of the day. Paul gave Adam a bear hug, and as he did an odd thought struck him, *I'm in love with my best friend's mother!* Everything he knew about Adam suddenly seemed slightly off, as if seen through broken glasses.

"It's all right, Paul." Adam said, in the same tone his mother used earlier. "Everything will make sense eventually. It will just take time to get used to it."

Paul looked at Adam, almost the same height as himself, same coloring; and he felt a strong bond of kinship. They both loved the same woman, just in different ways. It added to the already special feeling Paul had for Adam... it somehow validated it. He smiled. "Thanks for letting me drive you to the airport."

"Ah, it was nothing." Adam grinned.

Moira kissed Adam good-bye and walked out to the car with Paul. He held the door for her as she got in. The whole scene seemed absurdly natural, as if she had never left, and had spent the last two decades solidly with him. She sat in the front passenger seat of the Explorer, and it felt like she had always been there. Driving towards West Seattle, Paul couldn't think of one question to ask her. Since it felt like she had always been with him, he couldn't bring himself to ask where she actually had been. A little edge of insanity crept in.

She sensed it. "No, Paul, don't ask any questions on the freeway," Moira said calmly but firmly. Then she began chatting about Adam, a loving mother proud her son's accomplishments, happy that he had such a nice place to live and to work and that he had such good friends. She seemed surprisingly up to date on the goings on in Adam's life.

Paul interrupted. "Moira, did you know Adam worked for me all along?"

She hesitated, "That's a difficult question to answer, and it can be answered in so many ways." She stopped herself from explaining further. "Yes," she answered simply.

"Why haven't you come to see him sooner?" He meant, why haven't you come to see me before now?

"I've been on assignment. Adam has only been able see me two or three times over these past five years. He's had to come to where I was," she said, matter-of-factly.

So that's where Adam had gone when he left every six months. Paul's heart lurched -- why hadn't Adam told him? Why hadn't Adam taken him along?

Moira reached over and touched Paul's shoulder. "You know, Adam didn't know who you were at first. He didn't know that we knew each other."

"When did he find out?" Paul asked, as he pulled into the ferry line.

"When you talked to him on the phone from Los Angeles."

Paul felt a stab of queasiness in his stomach. Moira squeezed his shoulder.

"Be careful about asking too much when you're driving," she told him.

Ignoring the queasiness, Paul forced himself to ask, "You said that was twenty-five years ago to you. What does that mean?" Piercing pain filled his head.

"Too much, Paul, too much." Moira chided. "Let's wait until we get on the ferry and have a cup of tea." Instantly, the pain subsided and Paul breathed a sigh of relief.

"Tell me all about your place on Colvos." Moira very deliberately changed the subject.

So Paul told her about house-hunting with Adam, and his neighbor Aggie Nelson, and the house itself, and the improvements he intended. He went on about the simple pleasures of living on the island, where nobody locked their doors or cars, where there were no stoplights, only a few blinking four-way stops. The one movie theater played a new picture every week and closed on Mondays. The bank tellers and grocery checkers all knew him by name, and the florist remembered his mother lived in Connecticut as soon as he mentioned his last name.

"It's like living in small-town America fifty years ago." Paul ended his recitation.

"Very much so," Moira agreed. "What a wonderful, stress-free place to live."

"Well, the ferries can be a hassle, but it depends on your attitude." Paul said, "When I first came out here, Adam compared this to the commute from the Eastside, and how you can't read a book or get out for a cup of coffee on the floating bridge. So I see the wait for the ferry, and the ride over, as a time for contemplation or to decompress from the day."

Moira looked at him, picking something up in his comments that he hadn't meant to reveal. "Did you used to commute from the Eastside?"

Paul felt extremely uncomfortable. He did not want Maggie to exist between them. He didn't want to keep any secrets from Moira, but he didn't want to spoil this reunion with a very bad memory either. He finally decided he should tell her, if only to release the discomfort that had risen between them when she asked the question.

"I used to live in Medina on Lake Washington. My -- my ex-wife still lives there, she kept the house." And everything else, thought Paul.

"Oh." A little shiver of shock ran through Moira's eyes, which she quickly covered up. She said nothing else.

Paul felt obliged to fill the silence with explanation. "Moira, I have never loved anyone else but you," he began, and she put her hand to his face to stop him, but he took it away, holding it on his lap. "No, I need to tell you. When you disappeared from my house in Seattle, I was devastated. You left with no trace, no clue to what had happened. You also left nothing behind to prove you existed. Do you realize you never met any of my friends at that time, and we have had no photographs taken together -- none -- never? My God, we were in India for five days, even at the Taj Mahal, and not one photograph! Anyway, back then I thought I had to face reality, that you were gone and that I'd probably never see you again. Moira, I was neurotic. I used to follow women around town simply because they were blonde. I used to ask women out because they somewhat resembled you. I knew my behavior was not healthy. I finally went out with Maggie and asked her to marry me because she was absolutely nothing like you. I thought that the right thing to do was to do the opposite of what I felt compelled to do, which was to find you again." Paul looked out the window away from Moira. "But Maggie desperately wanted children, and I wanted a family, too." Moira squeezed his hand. "We tried for five years, a horrible, awful five years. I



finally had to confess to her that I really didn't love her, and let her go, to give her the opportunity to find someone who truly did love her. God, I feel like such a shit." Paul closed his eyes and leaned back against the headrest. Moira reached out and stroked his head.

"Paul, I am so very, very sorry that things worked out the way they did," she said, softly. "I am so sorry that circumstances have kept us apart."

"Yeah. Well. I guess it's not so bad. I've been married to someone else, and so have you." Paul said. "That doesn't have to change our relationship to each other, does it?"

"What?" Moira said abruptly. Then she shook her head in bewilderment. "I've never been married, whatever gave you that idea?"

Paul opened his eyes and looked at Moira. "Oh, I'm sorry. I just assumed that you were married. I mean, you have children," Paul felt the queasiness start again.

The ferry line began moving, and the ticket taker motioned them to board the boat. Their conversation paused while he maneuvered the car to the spot the ferry workers pointed out for him.

Moira patted his hand. "Let's get a cup of tea," she suggested.

"They serve lattes on the ferries now," Paul said, smiling at the memories the idea awakened.

She shook her head. "I think you really should have herbal tea; something soothing."

In the galley, with Paul drinking Chamomile tea and Moira drinking Earl Gray ("Earl Gray, hot." Paul murmured to himself, automatically repeating Captain Picard's standard request of the Enterprise's replicators), Paul struggled to remember what questions he'd been asking that she had postponed answering. He decided to try a different tack.

"When was the last time you saw me?"

"India," she said, promptly.

He felt lightheaded, but pushed on. "What about L.A.?"

"What about it?" she responded.

"Oh, God, I don't know. All right, all right. When was the first time you saw me?" Paul had no idea why he asked that.

"Seattle," she answered.

He stared at her. "What about D.C.?" She echoed, but he held up his

hands, "I know, I know." Then he wiped his face with his hands and looked at her. Very slowly, he said, "I first met you in D.C. when I was twenty-three. I next met you in Seattle nine years later. I was thirty-two. I next met you on the plane to India, nine and a half years after that. I was forty-two. Then, Los Angeles in 1993 -- I was forty-five. Now I'm forty-seven. Your turn."

She gazed at him. "Paul, are you sure you want me to answer that now? The ferry hasn't even docked yet, you have to be able to drive home."

He grabbed her hand and glared at her fiercely, "Tell me!" he said through gritted teeth.

She swallowed. Then took a deep breath. "I first met you in Seattle when I was eighteen years old. I next saw you in Los Angeles when I was almost twenty-three." She paused, her lip quivering. "I didn't get to see you again until I was thirty-eight, and that was in D.C., and then, in India I was forty." She smiled. "Now I'm forty nine."

The galley began to swim about, and Moira turned blurry and Paul began to faint. Moira grabbed him with both hands and pulled him upright. He sensed that magnetic pull to the earth as she did so.

"This doesn't make sense," Paul stammered. "This absolutely makes no sense at all."

Moira looked him directly in the eye. "Don't try to figure it out," she ordered, "until we get off the ferry and you drive us home."

Paul meekly obeyed. The ferry cut its engines and coasted into the dock. They both got up and followed the other passengers down to the car deck. Paul climbed into the Explorer and drove home as if on automatic pilot. He found himself parking in the carport and didn't recall how he got there. Moira helped him down the fifty steps through the madrona and fir trees to his house, and led him in the door.

Reality came back to him as he saw Moira walking through the house, taking in all the details of the different rooms and their furnishings. She had never been here before. This was new. This was in the present. His body began to feel a little comfortable again. Moira took off her raincoat and hung it on the coat rack by the door. She wandered into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator door. There were the cartons of Mexican food from the night before.

"Ooh! Leftovers!" she cried with delight. "I'm famished." She peeked in one container. "Fajita burrito! Yum!"

Paul laughed, "That was Adam's. I'm sure he won't mind."

They zapped the leftovers in the microwave and took them into the living room with glasses of lemonade. Moira sat on one end of the sofa, her feet tucked under her. Paul sat on the other end, his feet solidly on the floor. He needed all the stability he could get. The food in his stomach added to his body's comfort and his sense of being grounded, so he felt able to ask the next question.

"How can you do that, Moira? Move around through time?" He waited for the nausea and pain to overtake him, but it didn't. Sitting at home, in his living room, with a full stomach, he felt safe and comfortable. He was ready to hear and accept what she was about to tell him.

She sensed his readiness. "I have a human body. I *chose* a human body," she began. "It ages linearly. It started at infancy when it was created, and will continue to age until it dies. It's my body, designed and blueprinted for my vibrational level." She watched to see if he were following this. Satisfied, she continued. "I move through time – oh, how do I explain this? I'm given assignments, and I go where I'm sent."

"Who gives you assignments, who sends you?" Paul asked, feeling lightheaded again.

Moira touched his arm, which settled him.

"I belong to an organization of beings which is beyond time and space. We choose different bodies, not always human, and live through each body for its lifetime. We are sent through time to create change wherever we are. It's not active change; it's change made simply by our presence. We actually try not to do anything. When our assignment is finished, we move on to our next assignment. That's all." She stopped and watched Paul for his reaction.

He drank some of his lemonade. "So you move through time and create change. That's your job? Sort of like the Red Cross," he said ironically, yet not unkindly.

She smiled, "Well, sort of. I mean the Red Cross goes to wherever there are people in need and helps them. I go where I'm needed, and I'm helping people; they just don't know it at the time."

"What were you doing in D.C.?" he asked.

"God knows," she said. "That one threw me. I was between assignments, and I found myself killing time in D.C.. That's never happened before, or since, by the way. It really was time for me to transition, but I

knew I wasn't going to right away."

"So you let me pick you up? A fun way to kill time?" Paul asked, frustrated that he didn't understand this completely.

"Paul, you have to understand that I already knew you. In fact, it was the third time I'd met you. I was already deeply, deeply in love with you. You'd just never met me before. Oh, and it had been fifteen years! You know how you felt seeing me after missing me for a long time? Well that's how I felt towards you." She looked down at her plate. "That was a big judgment call on my part. One of the cardinal rules is to never get involved with people. You can have friends as long as they don't know the truth about you, but not romantic entanglements. It's too hard on the person involved with you... you know that." Paul nodded. "So here I was, with you as a gorgeous young hunk coming on to me, a woman nearing forty," she grinned, and Paul looked sheepishly at her, the memory coming into a totally new perspective. She reached out and caressed his cheek; he caught her hand and kissed her palm. "That's when I realized that linear humans all have free will. You were choosing me then out of your own free will. And that I was there with you because I was supposed to be there. Probably simply because I was supposed to meet you." She moved closer to him on the couch. "Adam doesn't understand that yet, because no woman has ever come up to him on the streets of Seattle and kissed him the way you first kissed me."

Suddenly Paul saw Moira sitting in his Prelude after being kissed by him, only eighteen, never having seen him before. And this thirty-two year old man had taken her into his arms and into his home. A shock wave went through him.

"Moira -- were you a virgin in Seattle?" he asked, a billion tiny bits of information coming together in his brain.

She smiled, and gently nodded.

He rubbed his forehead, as if trying to massage the information into it. "But what were you doing in Seattle?"

Moira looked at him, her eyes serious. "I'm not supposed to tell you. It's another cardinal rule not to reveal what we're doing. Actually, we're only given a vague outline of the time we're in, and then sent to go with the flow, that is, respond to whatever comes our way. It's our job, well *my* job, to create a ripple effect by my mere existence. It's not my job to make waves. However, if I stay someplace too long, I do create waves, because my vibrational frequency is too high. I try to stay long enough to help change to

happen, but leave before my presence becomes disruptive."

"Mount Saint Helens," Paul said.

"That was supposed to happen. But I don't think it would have happened with such force or so suddenly without enough warning if I hadn't stubbornly remained with you. My preoccupation with you kept me from hearing them call me back."

"Did you get into trouble?" Paul asked gently.

Moira looked at him sharply.

"With your bosses, or whoever assigns you," Paul said.

Her features relaxed. "Oh, they're very neutral about whatever you do. It's all seen as a learning experience. And I learned some very hard lessons because of that. I received more static from my friends, whom I had trained with, but none of them had chosen human bodies, so they couldn't possibly have understood." Paul gaped at her. "Well, my good friend, \*\*\*\*" she made a sound he heard in his head, but hadn't come out of her throat, "has a Xynethian body, it's gaseous. There's nothing to feel, no emotions. So love doesn't have quite the strong magnification that it has through a human body."

Paul decided he didn't want to understand more about that part of her life, at least at the moment.

"India," he said.

"I had to go to India to balance San Francisco. That was part of my assignment. I had been in San Francisco -- well, you don't need to know about that -- but anyway, I had to be on the opposite side of the world for a specific span of time to help ground the earthquake. Please don't ask me to explain it in more detail. I couldn't have come back with you at the time, it would have been very detrimental." Moira leaned her head on her hand and smiled. "India was so delightful. We were finally about the same age, and close in experiences with each other. And I had only seen you less than three years before, so it hadn't been so hard. Oh, and I'd seen you in Los Angeles, where you told me that we would meet in D.C. and India, so I knew it was coming. Maybe the nicest thing about it was that you left me."

"What? What could possibly be nice about my leaving you?" Paul sputtered.

"Well, it was of your own free will. And all those other times, it had just happened to you. In India, you were able to have a sense of power in the relationship, by being able to let *me* go for a change. I felt so good for you,

when I saw you get on that plane," she smiled, and touched his upper lip. "No more mustache," she whispered.

Paul pulled his head back. "So you felt powerful leaving me those other times?" A knot of anger twisted in his stomach.

Her hand fell to her lap. "Powerful? Quite the opposite. I have never voluntarily left you. Ever. Each time I have been pulled away, once even kicking and screaming. Well, perhaps in India, I, too, had free will. I suppose I could have returned with you and California be damned." She looked away. "I've never had a choice in anything, except to love you and be with you. But I never get to choose when or where or for how long."

Paul reached out and held her face with his hand. She leaned her cheek against his palm and he stroked it with his thumb.

"Los Angeles," he said.

She closed her eyes. "Los Angeles. I was there doing this job and it just wouldn't end. I kept wondering when they would call me back, but the call never came. I was really worried, because I had never stayed corporeal for so long." Paul made a mental note to ask her about this. "Then you appeared, and the last time I'd seen you was in Seattle. It felt like -- no, it was a gift from God. God gave me a chance to see you again. Before a really long dry spell." She laughed, but without amusement.

"Corporeal," said Paul, his hand slid from her cheek to her neck. She moved her head around like a cat being stroked.

"Mmm, that feels good. Corporeal. Oh. Well, just like you need to take your car in for a tune-up, I need to take my body to ... where I come from, where it gets recharged and cleaned out from all the energy it picks up. I sort of dematerialize, but that's not it. My molecules adjust themselves, that's it. And I leave to prepare for my next assignment." She looked over to see if he comprehended. He looked a little distracted but she continued anyway. "I'm given a briefing on the time period and the geographical area I'm going to and that's it. Then I rematerialize in body at the place I'm supposed to be, interact with whomever comes my way and then, when I'm done, I leave and start over."

Paul withdrew his hand at 'interact with whomever'. He thought of Adam's father. He was reluctant to ask her, because he hadn't liked talking about Maggie and certainly didn't want to go into any details about his marriage, so didn't want to put Moira through the same kind of discomfort. He was curious about Adam, but wondered if he should ask him directly. Suddenly a new thought occurred to him.

"Who was the little boy in L.A.?" he asked.

"Adam," she said.

He gawked at her. "But I talked to him on my cell phone that night. How could he be a five-year old in Los Angeles and an adult in Seattle at the same time?"

She grinned and said in a perfect Indian accent, "Really my dear, you should read Deepak Chopra. You would know that the human body is a totally different physical body every seven years. Every seven years every cell in the human body is totally replaced." Then she went on in her normal voice, "little Adam's body was a different body than the adult in Seattle."

"But the same person," Paul persisted.

"Well, the same being. But there's no time or space as spirit, it's all happening at once." She hurried on, "His personality develops linearly along with his body, so the adult Adam personality was also different than little Adam who was still with me. But don't ask me any more about Adam. That really is for you and him to talk about."

*Tomorrow will be one interesting day at the office,* thought Paul.

"Okay. Now. What are you doing now?" Paul asked, hoping for a clue as to how long they could be together. He wondered how he could shift his work schedule so he could spend as much time with her as possible.

Moira stiffened. "I had a short assignment in Oklahoma. I came to visit Adam because I hardly ever get to see him nowadays. But the oddest thing happened," she said, "On the plane I received another assignment in this time period. The original plan was for three days and then transition on. But something else has come up, and I don't know what it is." She looked up, perplexed.

Paul's heart leapt for joy. "In Seattle?" Would he get a whole three weeks with her again?

"Well, I guess so. Unless this is another gift from God, getting to see you. But I get the feeling that you're part of the assignment." She stopped herself. "I shouldn't say anymore. I really don't know any more than that, I'd just be guessing. I have to stick around and see what's up."

"And respond to what ever comes your way," Paul said.

"That's right," Moira nodded.

Paul's heart beat hard in his chest. Now. Now was the moment, not wait until she's about to vanish. *Respond to this,* he thought. Moira's eyes

turned wary as she began to pick up on his thoughts. He took both her hands in his.

"Marry me," Paul said, not a question so much as a statement.

"What?" Moira's jaw dropped to the floor.

"Washington State has a three-day waiting period; I can get a license tomorrow. Or if you can't wait, we'll fly to Reno. Tonight. There has to be a red-eye there." Paul nearly leapt off the couch to call the airlines.

"Paul, Paul, do we need to get married? Is it appropriate? Isn't marriage for people who want to live together and raise a family? We can't do that, we haven't been able to do that." Said Moira in a steady voice, but her hands shook.

"Marriage is a commitment between two people. With that in mind, we were already spiritually married in India. But you are physically here with me now, and I want to be married to you. For the rest of my life. Whenever and wherever I meet you again, I want you to be my wife. Wait, are there any times you've met me that you haven't told me about?"

Moira laughed but shook her head. "Nope, we're even on this round. But, seriously, Paul. A wedding license. How can I fill that out? I haven't a birth date. I haven't *parents* for goodness sake."

"Make something up," Paul snapped. "Who cares what the county records say? I just want to stand before God and someone official and tell them 'I do' with the woman I love. And I want a piece of paper to remember it by. Do you show up in photographs?" he demanded.

"Paul, I'm not a vampire. Of course I photograph." Moira laughed so hard, tears rolled down her cheeks.

"I want a wedding picture, too," Paul said stubbornly.

Moira stopped laughing, and looked at him. She inhaled deeply, and let it out for a long time.

"Yes," she said. "I'll marry you."

Paul leaned over and kissed Moira, and held her to him. He had meant to begin making love to her, but his head felt like a beehive and he had a stomach full of butterflies. He knew he was having difficulty assimilating all the information he had just received. She slipped her arms around him and began to stroke his back. Each stroke seemed to smooth



away some of the butterflies, but his head still buzzed. He closed his eyes, and images of all their past meetings flashed across his eyelids. More questions surfaced, but he pushed them down. When his stomach settled, she moved her hands up to his head and began to massage his scalp. He felt the bees dispersing and a sense of deep calm began to flow over him. He started to nod off, but stopped himself. His first time alone with Moira in three years -- he couldn't fall asleep!

"Hush," she whispered in his ear, "it's all right, just relax."

Her hands massaged his forehead and his face, and then the back of his head and neck. They gently kneaded their way across his shoulders and down his back. He leaned forward on her, his chin resting on her shoulders. His weight pushed her backwards on the sofa, and the motion awakened something within Paul. Still half asleep he kissed her neck. She giggled and squirmed under him. This succeeded in arousing him more, so he kissed his way down to the hollow of her throat, and down into the crevice between her breasts. She gasped and arched her back as he nuzzled, and his hands crept up her shirt and began to fondle the nipples. Her hands gripped the back of his shirt and began to pull it out of his trousers. Then he realized they were lying on the couch with all the lights blazing and no shades drawn. Aggie Nelson could probably see the whole show from her kitchen window up the hill. Paul abruptly sat up.

"Let's go upstairs." He looked down at her inviting body.

"Race you," she said.

They flew up the stairs to the bedroom. Paul won, simply because he'd gotten to the stairs first and they were too narrow for Moira to pass him. At the bedroom door he paused long enough for her to catch up, and grabbed her. He picked her up and threw her, shrieking with laughter, on the bed. Standing over her, he made a Tarzan yell while pounding his chest, then pulled his shirt off over his head. She giggled hysterically as he fumbled with her buttons, and clumsily pulled off her shirt. Her breasts jiggled with laughter. Her laughing slowed down as he unzipped her jeans and pulled them off, and stopped completely as he pulled off his own. Still in her bra and panties, he slowly slid his hands up the insides of her legs and slipped his fingers under the elastic, and pulled his hands down again, the panties with them. He slid his hands up the insides of her legs again, making her gasp as he lightly rubbed over her and up to her bra. He deftly unhooked the front of it, and it fell away from her breasts. Paul placed a hand over each breast and gently squeezed. He put his face down into her belly and kissed it as she slid her feet up the sides of his naked body and

wrapped her legs around his shoulders. He kissed his way down to her curly hair, and gently probed his tongue inside the lower lips, to the little mound. She began to writhe as his tongue lapped it, and probed still deeper. He remembered his hands and gently fondled her breasts. As much as he enjoyed this, he was distracted by his own member aching below. Moira pushed herself down towards him, kissing his face, his mouth, his chin, his neck, then nuzzling his chest. She took one of his nipples between her teeth and softly bit it, causing him to groan out loud. Then she actually began to suck it, creating little electrical shocks throughout his body. She kissed her way down his torso, and settled her face into his lower belly. He could almost feel her smiling as she reached his cock, like finding an old, good friend. She nuzzled it at first, making him want to push her head onto it, but he gripped her shoulders instead. Ever so lightly, she began little cat licks around it, and around his balls. She took his balls into her mouth and squeezed and sucked, squeezed and sucked until he could stand no more. Then she released them and focused on his cock. First she kissed the shaft from base to head, and back down again. Then she licked it with those little, hard, cat licks up to the head. Unexpectedly, she pressed her lips over the head and pushed the entire thing into her mouth. *No!* He stopped her. He didn't want to come just yet. She looked up questioningly, and he pulled her up to him; they lay, their bodies pressed together, and kissed deep kisses. He wrapped his arms around her and fondled her buttocks. She lifted up one of her legs and gently motioned for him to enter her. He obliged. Side by side, they pressed into each other, slowly, slowly, then more deeply, deeply, then she more urgently, wrapping her arms around him, her fingers entwined in his hair. A low groan began in her throat and rose up into a full, aching cry. Paul could feel it pulse through his own body, seismic waves rippling through him. His own groan joined hers as he rolled her onto her back and drove his final plunges into her.

They lay there, shivering in the aftermath. She pressed her face against his neck and gave him little kisses. He pressed his face into her hair and inhaled deeply of her scent. She began to giggle and he looked down on her.

"Happy to see me?" she asked, a big smile on her face.

"Always," he replied, and kissed her full on the mouth.

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ASSIGNMENT 437 OKLAHOMA CITY/SEATTLE, 1995

Hello:

Short check-in, as I see I have an additional assignment beginning. You already know that this assignment was extremely difficult for this body. I recognize that the challenges are increasing as I approach my 500th assignment. It was a great lesson in responding and reacting, and also in self-control. I am grateful for my out-of-body colleagues whose presence reminded me of the physical limitations I have chosen. And, again, thank you for the gift of Seattle. I recall your suggestion of awareness of time and space. That has always been helpful in my communications with Adam, and now I am able use that awareness in my communications with Paul.

Response:

Dear One:

For your new assignment remember, remember, remember: respond and react. You are embarking upon your greatest challenge ever, and you are the only one who can decide your best course of action. You will find that your students will become your teachers. Remain open, aware, and neutral. Remember also what your main life's lesson is, this will assist you with your choices.

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Paul got in line for the ferry at seven a.m., hoping to catch the eight a.m. boat. Moira slept beside him, her head resting against his shoulder. It was a comforting feeling, her weight and her warmth pressing against him. He still had a hard time believing she was really there.

He awkwardly sipped his coffee out of the blue and gray commuter mug with the picture of a ferry on it using his left hand, as Moira leaned on his right shoulder. They were going to the King County Records and Licensing office to get a marriage license before he went to work. He wished he could take the day off, but being out sick the day before meant he really needed to go to the office. If the traffic wasn't bad he could make it there by 8:30 and still get to work by 9:00. They would have been in line earlier but ... they were a little delayed in getting out of bed that morning.

Paul smiled at how some things change with age, and how some things stay the same. He didn't have the stamina he'd had at twenty-three, but he had more staying power. A newspaper vendor walked by hawking the Seattle paper and the Island Weekly News. Paul hid his smile and gestured out the window to buy the local paper. He'd noticed a classified ad in it for a minister who performed weddings, and planned to call her. He stashed it on the dashboard to read later as he couldn't manage the paper with only one hand free. He turned his face and softly kissed Moira's head. She stirred.

"Are we there yet?" she whispered sleepily.

Paul softly laughed. "No, we haven't even gotten on the ferry."

"Oh," she cuddled closer to him. "Wake me when we get there."

Paul put his arm around her and drew her into him. It was one of those forever moments, as he'd come to think of them. One of those times with her that he felt so happy and contented, he wanted to stay in it forever. His heart was full, and he felt very relaxed. In the past everything had been tinged with anxiety, because he thought at any minute he might lose her. Here with her now, that feeling was missing.

Perhaps too relaxed; he mulled over what she had told him yesterday. How could it possibly be true? She felt so real next to him. All this stuff about moving through time, her materializing and dematerializing... science fiction, that's what it was -- or was it quantum physics? Paul leaned his head against the car window, feeling the cold glass against his temple. The queer thing was, some of what she said made sense, or at least filled in the pieces of the puzzle that was Moira. It explained why she'd disappeared in the way she had. It explained why, in Seattle, she

hadn't known him, and also why, in Los Angeles, she hadn't known about India. Those little lines on her tummy ... so the first time he'd been with her, she'd already had a child, and was fifteen years older than him! God, if he'd known that at the time ... it would have blown his mind. But in Seattle, she'd been a virgin. He looked down at her. How difficult it must have been, to have to 'go with the flow' with a man who claimed to have known *her* nine years before, without having met *him*. He thought about their first time together in Seattle, and understood now why she had cried. If only he had known at the time he would have been gentler, more understanding; he would have talked more with her.

Adam. What was he going to say to Adam when he met him at the office this morning? Paul was uncomfortable at the thought of facing Adam after a night of luxurious and passionate lovemaking with his mother. Adam was a time traveler as well. That explained why he had to leave every six months and why, although he had friendships, he had avoided relationships. What about Adam's father? Had he known about Moira, who or what she was? Or was he merely a weekend in some other time period? Paul felt the jealousy rising again, and gritted his teeth. He pushed back the thought of some other man bedding the woman who was about to become his wife.

Adam. He had been able to be with Moira all his childhood. And, as an adult, to go where ever she was to see her. To travel with her. Suddenly Paul flashed back to Los Angeles. Adam as the little boy in the Armadillo pajamas, crawling into bed next to his mom, waking her and telling her it was time to go. Both of them holding him, and -- partially dematerializing him? How else was he able to move through a collapsing building, even through its walls, without harm? He looked down at Moira in awe.

The ferry line started moving, and he slowly coasted the Explorer down the hill without turning on the engine. He stopped at the bottom of the hill by the restaurant next to the ferry dock. The 7:20am boat left through the mist, its mournful foghorn calling out to other sea-going traffic. Moira woke up at the sound. She sat up and stretched, covering her mouth as she yawned deeply. Paul instantly wanted her.

"A little impractical in bucket seats, don't you think?" Moira laughed. Then her eyes widened. "Ooh -- an espresso stand! Want one?"

Paul laughed at her childlike excitement. "No," he said, lifting his mug, "the coffee vendor filled me up when we were back up the hill. You go, though."

She hopped out and scampered to the little booth, hugging herself against the morning chill. Paul could see the steam rising from her breath. She talked with the person in front of her in line, and he could see her teeth chattering. The woman said something. Moira laughed and that lilting

sound floated over to him, lifting his heart. He began to pick up snatches of the conversation. Moira said something about "King County" and the woman said "Oh, so who's the lucky?" and Moira pointed towards him. The twenty-something woman turned and looked at Paul, who smiled and waved. She nodded and turned back to Moira and the word "gorgeous" floated across to him. Paul picked up the Island Weekly and buried himself in the classifieds.

"WEDDINGS performed by ordained woman minister. Choose one of my ceremonies or create your own. Have the wedding you want, anywhere you want on or around Puget Sound. Rev. B. J. Andrews 555-3285.

He wondered if she was available on such short notice. And he wondered how brief her ceremonies could be.

"Hiya, gorgeous." Moira's voice was right by his ear. Paul dropped the paper and looked over. She had her forehead pressed to the side of the car and had a steaming latte in her hand. He rolled down the window.

"What did you say to that woman?" Paul asked.

"Oh, that we were going to get a wedding license, and that you were the man of my dreams." She grinned, went around to the other side of the car and got in. "Mr. Gorgeous. I like that name."

"Well, please don't call me that at the office." Paul was embarrassed.

"Mr. Hunky Gorgeous," Moira teased, enjoying his discomfort.

He decided to turn it back on her. "Mrs. Hunky Gorgeous. No, Mrs. Gorgeous-Babe." But it didn't sound the same, and instead of embarrassing her, it made her laugh. She kissed his cheek.

"Mr. and Mrs. Gorgeous," she said. "Hunky and Babe. Sound like good movie titles."

"Or dreadful movie titles." Paul slipped his arm around her and kissed her back. The car behind them beeped and Paul saw that the line of cars were moving. He quickly started the car and caught up with the van ahead of him to board the ferry.

The ride took twice as long because of the fog, and the traffic in town was anything but light. By the time they arrived at the King County office down town, it was already 9:00 am. Paul had to call his office.

"Francis? I'm going to be a little late this morning. Ferry trouble," Paul said into his cell phone as they stood in line at the King County Licensing Department.

"Should I cancel your nine o'clock?" Francis asked, a little testily.

"Oh, God, I forgot. Who is it?" Paul asked, his calendar blank in his memory.

"Oh, just Michael and Adam. But I want to remind you that your sister and Mr. Sanchez are driving up from Portland this morning for your

monthly luncheon meeting." Francis was a great administrative assistant. He should have promoted her years ago but he couldn't do without her, so kept raising her salary instead. The actual figure was one of the big company secrets; otherwise half of the architects would have quit.

"Thanks for reminding me, Francis. I completely forgot about Susan and Bob." Paul said. When Susan began running the Portland office, Bob Sanchez came up from San Francisco to take the position Adam turned down. Susan, Bob, and Michael and Paul had lunch together once a month, alternating between Portland and Seattle. It was a good thing this one was in Seattle, or it would have really messed up Paul's timing for the day.

He turned off the phone and looked at Moira. "You'll be able to meet my sister," he said, happily. "She's coming up from Portland." Even more happily, he realized that other people would be able to meet Moira. Michael, for one, who had heard so much about her over the years. After Los Angeles, however, Paul only talked to Adam; Michael had been too busy handling the deal with the Japanese and running the Seattle office while Paul recovered. Paul had never really told Michael what had happened in L.A., and Michael hadn't pried. He probably assumed that Paul's depression resulted from escaping from a collapsing building and the trauma of surviving an earthquake. Michael had just been a good friend, stepping in and taking over when needed, and then slowly letting go as Paul grew able to handle the workload again. Michael and Coral had also made sure to invite him to dinner at least once a week, to ensure he had at least one home-cooked meal. Adam was the one who'd nursed him out of his grief, in a million unspoken ways.

"That'll be nice. We can invite her to the wedding." Moira said, as they moved forward in line.

The wedding! What would his sister think? She hadn't indicated a high opinion of Moira when he told Susan about her in Portland the night Stephen offered her and Adam the job of running the new branch. She'd formed the opinion that Moira was some kind of flake. Well, she'd only have to meet her to know that wasn't true. Moira was one of the most grounded people he knew, except for Adam.

"Please fill out this form, sign here and take your \$35.00 to the line over there." The clerk behind the counter told them.

Paul and Moira looked at the form.

"Paul, how do I do this?" Moira asked in dismay.

It was a simple form from the Department of Health. It asked for the same information from the bride and groom: name, birthdate, birth state, both parent's names and where they were born.

Paul wrote: Paul Alexander Marbanks, b. 4/19/48, Hartford, CT,

Olivia Johnson Marbanks, Vermont, and Charles Adam Marbanks, New York. Then he signed it and handed the clipboard to Moira.

Moira hesitated, looking at the form. "Paul, yesterday was your birthday."

Paul was stunned. It had totally slipped his mind. Usually his mother sent him a card, but he hadn't gone to his Post Office box to check the mail for several days.

"What a great birthday present you are, Moira." He kissed her.

"Happy Birthday, Mr. Gorgeous." She took the pen from his hand.

She sighed, and began to write. "Moira Gottsdotter, born: " She looked up, "What's a good birth date?"

"What's it say on your driver's license?" he asked before he realized she didn't have one. "Your passport?"

Inspiration hit her, "b. 4/23/46 -- we can get married on my birthday!" She said. Then she proceeded "Let's say I was born in D.C., where you first met me. Mother: Gaia Terre, Louisiana, Father: Dieu Gottsdotter, Minnesota. How's that?" she said, very pleased with herself.

Paul stared at the form. "Where'd you get those names? And how did you pick those states?" he whispered.

"Earth and God. It's just Gaia Terre sounds French, so I thought of New Orleans. Gottsdotter sounded Scandinavian, so I thought of Minnesota," she whispered back.

The person in front of them caught part of their conversation and tried to look back at them without being obvious about it. The clerk began speaking to him and drew his attention away from them.

"How are you going to prove who you are without identification?" asked Paul, reaching into his pocket for his.

The person in front stepped aside and they were at the counter facing the clerk.

"\$35 dollars and your identification, please," she said.

Paul put his down on the counter and stared as Moira pulled a passport from her pocket. Had it been in there all along? He tried to peek at it while the clerk inspected it.

"Quite a few VISA stamps you must travel a lot," she remarked.

"I like to travel." Moira responded demurely.

The clerk gave them a receipt and handed them a manila envelope. "This license is good starting three days from now and expires in sixty days. Have a nice day."

"Thank you." Paul took the envelope. As they walked away from the counter, Paul asked Moira, "Let me see that passport."

"Let me see the license," she said, and they traded.



Paul opened the little blue book with a gold eagle embossed on it. Inside was a picture of Moira, looking very tired and pale, with a wan smile. All the details she had written on the King County form were in the passport. Paul felt a little queasy. This looked so real. Had she been making up all that stuff about time travel?

"Sometimes I use a black one. It's diplomatic. I can get through customs faster," she said. "Ooh, look at the pretty certificate."

She showed Paul the contents of the envelope. It held the form they had first filled out, two blank forms and a marriage license with the dates 4/23/95 to 6/22/95 on it. One form was a certificate in fancy lettering.

"That's the one we get to keep," Moira said.

They went back to the car and Paul headed to the office. He wanted to ask her about the passport, but decided to wait. Then he wondered if his passport was still good, or had it expired? Where would they go on their honeymoon? Could he get time off for a honeymoon -- what was his work schedule like? He wished he hadn't left his calendar at work on Tuesday when he went out to dinner with Adam. Francis would probably have a fit trying to reschedule next week.

"You sure do an awful lot of thinking." Moira said as they weaved through traffic.

Paul glanced at her. "Just how much of my thoughts do you pick up?"

She grinned. "I'll never tell."

"Do you pick up everyone's thoughts, or just mine?" He decided to try the question from a different angle.

"Everyone's and everything's." Moira brushed the hair away from her face with her hand. "It takes a lot for me to block all the telepathic input I receive. That's why I need to meditate so often, because I constantly have to clear out from everyone's thoughts and feelings. It's even harder around you because we're so connected. With people I don't know, it's quite easy."

Paul let that sink in. It explained her discomfort with the crowds in India. It also explained why she responded to his thoughts more than his words. He remembered all the lascivious thoughts he tended to have around her and was suddenly embarrassed.

Moira laughed, "You can imagine what it was like for me the first time I met you in Seattle, and you had all these memories of our weekend together in D.C. I had never even kissed anyone before, and here were all these, these *pictures* from you filling my head of us doing all kinds of amazing gymnastics." She covered her eyes, chortling at the memory. "It certainly aroused my curiosity." She grinned at him.

He wanted to put his arms around her, but he had to keep both

hands on the wheel to navigate the hills of downtown Seattle. He kept his eyes on the traffic, and tried to keep his thoughts focused, except they kept straying to 'all those amazing gymnastics.' Moira leaned against the passenger door, watching him, grinning from ear to ear.

"God, Paul, it's like watching the Playboy channel," she teased.

"Stop it." Paul said, "I'm driving." Then suddenly he saw thoughts in his head. He could tell they were hers -- because they were about him. Pictures of him as a twenty-three year old, naked and soapy in the shower. Pictures of the top of his head resting on Moira's breasts, he couldn't tell where. Lying naked across the bed at the Ashoka Hotel in New Delhi, snoring. Pictures of him walking around the Ballard house in his jockey shorts.

"Moira!" He cried, "Are these your thoughts?"

"Well, they're my memories, my pictures. That's what it feels like, to have someone else's stuff in your head. Except usually it's not so pleasant." Moira said.

She hadn't meant to, but suddenly Paul saw a huge explosion and saw a building collapse. Then the image vanished, like a slide being pulled from a projector.

"Wait, I know that -- I saw that on the news this morning when we were getting ready to leave." Paul recalled the headlines were all about a bombing in Oklahoma City. He reached for Moira's arm.

"That was the Federal Building! Moira, you just came from Oklahoma, were you there?" He tried to calculate the time she must have left Oklahoma and the timing of the explosion. Then another thought hit him. "Adam said you were working in a daycare center ... was it the one in the Federal Building?" He looked over at Moira.

She closed her eyes and tears trickled down her cheeks. "Please don't ask me."

He tried to search his mind for details, but there weren't very many. That was because the news hadn't much to tell, the explosion had just happened the day before; people were still being pulled from the wreckage. There had been a lot about the children there. A strange calmness came over Paul.

"Moira, do you help people die? Are you an Angel?"

Moira shook her head. "No, not really. I focus on helping people to live. Those of us who help the dying usually don't manifest bodies. They meet them as they're passing over."

Paul felt lightheaded. "I'd better not ask any more right now." As much as he wanted to know everything about her, he knew he could only handle a little information at a time.

They arrived at Marbanks Architects shortly before ten o'clock. Paul's lightheadedness was replaced by lightheartedness. He wanted to show Moira off, not really to the whole office, but at least to Michael. They took the elevator up to the office and as each floor passed, his excitement grew. He practically skipped to the receptionist.

"Alice, good morning. Any messages for me?"

The receptionist, with shaggy, slick black hair and a nose ring shook her head. "Sorry, Mr. Marbanks, I just gave 'em all to the Ms. Cook." She nodded her head in the direction of Francis' desk.

"Thanks anyway. Oh, Alice, this is my fiancée, Moira." He placed the emphasis on fiancée. It pleased him to see Alice's eyes fall out of her head. Paul was known as a confirmed bachelor around the office...

Moira graciously offered her hand. "So pleased to meet you." The receptionist's gum nearly fell out of her mouth.

He placed his hand protectively -- or was it possessively? -- on the small of Moira's back and guided her through the office, nodding at the heads popping out of cubicles and from behind computer screens. He steered her towards Michael's office; Francis could wait.

"Number One?" Paul said, as he approached his friend's door.

Michael was meeting with someone, and he turned his chair towards the door. He stared at Moira, which increased Paul's already puffed up chest.

"Michael, I'd like you to meet M-" Paul began to say.

"Mom?" Adam interrupted. He was sitting in the chair across from Michael's desk.

"Adam, sweetie, how are you doing?" Moira said.

Paul was extremely disappointed, as Michael turned to Adam.

"This is your mother?" he said, and then to Moira, "Pleased to meet you, Mrs. Paulson. Adam mentioned you were having lunch together today."

She smiled and took Michael's outstretched hand.

"Please, call me Moira. I'm very pleased to meet you. I've heard a lot about you, from Adam and from Paul." She took his hand in both of hers.

Michael's jaw dropped open. "Moira? Moira? This is -- Paul, this is her?" Michael kept shaking Moira's hands without letting go.

Paul grinned broadly. "Yes it is." *See, I told you she was real, he thought.*

"You're Adam's mother? Is that possible?" Michael looked from Adam to Moira, to Paul. "I'm sorry, I expected this little blue-haired lady ... Paul, you scoundrel, why didn't you tell me? Adam, why didn't you tell us? Coral, I have to tell Coral. You have to come to dinner tonight. Coral has to

meet you!" He finally released Moira's hand. "This is great! Just great!"

"Sure, Michael, we'd be happy to." Paul said. He'd been looking forward to having dinner as a couple with Michael and Coral for years.

"You too, Adam, of course." Michael said.

Adam looked glum, but nodded. Moira went over and gave him a little hug.

"Sweetheart, you look tired. Did you get enough sleep?" She brushed his hair from his eyes.

Adam pulled his head back. "Mom, not here!" he said sharply.

"Yes, you're Adam's mom, all right." Michael laughed. "My mother does that stuff to me all the time, and I'm in my forties. Paul, you remember when she kept coming to the office with *Bento* for my lunch when I first started working here. She was concerned I wouldn't be eating well. The last place I worked I was able to go home for lunch. She trusts Coral's cooking but nobody else's. 'Oh -- Miko, Miko you getting too thin, all bones,' she'd say. And I'd say, 'Mom -- not in front of the guys at the office!'" Michael and Paul both laughed.

"I remember." Paul said. "And you were so sick of Bento, you'd give it to me as soon as she left and go downstairs to the deli for a ham on rye. I got the better deal, that teriyaki chicken and rice was delicious." Then he looked over at Adam, who wasn't laughing, and Moira, who was. He felt that stab of jealousy towards Adam again, for having Moira beside him, caring about him.

"Oh, Mr. Marbanks, I'm so glad you're finally in. You have reservations in an hour and a half, and there's a stack of messages for you." Francis was at the door.

"Francis! Here's somebody I'd like you to meet." Paul went to Moira and took her arm. "Francis, this is Moira, my fiancée."

As he said that, he sensed ripples of shock from the two men behind him.

"Oh, oh, Mrs., uh, Moira, I'm so pleased to meet you." Francis' face twisted into a confused smile.

"I'm getting married on Monday, so we'll have to reschedule next week." Paul told her.

Francis looked like she was having a stroke, but she managed to continue smiling "Oh my, well, that will take some doing. I'll go work on it right away."

"You do that, Francis. I'll be right with you, just as soon as I'm done here." Paul gave her a little wave, and she gave a simpering smile and waved back.

He turned back to the men in the office. Michael looked like he

could be knocked over with a feather. Adam scowled fiercely.

"Mom, you can't be serious!"

"We are serious." Paul said firmly.

Adam ignored him and spoke directly to Moira. "Mother -- you can't, you know we can't -- how can you?"

"Adam, Adam. I can and I'm going to. Why don't I explain it all to you over lunch?" Moira soothed her son. "What time is it?"

"Ten-thirty," glowered Adam.

She patted Adam on the arm, and Paul got the distinct impression that they were continuing the conversation telepathically.

Michael recovered from his shock. "Paul, this is unbelievable! What great news!" He shook Paul's hand vigorously.

"Of course, I'm hoping you can be the witnesses. Or maybe you and Adam." Paul found himself saying. He had just assumed Michael and Coral would be the witnesses, but this strong thought had popped in his head to include Adam. He looked at Moira. Her eyes twinkled.

"I'd be honored, old buddy." Michael enthused. "I gotta call Coral."

"You do that, pal. I have to go see Francis. I'll meet you in an hour to get ready for our lunch with Susan and Bob." He looked over at Moira. He wanted her to stay with him for the whole morning, but he had work to do.

"Don't worry about me, I'll just hang out and bug Adam." Moira squeezed Adam's arm.

"I have work to do, too, Mom. I wasn't here yesterday either, you know." Adam protested.

"Well then, I'll make myself scarce and come back at twelve. How's that?" Moira said, cheerily ignoring her son's discomfort, the way a mother can.

Adam smiled for the first time since she came in the room. "Great, Mom."

"See you later, then." She gave him a little kiss on the cheek, and went over to Paul. She slipped her arms around his waist and gave him a squeeze. "I'll see you later this afternoon, Hunkey." She smiled teasingly.

Paul hugged her back, and kissed her forehead. "This afternoon," he echoed, and then added in the same teasing tone, "Babe."

"I look forward to meeting your wife tonight at dinner," she said to Michael as she turned to go.

"Dinner tonight. See you then," Michael said.

The three men stood and watched her leave the office, each experiencing a different emotion. Michael was in awe, feeling like he'd met a celebrity. Paul felt a mixture of pride and joy, and an ache at watching her

leave.

Adam scowled, "I better get back to work," he muttered, and went to his office.

"What's eating him?" asked Michael, "You'd think he'd be happy for his mom and you. I mean, you're his best friend, maybe his only friend around here, and well, his mom, you know."

"He's probably miffed because we hadn't told him. We only decided last night," Paul said.

"Ah." Michael nodded. "Maybe so. I've never seen Adam grouchy before. Mr. Spock has feelings!"

"I'll stick my head in his office after I'm done with Francis," Paul said, "to make sure he's okay with all this. Catch you later, bud."

"In an hour," Michael said, and picked up the phone to call Coral.

Meeting with Francis took longer than Paul expected, and it was almost time to go with Michael to meet Susan and Bob by the time Paul stopped at Adam's door.

"Knock, knock," he said, stepping in.

Adam sat at his desk with his eyes closed, meditating. The air seemed heavy and serious. He didn't say anything.

"Are you all right?" Paul sat down opposite him.

Adam opened his eyes, "Why?"

"Well, you seemed a little upset at the news about Moira and me." Paul said.

Adam sighed, and then bent over to the floor, disappearing behind his desk. His head popped back up, and he ran his hand through his hair. He no longer looked gloomy, but worried and a little sad. Then he looked at Paul.

"So, I'm not sure how much Mom told you ... " his eyes narrowed as he looked at Paul. Paul had the distinct impression that Adam was reading him, finding out what Moira had told him.

"Well, she wouldn't tell me anything about you. She said I'd have to find that out from you directly," Paul said, shifting in his seat. He hoped Adam was selective in whatever he was looking for; Paul would like to keep certain parts of last night between Moira and himself. The moment Paul thought that, Adam turned his gaze away, looking a little embarrassed.

"Uh, yeah," he said, regaining his composure, "We're not supposed to have personal relationships. And I'd call getting married a definite act of having a personal relationship." Adam said.

"But Adam, your mother and I have had a personal relationship for years, this is just ... announcing the obvious to the world. To the universe." Paul explained.

"The Universe already knows," Adam retorted. "Sorry, it's just ... oh, maybe it's just my stuff. Listen, let me have lunch with my mother and let her talk to me. She's really good at helping me get past an issue and see things clearly." Paul sensed that Adam wanted to tell him more, but wouldn't.

"Am I going to have to ask specific questions of you, to find out more about you?" Paul asked.

Adam nodded. "But not right now. I think we're both on overload." Adam looked away.

Paul felt something between them, and wished he could interpret what it was. He wanted to go over to him, like Moira would, and give him a little hug. But that wasn't the way he and Adam interacted. He would have stayed there longer, but Michael stuck his head in the office.

"Okay, boss-man. Let's do the lunch thing. Let's boldly go where we've always gone before." Michael said, referring to the fact that Francis always reserved the same restaurant. "Gotta get Francis to try someplace else. I'm getting really sick of that food." Michael turned a mischievous grin on Adam. "Hey, Adam, why don't you and Paul go have lunch with his sister and Bob, and I go have lunch with your mom at some other restaurant?" He nodded his head animatedly. "Bet she'd like Thai."

"Well, if Coral wouldn't kill you, I would," Paul said, jokingly. Then, to Adam, "It's too bad it's a business lunch, or I'd invite you and Moira along. I want Susan to meet her. I'll see if she can come back to the office after lunch. Usually they hit the road." To Michael, "I'm hoping she can come back up to Colvos on Monday for the wedding."

Standing by the door, Paul felt two arms slip around his waist and tickle his ribs.

"Moira!" he exclaimed.

"Who's Moira?" his sister said, playfully punching him in the arm.

"Susan, I nearly had a heart attack!" Paul clutched his chest melodramatically.

"Well, cut the cholesterol and fat," his sister shot back. "Bob and I got here early, so we decided to use the company parking here instead of trying to find a spot near the restaurant." She lowered her voice, "Do we really have to eat there again? The food's not that good." Her voice returned to its normal level. "Who's Moira? That name's familiar..."

Adam piped in before anyone else. "Moira's my mother. She's ... visiting." Causing Michael to shoot him a look of curiosity.

"Oh, hi, Adam." Susan gave him a friendly smile. "Your Mom's here, eh? I hope you've cleaned your office," she said adopting a maternal tone.

Adam wrinkled his nose. "You sound just like her."

"Well, I have four of my own. I know how to do it." Susan turned to Michael. "Hey, Michael, how's it going?"

"Same old same old. Michelle aced her solo performance at Cornish last week, and Coral entered us into the Garden Tour this year." Michael could to relate with Susan on a family level where Paul could not.

"You should talk with Bob. His wife did the same thing last year and he said it was unbelievable the amount of people that showed up for the tour. Bob, how many people did you say came on the Garden Tour in Portland?" Paul's sister called to her coworker.

A tall, dark man came striding through the office. He had a pleasant face and calm eyes. "Don't ask. Our neighbors didn't speak to us for a month because of the amount of traffic it caused on our street. Hello, everyone." Bob greeted everyone.

Then Michael said, "Have you told your sister the good news?"

Paul hesitated. He had wanted to tell her alone, not in front of everyone. She'd probably kill him for springing news like this on her. Susan stared up at him.

"Um. I'm getting married," he stated.

She almost fell over. "You're getting WHAT?"

"Married. You know, it's that ring thing, that 'I do' thing." Paul said, hoping to muffle the shock with humor.

"Paul!" Susan said through clenched teeth. "Why didn't you tell me you were seeing somebody?"

"She's just come back into my life." Paul said gently, his eyes softening.

"That's where I've heard that name before." Susan said, frowning. "Her, huh?"

"My mother." Adam stepped in.

This totally confused Susan. "You're MOTHER is marrying my BROTHER?" She obviously envisioned someone their own mother's age with Paul.

"Moira, I'm marrying Moira," Paul explained gently. "Moira turned out to be Adam's mother. I discovered that fact when I gave Adam a lift to the airport yesterday."

His sister was quick. "YESTERDAY? You ran into her yesterday, and you're getting married today?"

"Well, on Monday, actually. Washington has a three-day waiting period." Paul felt uncomfortable being interrogated in front of the others. "Hadn't we better get to the restaurant?" he changed subject.

"Not so fast, buddy boy," his sister said. "Where is she, or has she



disappeared again?"

This was a signal for Bob and Michael to step out of the room. Susan and Paul were like this often. She was a deadly combination of corporate lawyer and kid sister. Paul couldn't get away with even the most casual remark without cross-examination. The others knew the sparring wouldn't last long -- they always made up before the end of their meetings.

She'd struck a nerve in Paul. He looked up at Adam with a touch of panic in his eyes. Adam shook his head reassuringly.

"She's downstairs. She's coming up right now," Adam said. How he could have known that, having spent the last ten minutes standing here with them? Paul wondered.

Everyone looked expectantly across the office to the glass doors looking into the lobby. The elevator dinged and Moira stepped off, packages in hand.

"Hmm." Bob hummed appreciatively. "Lucky guy."

"Thank you," said Paul.

His sister stiffened in his arms.

"Don't give her a hard time." Paul whispered under his breath to her.

"Moi? Never." Susan said, getting ready.

Adam broke the ice by walking past everybody and reaching her first. He took her packages and gave her a peck on the cheek. She gave him a hug, and slipped her hand through his arm. Visually, this established an affectionate, maternal image calculated by Adam to throw a curve ball at Susan's preconceived notion of Moira. Paul was grateful for the save.

Adam escorted her to the group and made the introductions.

"Susan, Bob, this is my mother Moira. Moira, this is Susan and Bob from the Portland office. Susan is --" he began.

"Paul's sister. Oh, I'm so glad to meet you." Moira went to shake her hand.

Susan had to unhook her arm from around Paul in order to return the gesture. She looked Moira up and down appraisingly. "Nice to meet you, too," she said, not quite convinced. "Uh, congratulations, I suppose. I just heard the good news." She looked up at Paul. She was dying to say something else, but wasn't sure quite what.

"Oh, yes." Moira beamed adoringly at Paul. Her smile spread a sunny warmth through the group, and almost melted Susan. Almost.

Paul cut in. "Darling, we have to go, we're late for our reservations. Perhaps Susan can come back after our meeting and spare a few minutes with you before hitting the road back." He stepped away from Susan to Moira and gave her a short kiss on the lips. He stifled the urge to give a

longer one to her. "Susan, Bob, Michael -- shall we?"

"Okay," his sister said reluctantly as Paul began to steer her out of the office. "I'll see you later, we can chat then." Susan smiled the smile of a lawyer getting a chance to question the defense's witness.

"See you later." Chimed in Moira, and the group left.

Adam and Moira remained in Adam's office. Adam glanced down at the packages she was carrying. He lifted one eyebrow.

"You went shopping?" he asked, incredulously.

"Oh, these." Moira looked down at them. "No, in the elevator I realized I might have to make an excuse for what I've been doing this morning, so I manifested these."

"What's in them?" Adam asked.

"Oh, nothing. Well, you know. I'd probably react to the questioner's expectation. So whatever they expected would be in there. No need for them now, though. Nobody saw them." She put them down behind Adam's desk. "Where are we going for lunch?"

"The Market. Let's walk." Adam said, and they headed towards the elevators themselves. The bags by the desk slowly faded away.

The morning fog had burned away and it had become a clear, sunny day. As they walked downhill towards the Pike Street Market, they had a clear view of Elliott Bay. Ferries headed out towards Bremerton and Bainbridge Island. A little passenger ferry was coming around Alki point. A huge freighter lumbered past an aircraft carrier towards Harbor Island. Beyond the Sound, you could see the Olympics, majestically snow-dusted against the sky.

"What a beautiful place to live." Moira remarked, slipping her arm into her sons' arm.

"Mm." Adam agreed.

"Talk, talk, talk, talk. That's all you ever do is talk," Moira teased at her son's comment.

"I do talk. Just not as much as you." Adam protested.

Moira looked down at her shoes while they walked. "So, what do you think about Paul and me? I mean, really. There's something you're blocking me from knowing."

Adam squinted outwards towards the mountains. "It's only because I haven't figured it out for myself yet, and I don't want you telling me about it before I have."

"Oh, I never do that." Moira laughed facetiously.

"Oh, you always do that." Adam said. "But in answer to your question: I'm really uncomfortable about you and Paul. You know the cardinal rule. And yet it seems every time you completely ignore it."

"Not every time. Only when I'm with Paul." Moira said, softly.

"Why, Mom?" asked Adam.

"Because I love him." Moira responded. "And I think it must be correct to do so. I mean, why would I keep running into him? That's never happened with anyone else. We don't choose our assignments; we're sent. So I'm not choosing to run into him every time; I'm being given the opportunity."

"Don't you think that maybe you're being given the chance to say no? To avoid a temptation of the body? To learn to keep your focus off the physical and on the job at hand?" Adam lectured.

"Adam, I didn't realize that stint in Catholic school rubbed off on you so well." Moira teased. "Temptation of the body," she snorted. "You make it sound like I respond to every pass I've received on every assignment. You know I keep my focus on the job at hand. But I believe that my relationship with Paul is a very important learning experience for me, as well as for him. Can you understand that?" Adam was silent, so Moira went on.

"Adam, you have never experienced love like this, in physical form..." she began.

"I certainly have experienced love. I know what love feels like. I feel love for all living things, and I know my unique love for you and Paul. I just choose not to experience lust. It's too distracting." Adam interjected.

Moira grinned. "Well, lust can be an expression of love, you know. And I'll tell ya, there's nothing quite like experiencing lust on this physical plane. It's like the ecstasy we feel when we're out of body, but magnified." She kept going, ignoring Adam's discomfort. "The last time I talked to \*\*\*\* I tried to explain it, but you know, \*\*\*\* can't comprehend. No second chakra, no nerve endings. Like describing colors to a blind person."

"But you really lost your space when you became involved with someone." Adam pointed out. "Just look at you and Paul. You're like Siamese twins."

His mother chuckled. "And that's a fatal disease?"

"Well, you lose your effectiveness, I think." Adam opined.

"Bosh. Have you noticed me losing my effectiveness here? Anywhere?" Moira challenged.

Adam thought. "Well, I've only been around when you were together twice. In Los Angeles and here. I would say that your timing was off in Los Angeles, but not by much. I don't know about here; I'm not sure what you're here for."

"Neither am I. I'm just watching and waiting." Moira mused. "But you're right. My timing has been off a couple of times when I've been with Paul, but he wasn't the reason in Los Angeles -- well, okay, we should have

transitioned about six hours earlier. I would have preferred to have transitioned six days earlier, or sixteen. But that was the Universe at work, not me. I believe the Universe gave me that opportunity to be with Paul then, to have that incident with him occur so that we would be together here, now and I would have reason to be fully truthful with him."

"Humph." Adam grunted, not entirely in agreement. "How about your timing the last time you were in Seattle?"

"Adam, it was my first assignment unchaperoned. Did you perform your first unchaperoned assignment perfectly?" his mother asked.

"I certainly didn't go jumping into bed with somebody for three weeks and cause volcanoes to explode prematurely. Speaking of volcanoes, are you planning to stay here long? Because I really don't want you to affect my project with Mount Rainier." They came to the far end of the Market, and wove through the crowds around the stalls towards its center. On either side of them, vendors sold tee shirts and jewelry, carvings and paintings. Fiddle music wafted past their ears.

"I intend to keep moving this time," his mother replied. "However, you are the last person to be critical about my jumping into bed for three weeks. Have you ever meditated on why you chose a gestated body, rather than one like mine?"

Adam's head jerked slightly with shock. Obviously, he had not. They passed stalls overflowing with fresh broccoli, tomatoes, apples and spinach now. The fish and seafood stalls were up ahead.

"Look at your abilities, Adam. You can stay somewhere for six months at a time. You have remarkable grounding, and you can ground this entire area. I can't do that, none of us can." Moira said. "At least, not the way you are able to. When I ground this area, it shakes things up. When you ground this area, it settles and stabilizes. Why is that?"

Adam didn't respond to the last question. "I always thought being gestated was a liability. I don't get to go on as many assignments anymore. My body is denser than yours and the others. I have to work harder to keep my focus."

They stopped by the door of the restaurant. Moira pulled him close to her and gave his arm a squeeze.

"Adam, you are unique. There hasn't been a mingling like this in eons. Whatever you are contributing to this time period, this area, is special and unique. You may not feel it now, but then I never know what I'm giving during each of my assignments until it's over and I look back on it." She gazed at him with complete and total love. "You are not less advanced or less capable because your body is gestated. Paul is not a lesser being because he had parents and is learning through linear time."

That struck a chord in Adam. He looked at her, working hard to mask the feelings welling up in him.

Moira chuckled. "Let's get a table and I'll talk to you a little about resistance and non-resistance."

They ate lunch in silence, Adam pondering over the previous conversation and Moira waiting for the right time to start talking again. She looked around the restaurant, at all the people bustling about, waiters carrying trays of steamer clams and garlic bread, friends having lunch, tourists staring at glossy brochures.

"What you resist you get stuck with," Moira said.

Adam looked up from his bouillabaisse, his mouth full. His response was telepathic.

"I know you know that." Moira continued. "But are you looking at how resistant you are in your life? The whole Mr. Spock thing -- you're resisting your emotions. What happens when you resist?"

"You attract what you're resisting." Adam sighed. "So you're saying my creation in this situation with you and Paul is to help me deal with my emotions?"

Moira nodded. "Furthermore, have you ever considered that your creation in having a human body in general is to learn about dealing with emotions and the other unique aspects of having a physical body?"

Adam sipped his soup, deep in thought.

Moira continued, "Paul tells me that you have a parade of people through your office every day, telling you their problems."

Adam nodded. "That's really no different from strangers walking up to you on the street and telling you their life story," he noted. "I just happen to stay in one spot for a period of time, so the people who seek me out are the people I know."

"What are you learning by listening to them?" Moira asked.

"Well, I try not to fully listen. I'd never get any work done," Adam said, wryly. "I try to provide a safe place for them to dump, without taking it on." His mother opened her mouth to speak, but Adam raised his hand. "No, I know what you were asking. I've learned a lot from hearing how others deal, or don't deal, with their problems. It's helped me a lot in my interactions with others." He took a deep breath. "I've certainly learned not to get involved in an intimate relationship. That seems to be the one thing that causes people the most pain."

"What's wrong with pain?" His mother poked her salad fork towards him. "Do you have an expectation that pain is bad?"

Adam shook his head, backing away from the topic. "Pain is a valid learning experience. I just choose not to inflict it on others. Which would

happen if I were to get involved with someone. Mother, you haven't been here with Paul all this time. I saw him after Los Angeles; he was devastated. You influenced his whole life. Is that appropriate? Is that right? We are not meant to directly touch lives in that way. We are supposed to assist with gradual change."

Moira furrowed her brow. "You sound just like our teachers." She tapped her index finger on the table. "Perfect pictures! Assumptions! Expectations! Paul has free will, the same as all of us with human bodies. He chose me as much or more than I chose him. I did not manipulate any of our encounters. And neither you nor I are in a position to say whether it is appropriate or right. And you can hardly say that either of us have consistently assisted with gradual change." She reached out and placed her hand on Adam's. "Adam, maybe you're Paul's purpose for being here."

Adam leveled his intense brown eyes on his mother. He did not speak, verbally, at any rate. They simply looked at each other, the communication flowing between them faster than words could convey.

"That's up to you, Adam. I respect that. You and Paul have your own timing." She released his arm. The waiter approached them at that moment.

"How's everyone doing here? Ready for some dessert? Espresso?" he asked them.

Adam and Moira looked at each other, grinned, and said in perfect unison, "Lattes!"

Across town, Paul, Michael, Susan and Bob drove to the restaurant, exchanging pleasantries and ignoring the tension between the siblings on the way. When they got to their table, Bob excused himself to go call his office. His cell phone's battery needed recharging so he had to call the old-fashioned way, at the pay phone in the waiting area. Susan used the opportunity to launch in on Paul.

"Why, Paul? Why are you setting yourself up like this?" she asked.

Michael leaned back to watch the fireworks with a certain amount of detachment. It reminded him of his relationship with his own sister.

"Setting myself up? What are you talking about?" Paul asked, walking right into it.

"This is the woman who's broken your heart several times over. This is the person who's vanished on you again and again. How much do you know about her? How do you know she's not going to deep-six you this time?" Susan's cheeks grew flushed.

Paul's flushed, also. "I know a heck of a lot more about her now than

I did before. I understand her disappearances -- they were because of her work." Paul talked quickly so Susan couldn't interrupt. "I'm not at liberty to explain what she does. She is not going to deep-six me, as you put it. She may have to leave me from time to time, but I know she'll always come back. Why am I talking to you about this, why is it any of your business?"

"Because I'm your sister and I love you and I want the best for you," his sister said. "You told me about how you were after Los Angeles. Who's to say that's not going to happen again?"

Michael started at this; he'd suspected Moira had something to do with L.A., but Paul hadn't talked about it. His friend had been the worst he'd ever seen him after that time. He began to worry about Paul's impending marriage himself.

"What about the little boy, Paul?" Susan said, as if pulling out a trump card.

Paul was startled. "What little boy?"

"You said she had a young son with her. Where is he?" Susan demanded.

How was he going to explain this? Or how was he going to convincingly *not* explain it? A flash of inspiration hit him. "No, no, not with her. She had a, um, photograph of a young boy, so I assumed she had a young child. Er, it turned out to be a photo of Adam. I had misunderstood." Yeah, that's the ticket. He waited to see how Susan took this. She was great at seeing right through him. He waited for her to call him on it.

The truth that the boy was Adam struck a chord in Susan. You could almost see her measuring up the information he'd given her in Portland, trying to recall his exact words back then, with this new picture he'd given her. She bought it. What's more, she really liked Adam, so it started to sway her off her high horse.

Paul decided to press his advantage. "Take some time to talk to her, Susan, after lunch. Give her a chance. This is important to me." He put his hand on her shoulder, to enhance her softening.

"Oh, rats," she said, knowing she was capitulating. "Bob and I were hoping to make it back to Portland before the office closes."

Just then Bob returned from his phone call. "Hey, I don't mind hanging out a while. My secretary just reminded me that it's my anniversary. I was thinking I could run down to a store here before we hit the road, so I don't have to go home empty-handed."

"It's settled then," said Paul. "Susan, you can come back to the office with me while Bob saves his marriage, and you can take the time to get to know Moira. Now let's order and get down to business."

With that, four menus opened and four heads disappeared behind

them.

Adam and Moira took less time at lunch than Paul and the others, so were already in the office when they returned. Moira sat in Adam's office as Paul and Susan approached. Adam made some remark and Moira laughed at it. Her laughter lilted out the door towards them as they walked in.

"Hello, hello," Paul greeted them. "How was lunch?" He walked over to Moira.

Moira stood and gave him a little kiss. "Delicious. How was yours?"

"Profitable," Paul replied. "Portland and Seattle are going to cooperate on a project that neither branch could handle on its own. We're going to make out quite nicely."

"Paul, don't you and Adam have a meeting or something?" Susan said, characteristically blunt. She didn't want to waste a lot of time.

"Oh yes, um, Adam, I wanted to show you these plans in my office, er -- get your opinion on them." Paul nodded his head out the door.

Adam hesitated, seriously considering whether to throw a monkey wrench into this set-up. His mother looked at him reassuringly, so he shrugged, "Sure, I'd be happy to," and left with Paul.

Susan folded her arms across her waist and leaned against the doorway. Moira sat back in her seat and smiled.

"So. Why are you marrying my brother?" Susan fired the first shot.

"Because I love him." Moira responded gently. "I've always loved him."

"If you've always loved him, why have you treated him so badly? Why do you keep leaving him without a word?" Susan walked into the room and sat on the stool beside Adam's drawing table. She wanted to stay a head taller than Moira.

"I've discussed those circumstances with Paul," Moira said firmly. "He understands they were beyond my control. I never intended to, and would never intentionally do anything to hurt him. His happiness is one of my highest priorities."

Susan looked her up and down. She resisted melting to Moira's warmth. "I'm concerned about my brother's happiness also. I'm concerned that you'll marry him and poof! Disappear."

Moira looked down at her hands. "Well, I will have to go away from time to time, but I think it will be different now." She looked up directly at Susan, "Paul is willing to make a commitment to me, even though he knows we won't be consistently together. And I definitely am willing to make a commitment to him, for the rest of my life, whether we're consistently



together or not."

Susan had heard what she wanted, and reluctantly smiled. "Well, it's hard not to like you," she admitted. "You're definitely as charming as Adam." She glanced over towards Paul's office where Adam and Paul were standing over a table with large blueprints on it. "If you don't mind my asking, I'm curious about Adam's father..."

Moira stood up, effectively making her a head taller than Susan. "What about him?"

Susan looked up at her. "I know it's not possible, but ... "

Moira smiled down at her. "Anything is possible, Susan. But it's not for me to talk about."

"Oh." She frowned and looked back towards her brother's office.

"Let's put it this way, I can neither confirm nor deny what you're thinking." Moira said, with humor.

"But Adam can?" Susan asked.

"Yes." Moira nodded.

"Good," Susan rubbed her hands together. "I'll work on him. Maybe not right now, though." She noticed Bob getting off the elevator. "Well, it looks like I'll be coming back up here on Monday, then. I'll see you and Paul and Adam then."

"Well, it was nice that we had this little talk." Moira grasped Susan's hands. "And, really, you have nothing to worry about with Paul. I'll take good care of him." She smiled.

"I'm glad to hear that." Susan said. With that, she walked over to Bob at Paul's office, said good-bye to Paul and the pair left to go back to Portland.

Coral's garden had not changed much in the past fifteen years to the untrained eye. To one who knows gardens, however, they would notice a thousand different things. The well-pruned and well-trained weeping plum tree had aged gracefully. Different shrubs had come and gone, but their replacements blended in so skillfully they looked like they had been there for years. Again, a non-gardener's glance would see only a neat and tidy garden, but someone with a true green thumb would be amazed at the exotic and delicate plants that thrived there, side by side with hardier Northwest varieties.

Paul walked with Moira up the path, only noticing that Adam's bicycle was already there. Moira lingered behind him, taking in the beauty of nature surrounding her. He rang the buzzer and the door opened as she joined him on the doorstep.

"Paul, it's great to see you. And you must be Moira, I've really been looking forward to this!" Coral gave them both a big hug, and stood back, appraising her. It was a humorous contrast, the petite Asian woman with short black hair, and the tall female Viking with the silver-gold mane. Moira smiled warmly.

"Coral, your garden is amazing," she complimented her hostess.

Coral, delighted, asked, "Would you like a tour?" Moira nodded, so Coral turned to Paul, "Adam and Michael are in the kitchen. Could you ask Michael to check the vegetables? I want to show Moira my garden."

Coral slipped past Paul and took Moira by the arm, pointing out each living green thing as if it were a favorite child. Paul chuckled and showed himself in. Moira and Adam sure knew how to ask the right questions.

Michael was already stirring the vegetables when Paul came to the kitchen. Adam leaned against the counter drinking a bottle of Tahoma water.

"And with that, Susan shut right up." Michael was saying, "Oh, hi, Paul. I was just giving Adam the highlights of our meeting with the Voyager crew."

"Sounds more like you were giving the pre-game sparring between my sister and myself." Paul observed, and the two men smiled at him.

"Yeah, she sure knows how to bust your chops." Michael laughed. "Reminds me of my sister. I'm sure glad she lives in Japan. Adam, you don't know how lucky you are to be an only child. You are an only child, right?" Michael asked, with a subtle undertone, checking out Paul's story from lunch.

Adam nodded. Then he adopted his Spock voice, "Although I find familial relationships fascinating, I am grateful that my mother stopped at one." He broke the image by grinning. Michael grinned back.

Paul didn't. He felt another twinge of regret, wishing that he and Moira had had a child together. He still couldn't let go of the image of Adam as a little boy in Los Angeles, and all that he could have given them at the time. He straightened up and contributed to the conversation. "You stopped at one, Michael. I always wondered about that."

Michael shook his head as he added tamari to the steaming pot. "That was Coral's call, but I don't blame her. She's real small, you might have noticed," he smiled. "Anyway, she had a difficult time with Michelle, so we decided not to try again. We're happy, but our parents aren't."

Paul could understand their disappointment. Michael was the only son of an only son, having no son of his own. He could see Michael's parents giving that a lot of weight. Then he heard Moira's lilting laugh mingling

with Coral's bird-like one. The two women entered the house as if they were old friends.

"I see Moira's hit it off with Coral," Michael observed. "That's good."

The women came into the kitchen. Moira went over to Adam and gave him a hug, before standing by Paul. Coral walked over and took over Michael's position at the stove.

"Oh, Michael, the heat is too high on these vegetables. They are cooking too fast. Is the rice done?" Coral worked with the grace of an orchestra conductor, managing all the pots of food at once. "I think it's done. Dinner is almost ready, people."

The others moved out of the kitchen to the dining area, to give Coral room for the command performance. It was Thai shrimp sate in peanut sauce, with vegetables and rice. A simple meal for Coral, but then she'd only heard about the dinner that morning.

"So, Moira, I gather you have known Paul for a pretty long time?" Coral asked as she and Michael passed around the plates of food.

"It seems like forever." Moira smiled at Paul.

"How come you two never tied the knot before?" She poured ice water for everyone.

Moira looked at Paul blankly, so Paul answered.

"I've been about to ask her several times, but Fate always stepped in. This time, Fate was on my side." Paul reached for Moira's hand under the tablecloth and squeezed. Moira squeezed back, tightly.

"It's too bad, but it's so romantic! You meeting over and over again, in all these different places!" Coral said. "And now you get to be together for good." She smiled brightly.

Moira and Paul glanced at each other. Michael looked at them, expectantly, and Adam looked at his food. "Well, we don't know. I mean, we're together now. But my work ... I won't always be able to stay with Paul, but I'll be able to come back to him." Moira hesitated.

"Oh, what do you do?" Coral asked.

Moira paused. Adam looked up. *How are you going to handle this one, Mom?*

"I work for an international organization," she began slowly. "It requires me to travel. I'm afraid that's all I can tell you."

"Is it with the government?" Michael asked.

Moira looked at him. "Yes," she said. Just not an earth-based one.

With that the dinner conversation turned to a variety of other topics. While the guys hashed out their work, Moira and Coral discussed plants. When dinner ended, they moved to the living room for coffee. Moira excused herself to use the powder room down the hall. She came out to find

Michael standing there.

"Moira, I know Susan has already talked to you about this..." Michael paused, uncertain how to proceed.

"That's all right, Michael, I'm sure you're concerned also." Moira encouraged him.

"Well, I suspected that you might be the reason for Paul's depression after L.A., but I didn't know for sure until today. I guess that's what I'm concerned about -- I've been here with him all this time and I've watched what he's gone through when you leave him. I just don't want to see it happen again." There, he'd said it as best he could.

Moira touched Michael's arm lightly. "I know. I don't think he will; because now he knows I'm coming back. I really don't have control over my assignments, but I do have it over coming to see my family." What she really meant was Adam, but if he was near Paul she could manage to be with both of them. "He and I made a commitment to each other a long time ago. This is just acknowledging it to the world."

Michael nodded. He wasn't entirely convinced, but he was convinced enough. He would have been happier if he'd known what kind of work she did. But if Paul could accept it, he guessed he could, too. They walked down the hallway to the living room together. "Well, we look forward to Monday. It is Monday isn't it?"

Paul, sitting on the couch, looked up. "It's Monday. I called a minister today and she's free on Monday. Oh, she'll be coming out on Saturday to talk to us," he said to Moira as she joined him on the couch. She slid close to him and he draped his arm around her shoulders. Adam observed them from the easy chair opposite them, his face unreadable.

Coral turned to Adam. "So what do you think, Adam? Isn't it great, your mom and Paul?"

"Oh, great, yes. Well, it'll take some getting used to," he said, diplomatically.

Paul looked over at Adam and wondered if his mother had talked with him at lunch, and helped him with his 'stuck stuff' as he said she would. Adam looked back at Paul and nodded at him. Paul had a reaction at that. It felt quite odd to have someone responding to his thoughts so directly. But then, with Adam and Moira, he should be used to it by now. Or *get* used to it, he thought, wryly. He looked down at Moira, who was leaning against him and smiling at Adam.

Michael joined in the conversation. "After Monday, you can call Paul 'Dad'," he joked.

He comment didn't get quite the reaction he anticipated. Adam stared at him, a look of shock on his face. Paul glanced at Moira and saw her

smile freeze. Anger burned in the pit of his stomach. Obviously, they still felt loyalty towards Adam's real father, whoever he was.

"Come on, guys, Michael was just joking." Paul said, testily.

Adam shifted in his seat, searching for something to say.

Moira saved the day. "Actually, Michael, I think Adam wants to call Paul 'Pa'," she said, and looked up at Paul, "and you can call him 'Opie'." Everybody laughed -- even Adam, who didn't know who Opie was.

Paul, feeling more at ease, chimed in, "Wa'll, Opie, y'all have ta go fishin' with me some day. We'll have a right good time, yup," he said, doing his best imitation of Andy Griffith.

After the laughter died down, Coral asked, "Where are you two going on your honeymoon?"

Paul and Moira looked at each other. "We haven't even talked about it. Where do you want to go, darling?" Paul asked.

"*Not* Hawaii's Big Island." Moira quipped, and Adam laughed, but Coral and Michael looked puzzled. "I have a thing about volcanoes," she explained.

Paul hadn't gotten it at first either, and when he did, he didn't feel like laughing. He was beginning to see that there would be a lot of limitations to his and Moira being together.

"How about Europe?" he suggested. "Some place without active volcanoes?"

Moira asked, "Where in Europe?"

"Paris is a wonderful honeymoon spot." Coral offered. "Michael and I went there for our tenth anniversary."

Moira looked at the group, "I think we'll need to take a day or so to discuss this, we haven't even planned the wedding yet," she stifled a yawn.

Paul saw that it was getting late, and made noises about catching a ferry. Adam piped up that he'd better head home, also. Their hosts saw them to the door. Paul stood chatting with Michael for a few minutes while Moira went to Adam as he strapped his helmet on by his bicycle.

"I'm going to stay home tomorrow, so I won't be coming into Seattle with Paul," she said to him.

"Home, huh?" Adam said at his mother referring to Paul's house as 'home'.

Moira smiled patiently. "Would you like to come out to Colvos for dinner tomorrow night?"

"Hm, two home-cooked meals in a row, can I stand it?" Adam asked rhetorically.

Moira laughed and hugged him. "Oh, it's so hard. I want to spend time with you, but I want to be with Paul, too."

"It's okay, Mom. I understand." Adam hugged her back and got on his bike. "Listen, I'll be glad to come to dinner. I'll just hitch a ride back with Paul tomorrow night."

"Bring a change of clothes, you can stay over," his mother suggested.

Adam hesitated. He had stayed over at Paul's before, but this was different. He didn't know how comfortable he'd be crashing on the couch with Paul and his mother upstairs.

She grinned at him. "We'll be quiet, I promise," she snickered.

"God, Mom, what a picture! Keep it to yourself. Sheesh," said Adam, clearly embarrassed. "I can barely sleep in my own bedroom in Ballard now, since you told me."

"Told you what?" Paul asked coming up to them, his conversation with Michael having ended.

"Oh, she, well... nothing. Listen, I'd better be going. See you tomorrow, boss," Adam said. "See you tomorrow night, Mom," he kissed her cheek, and took off.

Paul glanced at Moira. "Did you actually tell him that you lost your virginity in that bedroom in Ballard?" he asked incredulously.

"Oh, no, but that would have been good, too." She smiled a Cheshire cat grin. "I invited him for dinner tomorrow. I hope that's okay." They walked towards the car.

"Oh, sure. We've had to answer to my sister and now to Michael, might as well deal with Adam." Paul sighed, and they drove back to the ferry and Colvos.

Moira stayed on Colvos that Friday, while Paul went into work. He had the feeling that she was going to meditate all day, as she was sitting in a chair when he woke up that morning, and was still there when he left for work. He, on the other hand, had his slate full that day. He had to prepare for taking the next week off, as well as rush around to jewelers at lunchtime. He wondered whether Moira should be with him when picking out wedding rings, but he decided that, as unattached to material possessions as she seemed to be, she would be happy with the unassuming gold bands he chose. The jeweler's assured him they could adjust the size. Paul thought regretfully about the engagement ring he'd returned to this same jewelry store so many years before.

He went non-stop right up until quitting time, and had almost forgotten that Adam was coming home with him until Adam stuck his head in Paul's office.

"Knock, knock," Adam imitated Paul. "Ready to go? Or do you

want another couple of hours?"

The joking felt good to Paul. It was the first time since Wednesday that he'd gotten any humor from Adam. "No, I think we can go home," he replied. "Opie," he added, hoping to continue the humorous vein.

Adam glanced at him. He swallowed. "Well, Pa, you want to get on the boat with me?" he said, but his tone was strained.

All right, he'd pressed it a little too far. They stepped into the elevator, Paul with his small attaché case, Adam with his bike in between them.

"Adam, why don't you move as often as your mother?" Paul suddenly found himself asking.

"When I was younger, I used to. But when I hit twelve or so, my energy began changing, so I started staying places longer," Adam said.

"Longer than Moira? Who took care of you?" Paul was curious.

"Oh, well, at about that age I started getting a variety of chaperons, but that's not unusual. I mean, everybody else has a different chaperon per assignment, from infancy through adolescence. I just was able to be with my mother until I began changing." His voice trailed off.

Paul started to get that queasy feeling, but he wanted to keep talking, since Adam seemed to be in a receptive mood.

Answering the unspoken question, Adam continued. "I'm gestated, unlike the others. So my energy is ... denser ... the rest of us have to move through time, although each one is assigned a hundred-year period. We don't move beyond that, because it wouldn't match our vibrational levels. As linear time progresses, the vibrational frequency increases. Fifty years ago things were much slower than they are now, and fifty years from now things will be a lot, er, quicker. Our bodies are made to fit within this vibrational span. Or any vibrational span. Well, other people's bodies. Mine is... different," he paused and looked at how Paul was taking this. Most of it soared over his head, so Adam kept going. "When I reached puberty my energy changed. Unlike the others, who have to keep moving, it became apparent that I do my best work by staying put. I still leave every six months or so, for a tune-up, so to speak, and once in a while I have another assignment, but mostly, well, I'm here." They were at Paul's Explorer by now, and Adam put his bike in the back.

"Adam, about Los Angeles ... " Paul began, and then hesitated as they got in the vehicle. How to put this? "That little boy was you, and you called me on the phone?"

Adam shrugged his shoulders. "That was a surprise. We don't run into ourselves on assignment, the same way we're not *supposed* to run into the same people throughout time. I didn't realize who you were, as an adult,

because I was operating off that belief. I simply didn't put together that you were the same person I'd seen those times before."

"Times," Paul exclaimed. "You've seen me more than twice?"

Adam clearly had made a slip. He struggled to find a way to backtrack. Then decided to level with him. Since Paul had asked, he must be ready to hear the answer.

"I've seen you other times, not just with Mom," Adam said.

Paul's heart began beating hard. What did this mean? "What other times?" Paul asked.

"Well, actually, you know the other times. I've noticed you thinking about them... I mean I have since I figured out who you are," he said, shifting in his seat uncomfortably.

Flashes of insight began to come to Paul. "Was I your Big Brother?"

"Uh-huh." Adam nodded.

"Twice?" Paul asked, and when Adam nodded again, he went on, "Were there any other times?"

Adam paused, assessing how much Paul could take. Then he shrugged his shoulder and said, "Just one other time."

"Oh, my God, Adam. Was it in Connecticut?" Paul felt the beehive start up in his head.

Adam began to sing the little jingle they had learned in nursery school.

"Adam, we must have been four years old!" Paul exclaimed. "Was Moira with you?"

Adam grinned. "Yeah. You loved her even then. You kept hanging out at our house, and wanting to sit on her lap when she read us stories. I got really pissed off once, and pushed you off. Mom made me sit in the corner while she read only to you. Oh, I was sore about that." Adam was laughing at the memory.

An eerie feeling crept over Paul. He remembered the beautiful lady next door. He wanted her to adopt him. But he couldn't remember the father, or if there was a father. Oh, hell, it was time to ask the question.

"Was your father with you then?" Paul asked, dreading the answer.

Adam was shocked. "What on earth do you mean?"

"I'm sorry, Adam, I don't mean to pry. I just mean, well..." Paul sought for the right words to say. "Listen, you don't have to tell me about him if you don't want to. I can see it's a private thing between you and your mother..."

Paul was stunned by what happened next. Adam pounded on the side of the car.

"Good God, Paul, you are unbelievably dense. Do you think my



mother has a man in every time period or something?" Adam seethed.

"Why, no, I mean, I just --" Paul stammered.

"Don't you comprehend? It is absolutely, completely, forbidden to have personal relationships. And my mother had one with you. And she kept having one with you, over all this time. Do you think she would do this with any one else?" Adam's face flushed beet red and the veins stood out at his temple.

Slowly the truth began to dawn on Paul. He was the only man Moira had ever been with. He pulled the Explorer over to the side of the road and looked at Adam. The truth was right there in front of him. The family resemblance really was a family resemblance.

"Adam," Paul said simply, and didn't know what else to say.

Adam looked away from Paul. The anger was subsiding, but there were tears in his eyes. Paul reached over and touched his friend's shoulder.

"Adam," he said again, and Adam gave out a sob. Paul's heart welled up in his throat and he pulled Adam to him. Adam was stiff at first, but Paul wrapped his arms around the younger man, and soon they were both sobbing. The emotions were the same. Paul's longing for a son, realized in the man he loved almost as much as he loved Moira. Adam's longing for a father, something he'd not realized until just then. After a moment, Adam sat up, groping for a handkerchief in his pocket. He noisily blew his nose.

"Wow. I didn't realize how deep that was," he said. "I mean, I always enjoyed hanging out with you when I was a kid, and I was sad when I had to move on. But I never realized the connection. God, I really understand my mother now, and what she went through." He sounded amazed.

"Was it hard for both of you?" Paul gently asked, wiping his eyes.

"Not hard, like financially or anything. We're always taken care of. But I was a constant reminder of you to her. She'd look at me sometimes and get so sad, and then she'd give me these big, big hugs. I always knew she loved me, but sometimes I could tell... well, that I wasn't enough. No, that doesn't sound right. I never felt inadequate. I just knew she was missing something. Someone. You." Adam shook his head. "Now I realize I was missing you, too."

Paul patted Adam's shoulder. "Well, now you have me," he smiled. "This is great! I can hardly wait to tell everyone," he was overjoyed by the news.

"Uh, Paul, are you sure that's a good idea?" Adam asked.

"Why not?" Paul said, feeling giddy.

"Paul, I'm thirty one years old. How old are you?"

Paul stopped. "Forty-seven."

"You want to go around telling people you fathered me when you were sixteen?" Adam smiled ironically. "With an older woman? Mom was eighteen, you know."

Paul smiled at Adam. He wished he'd been with Moira when he was sixteen and she was eighteen and any adolescent's dream. But Adam was right. Paul took a moment to consider the ramifications. What would his family think? Heck. He didn't care.

"Yes, I do. I'd be proud to tell people that I'm your dad." Paul said.

Adam took in a deep breath. "It will be interesting around here for a while. Can I be there when you tell your sister?" He chuckled.

"Sure, you can hold the first aid kit." Paul joked. "I'll need it."

Both men continued their ride to Colvos with a newly relaxed atmosphere between them. After the tension of last the few days, it felt like the air after a thunderstorm. They chatted about unimportant stuff, aware that Paul had received all he could handle for the day. The ferry docked and they drove off to Paul's place. Paul noticed a difference the moment he got out of the Explorer.

"It must be the time of year, but look at all the wildflowers blooming," he said to Adam, looking at the myriad of little flowers all through the woods down to the house. "I don't remember so many last year."

They descended the fifty steps down to the house. Paul stopped. The rhododendrons growing alongside the house, the ones that never bloomed because of the soil or shade or something, were full of color. They hadn't even had buds that morning.

"What's going on here?" Paul asked, and he walked around to the front of the house. The deck was fringed in full-bloomed wisteria. There were flowers and plants growing everywhere, most of them looking fully established, even if they hadn't been there before. Already established plants looked like they had gone through years of fertilizing, pruning and weeding -- something Paul never had time for. Paul stood on the deck and looked down the stairway. There was a green lawn growing between the bottom steps and the beach where before had been only mud and leaves and twigs. Adam joined him and Paul could feel his quiet amusement.

"Mom's been busy," he said.

"How could she do all this in just one day, without any transportation? She must have had the nursery deliver all this stuff." Paul turned to go inside. The most delicious aroma hit his nose before his hand touched the door.

Adam sniffed. "Oh, yes, Mom is home."

Paul opened the door warily, wondering what the inside of his home would be like. To his relief, all the furniture was the same and in the same place. It did look like someone had vacuumed, and actually dusted for the first time since Paul had moved in.

"Hi, honey, we're home." Paul called out.

"Is Little Ricky with you?" Moira's voice called from the kitchen.

"No, but little Paul Jr. is." Paul said, noticing Adam's reaction with glee.

There was silence from the kitchen. Moira came out. She looked at Adam, and looked at Paul. Then she opened her arms wide to both of them. "Oh, my guys," she said, as both men embraced her at once.

"You finally know, you finally know," she said, tearfully. She stroked both men's hair.

"I pried it out of him." Paul joked.

"The man thought you'd been with someone else!" Adam said, hotly.

Moira laughed through her tears. "You guys are so cute." Then she broke away, and dabbed her tears on the edge of Paul's 'quiche the cook' apron. "Well, I hope you're hungry. I've been having fun in here."

They sat down to spaghetti da Vinci, with fresh baked garlic bread, spinach salad, but no wine, of course. Paul looked at his plate and breathed in deeply.

"What is that spice I'm smelling? I'm not used to it in spaghetti sauce," he tasted a bite.

"Betcha it's cinnamon. Mom's secret ingredient." Adam slurped up a noodle.

"That's it. How interesting. This is really good." Paul said, twirling his fork.

Moira smiled. "Mama Tressa's recipe. You remember Mama Tressa, Adam?"

Adam nodded. "Big woman. I thought I had to be good or she'd sit on me. You always hired big women to watch me. I wonder why?"

Moira looked at her son sternly, "Now Adam, Mama Tressa wasn't that big. But you were pretty little at the time. Maybe she just had a big aura."

"Yeah, the size of Chicago." Adam muttered.

Paul nearly choked on his spaghetti, laughing at the comment. He wanted to ask where and when they'd known Mama Tressa, but Adam kept talking.

"Remember Daniel's mother? She was just the same." Adam said.

"Oh, Daniel. You guys were such nuts. You used to hydro-ski all day long, I was worried the sun would fry the skin off your back. And that

time you were doing the jumps and the ski shot out from under you? I thought I'd die, when you slowed your fall." Moira's shoulders were shaking with mirth. "Someone came up to me afterwards and said that they thought they'd seen an optical illusion. That the speed of the hydro ski going forward made it look just like you were falling slowly backwards." She shook an admonishing finger. "You have to watch yourself in public."

Paul watched the two interact. What was a hydro ski? What was this about slowing a fall? They were speaking out loud, but Paul still felt totally left out of the conversation.

"I was a kid then, Mom. I don't do stuff like that any more." Adam protested.

Moira leveled her deep blue eyes on her son. "Aggie Nelson told me about the other day. You were pretty convincing in your explanation to her, but not enough, or else she wouldn't have talked to me about it."

Paul had to interrupt. "What happened the other day?"

Both faces turned to him. It wasn't as if they'd forgotten he was there, it was just that they were so at ease in his presence that they had forgotten he wasn't one of them. Adam looked down at his plate, stone-faced.

"Aggie thought she saw Adam carrying you in his arms down the stairs on Tuesday night." Moira said.

Paul gave a short laugh. "He might have dragged me down them. I don't remember how I got from the restaurant to the house. You're pretty strong Adam, but I doubt if you could do *that*. Or can you?"

Adam toyed with his food. "Nah, it was dark, she couldn't see so good."

There was a short silence, so Paul filled it. "What's a hydro-ski?" he asked.

Mother and son looked at each other. Moira started to speak and Adam shot her a glance. She put her hand on his and nodded her head firmly.

"It hasn't been invented yet, Paul," she said.

Paul let that sink in. He thought he should be getting used to these little shock waves. Every time he began to relax and feel like things were normal, something like this would happen to remind him that they weren't.

"You and Adam were in the future together?" he asked slowly, checking his stomach and his head.

"Mom, you're going to have to teach him some techniques if he's going to handle this stuff," Adam said.

"He's been doing pretty well matching you so far, but you're right. I'll talk to him after dinner," she replied.

"Excuse me, I'm sitting right here!" Paul interjected angrily. "Will you answer my question, please?"

Moira looked at him with compassion. "Paul, Adam and I are assigned anywhere within a hundred-year period. Of course that includes your future," she hadn't meant to emphasize the word your, but it stood out.

"How far into the future?" Paul asked bluntly. He wasn't hungry anymore; in fact, he felt slightly nauseated.

Adam shook his head, but Moira said, "I can go anywhere from about 1945 to 2045. Adam goes from 1964 to 2064. We think. He was gestated, so we're not sure. He doesn't go that far anymore."

The beehive started up, along with a fierce headache. Adam touched his shoulder, which helped. "Paul, don't ask any more for a while." Then he stood and walked behind Paul's chair. He put a hand on Paul's shoulder and his index finger on Paul's forehead. Paul felt himself being pulled magnetically towards the earth, and it was as if the nausea and the beehive were dissolving and flowing out of him. The pain dissipated and his head became clear. His appetite even returned. Adam removed his hands and returned to his seat.

Paul wanted to ask 'What did you just do?' but decided to eat his spaghetti instead.

Adam started talking about his new next-door neighbors who were house painters, and then Moira suggested Paul hire them to paint the Ballard house and the rest of the evening passed without any more surprises.

Adam did not stay the night; he was more accepting of Moira and Paul, but still uncomfortable. Besides, Percy hadn't been fed since that morning. He chose to cycle home around nine pm, with the promise to return sometime that weekend.

After he left, Paul began clearing the dinner dishes and Moira filled the dishwasher and soaked the pots and pans. As they worked together in silence, Paul remembered their time together in Ballard and how much pleasure he received from doing these little things with her. Tonight, however, there was unfinished business lingering in the air.

"Tell me more about the jet ski, I mean hydro ski incident." Paul asked, grabbing a dishtowel to dry the pot Moira had finished scrubbing.

"Oh, it was one of the last times Adam and I were together on an assignment. He was eleven or twelve, I forget. It was Florida. And he had this friend, Danny, whose dad was a hydro-ski dealer, and they got to play on them. I felt it was a little dangerous, but their Dad said it was safe if they wore, um, life jackets." Moira kept her voice steady and even.

"You make it sound so normal," Paul said with annoyance.

"It was normal," Moira replied.

"But it hasn't happened yet!" Paul exclaimed. "That's not normal!" He started to feel dizzy.

Moira wiped her hands on the dishtowel. "Paul, come into the living room with me," she ordered.

Paul followed her into the living room and sat on the couch.

"Now, place your feet flat on the floor and rest your hands on your knees," Moira instructed.

"Are you going to teach me to meditate?" Paul wondered if this was just a ruse to avoid the conversation they'd been having.

"Yes. Close your eyes." Moira said. Paul obeyed reluctantly. "Now be aware of an energy center near the base of your spine. It's called your first chakra."

Paul wasn't sure what she was talking about, so he just pretended.

"Now imagine a stream of energy flowing from that spot down through the floor into the earth and into the center of the earth," she continued.

Immediately, Paul felt the sensation he had every time Moira or Adam touched him. That magnetic pull, as if the earth's gravity had increased. What was this?

"This is grounding." Moira replied to his thought. "It's an energy connection between you and the planet. Now take a deep breath and imagine releasing it down your grounding."

Paul did so, and he felt the tension draining out of his body. "Ahhh," he said.

"Yes," said Moira. "Use this technique whenever you feel dizzy, or before you ask me or Adam any questions, okay? It will help stabilize you, keep you from feeling so spacey. Also, you can use it to release any energy or tension that comes up when you hear the answers to your questions."

Paul nodded. "But what about the finger to my forehead?" He referred to Adam's touching him at dinner.

"Try it: touch your forehead the same way." Moira suggested. Paul did so. "Now pull your focus and your awareness into the center of your head, behind your eyes."

It was an odd sensation for Paul. Like refocusing a camera. He realized that he had a lot of tension in his forehead, so he breathed and released. Suddenly he found his whole awareness focused in his head. What *was* this?

"This is the center of your head." Moira said with some amusement. "This is where you can center as spirit in the body."

"As what in the body?" Paul wasn't sure if he heard correctly.

"You. Spirit. In your body." Moira said. "You'll find it easier to

accept what I tell you from this neutral space, the center of your head. It'll be easier to see the forest from the trees in this space. You won't need to figure it out, as you like to do. You'll be able to just accept and know."

As she spoke, Paul understood. Accept and know. He was both aware of his body and detached from it.

"If you view your body as your vehicle for this lifetime, your car, then the center of your head is your driver's seat." Moira said.

Paul instantly had the picture of windshield wipers. He chuckled, but the image also helped release tension from his forehead.

"Yes, you like to analyze things a lot. Figure them out. But there are some things your body cannot comprehend. Like most of what I've been telling you these past three days." Moira said, sitting down beside him. "How do you feel now?" she asked.

Paul opened his eyes and looked at her. "Relaxed."

"Good. Let's finish the dishes." Moira said, standing up.

"Wait, do I do that little thing you and Adam do?" Paul said, and bent over and touched the floor, and sat back up.

"Very good." Moira said. "See, I knew you'd been learning by watching Adam. Yes, it helps to do that if you've been meditating for a while, it releases energy off your head and shoulders."

Paul stood up. "Is that all you do, or is there more?" he asked, following her into the kitchen.

"That's all for tonight." Moira said.

Saturday morning, Moira and Paul lay naked in bed, the sheets torn off by earlier activities. Moira's head rested on Paul's stomach. He gazed at her outstretched body, always amazed at how translucently pale it was. He could see the little blue veins in her breasts. Her hand idly rested on his thigh, playing with the dark brown hair on it. She began to move her hand subtly up his leg, but Paul shook his head.

"Let it rest, Moira. It has to conserve its energy for our honeymoon." His chuckling made her head bob up and down.

She turned her head and looked up at him. Paul felt his chest go warm with emotion. It was one of those forever moments.

"Where do you want to go on our honeymoon?" she asked him.

Anywhere but the Caribbean, he thought, before he could stop himself.

She opened her mouth to ask why, but saw the answer. Her mouth popped shut. She didn't say anything for a while.

"I'm sorry." Paul said softly, feeling the familiar sting of guilt.

"Why?" Moira rolled over and looked at him, propped up on her elbows. Her breasts gently grazed the bed.

"Oh, I don't know. Yes, I do know." Paul corrected himself. "I feel really shitty about the way I treated Maggie. I feel badly that I ever married her. And when I'm with you, I just want to pretend that whole period of my life didn't exist."

Moira sat up, and put her hand on his chest. "You were honest with her as soon as you were able to be honest with her. That was very difficult. But what if you'd continued lying to yourself and to her? You could still be married."

Paul shuddered. If he'd still been married to Maggie when he drove Adam to the airport ... the thought chilled him.

"We all make mistakes, Paul. It's what we learn from them that's important," Moira said.

He looked up at her. "Have you ever made a mistake?" He found it hard to believe.

Moira nodded. "Of course," she looked down at her hands. "I stayed with you too long, once, I disappeared without telling you, twice. And now. Oh, and Adam. They could all be looked on as mistakes," she shrugged.

"How is now a mistake?" Paul asked. "And what do you mean about Adam being a mistake?"

Moira smiled down at Paul, who was still lying on the bed. She reached out and touched his face, and smoothed her hand down his chest. She lay down next to him, with her head cradled on his shoulder, cuddling close before answering.

"Telling you all these things. Things you're not supposed to know. Things so difficult to comprehend. It's hard on your system. I may be causing you more anxiety than I'm trying to alleviate," she pressed her face into the side of his chest. "And Adam wasn't planned, of course. So that could be considered a mistake. I've always wondered about that."

Paul kissed the top of her head. "He was definitely no mistake. He was definitely meant to be." She nodded, her face rubbing against his chest hair. He found it mildly stimulating. So much for conserving energy. He asked a final question. "When was he ... I mean I guess it wasn't D.C.?"

Moira looked up. "He was conceived in our bedroom in Ballard. That's what I told him when I went in there on Wednesday."

Paul could just imagine Adam's face in reaction to that news. No wonder he'd avoided looking at him. No wonder he'd declined to stay overnight. He curled Moira's head up in his arm and started laughing.

"Moira! What a thing for a mother to tell her son!" He kissed her.

"Oh, he needs the education," she said, and kissed him back. A long



deep kiss. Paul wrapped his arms around Moira, and Adam's education was the last thing on his mind.

They managed to be dressed and decent before the minister came for their appointment. A tall woman with auburn hair, in her early forties, she had a bright smile and a broad sense of humor. Paul was quite nervous, but her air of amusement put him right at ease. They all sat on the picnic table on the front deck. She brought an overstuffed file out of her briefcase and handed them sample ceremonies.

"Now, you don't have to memorize these; they're your copies," she said as she leafed through her pile. "You can take one of my generic ones and put your name on it, or you can cut and paste parts from several ceremonies together. Here are some examples of what other couples have created so you can get an idea of how different everyone's wedding can be."

"Well, we don't have a lot of time to figure this out if it's going to happen on Monday," said Moira, scanning them all. "Something short, sweet and to the point is my vote."

Paul looked at them all but he was having trouble focusing. *Ground.* He heard in his head. So he tried it. Instantly, his body felt calmer. *Center of your head.* He tried that too. He could see the words on the sample ceremonies.

"How about one of these two? They seem short." Paul pointed out.

"Those are both very nice, they say some good things about marriage," the minister said. "I especially like this one's vows." She pulled her calendar out of her briefcase and flipped it open to the month of April. "What time on Monday?"

Moira shrugged, so Paul said, "How about one o'clock?"

"Great. Let me know tomorrow what ceremony you want, or fax me what you've created. I'll get here, oh, about twenty minutes early and we can do the paperwork and everything before we get started," she scribbled the time in her calendar, and put things back in her briefcase. "Now, do you have any other questions?" Moira and Paul looked blank, so she continued. "Have you thought about music?"

"Oh." Paul said. Then he flashed on Michelle, in her senior year at Cornish. "My friend's daughter is a musician, I'll ask her."

"You don't have to use the traditional wedding march," the minister said. "Anything that you like and that sets the mood you'd like to set. And you can end with anything that's celebratory. You can have musical interludes, but that makes the ceremony longer. My ceremonies, if there are no musical interludes and if you're not having anyone else speak, take about 10 to 15 minutes," she smiled. "But it's really nice if you have someone you

know say something during the ceremony. After all, they know you and I don't."

Paul considered asking Adam but realized he'd be uncomfortable in the spotlight.

Moira broke in on Paul's thoughts. "You know, there's only going to be a few of us here. We could have everyone say a word or two."

The minister nodded. "That's a good idea. I've done ceremonies where everyone has been able to say how they met the couple, and ones where everyone was able to give the couple their blessings or good wishes."

Moira turned to Paul. "What do you think?"

Paul shrugged. "If it doesn't take too long." He realized that didn't sound right. "I mean, I just don't want an hour and a half ceremony. Fifteen minutes sounds just right to me."

The minister gave a knowing smile. "Yes, it can be hard standing up there with your life passing before your eyes. Even fifteen minutes is a long time to hold your breath," she chuckled. "If you have any questions, you have my number. Just let me know by this time tomorrow what you've come up with, and I look forward to seeing you on Monday."

The minister left, and Paul and Moira sat back down at the picnic table and stared at the ceremonies.

"She seems like a woman after your own heart," Paul commented.

"She certainly is. I like her a lot." Moira said. "How about this one? But with this one's vows?" She pushed two ceremonies over to him.

Paul scanned the two. "But this one says 'repeat after me.' I don't know if I'll be able to manage more than an 'I do'," he said honestly.

"Oh, Paul. Just use your grounding. You'll be fine." Moira said.

Just then the phone rang, Paul went into the house to answer it, leaving Moira studying the ceremonies. He picked up the receiver and was startled to hear someone crying.

"Hello?" he asked with some trepidation.

"Paul. It's Susan. You have to come home quick. Dad is dying," his sister sobbed.

Paul went numb. "Susan? Where are you?"

"I'm home. I mean, I'm in Connecticut. I flew home to Michigan last night -- you know we aren't moving to Portland until the end of the school year -- and Ron met me at the airport with the news, so I took the redeye directly to New York and drove here to Hartford. I've been with Mom at the hospital all day. Oh Paul," her voice trembled. "He looks so awful."

"We'll be on the next plane." Paul said.

"We? Oh, God, I forgot totally about Moira. Yes, yes bring Moira. I think the whole family should be here. Ron's driving the kids, and I'm

calling Uncle Stephen next. And we should ask Adam," his sister babbled, distraught. She couldn't possibly want all those people in the house while their father was dying. "Can you ask Adam?" She began sobbing again.

"Yes, Susan." He repeated her name to get her attention. "Susan, we'll be right there." Susan mumbled her thanks and hung up.

Moira came into the house, aware that something was wrong as Paul hung up the phone on his end. He looked up at her.

"My father is dying. We need to go," he said, feeling shaky inside.

Moira went to him and held him. He didn't feel like crying, but his whole body started to shake. His teeth chattered. "Th- th- the oh-oh-oddest thing," he stammered.

"What?" Moira held him as he shook.

"Sh-sh-she wants A-Adam to be there. N-now why would she want that?" Paul said.

"She knows." Moira said, simply.

"Huh-how?" Paul put his arms around her held her, hoping to steady himself.

Moira looked at him and smiled. "She's a mother. She just knows."

They tried phoning Adam, but no answer. The guy didn't even have voice mail. Moira said he was on his way to Colvos, as he'd mentioned he would do. They left a note for him on the door after calling the airlines, threw some clothes in a couple of suitcases, and drove to the airport.

Chapter 8  
CONNECTICUT 1995

The afternoon flight to Connecticut landed in Hartford around eleven p.m. Paul rented a car and they headed straight to his parent's home. Paul drove in brooding silence, while Moira meditated or looked out the window. The neighborhood he'd grown up in had long since transitioned from rural to suburban, and was bordered by a shopping mall. The houses, however, were still the same formal, brick colonials that had been there since his childhood. He never failed to be surprised at how large the trees had become on the street where he'd lived, or how short the streetlights seemed. One of his favorite childhood memories was of standing under those lights in late summer, catching fireflies.

The living room lights were on when they pulled up to the curb, and Paul was grateful. He hadn't wanted to wake anyone up. The front door opened before they reached it, and his sister met them on the steps.

"Oh, Paul, I'm so glad you could make it. I waited up for you -- Mom's asleep." She collapsed into her big brother's arms. They held each other a while, and then broke apart. "Hello, Moira." Susan said to her. "I'm glad you could make it, too." She looked beyond them. "Is Adam here?"

Moira took Susan's hand in hers. "I'm sorry it has to be under these circumstances," she said. "We couldn't get in touch with Adam, so we left him a message. How is your father?"

Susan teared up. "They have him on a respirator and a bunch of other things. We're supposed to go to the hospital tomorrow to discuss whether to leave him hooked up or not."

Paul was stunned. "He's that far along?"

"Oh, they've revived him twice already." Susan said. "I just want him to stay alive long enough for everyone to get here."

Paul wanted to ask why, but he knew the answer. When their grandmother had died, their father had decided to pull the plug on her without telling anyone else in the family about it. Uncle Stephen had been glad to be left out of the responsibility of such a decision, but Susan had gone ballistic. She thought she'd been cheated of the opportunity to say good-bye. This time, she wanted to make sure everyone had the chance. Paul wondered how his mother felt. She probably was willing to go along with anything Susan decided.

"How's Mom?" Paul asked once they were inside.

"Oh, she's in shock, as you can imagine. I've been making sure that

she eats, and I drive her to the hospital. But other than that ... she's very distant." Susan shook her head. "I'm worried about her."

"It's quite common to be that way at first." Moira commented. "We'll need to watch her for when the reality of what's happening sinks in."

Susan looked up at the use of the word "we". She wasn't quite ready to let Moira into the family yet. "Yes, thanks for warning me," she said, with as much politeness as she could muster. She turned to Paul. "Well, I hope you don't mind your old room. I'm in mine, and when Ron gets here, the kids are going to sleep in the rec room."

"Did you get hold of Uncle Stephen?" Paul asked.

Susan shot him a disgusted look. "That bastard said to call him for the funeral. I'm seriously thinking of quitting the company."

Her vehemence took Paul aback. "You know Uncle Stephen and Dad weren't on the best of terms. You should probably take it as a positive sign that he'll even come out for the funeral." Paul realized that he was talking about his own father's funeral, and he wasn't even dead. Yet. The events of the day, and the week, began to hit him then, and he began to slump.

Moira stepped in. "Susan, we all could use a night's rest. Why don't we talk about things in the morning? I'm sure everything can wait until then."

Susan nodded. "Yes. Ron called and said they were spending the night at a motel somewhere between Ann Arbor and Hartford and they'll be getting here tomorrow. I guess I can try to sleep." She looked like she hadn't slept in several days.

"Good night." Paul kissed his sister on the cheek and they embraced once more.

"I'm so glad you're here," she whispered to him, and left for her room.

Paul and Moira went upstairs to Paul's old room on the second floor. He opened the door and started to laugh. Two twin beds, wooden bunks that split apart, graced opposite sides of the tiny room. A Howdy Doody lamp was beside one, a lava lamp was beside the other.

"I don't think you could read by that one," she commented, pointing to the lava lamp.

"I'm so bushed, I don't think I can read. I wish we could push these two together, though." He nodded at the beds. It seemed a little impractical to be moving furniture at midnight, and a chest of drawers would have had to be relocated as well.

"I think we can survive at least one night in separate beds. Actually, we're not married yet, so I guess it's appropriate," Moira said.

Paul's jaw dropped. "Oh, God, the wedding! The minister!" He had totally forgotten.

"I called them from the airport. The minister and Michael, I mean," Moira said. "We're fine. The license is good for two months."

Paul looked at her. "But are you?"

Moira hesitated before answering. "I don't know," she said. "But this won't take two months, so let's not worry about that now."

They got ready for bed. Paul was surprised to see Moira in a flannel "granny" type nightgown, and that she braided her hair before bed. Most of the times they'd spent together, they hadn't slept much, except in the nude. During the three weeks they'd had in Seattle some fifteen years, before she'd favored his tee shirts as nighttime apparel. He could still see her in his white pocket tee that came down to just the curve of her bottom. She noticed Paul's reaction and laughed.

"Well, you look cute yourself." She pointed to his very worn cotton pajamas. He used to wear only boxer shorts to bed.

"I wear these when I visit my folks." He grinned.

Then they got in their separate beds and Paul turned out the light.

"Good night," he said to her.

"Sweet dreams," she said to him.

Silence.

"I miss you," he said.

"Okay," she said, and got out of bed.

It was rather ridiculous, the bed was barely big enough for Paul; his feet hung over the edge. But she managed to wriggle in and, if they both slept sideways, she wouldn't topple out of bed in the middle of the night. Paul kissed her forehead.

"Thanks. I can sleep now."

She kissed the hollow of his neck. "So can I." And they slept.

Paul awoke disoriented the next morning; it took him a few moments to remember where he was. He sat up and promptly bashed his head on the bookshelf above the bed. He groped for Howdy Doody and turned the lamp on. His watch read 6:00am. Good. He could have another hour or so of sleep, so he turned off the lamp. When his head hit the pillow, he realized Moira wasn't beside him. Up again he sat, bashed his head a second time, and turned on Howdy Doody, cursing. The other bed was empty, but her suitcase was on the floor beside it. She must still be here, he thought. When she vanishes, all of her things vanish as well. He got out of bed, slipped on his robe and went into the hall. Daylight streamed in

through the windows at the end of the hall. His room had been dark, but the shade had been down. Then he noticed the grandfather clock by the stairs showed 9:00am. Of course -- his watch was still on Seattle time. The bathroom door was open, no one in there, so he went downstairs.

Moira and his mother were sitting at the kitchen table in their bathrobes. A strong aroma of mountain grown coffee filled the air. It wasn't Seattle's Best, but it was coffee. Paul's mother looked up when he came in.

"Paul, you're awake!" she exclaimed, jumping up.

She was shorter than he remembered and her hair a lighter shade of brown. He recalled Susan having some opinion about their mother dyeing her hair. He embraced his mother and she patted him on the cheek.

"You look so handsome clean shaven. That beard looked so scruffy." She smiled beatifically. Paul resisted the urge to say 'Oh, mom'. His mother went on, "I've just been talking to your lovely friend -- Moira, isn't it?" Moira nodded. "She gave me ever such a start when I came down this morning. In that white bathrobe and that hair, I thought she was an angel! I asked, 'Are you an angel?' and she said, 'Well, maybe the Coffee Angel', because she was making us all a pot of coffee!" His mother giggled and pulled Paul over to the kitchen table. "Now sit and tell me how you two met."

Paul was slightly unnerved. His mother acted as if everything was fine, but he sensed that she was delicately walking a fine line and that any moment she could cross over and totally lose it. Paul wanted to ask about Dad, but thought better of it.

"We met a long, long time ago," said Paul, not wanting to go into details.

"I seem to keep coming in and out of his life," quipped Moira.

"Oh, isn't it nice when that happens! So romantic, just like it's meant to be!" his mother exclaimed, her eyes unusually bright. Just then the back door opened and Susan came in, wearing a sweat soaked tee shirt and shorts.

"I didn't know you jogged," Paul said, glad for the diversion.

"I run," his sister corrected him. "Ten miles every day. Between work and my family, it's the only time I have to myself." She got a glass from the cupboard and filled it at the sink. She downed it and turned to her mother.

"Visiting hours start at ten on Sundays. We'd better get ready."

Mrs. Marbanks turned to Moira. "You've never met Paul's father, have you? Well, I'm afraid he's not looking his best right now. Let me show you my favorite picture of him -- it's on the mantelpiece in the living room. I'll go get it."

"Mother, there isn't time --" Susan started to say, but her mother was already in the other room. Susan looked at Moira and Paul. "We've really

got to be careful around her; she's going a little nuts," she whispered.

Their mother's voice floated in from the living room. "Oh, my, we have a visitor." They heard her open the front door. "For goodness' sake! Charles! You're home! Charles is home, everyone!"

The three got to the living room in time to see her run out of the house in her bedroom slippers and robe.

"She's lost it!" Susan cried, and they all ran to the front door.

Mrs. Marbanks was standing on the sidewalk embracing a very bewildered Adam, saying, "Oh Charles, you shouldn't have taken a cab -- would have picked you up from the hospital!"

Susan was the first to reach them. "Mom, mom, this isn't Dad," she said, her voice shaking.

Her mother broke away and looked up at Adam. "Oh! No it isn't!" she said, her voice fading to a whisper. "Silly me." Then tears welled up in her eyes, "You look just like him in our picture!"

Paul took his mother by the arm, "Mother, this is Adam ... my son."

Susan shot an 'I knew it!' look at him.

Their mother looked completely lost. "Your son? But he's so big. He's not a little boy." She turned at Adam. "You look so like Charles."

"Mother, stop saying that!" snapped Susan. "He may look like Dad in the photograph but he doesn't look like Dad now! Please, let's go in. We're making a spectacle of ourselves here on the sidewalk."

Mrs. Marbanks blinked at her daughter, not comprehending one word. Adam stepped in.

"Would you like to show me the photo?" he asked, gently taking his grandmother by the arm. Paul and Adam led her into the house. They sat her on the davenport, and Adam sat beside her. Paul got the photograph from the mantelpiece. He nearly dropped it when he looked at it. A sepia image of Adam and a young Susan stared out at him, except Adam had an extremely short haircut and wore full military uniform. Susan had on a white satin gown with a lacy veil poofed on her head, and clutched a bouquet of lilies of the valley. 'Charles and Olivia Marbanks, December 15, 1945' it said at the bottom. Paul brought it to his mother.

"Oh, I always think of him looking exactly like this." She touched the glass fondly. "So dashing, so handsome. From the first day I saw him -- I was a cigarette girl at the Our Boys Canteen -- I knew he was the man for me." She looked up at Moira and Susan, standing nearby. "You know what that feels like? Love at first sight?"

Susan said nothing, embarrassed by her mother's odd behavior.

Moira, on the other hand, nodded in agreement. "I most certainly do." She smiled at Paul.



"Mother, we'd all better get dressed if we're going to get to the hospital." Susan said. "Do you need to use the bathroom before I take a shower?"

"Oh goodness, yes indeed. I always have to piddle!" Her mother stood up. She turned to Adam. "Paul's son. Oh, Charles will be so pleased to meet you." She patted him on the head and Adam managed a smile. Then she went upstairs with Susan hovering close behind.

Paul grimaced when she left. "I just got it!" he groaned. "Adam Paulson. How could I be so dense?"

Moira sat down between them. "Not very original, but the best I could do at the time."

"Better than Gottsdotter," Muttered Adam under his breath.

Ignoring the comment, Moira leaned over and pecked her son on the cheek. "Hi, sweetie, thanks for coming on such short notice."

"Don't thank me," Adam said. "I'm on assignment."

"Oh, you didn't get the note I left at the Colvos house?" his mother asked.

"What note? I never made it out to Colvos. I sensed you were trying to contact me, but I was getting briefed," Adam said.

Paul leaned forward on the davenport. "You mean you're on assignment *now*?" Adam nodded. "What are you supposed to be doing?" Paul asked.

Adam shrugged his broad shoulders. "I just go with the flow."

A short time later Susan came back downstairs.

"Well," she said, seeing all three of them sitting together. "It's one big happy family."

Paul squirmed, getting ready for the onslaught.

Susan turned to Adam. "I knew it! From the first time I saw you, I knew you were a Marbanks." Adam's eyebrows rose. "I just wasn't sure if you were Paul's or some bastard son of Uncle Stephen's. How old are you?" She demanded.

"Thirty-one." Adam said.

Susan whistled. "Paul! You were *sixteen*? That's the same age my daughter is now. Why didn't you tell anyone? Why didn't I know?"

There was an awkward silence. Paul could feel Moira and Adam having a swift telepathic discussion. Before anyone could say anything, Susan went on.

"I remember you. You were that cheerleader," she said, accusingly.

"She was not!" Paul snapped. "You wouldn't have known her. You were in junior high."

She was about to say something else, but the telephone rang. Susan

picked up the phone. It was Ron on the cell phone with the kids, saying they were approaching the outskirts of town.

"Meet us at the hospital, we're going straight over. No, don't come here first, there's no time. We'll probably be pulling the plug today," she said into the receiver.

"Isn't there a better way of saying that?" Paul said, helplessly.

Susan hung up. "Everybody get dressed; we'll leave in fifteen minutes."

"Uh... shouldn't I stay here?" asked Adam, hopefully.

"Nonsense. This is your only time to see Dad." Susan said with finality, and went upstairs.

Fifteen minutes later everyone was dutifully dressed and waiting by Susan's rental car. Paul sat in the front passenger seat while Moira and Adam flanked Mrs. Marbanks in the rear. They drove to the hospital in silence. Every time Paul thought of something to say, he thought better of it. Either his mother would fall apart or his sister would jump down his throat. Better to keep quiet, he decided.

At the hospital, Susan and her mother stopped to talk to the doctor while Paul and Moira went directly to his father's private room, Adam trailing behind. Paul got to the doorway and froze. There was his father, lying in bed, hooked up to oxygen, an IV drip, an EKG, an EEC and probably seventeen hundred other things. His mouth was slightly open. If it weren't for the noise on the monitors, Paul would have already thought he was dead.

"No, he's not." Moira said. "Go talk to him, he can hear you."

Paul stared at her as if she were mad. "Talk to him? I could never talk to him when he was alive -- I mean -- awake. What makes you think I can now?"

Moira gently pushed him into the room. "Maybe it'll be easier now, when he can't talk back," she said. "Go on. We'll stand guard." Adam had come up beside her.

Paul found himself standing by his father's bed. He looked down on the withered form -- it hardly looked like the man he remembered. Where should he begin? He cleared his throat.

"Dad. It's Paul," he said, feeling like an idiot. He looked back at the door, but Moira had closed it. He could see Adam and her through the glass, but they were staring down the hallway. "Uh, I guess this might be the last time to talk to you." This sounded really stupid. How could he say all the things he was thinking? "I just want to let you know that I didn't turn out all that bad." Now what was that supposed to mean? "I know you never liked me working for Uncle Stephen ... but I'm very successful. Last year our company netted..." What the hell was he talking about business for? *Ground*

he heard in his head. Oh, yeah. He closed his eyes and imagined connecting to the earth. That now familiar magnetic feeling immediately comforted his body. He opened his eyes again. "I'm sorry I never lived up to your expectations." He found himself saying, and his heart immediately contracted in a spasm of pain. His eyes began to water. "I - I wish you could have a chance to meet Moira and Adam." Tears began to run down his nose, and he wiped them away. He covered his eyes while he wept. It occurred to him that if he didn't stop himself right then, he might not be able to when the others came in. He took a deep breath and looked up at the ceiling. "I'm sorry we never had the chance to know each other. But ... I love you, Dad." He felt the grief surging up again, but there was a knock on the door, so he stifled it. "Come in," he said in as strong a voice as he could muster.

Susan came into the room and stood beside him. She put her hand on his shoulder. "He looks awful, doesn't he," she said softly. "Poor Daddy." She grabbed a tissue from the side table and wiped the drool from the corner of his mouth. "Paul, the doctor wants to talk to us all together, about ..." she glanced at the body on the bed, "you know."

Paul's head weighed a hundred pounds as he slowly nodded it. He followed his sister out of the room. He didn't even notice Moira and Adam slip in after he'd left.

"Well, I just want the whole family to approve before we take such a step." The doctor was saying to their mother as Paul and Susan came up. "He left no instructions as to life-saving measures, so it's up to the family to decide. It really won't take very long after we disconnect the machines."

Paul's mother looked at her children. Her eyes were vacant. "I think your father wants to go home," she said, distantly.

"We can't take him home." Susan snapped, impatiently. "We talked about this, mother."

Paul stopped his sister. "Yes, Mom. I think Dad wants to go home, too. I think he's ready." He reached out and took her hand.

She nodded, staring past the doctor at the wall. "Yes, he should go now. It's time to let him go."

The moment she said that, something inside Paul panicked. No. He thought. This can't be happening. This is too fast.

"Wait a minute," Susan said. "My family isn't here yet. We have to wait until Ron gets here with the kids." She turned to the doctor. "He's on his way."

The doctor nodded. "We'll be standing by," he said to them, and they went to their father's room.

Adam was standing in the far corner, and Moira was standing by the foot of the bed. Susan and her mother didn't seem to notice, going right up

to the head of the bed. But Paul wondered what they had been doing. Moira had her hands resting lightly on the end of the bed, right by his father's feet. She looked over at Paul and smiled. Paul went to stand beside her, and then thought he should be up by the head of the bed, too. He took his place on the opposite side of his mother and sister.

There was the sound of people running down the hall, and a teenage girl with magenta hair and a pierced eyebrow came skidding into the room.

"Oh, good, we haven't missed it!" she said. "Dad, they're in here!" she yelled.

Susan glared at her, and jerked her head to indicate she was to stand - *silently* - by her. The teen rolled her eyes and said, "Sor-reee!" to nobody in particular, before taking her place by her mother.

Two chubby twelve-year-olds in identical wedge haircuts came in next. They looked stunned by the scene, and giggled. They also received a glare from their mom, and scuttled over to Paul's side of the bed. Then a tall, blond man, Ron, and a tall, blond adolescent boy came in the door. Ron nodded to everyone in the room and went and stood beside the twins; the boy followed him.

Everyone waited for something to happen. Moira gently spoke up. "Should Adam get the doctor?"

That startled Susan into action. "Oh, no, I can use the call button. Adam, you should come over here and stand by Paul."

Adam shook his head. "I've already talked to Charles. I should stand here," he said firmly. Susan's eyes opened wide, but said nothing. She looked at Moira as if to tell her to switch places with Adam, but didn't open her mouth.

The call button brought both the doctor and a nurse.

"So it's time." They both swiftly went around and disconnected everything. "There," the doctor said. "It won't take long now. We'll be outside." He retreated to the doorway, clipboard in hand. He stood in the hall scribbling notes.

Susan spoke first. "We're all here, Dad. We want to say --" her voice choked, "good-bye. Everybody, say good-bye."

Her daughter gave her an agonized look, "Do we *have* to?" she whined. Her mother's glare confirmed she did, indeed, have to. "Oh, okay, keep your shirt on." Her mother was ready to kill her. "Good-bye, Grandpa," she said, unenthusiastically.

The twins mumbled something acceptably sounding like good-bye. Ron leaned over and touched the man's hand. "Good-bye, Charles," he said with genuine affection. His wife smiled at him, gratefully.

The blond boy bobbed his head. "Good-bye, Grandpa," he said in a

squeaky voice. "Uh, thanks for teaching me chess." He shrugged his shoulders, and Ron gave him a reassuring squeeze.

It was obviously Paul's turn next, as his sister stared at him expectantly. He looked at his mother, then over to Moira and Adam, who were each standing with surprisingly serene looks on their faces. What they were up to, he wondered. He turned his attention back to his father on the bed.

"Good-bye, Dad," was all he said.

Then his mother leaned over and kissed her husband on the lips.

"Yuck," whispered one of the twins, and got an elbow nudge from the other.

Then, to Susan's surprise, her mother straightened up and looked over at Moira. "Give him to the Angels."

At this, Moira smiled and nodded and closed her eyes. Adam remained immobile in the corner, his feet planted firmly on the floor, his eyes open and observing.

Paul sensed the strangest thing, and looked to see if the others felt it, too. The energy in the room seemed to be rising, getting lighter. He felt drawn upward. He looked around at the others but no one reacted. They were all staring at the body on the bed. He felt, no, he *saw* his father leave. It was invisible, but he saw it. One moment he was there, the next, he was gone. The body was empty. Paul felt nothing. He looked at the other faces in the room. His mother was smiling. His sister looked stricken. Her daughter looked bored. The twins looked uncomfortable. Ron looked sad, and so did his eldest son. Adam looked ... impassive. Moira looked like she was praying.

Paul wanted to tell everybody it was done. It was over. Time to go home. But nobody moved, and he thought he shouldn't either. After a few minutes, Moira opened her eyes and withdrew her hands, which Paul hadn't realized until then had been resting on his father's feet. Somehow the movement woke everybody up and everybody started to talk or move at once. Susan began to sob, and her husband went to her. Paul leaned over and closed his father's eyes. His mother floated around Susan and Ron and went directly to Moira.

"You were very, very helpful," she said, patting Moira on the hand.

"Thank you," murmured Moira, her eyes shining. It seemed to Paul as if her whole body were glowing. He looked at Adam, and he seemed to be glowing, too, only with less intensity.

"Let's get her out of here," Susan said. With that, everyone filed out of the room.

The family went back to the house in two cars. Susan went with her husband and kids, and Paul drove Susan's rental car with his mother, Moira and Adam. Paul reflected on the incident at the hospital. Why didn't he feel anything? What did Moira and Adam do in the room during the family good-byes? His mother kept staring out the window and sighing deep sighs but with this odd smile on her face. It scared Paul a little. In the rear view mirror he looked at Moira and Adam, who also were looking out the window. Moira had a small smile on her face, as if she were remembering things from long ago. At one point she nudged Adam and pointed out her side of the window, and Adam nodded and smiled. Paul looked in their direction and was shocked to see his old nursery school. That's right. They'd been there before. This led him onto another tangent of thoughts for the next several blocks until they pulled up at his home. He heard Adam mutter. "Trees got a lot bigger."

To which Moira replied, "Yes, but they cut the oak down..."

Paul looked at the house next door, and remembered there had been an old oak tree there that he and his childhood friend -- that he and *Adam*, he realized with amazement -- used to climb in. It wasn't there anymore. He hadn't noticed when it was cut down; it must have happened after he left home.

Susan and her crew were already inside when Paul's group arrived. The twins were out back fighting over something, the daughter was sitting in a chair facing the wall listening to a Walkman that sounded like it could have been on the stereo it was so loud. The eldest was engrossed in a hand-held video game. Susan and Ron were in the kitchen arguing over what to make for dinner.

Moira went straight to the kitchen and stuck her head inside. "Why don't we call for Chinese take-out? That way we won't have to deal with any pots and pans."

Ron looked at her in genuine relief, while Susan struggled with wanting an opposing argument, but couldn't think of one. Moira walked into the kitchen and filled the kettle with water and set it on the stove to boil. "Isn't there someplace like Wong's we could call?"

"How do you know about Wong's?" Susan asked suspiciously. "Oh, that's right -- you used to live here."

Ron extended his hand. "I'm sorry, I saw you at the hospital but we haven't been introduced. I'm Ron, Susan's husband. Susan says your name is Moira?"

Moira graciously shook his hand. "Yes, and out there is my son, our son, Adam." Adam was sitting on the davenport with his grandmother, who

had pulled out a stack of photo albums and was showing them to him.

"Oh, God, don't let her do that!" Susan said, seeing her mother leafing through the old memories.

"Why not?" asked Paul, bracing himself.

"Well, we don't know what's going to set her off, we can't have her looking at those now, I mean, especially since, you know." It seemed like Susan was more in danger of being set off than her mother at the moment.

Moirra quietly went about making tea. Ron found the teapot and showed her where the tea bags were kept.

Paul stood in the center of the kitchen door, to physically block his sister in case she tried to go out and snatch the albums away from her mother. He usually didn't use his height, so it surprised his sister to see how his six-foot-four frame filled the entire doorway. He shook his head.

"Showing Adam the family pictures may be just the thing she needs to do right now. It's probably comforting for her to remember. In fact, when Moira finishes with the tea, I'm going to get myself a mug and go join them." Paul was pleased to see his sister speechless for the first time in her life.

He left her and Ron to order the Chinese take-out, and went to join his mother and son on the davenport.

"This is Paul as a little boy, in nursery school ... "she was saying. "He loved his sailor suit."

Paul's eyes zoomed to the photo, scanning it for any sign of Adam. He couldn't see any. His mother turned the page.

"Now, this is Paul's fourth birthday party. We gave him a bright red tricycle. Oh, you loved that trike so much, dear!" his mother gushed.

Paul wasn't listening; he was staring at the photograph. It was a black and white picture of a little boy in a cowboy outfit, Paul, sitting astride a tricycle with a toothy smile on his pudgy face. In the background there were several girls and boys and a few parents, watching. Standing next to his mother, and beside a solemn little boy with dark eyes, was a woman in a slender fitted dress and hair pinned up in a bun, smiling. It was Moira. Paul wondered if anyone else would recognize her. He looked at Adam, gazing at the page.

"These are great," he said to his grandmother. "I don't have any photographs of my childhood."

"You don't? Why ever not?" she asked.

"Well, we moved around a lot as a kid. If there were any photos, they probably got lost. We just didn't keep a lot of stuff because it was too hard to take it with us." Adam explained. *Too hard to transition with?*

Thought Paul. Adam looked at him. "Yes, something like that."

Paul's mother looked at the photo album. "Oh, you must see this

one." She jabbed a finger at the next picture. "That's Charles."

The photo was one of Charles, looking like an older version of Adam, with two little boys stuffed into life jackets in a canoe. One was Paul and, Paul realized with dawning shock, the other was his childhood buddy -- Adam.

"Oh, that's the time the boat flipped over and everybody got wet." Adam said.

"Why yes, how did you know?" she asked him.

"Uh Dad told me." Adam said, with a sheepish grin.

It was the first time Adam had referred to Paul as Dad. And Paul had never told him about the incident. Paul took a big swig of tea. *Ground. Center.* He reminded himself.

"Well, that little boy was Paul's best buddy that year, but he only lived next door for a short time. I actually think it was for less than a month. They were as thick as thieves." She held up her two fingers, crossed.

Susan came out of the kitchen. "Mom, Ron and I are going to pick up some Chinese take-out. We'll be right back." She looked at Paul. "If any of the kids give you any trouble, send them to the rec room. Better yet, maybe they should all go down there now anyway."

"No, they're okay where they are right now." Paul said. If they started out in the rec room, there wouldn't be anywhere else to send them when they acted up.

When they left, Paul got up to check on Moira. She was still in the kitchen, sitting in one of the chairs with her eyes closed. He decided not to disturb her. The twins were outside but no longer arguing. Livvy, Susan's daughter, still had the Walkman on too loud, but was also engrossed in a back issue of Readers Digest. Susan's eldest, Chuck, had taken Paul's seat and was looking at the photo album with his grandmother and Adam. As Paul watched them sitting there, seeing Adam in a different context than before. He was just getting used to Adam being his son. But Adam was his mother's grandson. She was his grandmother. And Chuck was Adam's cousin. And Susan was his aunt. He saw Adam connected to everyone in the room, and it was as if the familiar tapestry of his family was suddenly illuminated with a new, golden thread. He felt arms slip around his waist and a head rest upon his shoulder.

"How are you doing?" Moira whispered in his ear.

"Fine. I mean it, I'm really fine." Paul said. "I don't know why, either. My father just died!" He shook his head. He turned around to face her, and they stood in the kitchen face-to-face, arms around each other.

"Thank you for being here. I know you helped."

"You're welcome." She nodded. "We're not quite through yet, there's



a little more to be done."

"What?" Paul said. "This is your assignment? This is Adam's assignment."

She glanced past him at Adam, who seemed thoroughly engrossed in the photo album. "I think so, but I'm not always sure until it's over."

Paul felt a tiny icicle creeping into his heart. "And when is this assignment going to be over?"

She gave him a squeeze. "Oh, shush. Don't worry about that. It ain't over 'til it's over."

"Until the fat lady sings?" Paul said, trying to be cheerful.

"I beg your pardon?" Moira said, with mock indignity.

Paul hugged her close. "You know what I mean." He kissed her forehead.

"Ooo! Look at Uncle Paul and his *girlfriend*." The twins had come in from outside via the kitchen door.

Paul looked up. "Into the rec room, guys, until your mom gets back."

"Cool. The TV's down there." They stormed by the couple and went downstairs with all the delicacy of a herd of rogue elephants.

Paul's mother had apparently moved on to more recent photo albums and was showing Chuck all his baby pictures. Adam extricated himself and went to the kitchen.

"How are you doing, Adam?" Moira asked.

"Not bad, not bad." Adam answered. "It's interesting to see those old photos. I'd forgotten what I looked like."

"How do you like your grandmother?" asked Paul.

"She's a pretty neat old bird. Just a trifle wigged out at the moment, but she's hanging in there. I think she's doing okay." Adam looked at Moira. "She really knew what was going on in there today. So did you." Adam said to Paul.

Paul wanted to ask about that, but felt the nausea rise in his stomach. He decided the questions could wait until later.

"I think I need some fresh air," Paul said.

"Why don't I sit with your mother while you and Adam take a walk?" Moira suggested.

So the two men found themselves out on the sidewalk in the late afternoon sun. Paul walked towards the space where the old oak tree was. Adam stopped him.

"Over here, Paul." Adam pointed.

"What?" asked Paul.

"I didn't live in this house; it's the one next to it." Adam said, with a tinge of excitement. "Let's see if it's still there." He began to take off over the

lawn.

"What's still there?" asked Paul, going after him. He had flashes of being little, all the houses big and all the trees skinny. Chasing after a little boy who was running on ahead.

"Here." Adam stood in front of the next house. "Let's see if anyone is home." He went up and rang the doorbell.

Paul felt a little foolish, standing there. What was he going to say when the door opened?

The door opened and a tall African American woman answered the door. "Can I help you?"

"Hi, I'm Adam Pa- Marbanks, and this is Paul Marbanks. We're from over there." Adam pointed to Paul's house. "We used to play here when we were kids and I was wondering if you'd mind if we looked around."

"Oh, yes, I know your mother -- or is it grandmother?" The woman looked confused.

"Mother, my mother." Paul said. He was a little disturbed by Adam behaving totally out of character.

"Lovely woman. Gives great Halloween treats," she said. "My kids like to hit her house first. You go right ahead and look." She smiled and closed the door.

"This way." Adam went around to the back. In the back there was an old brick barbecue grill. He went up and squatted behind it.

Paul went up to Adam. "What are you doing?"

"Seeing if it's still here." Adam was fingering a brick.

Paul had some half-memory of this grill. He associated it with his Dad being angry with him for something.

"Got it." The brick came out in Adam's hand. Inside was a hollow space, probably designed that way for heat distribution. Adam felt inside the hole. Paul wondered about spiders and maybe snakes. "Here it is!" Adam pulled out an old canvas sack.

"Treasure!" Paul said, kneeling beside him. They had been playing pirates and they were burying treasure. Back when the barbecue was new.

Adam opened the sack and dumped out its contents. Three giant marbles, several Lincoln logs, two green soldiers and a gold coin. That was it. The gold coin had come from his father's desk. Paul could still see in his mind's eye his old man chasing him with his ruler for stealing the coin.

Adam looked at him. "Your dad hit you with a ruler?"

"Sometimes," Paul said vaguely, picking up the coin. "I wonder how much this is worth?"

Adam shrugged his shoulders, disinterested. "Well, this is cool." He said. "I never get to check out any of the places I grew up in, so this is fun."

Paul eyed him sharply. "You never go back?"

"Well, I've been to my old junior high in Seattle. Remember that time I got beamed with a baseball?" Adam grinned.

Paul stared at him. Oh, that's right. The only other person Adam can share his childhood with is his mother. There is no one else that he can validate parts of his past with, because it all happened in different times.

"And countries. We shifted everywhere." Adam said, softly. "But what's really weird is ... all this family stuff. Until I was eleven, it was always my mother and me, alone. Afterwards I had chaperones, but it was always one on one. They never assigned me with another. I think because my energy was already starting to be different, and no one else matched me. So it's weird to have cousins and things." He picked up a Lincoln Log and examined it. "I used to love these."

"Me, too." Paul looked down at the treasures. "Which of this stuff is yours and which is mine?"

"Oh, it's probably all yours." Adam said. "Mom never got me anything because we couldn't take it with us."

"You mean you never had any toys when you were a kid?" Paul found this hard to believe. Moira didn't seem the type to deny her son -- their son; Paul corrected himself in his thoughts -- toys and playthings.

"No, no that's not it." Adam sighed. "I had stuff, we just never bought anything." He looked at Paul. "It's too hard to explain."

Paul fought the queasiness that was rising in his stomach. "Try me," he challenged.

Adam leveled his brown eyes at Paul. So Paul leveled his brown eyes at Adam. Momentarily they were both four-years-olds at a standoff. Adam broke the stare first, by shrugging his shoulders and looking away.

"We ... manifest stuff," he said, simply.

"You manifest stuff?" Paul echoed.

"Yes. You know, manifest. Create what we need. And when we go, it goes." Adam shrugged his shoulders again, to emphasize simplicity.

Paul shook his head. "Moira manifested you toys?" He tried to understand.

"Well, at first, and then I did. It's pretty easy, once you get the hang of it." Adam said.

"How?" Paul asked.

"No, Paul. I don't prove stuff. I only manifest what I need, when I need it. I don't need to prove to you that I can," Adam said firmly, as if reciting a rule.

"I didn't mean prove it to me, I meant show me how. If it's so easy, I must be able to do it too, right?" Paul asked. He suddenly realized they'd

been sitting on this lady's lawn behind her barbecue for a while now. He wondered if she was watching them. He wondered if he had grass stains on his trousers.

Adam began to stand up. "Let's put this stuff back. A kind of time capsule, okay?" He picked up the bag of trinkets.

"Fine with me. But I should keep the coin," Paul said, and Adam gathered the other things and put the bag back into the barbecue.

"I think we should be getting back. I think Susan and Ron have returned with dinner," Adam said.

Paul realized he had heard their car pull up to his house while he and Adam were talking. He'd been so absorbed he hadn't paid attention.

"Paul! Adam! Come and get it!" Moira's voice floated over the hedges.

Paul had a sudden flashback of being four years old, with Adam playing in his back yard. Adam's mom - - Moira - - calling from the house they now were standing in. Climbing up the back stairs to the kitchen, sitting at the white Formica table with the gold flecks in it and Adam's mom -- Moira -- serving them ... was it peanut butter and jelly?

"Grilled cheese. You liked Mom's grilled cheese, because she melted it in the oven instead of in the pan like your mom," Adam said as they walked towards Paul's house.

Paul felt a little woozy by the time he got to the kitchen door. Moira was standing there, a dishtowel wrapped around her waist. She smiled a broad smile.

"You guys been out playing in our old back yard?" She grinned.

Adam smiled. "Yeah, we found our treasure."

Paul didn't feel like smiling. He felt like throwing up. *Ground, breathe down your grounding.* He did so and began to feel better. Moira patted him on the back. "Take it easy, Paul dear. You're already dealing with a lot."

Paul nodded and they went inside.

Wong's Take Out was mostly devoured by the time Paul and Adam got washed up and to the table. Susan hadn't adjusted for the extra family members.

"Geez, guys, I'm sorry. I don't know where I left my head." She genuinely apologized.

"Oh, I think we have plenty." Adam said, reaching for a nearly empty carton.

Paul stared at him. There was enough for one person to eat, but, not three, as Moira hadn't had any either. Adam began dishing out the steamed rice on to his plate. He made a sizable heap and handed it to Moira. She

dished herself out an equal portion, and handed it to Paul. The carton was still nearly empty, but there was a decent amount left for Paul. Adam grabbed the Sweet and Sour Shrimp, which also was depleted, yet he dished himself several full spoonfuls, while his mother did the same and when Paul got the carton, there was more in it than when Adam started.

"There's enough for you guys, oh, I'm so glad!" his sister said, with a dazed expression.

"These cartons are deceptive in the amount they can hold." Moira said.

Susan's children excused themselves because it was time for their favorite show, and went to the rec room to view it. Susan went to call relatives, their mother was lying down, and Ron began to wash the few dishes the dinner had produced.

Paul looked at Adam, hoping he'd telepathically picked up on his question.

Adam shrugged, "Well, you wanted an example."

Moira caught what they were talking about. "Only what we need."

"Well, it looks like you provided me with what I need, too." Paul said, jabbing his fork at his now nearly empty plate.

Moira and Adam both smiled at him like two sunlamps. He'd never noticed quite how much they looked alike. Paul's heart swelled. These two people were his family. *His* family. His *family*. He wasn't just the bachelor uncle at this gathering. Paul was here with his family. Then he remembered his father. Why didn't he feel sad?

Moira and Adam began to talk at once, and then laughed.

"You're the teacher, Mom, you answer him." Adam said.

"Oh, Adam, you teach him things I'll never know." Moira responded. With a glance at Ron, absorbed in his thoughts at the sink, Moira leaned over and whispered to Paul. "You saw your father leave. You realized it was a transition. A birth, not a death. That's why there is no grief."

Paul let the explanation settle into him, a comforting blanket over the guilt he'd been experiencing. He'd thought he was emotionally lacking or something, to have no sadness at his father's passing. He saw his mother in shock, his sister in tears, and her family having various reactions, and he had none. Come to think of it, Moira and Adam had none, either. Paul saw them both being compassionate and understanding to his relatives, as well as supportive and patient. But both were undisturbed by witnessing a death. As if they'd done it before. Paul wanted to ask about it.

"All right, folks, listen up." Susan reappeared from the office where she'd been on the phone. "We've a nine o'clock appointment with Bill at his office tomorrow morning." Bill McHenry was an old family friend and their

father's executor. "That won't take long, as the will is up to date and all of Dad's papers are in order. We've a ten-thirty appointment with the funeral home. I don't know how long that will take. We've a one o'clock appointment with Rev. Truman to discuss the funeral. Uncle Stephen will be flying in tomorrow; his flight gets in at 6:45pm. Paul, you can pick him up from the airport. None of our cousins have responded to my messages, so we don't know if they're coming or not."

"You've been busy!" Paul interjected when his sister took a breath. She looked better; she had color back in her face. She always was happier when she was organizing things.

She gave Paul a tense little smile. "Well, I won't bother you with the details about the caterer for after the funeral right now," she said. "I'm going to look in on Mom." She turned on her heel and went upstairs.

Paul looked over at Ron, and whistled. Ron smiled and nodded. "That's Susan. You know, Paul -- you just step out of the way and let her run."

"I can see why you two have such a successful marriage." Moira observed.

Ron came over and joined them at the table. "It's a lot of hard work, but it's worth it," he said. He paused and looked at Paul. "I know you and your Dad didn't always see eye to eye," he began.

Paul gave a short laugh. "That's an understatement!"

"Well. I just wanted to say how sorry I am that this has happened." Ron said, as if taking responsibility for his father-in-law's death. "I really respected and cared for your father, Paul. I thought he could have had a few more years left in him, if he'd only managed his stress better."

"I know what you mean," Paul agreed. "I don't handle my stress very well, either." He smiled, thinking of the extraordinary stress he'd been dealing with since Moira came back into his life.

"Well, Susan's getting better at it." Ron observed. "The kids used to really get to her." He gave a little glance at Moira. "She couldn't sue them if they didn't obey her, or subpoena them to dinner on time." He gave a wry smile.

"It's definitely easier to manage your work than to manage your loved ones." Moira said, understandingly.

Ron managed a grin. Then he turned to Adam, "So Adam, what do you think of the Marbanks?"

Adam was surprised at being part of the conversation. He was used to quietly listening in the background. "Um, in what way do you mean?" he said, stalling.

"Oh, it's just that I know what it was like for me, meeting the family

for the first time," Ron said, kindly. "I mean, it was under entirely different circumstances and there weren't four kids racing around," he said, meaning his own. "And of course, I had Charles interrogating me as only a lawyer can." He smiled at the memory. "The old man sure terrified me at first. It took me a while to find that under that crusty exterior was an old softy."

Paul raised his eyebrows. He'd never met the soft side of Charles Marbanks.

Adam nodded, understanding what Ron had asked. "Well, I already know Paul and Susan from work, so it really was ..." he hesitated over what to call Olivia. Grandmother didn't quite fit. "Paul's mother I hadn't met yet. It's hard to get a feel for her right now," he ended. He saw Ron still expected something of him. "Well, Susan, now, let's see. I like Susan. You have to really stand your ground with her, not let her blow you away. But the thing I like about her is that you can see her coming. With some women it's subtler; you don't feel the bullet holes until you've fallen over. Susan, you said it perfectly, you can just step aside."

Paul looked at Adam. He'd never heard him talk about women before; at least he noticed them.

Ron nodded, satisfied with what he'd heard. "She's always liked you, Adam, ever since she met you in January. She called me that night and talked about you. She was pretty convinced you were a Marbanks back then, too." Ron glanced at Paul. "She's sharp, Susan is." He stood up and stretched. "I'm going to check on the kids. It sounds like we've a busy day planned for tomorrow. Unless," his face brightened with the thought, "I can get out of it by watching the kids." He said good night and went downstairs.

Paul, Moira, and Adam all sat at the kitchen table for a few minutes in silence. Moira reached out and rubbed Adam's back.

"Good job today, Adam." She gave him a little hug.

"Thanks, Mom. You weren't half bad yourself." He smiled at her.

"No, I don't just mean at the hospital. I appreciated your energy control, but in general, with all these people. You are actually related to these people, you know." She looked him in the eye.

"That fact had occurred to me once or twice today." Adam replied, sounding like Spock. "It's most interesting how relatives can get in your space, even when you've never met them before."

"That's your unique learning experience, Adam. I don't have that. Except with you and Paul. And you're very well behaved," she complimented him.

"And I'm not?" Paul broke in, feeling left out, but not understanding what they were talking about, either.

"No, you're not." Moira shined her smile at him. "But that's okay,

because I love you." She sounded like she was talking to a little boy who didn't know any better. It reminded Paul of when he was four. "What I mean, darling," she took Paul's head and pulled it towards her to kiss, "is that you are able to affect me in ways no one else can. And that I don't mind it. Not in the least."

Paul lifted his face up so that her lips, aiming for his forehead, met his instead. "You're able to affect me, too."

"Well, I'm going to leave you two love birds affecting each other." Adam said, dryly, and standing up. "I'm going to look for a quiet corner to meditate in for a while."

"Try the den," suggested Paul, thinking of his father's study. Susan had already been in there, so she was unlikely to go back in that evening. Adam nodded and headed off in that direction.

Paul and Moira watched him go. Moira was caressing the back of Paul's neck. Paul had his arm draped casually around her waist. He looked at her.

"Well, I can't get out of tomorrow's schedule by staying behind to watch my kid," he said with some humor, "so I feel like turning in right now."

"Sounds like an excellent idea, even if it is only about six pm our time." Moira said with a smile.

"Oh, well, I can think of a few ways to occupy our time before falling asleep." Paul leaned over and kissed her neck. He felt Moira's throat vibrate with her laugh.

"I think the TV show is over, Paul. Let's get upstairs before we have an audience." She took Paul by the hand and led him up to the bedroom.

Paul and Moira lay with their limbs entwined in Paul's childhood bed. It had been quite a challenge to keep the bed from squeaking or thumping the wall. It had been an equal challenge to have any movement at all without rolling onto the floor. They were smothering their giggles into each other's shoulders.

"I think we should have just done it on the floor," Moira whispered.

"No, that wouldn't have worked. The kitchen is right underneath. You can hear everything. The ceiling lamp would have rocked back and forth," Paul whispered back. Then he gave her little kisses on her cheek and ears and neck, and started her giggling again. She began to tickle his back. "Stop it! Stop it," he hissed. "I'll push you onto the floor, I swear!"

She stopped, and began to kiss him on the chin and neck.

"God! I can't believe we just did it in this old bed of mine." Paul



murmured, thinking of all the younger Pauls who would be either very impressed or shocked. All his teenage years he spent dreaming of sex, lying in this bed. Now he was here, not just with a real, live girl, but a real, live Moira.

"You think the sweetest things," she whispered.

"I also can't believe we're doing this the evening after my father died." Paul said, still wondering at his absence of grief.

"You don't think Susan and Ron are humping right now?" Moira asked.

Paul's mind went blank. "I don't think Susan and Ron ever humped. She was probably artificially inseminated." It was the first thing that jumped into his head; he hadn't meant to sound unkind.

Moira snorted. "You don't mean that. You just don't like the image of your sister having sex."

Paul realized that was true. Another image came to his mind. "Well, I bet he's never on top." He began to snicker uncontrollably.

"Hm. That's an idea." Moira said, and carefully rolled on top of Paul. "Now, don't you move, or it'll shake the bed."

"Oh, God, Moira, no!" he croaked huskily. She ignored him, and subtly began to do some very erotic moves.

Downstairs, Adam, the only person in the house not retired for the night, sat in the kitchen. He sipped a cup of coffee and watched the ceiling light gently sway.

At 8:30 the following morning the entire Marbanks contingent assembled, front and center and ready for inspection. Paul thought his sister was going to put on white gloves and check to see if everyone's shirt was buttoned. Ron received his instructions. He succeeded in hiding his relief as Susan gave him the itinerary for activities around Hartford with the kids. Adam managed to get out of the day's schedule also by saying he wanted to accompany the kids, as he'd always wanted to see Mark Twain's house. Moira was blatantly left out of the schedule, and Paul tried to get her included. No way did he want to go through the day without Moira. There was a little tension when he raised the matter with Susan.

"I'm sorry, Moira," Susan said pointedly, "I thought it more appropriate if just Paul and I go with Mom go to the executor's this morning."

"I understand, Susan," Moira said, soothingly. "I certainly don't want to be where I might be in the way. I only want to be of assistance and support at this time."

Olivia piped up. "I'd like Moira to come along." They were the first words she'd said all morning.

Susan wheeled around towards her mother. "Now, Mom, I don't think that's a good idea. This is a *family* matter."

"She's Paul's wife," Olivia said stubbornly, her facts slightly inaccurate. "And I like her. I want her to sit beside me in the car, too."

Susan stared at her mother as if the woman had completely lost her marbles.

"I find it comforting. She doesn't tell me what to do." Olivia crossed her arms over her lap as if to indicate that the subject was closed.

Susan's mouth opened and closed. Tears sprung to her eyes, but she didn't let them spill. "Fine," she said through clenched teeth. "I'm going to get ready to go." She marched out of the room.

Ron started to say something, but Paul raised his hand. "It's okay, Ron. We understand. We all understand." Ron nodded, gathered the kids up and herded them to the car, with Adam following behind.

Adam shot Paul a humorous look. "Good luck, Dad," he said, emphasizing the word Dad.

Paul looked back, wishing he could go with them. "Have fun with your cousins, son," he smiled. "Opie."

Paul turned to Moira and put his arm around her. "Thanks for being here."

She patted his chest. "De nada," she answered.

They went to Bill McHenry's in their parents' car. Susan drove, with Paul sitting up front. Moira sat in back with Olivia. Olivia reached out for Moira's hand, and Moira gave hers a comforting squeeze. They rode to the executors in silence.

It was a short meeting. Their father, lawyer that he was, had everything in order -- trust fund set up and finances organized so that Olivia should never have to worry about anything. There was little for Paul or Susan to do or say, as they would receive no inheritance until their mother passed on. This was perfectly fine with them, as they both were well off on their own accord. Susan got a little testy, because Olivia would not let go of Moira's hand during the proceedings. She obviously thought her mother had gone off the deep end and suspected Moira of either pushing her, diving with her, or both.

The funeral home was a little more difficult, as there were decisions to make. Neither Paul nor his mother really cared about the details, which frustrated Susan because she wanted them to heartily approve of all her choices. There was a slight fracas over whether the body would be viewed. Paul was horrified, but Susan insisted on it. Olivia wouldn't offer an

opinion, so Moira spoke up.

"I understand that this is none of my business," she said softly, "but I agree with Susan." Paul gaped at her. "None of Charles' friends got to see him at the hospital to say good bye. Viewing his body is a way for them to have that chance." She looked at Susan. "It's also nice for the family, who last saw him in the hospital, because he'll look so much better once the funeral home has taken care of him."

Paul was about to raise his objection when he heard Moira's voice, clear as a bell, inside his head. *Paul, your sister doesn't understand about spirit. The body is very important to her. Let it go.* Paul understood, without understanding, so he let it go.

They went to lunch at a restaurant on the way to the church. Nobody was very hungry. Paul desperately wanted the day to be over with, and poked at his ham on rye. Moira methodically worked her way through a tuna melt. Susan mechanically nibbled on a Caesar salad, while their mother had ordered a grilled cheese sandwich, tomato soup, and cottage cheese. Except she only had one bite of each.

Suddenly Olivia spoke. "It's too bad Charles couldn't have met you," she said directly to Moira. "He would have liked you very, very much. He would have been very impressed."

Moira smiled modestly, while Paul puffed with pride. Susan looked like she was about to explode.

His mother looked at Paul. "I know it hasn't been easy, dear," she patted his hand gently. "But I have been behind you all the way. You may not have known it, but I have. Charles and I had quite a few ... discussions about you becoming an architect. I'm very proud of your accomplishments."

Paul was speechless. He'd never seen his mother stand up to his Dad on anything in his life. He'd wondered how he'd been able to go to architecture school without his father disowning him. Now he understood.

"And you have a lovely, lovely wife. I am very pleased, Paul dear." His mother squeezed his hand.

"Mother," Susan hissed. "They're not even married yet. If they ever *do* get married."

Olivia turned a stern eye on her daughter. "Susan, that is a very ungracious thing to say." The reprimand stopped Susan in her tracks. "Marriage is more than a ceremony and a piece of paper, dear. Paul and Moira are already married in the eyes of God." She looked very solemnly at the whole table.

Paul could not believe his mother really said that. Susan was about to call the funny farm on her. Moira just beamed at Olivia.

"Thanks, Mom. It means a lot to me to hear you say that." Paul

sputtered.

Susan started to speak, but for some reason stopped. Paul noticed Moira's hand was resting on the table, but her fingers were gently moving. She seemed to be -- directing energy at Susan. Was that right? He couldn't see anything. But he could see the affects. Susan's focus seemed to be pulled inwards, and she sat back in her chair. Paul wasn't ready for what happened next. Susan's strong facade crumbled; she wilted and began to cry.

"I - I - I miss my Daddy," she said in gasps. Both Olivia and Paul reached out for her. "I - I - I want my Daddy." She dissolved, sobbing into her napkin.

Moira's hand kept gently moving, while Paul and Olivia patted Susan on the back. It was as if the grief was being washed out of her. All the years of being strong so her father would admire her, all the decades of doing the right thing according to Charles, all the rigidity and strong opinions melted away. When she was done, Susan looked soft and pink and glowing, like a newborn with puffy eyes and a swollen face.

"Oh, God, I look a mess. I have to go fix my face." Susan got up to go to the ladies room.

"I have to fix my face, too," Moira said, and went with her. After she'd left, Paul realized Moira hadn't been wearing any makeup.

Paul looked at his mother. "Well, that was something."

Olivia nodded, a wise smile on her face. "A long time in coming, I think."

They continued on to the church to meet the family pastor. Paul hadn't been inside that building since he was a teenager and he was slightly uncomfortable. Moira provided a calming presence by his side, a buffer between him and all the things he rebelled against. This time, it was the minister who had a lot of opinions about the way things should go. Fortunately, Susan wasn't up to arguing, and their mother genuinely agreed with the minister. They were out of the church in twenty-five minutes. Paul drove everyone home.

Olivia took Moira around to the back of the house to show her the garden, leaving Paul and Susan in the house alone.

"Are you all right?" Paul asked with genuine concern. He'd never seen his sister look so fragile.

"I'm okay," his sister said softly. She went into the kitchen and looked out the window at her mother and Moira in the back yard. "Mom's right, you know."

"About what?" Paul said, coming up behind his sister and putting his arm around her.

"About Moira. Dad would have loved her." His sister leaned her

head against her brother's shoulder.

Paul gave her a little squeeze and kissed the top of her head. "That's nice of you to say."

"It's not that I don't like her." Susan said, looking up at him. "I guess, maybe I'm jealous."

"Of Moira?" Paul said, surprised.

"Not really, just ... that I'm no longer your special one," she said, smiling.

"Special." Paul echoed, thinking of the summer he coined that endearment. He had just finished junior high and his sister had just started. He called her his special sister, and joked that she could compete in the Special Olympics. She hadn't known at the time that the Special Olympics were for developmentally disabled people and took it as a great compliment. When a friend had clued her in, she socked Paul in the stomach. Winded him, too. Later on, being special was always a secret joke between them.

"Susan, you are my sister." Paul held her tight. "You will always have a special place in my heart."

"You, too. Special." Susan hugged him back.

Stephen's plane landed at 6:45pm at Hartford Airport. Paul went to pick him up and take him directly to the restaurant where all the adults were having dinner. Susan had to arrange to pay each of her children baby-sitting wages to take care of themselves, to insure that the house would still be standing when they arrived home after dinner.

Stephen was in fine spirits, having imbibed a few during the journey across the country.

"Well, I expect Susan has got everything organized to a 'T'," he said, as Paul drove him to the restaurant.

"Oh, yes," Paul answered. "Everything is in perfect order. You know Susan."

"Yes, I do," Stephen said. Susan had not only whipped the Portland office into shape in four months, but she was attempting to do the same to San Francisco. She left Seattle alone, because Paul was doing the job almost up to her standards. San Francisco was a mess, and Susan wanted to fix it.

"Well, we left the kids at home. Except Adam," Paul joked.

"Adam?" Stephen said. "What's Adam doing here?"

Paul realized that no one had yet told Stephen about Adam and Moira. Paul swallowed before answering. "Well, I just found out that Adam is my son," he said, quietly.

Stephen let out a big hoot. "I knew it, I just knew it." He slapped Paul heartily on the back, nearly making him run off the road. "You old rascal. I knew there was something you were hiding in your britches when

you were a lad."

Paul stuttered a protest, "Well, no, I, that is, I didn't know until last week."

"Ah ha, well." Stephen paused, and then nudged him again. "We should pass out cigars, eh?" And dissolved into a wheezing fit of laughter.

"There's something else I should tell you before we get to the restaurant," Paul said, trying to talk over the wheezing. "I'm getting married."

Stephen stopped in mid-laugh. "You're taking the plunge again, boy? I'd thought you'd have learned the first time." Stephen had never stopped smarting from his own divorce.

Paul winced. "It's not like the first time, uncle. I'm marrying Adam's mother." He wondered if he should mention that Stephen probably knew Moira from L.A., but decided to let that matter come up if Stephen raised it upon meeting her.

His uncle chuckled a slightly lecherous laugh. "Doing the right thing, eh? Seems a bit late for that."

"No, no, no," Paul said, and then realized that he didn't want to go into it with Stephen. He didn't want to talk about true love or love at first sight with someone who didn't know the meaning of the word. "Well, you'll meet her and you'll understand." He knew his uncle would judge her on the basis of physical appearance alone, and on that matter Moira would pass with flying colors.

They got to the restaurant and were led directly to a table where the others were already seated. Stephen transformed into a perfect gentleman, but only for the sake of Olivia, to whom he gave a compassionate hug, and murmured appropriate condolences in her ear. He nodded at Susan, who nodded back with pursed lips. Then he went over and thumped Adam on the back.

"Adam, you old scalawag," he said, although that was hardly an accurate description of him, "welcome to the family."

Adam coughed slightly at the thump. "Thanks, Uncle Stephen." He emphasized the word *Uncle*.

Then Stephen stood by Moira and looked her up and down, eyes lingering a bit too long below her neck. Moira broke the stare by lifting her hand up to shake his.

"So, you're Moira, eh?" Stephen practically drooled as he took her hand.

"So pleased to meet you, Stephen." Moira said, her diction a bit clipped.

"Well, well, Paul, you are full of surprises." Stephen took his seat,

fortunately situated across the table from Paul and Moira; otherwise Paul would have decked him.

"Oh, Uncle Stephen, put your eyes back in your head and order. We're starving," Susan broke in. The presence of her uncle restored her to her old fighting self. Her uncle laughed congenially and looked at his menu.

The dinner conversation covered everything except Charles. For some reason, everyone was skirting around any references to the dearly departed. There were just so many topics one could cover at a family gathering such as this one without mentioning family members, so the talk turned to work. It turned out that Ron wanted a small office building designed for his new practice in Portland so the conversation included him a great deal. The two persons excluded were Moira and Olivia. Adam didn't talk either, but he at least followed along. Unnoticed by the rest of them, Moira and Olivia excused themselves and went, not to the ladies room, but out of the restaurant for a walk.

It took Paul a while to realize that they were missing. He glanced at Adam to see if anything was wrong, but Adam's impassive eyes gave no indication of alarm. Stephen and Susan were haggling over some minor details so Paul got up and went to the rest rooms. He stood outside the ladies room for a while until he ascertained that the women weren't in there. He stepped outside and looked up and down the block. He caught sight of them down at the corner, sitting on a bench by a bus stop. He strolled down to join them. As he got closer he heard snippets of their conversation.

"So you're saying he held his feelings deep beneath the surface?" Moira asked.

"Oh yes..." Olivia's voice faded in and out "... you'd just have to know they were there ... that's why Adam reminds me ... such a good man, I was so lucky..."

Paul stopped a few yards from them, feeling like an intruder. He considered backtracking when both women looked up and saw him.

"Oh, Paul dear, come sit beside us. Moira and I are having the most delightful time." His mother's voice sounded frail and delicate, but light at the same time.

Paul sat down on the bench beside his mother. He rested his arm on the back of the seat behind her.

"It's such a beautiful night. Isn't that breeze just lovely?" His mother patted his knee.

"Yes, quite refreshing after that stuffy restaurant." Paul agreed. They'd been seated in the non-smoking section, but without air circulation, so there might as well have been no separation at all between the two parts of the restaurant.

"When your father and I were courting he had very little money, so our early times together were spent like this." His mother smiled up at the stars. "We used to take the bus to the park and walk along the river. You know, I enjoyed being with him so much we could have saved ourselves the bus fare and just stayed at the bus stop, talking."

Moira was smiling at Paul's mother with glistening eyes. She'd leaned back against the bench so Paul's hand had just grazed her shoulder. He let his hand rest there.

"You know, Paul, your father was the most wonderful talker. I could just listen to him go on forever." his mother said, lost in her reverie.

Paul suppressed the comment that his father's talking was one of the reasons he left home. The man didn't know when to stop. It wasn't easy being a teenager with a lawyer for a father. You could never get him to shut up long enough to hear your point of view. Of course, being a teenager, it had been difficult for Paul to get his thoughts collected enough to *present* his point of view.

"He had the most wonderful voice," Olivia was now telling Moira. "So deep, so manly. Paul has that voice, too." Moira smiled and nodded, flashing a secret look towards Paul, whose heart contracted when she did.

"Oh, his health has been so poor recently." Olivia's voice quavered. "I knew what was coming, I really did. But still, it's so hard to get used to." Her head dropped and she shook it. "Fifty years in December it would have been. We just missed our fiftieth." She was silent for a moment, and Paul slipped his arm down around her shoulders. Olivia collected herself. "Now Paul, you hang on to Moira. You hang on to her with both hands. She's a good woman. She's a keeper, as Charles used to say." Olivia turned to Moira and touched her cheek with her trembling, knotted hands. "Sometimes you don't know what a precious thing you have until you lose it." Moira smiled into Olivia's face, and a tiny teardrop trickled over her lower eyelid. She gave Olivia's hand, a squeeze.

The three sat there for a while, huddled on the bench, the night air gradually growing chillier. Paul broke the silence.

"We'd better get back to the others, Mom," he said. "They probably haven't missed us yet. Stephen and Susan were getting into it when I left. But it would be nice to have some dessert and coffee."

The trio stood up and walked back to the restaurant.

Later that evening, Paul and Moira were in Paul's little bed, face to face sideways, pressed up close to each other.

"This is getting ridiculous," Paul said. "I don't think I can hold out



for two more nights of this." The funeral was the day after tomorrow.

"Let's throw both mattresses on the floor." Moira suggested. "It may be drafty, but we'll have room to stretch out."

Paul thought about it as he gave her face little kisses. "On the other hand, this is awfully nice."

"Nice for you," retorted Moira, "you're against the wall. You can't fall out."

"I'm sorry; I didn't know you were so uncomfortable. Do you want to move the mattresses? We can." Paul shifted himself.

"No, that's okay. I'll just adjust myself." Moira said, pulling him close.

Paul wanted to ask what she meant, when the oddest thing happened. In his arms she shifted in solidity. That is, one moment she was leaning heavily against him, the next ... she was still there but she wasn't. Paul gave her a little squeeze. He could still feel her, but she was lighter somehow.

"Sure wish you could teach me this trick before I have to go in for my next physical," Paul said. "What are you doing?"

"Oh, I'm just insuring I don't fall off the bed," she said, matter-of-factly. "Let's go to sleep."

Paul anticipated the queasiness as he pursued the question. "But how are you doing it?"

"I've just adjusted my molecules so I'm not so affected by gravity," she said, sleepily.

Paul felt her drifting off in his arms, but kept pressing. "Moira, I thought you were human, that is, your body was human."

"It is." Her face was nestled into his neck.

"But human bodies can't do this. Human bodies can't travel through time. Human bodies can't make Chinese food appear out of cartons." He felt like they were lying on a narrow waterbed, and he was becoming dizzy.

"Well, they can, but most people don't know how." Moira sounded a little grumpy at being kept awake.

"How?" Paul said softly. Perhaps if he knew how, he could travel with her. Then they would never have to be apart.

"It takes years of training, from birth." She lifted up her head. There were dark circles forming under her eyes. "Plus, my body is slightly different. Adam's body is more like yours."

"Different, how?" Paul asked, only slightly guilty at keeping her awake.

"Well, mine operates on a higher vibrational level; it can handle a higher level of energy. Part of that is the original design I was created with,

but part of it is training and years of energy work -- meditation. Adam has the same training, but his body was formed differently." She smiled at this, and Paul felt warmth rising between them. "The seed came from you, and the egg came from me, and grew inside me." Paul suddenly found the seventh grade health class illustrations that appeared in his head while she was talking incredibly erotic. "His energy vibration is heavier, denser, and more solid than mine. But it means he can stay in one place longer, and his grounding is more stabilizing than mine, if that makes any sense." They were looking into each other's eyes.

"Tell me again about the seed and egg stuff," Paul said, forgetting his earlier curiosity.

"Hang onto me with both hands and I'll show you." Moira replied.

The next day was one of relative ease for Paul, who had nothing in particular to do. It was one of intense activity for Susan, who was handling all the details herself and not delegating to anyone. He found her in the den, sitting in their dad's overstuffed leather chair, talking on the phone. A yellow legal pad lay on the large oak desk in front of her, filled with scribbled notes and phone numbers.

"Anything I can do to help?" Paul said when she'd hung up the phone.

Susan shook her head, "No, I have too many details in my head to delegate. Besides, I need to keep busy." She gave her brother a tight little smile. Susan sighed and leaned back in the chair. "I just love this room. It holds so many fond memories of Dad."

Paul looked at her blankly. "This room? It does?"

"Oh, yes, I used to come in here when he was working, and he'd put down his pen and pick me up on his lap..." Susan's eyes had a faraway look in them, "he'd let me play with his paperclips and the stapler."

Paul's head sunk to his chest. "Susan, you had a different relationship with Dad than I did. You see these things and it brings up fond memories. I see these things and" Paul picked up the metal ruler on the desk. He shook it at her the way his father used to shake it at him when he was close to getting hit with it.

"Oh, Paul, you're exaggerating. Dad never hit you." Susan said.

"What!? I was there! I can tell you almost every time this ruler was used, and every place it hit. One time I couldn't sit down for a whole weekend. What would you do if Ron hit one of your kids with this? How would you feel about Dad if he'd ever hit you himself?" Paul was astounded by her denial.

Susan's eyes opened wide. "He really hit you?" She sounded stunned. "Why don't I remember?"

"Well, either you were at Brownies, or piano lessons, or ballet, or you were in the kitchen with Mom doing dishes. I don't know. Almost every Friday night, for as long as I can remember, I'd have a date with this." Paul wanted to take the ruler and break it or melt it down. "He'd bait me into some stupid argument, and I'd end up in here, bent over. Sometimes he'd work late on Fridays so I knew I'd better be out of the house all day Saturday or he'd get to me before breakfast. Or after dinner. Meals were his prime time to go at me, get me to contradict him or argue with him. Don't know where he was at lunch."

"Playing golf." Susan said, staring at Paul. "I remember you always fought, but ... I thought you went into the study to get a lecture."

"A lecture? Are you kidding? You couldn't hear?" Then Paul realized he'd never cried out during the beatings. With the study door closed, someone in the kitchen probably wouldn't have heard the ruler hitting his flesh, either. Suddenly, Paul wondered if his mother had even known it was happening. He looked over at the doorway, and there was Moira and his mother, looking at him.

"Paul, things were different back then," Susan began. "Ways of raising children were quite different then they are today."

"Oh, yeah, spare the rod and spoil the child," Paul spat out. "At least it wasn't a leather riding crop. That's what his father used on him. He had scars, you know -- mom told me." The faraway look came back into Susan's eyes. Paul stopped himself from continuing. He'd never thought that his father had simply been passing on what he himself had experienced. Maybe he had thought a metal ruler was kinder than a leather-riding crop. If only Paul had had the opportunity to raise Adam, he would never have hit him, ever, with anything. Just then the phone rang and Susan's attention returned to planning the funeral, absent-mindedly playing with the ruler on the desk. Paul shut the door behind him and went to see what the rest of the family was doing.

Ron was busy supervising the kids. Moira was with Olivia, handling meals. Adam seemed to be there whenever a helping hand was needed, and gone otherwise. Paul decided to get some fresh air to calm down.

Paul sat out on the back steps, breathing in the spring sunshine. Crocus blossomed in his mother's flowerbeds, with daffodils and tulips getting ready to. The old cherry tree had bloomed and it looked like it had been snowing on the lawn. Birds constantly chirruped, and busy chipmunks raced across the lawns from one house to another. Adam came out and

joined him.

"How was the Mark Twain house yesterday? I never got a chance to ask you." Paul inquired.

"Neat. I really enjoyed it. Feels really good, too. The guy had a lot of amusement." Adam responded.

Paul had expected a discourse on the unique and beautiful architecture. He smiled at Adam. They really did have similar interests, but they had completely diverse ways of viewing things.

"How did yesterday go for you?" Adam asked, although Paul could tell he was being polite. Adam already knew how yesterday went; he could read Paul's thoughts.

Paul hesitated before answering. "Better than expected," he said. "It really helped that Moira was there. I couldn't have made it through the day without her." He looked down at his shoes. "I couldn't have made it through this week without either of you," he admitted.

Adam put a friendly hand on Paul's shoulder. "Ah, you could have. You just wouldn't have enjoyed it as much." Adam said with a straight face and Paul got the sudden image of the kitchen ceiling lamp swaying. "You never create more than you can handle," he finished.

"Well, I suppose that's true." Paul mused. Then he thought of a new subject. "God, Stephen is a trip."

Adam chuckled. "You didn't know that before?"

"Well, it's different when it's just him and me. Him and my family," said Paul, thinking of last night's dinner, "That's a different kettle of fish."

"I can handle Stephen. Mom can handle Stephen. You should see Mom handle Stephen." Adam said.

"Well, she did great last night, or are you referring to another time?" Paul racked his brains. "Are you referring to L.A.?"

Adam nodded. "Yeah, when Mom was working for those Japanese guys. He came to our apartment one night, drunk as a skunk. Scared me out of my wits." Adam grinned at the memory. "She handled him good. I'm surprised he can still pee standing up."

Paul felt a flush of rage pass through him. "What do you mean? What happened?"

"Oh, nothing physical." Adam assured him. "He wasn't able to get through the front door, although he tried. She blasted him back to his car. I mean, from his awareness, he probably came to our place, tried to get in the front door, and then found himself instantly jammed into his car, but not exactly in the driver's seat."

Paul strained to remember what kind of car his uncle drove back then. Oh, yes. A Porsche. Was it a stick shift? Or was that the emergency

brake in between the bucket seats?

"You got the picture," Adam said. "Anyway, I'm not surprised he doesn't remember her. She did a lot of energy work about that time." Then Adam seemed to recall Paul's participation, and he looked away.

"Energy work about what?" Paul asked, softly.

Adam squinted in the sunlight. He responded slowly, choosing his words carefully. "Oh, she was pretty freaked out about the earthquake. Felt very responsible, although it was supposed to happen. She felt it was worse because we were there. And she was freaked out about meeting you. It was only her second time, you know, seeing you." Adam glanced sideways at Paul. "And she told me, much later, how you asked her to come to Seattle, and she knew she couldn't. She knew she couldn't because she'd been corporeal for too long during that assignment, and she knew she couldn't because I was already here. She had to let go of you, again, not knowing when or if she'd see you again, and not knowing when or if I'd get to see you again until I was an adult."

"But I told her of the other times I'd met her." Paul said.

"That's right," Adam said. "I guess it was just she didn't know how old she was during any of those times." He nodded, resolving something in himself. "So she knew she'd see you again. Maybe she was more upset because of me."

"Why?" asked Paul.

"Oh, growing up without a father, that stuff. She really wanted us to be together. I mean, she realized the Universe was in charge of it all - the timing and the circumstances - but she's still my mother." Adam smiled. "I got to see you when I was older, and that was important."

Again Paul felt little pieces coming together inside him.

Accumulated experiences of being a Big Brother, two different decades, same kid, same person sitting in front of him. Then he remembered all the things they did together, shoot hoops, go to museums, go hiking. He chuckled.

Adam picked up on what he was thinking. "Oh, the Lincoln Memorial." That was when Paul was in college and Adam was in his mid teens. In the late sixties.

"You said, 'man, that guy has big feet!'" Paul laughed.

"Well, he did." Adam said.

"And hiking, we went hiking when you were about twelve in Seattle in the mid-eighties... on the same trails that we went on together a couple of years ago!" Paul marveled at the memory.

Adam grinned. "That was fun. You know, I should have guessed who you were by then, because you pointed out the exact same things on that trail that you did when I was twelve. It just didn't occur to me until I

called you in L.A. and you were with ... us." Adam looked at Paul. "So many things came together for me after that. I pretty quickly figured out you were my dad. And that I couldn't say anything about it. So, I just accepted the relationship for what it was, what I could have. Enjoy the time I do have with you, instead of regretting the time we didn't have." Adam could have been echoing Paul's resolution about his relationship with Moira.

"Well, it may be a little late to begin being your father, but you're welcome to consider me as your dad and to talk to me about anything you might need to talk to a father about," Paul said, feeling kind of silly and uncertain. He hadn't talked to his father about anything since he was a teenager. He had no idea how to be a father, based on the fathering he had experienced.

"Well, thanks, Paul --I mean, Dad." Adam tried not to sound condescending. "But I think we have a pretty good thing going already. Compared to other people's relationships with their fathers, I feel quite lucky. I mean, we're friends. If I needed to talk about anything, I guess I could..." he paused and looked off into the distance.

"What are you thinking about?" Paul asked.

"Oh, how I usually talk to God about everything, and my mother, who helps explain things in terms of having a body, but I just realized you could probably give me better information regarding that than she can now. She has an intellectual understanding about my body, but you've actually lived in one of these." Adam sounded like he was talking about a house or a car. "Come to think of it, you really helped me with some stuff when I was a teenager."

Paul strained to remember the conversations he'd had with Adam as an adolescent. All he could remember was hiking and shooting hoops.

"Well, I didn't really talk to you then." Adam said, picking up on Paul's thoughts. "But I observed you. I learned about being male from you."

That sounded very odd to Paul. "In what way?"

Adam smiled, but he didn't look like he was going to tell him.

"Go on." Paul urged.

Adam looked down at the garden and chuckled. "Oh, you used to ogle girls a whole lot when we were in D.C. And you used to strut your stuff for them." he went on, ignoring Paul's embarrassment. "So it was easier to handle those urges in myself when I had them."

"So you've had urges." Paul said, trying not to sound too relieved.

"God, Paul, I have a body." Adam said. "I just choose not to act on those urges."

"You sound a whole lot like Spock right now." Paul teased.

"Well, a Vulcan's goal is to master his emotions. My goal is seniority

over my body. So that I as spirit can be in charge of what I do, instead of letting my emotions and ego run the show," Adam explained.

"You know, cooperation with your body works a whole lot better." Moira's voice suddenly came from behind them. Both men looked up at her. "I could hear your conversation in the kitchen. It's a good thing that nobody else is in there." Moira came out and took a seat between the two men in her life.

Adam looked at her with one eyebrow raised in a deliberated imitation of Spock. "Elaborate," he said.

"Our bodies are more like horses than cars, Adam. Cars don't have the emotional aspect that bodies do. Cars won't drive themselves away if we're not in them. If you use the image of a rider on a horse, rather than a driver in the car, the picture will be clearer to you. See? Our bodies have emotions, and needs, and survival instincts. You can drive a car off a cliff and it won't bolt on you. A horse, or a human body, would definitely resist that kind of direction." She spoke directly to Adam, and Paul struggled to keep up.

Adam snorted, rather like a horse, "By cooperation do you mean allowing it to have sex?"

Moira smiled, and coozied against Paul. "What I mean by cooperation is allowing the body all the emotions it has to communicate to you with. Not resisting the body's feelings and urges." Adam started to speak but Moira went on. "By not resisting, I don't necessarily mean give in, I just mean ... to accept it. Not stifle it."

Adam's mouth shut and he appeared to be mulling the information over. "Okay," he said, simply.

Moira patted him on the knee. "Good boy." She grinned.

Paul sat there, watching the interaction between mother and son, trying to process what they were saying. It occurred to him that they were verbalizing for his benefit, and that probably many more of these conversations had already happened on this trip -- but telepathically. He thought about Adam's comment that he, Paul, could give him better information about having a body than his mother could. He couldn't think of one thing that he knew that Moira wasn't more aware of, or wise about. Next to them he felt like a man in a deep-sea diving suit, viewing the world outside through thick layers of padding, steel and glass, and they were scuba divers, directly touching and feeling the reality around them. He looked at Moira, and how the sun reflected off her silver-gold hair. Scuba divers -- or mermaids, perhaps. What would it be like, he wondered, to experience reality from their level of consciousness? To know people's thoughts, to be able to do all that they could do? It seemed overwhelming to him. If he

were that way, how would he cope with the bombardment of thoughts and feelings? How could he stop himself from feeling responsible for everything going on around him, and running out to try and save the world? Oklahoma City. Why didn't she stop the bomb from happening? Why didn't she save all those people?

Moira sharply turned towards Paul, her eyes flashing. "That was not my assignment. I don't know what is going to happen; I am put in places to respond to the moment. Obviously, all the people who died were meant to die. And the room I was in --" She choked on the tears welling up "the children who lived were meant to live." She stared at him, eyes wide and glistening.

Adam stepped in. "Who knows, maybe if she hadn't been there, the whole building would have collapsed. We don't know these things, Paul. We're given limited information so that it doesn't affect our response. We're simply briefed on the general time period and circumstances, and sometimes we vaguely know that a major event is about to take place, but then we're dropped there and have to rely on our own knowingness."

Moira had closed her eyes and was struggling for self-control. Paul had never seen her quite like this. Obviously she'd asked herself the same questions Paul had thought, and struggled with the sense of responsibility Paul thought he himself would struggle with, had he Moira's abilities.

"Anyway, I probably wasn't the only one there," she said. "There are lots of us. Sometimes we recognize each other, sometimes we don't. We each have different assignments, also. And some of us are more corporeal than others."

Hearing that new piece of information, Paul wanted to ask a million questions, but Adam stopped him.

"Hello, Ron." Adam said, loudly.

Ron was just walking into the kitchen and hadn't noticed the three sitting on the back stoop.

"Oh, hi there. Beautiful day, isn't it?" Ron seemed in good spirits. "Have you heard the latest?"

"On what?" asked Paul, not certain he could absorb any more information.

"Oh, Susan has contacted about 150 of Charles' closest friends," Ron rolled his eyes, "and most of them are coming to the funeral tomorrow. She's been on the phone to the caterers for the last half hour."

"Popular guy." Adam remarked.

"Oh, he had many, many friends and contacts in the business community around here. And he and Olivia were quite active in church, so there are a lot of committee members and trustees who were good friends. A



hundred and fifty is actually quite small, but it's happening so soon, many people had plans they couldn't change. Some people who can't make it are going to the viewing this evening."

"What viewing?" Paul said, uneasily.

"Gosh, Susan's been telling everyone about the schedule of events except her own brother. Actually, I doubt Olivia knows what's happening, but she doesn't seem real tuned in with what's going on in general." Ron said. "There's a family viewing this afternoon at the funeral home, at four, then a viewing for the general public at seven tonight, then the funeral is tomorrow morning at the church at ten followed by a catered luncheon. There was a big discussion whether the lunch should be here or not, but it was suggested by the Reverend Truman to have it in the church dining area, to save us from having that many people tromp through here. There's a small graveside ceremony after lunch for the immediate family."

Paul stared at him, letting all the information sink in. Susan had indeed been busy. "Dad has a gravesite?"

Ron looked at Paul and chuckled. "You don't come home much, do you? Last Thanksgiving, Susan and your parents went shopping for gravesites. They chose two plots at the cemetery. They already have gravestones carved for both of them, just needing the dates filled in."

This was too morbid for Paul to comprehend. He knew his sister liked to be organized and prepared for anything, but this was sick.

"I bet her foresight has made things a lot easier for her mother right now. It would be so difficult to have to do those things *and* plan the funeral," Moira said, attempting to smooth things over.

"Well, she couldn't get Charles to pre-plan the funeral." Ron smiled. "But she did try to get me to go shopping for gravesites for us when we got home. I told her, 'Susan, I don't want to spend my money on plots and gravestones right now. I don't even know if I want to be buried here, or anywhere. Maybe I want to be cremated. Anyway, we have kids to put through college, and I'd rather invest our money in their education instead of our eventual deaths.' It quieted her down. Of course, now we're moving to Portland, so just imagine if I'd let her run with that whim -- having two plots in Ann Arbor while we relocate to Portland." Ron shook his head.

Just then, screaming erupted from somewhere in the house. Paul must have jumped a foot in the air at the sound, but the others acted perfectly calm.

"It's the twins." Ron said, wearily, "They're always like this. I'd better go see if any blood is being shed." He turned and disappeared into the house.

Paul watched Ron go, not envying him the active role of parenting.

After he'd gone, Paul turned to Moira and Adam.

"I don't care what Susan says, I'm not going to view my father's dead body!" The thought of it practically made him ill.

Moira and Adam grinned at him.

"It's just a body, Paul." Adam said. "There's nobody in it."

Moira put her arms around Paul and gave him a little hug. "It might be good for you to go. You may still have something to say to him that you hadn't thought of yet."

Adam looked at Moira. "Well, he doesn't have to talk to the shell; he can talk to him directly as spirit."

"That's easy enough for me and you, but we're talking about Paul and his father. Paul hasn't had any experience relating to his father as spirit. It probably will be easier for him to finish his cycle by viewing the body." Moira held Paul and he enjoyed the familiar magnetic feeling. Little rivulets of current ran down his legs into the ground and his shoulders felt tingly and relaxed. Suddenly he jerked himself out of her arms.

"Oh, no - no way are you going to talk me into seeing a dead body, much less *talk* to a dead body. They'd cart me away!" Paul said, stubbornly.

Adam folded his arms across his chest. "I don't think he should have to do anything he doesn't want to do, Mom. It means he's not ready. You're manipulating him."

"Oh, horse hockey," Moira said. "I'm just suggesting."

"Well, I'd say his horse is bucking, and you'd bucking better leave him alone," Adam said, matching his father's stubbornness.

"And you both are resisting. I'm just trying to get Paul past his resistance. But I can see I'm not welcome here. Fine with me! I leave you to Susan," she said, making a gesture that looked like she was washing her hands. She smiled at both of them. "Good luck."

In the car on the way to the funeral home, Adam and Paul slumped in the back seat with Olivia in between them, while Moira sat up front and chatted with Susan who was driving. Olivia seemed serene, while Moira and Susan were unusually animated. They were talking about the caterer's menu for the next day. Paul stared out the window, his brows furrowed. Adam did the same out his own window until they were halfway there, and then he began to chuckle.

Paul threw him a look. What's your problem? He thought. He immediately heard in his mind Adam's telepathic answer: *what you resist, you get stuck with*. Was it this easy to communicate telepathically? Paul wondered, just think it, and Adam gets it? Yes. Well, what's this crap about resisting? *Moira warned us about resistance. Resistance attracts what you're*

*resisting. You resisted going to view the body, and - guess what?* Paul wondered how you hung up on somebody who was talking in your mind. Adam just laughed, and began talking with his grandmother.

Amazingly, Uncle Stephen was at the funeral home when the two cars, driven by Susan and Ron, arrived. Paul tried reasoning with his sister one more time.

"Look, the kid's aren't into this viewing thing either. Why don't I stay outside with them?" Paul said. Anticipating her answer, he tried it from another angle, "We already said good-bye at the hospital, why do we have to be here?"

"For God's sake, Paul, grow up and show some respect," his sister said in a way that made his insides wither. He went over to Uncle Stephen, who was talking to Adam.

"Ah, he was a good man. Shame he had to go so soon," Stephen was telling Adam.

Paul was not in a diplomatic mood. "What do you mean? You guys hated each other."

Stephen looked at Paul. "Not true, not true. We didn't get along, we didn't understand each other, we didn't even respect what the other did for a living, but we did love each other."

Paul was slightly ashamed at his outburst. Stephen spoke the truth. Paul imagined that, if he were estranged from his sister for thirty years, he would still come to her funeral, and probably say the same thing to his nephew.

"Why did you come to the viewing, Uncle?" Paul asked.

"Oh, I prefer it. Hate the hospital stuff, tubes up their noses. Awful sight. And the funeral... there's too many people at funerals. But a viewing like this..." Stephen paused. "Paul, when my father died, I hadn't talked to him for longer than I haven't talked to Charles. The man -- I won't get into character assassination here. When I saw him in the coffin, it was the first time we'd been in a room together trying to start an argument or hit me. It was quiet. The guy looked good -- for a dead man, I mean. I was able to make a sort of peace with the old man that day. I let the past be buried with him."

Stephen sounded unusually introspective. He must not have had anything to drink yet today, thought Paul.

"Go take a look, Paul." Stephen nudged him. "You too, Adam."

Paul and Adam walked into the funeral home together. The coffin was at the end of a large room that looked like it was also used for services, although Charles' would be held at the church. It appeared that Susan and Olivia had already had a good look at the body, because they were sitting

down in the first pew with Moira sitting between them. Susan cried as Moira patted her back. Olivia sat there with a blissful smile on her face, her eyes closed. Ron ushered the kids past the body and took them outside.

The two men, father and son, walked down the center aisle towards the casket. Paul had the feeling Adam walked with him to keep him from bolting out of the room. He slowed down as the open part of the casket came into clear view. There was Charles resting in his Sunday best, surrounded by dark blue silk, flowers on top of the casket. It was eerie. It looked like he was breathing. His face was a fleshy pink, instead of the ash gray pallor it had in the hospital. He looked more at peace than Paul had ever seen him.

Paul stood over the casket and thought about his father's death, and how he'd had no reaction. He looked at the man now lying in front of him, and a flood of memories came rushing to the surface. Years' worth of conflict and misunderstanding, followed by wrenching regret. Paul felt a surge of grief overtake him. He would have fallen over if Adam hadn't been there. Adam held Paul's arm, while he gasped for air. Adam steadied him, and Paul, not crying, released the grief. He released it through breathing, through letting it flow from him, through feeling the ground beneath his feet. He could almost see all the times with his father race past his eyes like a swollen river almost overflowing its banks, each memory an uprooted tree or piece of debris. Adam stood beside him, grounding, until the floodwaters subsided and Paul was able to move again. They went and sat down in the pew opposite the women.

Paul closed his eyes and tried to pray, but no words came to mind. Instead, he turned his thoughts towards his father, and to consciously releasing him and the history they shared. He imagined boxing up photo albums containing all their interactions and loading it on some plane that his father was about to take off on. Then he imagined a case of letters, honest ones Paul had wanted to write his father but never had, and loaded that onto the plane as well. Finally, he imagined a footlocker filled with books and old mementos, all belonging to his father representing his father's ideas and expectations for him, all of his dad's advice and opinions. And loaded that onto the plane. Then, he didn't imagine, but rather saw, his father wave good-bye and get onto the plane himself. And the plane took off into a cloudless blue sky.

Paul opened his eyes and felt unusually light, and a little dizzy.

"Good job." Adam murmured. He was sitting with his eyes closed.

Paul looked over at Moira and found her gazing at him. Her eyes were full of love. He sensed her love pour into him like a soothing balm. It filled all the space in him that his father's energy had occupied. Paul

checked inside himself, and felt like he'd undergone some personality transformation, as if he were not the same person who had walked into the funeral home moments ago. He felt incredibly free, able to go anywhere and do anything.

Inspiration hit him. He knew what he was going to do with the rest of his life. But he couldn't say anything until after the funeral.

Everyone got up at the same time and went to the back of the room. Susan was the first one to speak.

"Thank you all for coming today to show your respect for Dad, and support for Mom," Susan began, rather formally. "None of us have to be here for the public viewing, but I thought Mom and I would come so we could say hello to people who might not make it tomorrow." Susan looked at Paul. "No, you don't have to be there. I appreciate how hard it was for you to come today; you don't have to do it twice."

Paul was stunned. He wouldn't have come without his sister verbally putting his balls in a vise. And now she was being appreciative? He managed a grateful smile.

Stephen, who'd been standing in the back all along, said, "Well, why don't I treat you all to some dinner, and then I can drive whoever needs a ride back to the house in my rental car so you and Olivia can come back here."

Susan smiled gratefully at her Uncle, all of his past sins --real or imaginary-- forgiven. Susan drove her mother to the restaurant, while Stephen drove Paul and his family.

"That wasn't too bad now, was it, my boy?" Stephen asked Paul in the car on the way over to the restaurant.

"No. Quite cathartic, actually." Paul said, musing on the experience. He still felt a little lightheaded and shaky from it.

Stephen grunted, not interested in the details of Paul's catharsis, and then launched into a monologue about his plans for expanding Marbanks Architects. Primarily, he wanted to expand their international contacts, both for increased business within the United States and for doing business in other countries. While he talked, Paul noticed Adam and Moira being very quiet in the back seat. He could sense that they were actually having a lively conversation, but when he glanced back there, both were looking out opposite windows. He felt a twinge of frustration that he couldn't participate in their communication.

"The only thing is, Paul, my lad, I'm no spring chicken, if you hadn't noticed." Stephen was saying as they pulled into the restaurant's parking lot. "I can't go gallivanting across several time zones with quite the energy I used to have."

Paul had noticed his uncle aging rapidly since his slipped disc in '89. That particular injury began his decline. He'd never paid much attention to his physical health, and the amount of alcohol he consumed surely must be adding to his ailments. On the other hand, the man was in his late sixties; perhaps it was just part of a normal process.

"You know," Paul found himself saying something he'd been considering but had never put into words, "perhaps what Marbanks Architects needs is an international representative."

Paul noticed Moira and Adam cease their telepathic chatter and direct their attention to Paul's conversation.

"International representative? Capitol idea." Stephen said with a broad grin. "Do you have any recommendations?"

"Me." Paul said.

"You?" Adam asked from the back seat. "What about Seattle?"

Paul shifted himself so he could see everyone in the car. He primarily looked at Moira as he talked.

"Well, I'd like to travel more. I'm thinking of turning the Seattle office over to someone else, maybe someone younger who could use the career opportunity." Paul only slightly glanced towards Adam before continuing. "Moira likes to travel. We could go together." He remembered India as he said it.

Moira, who had been looking at him with a stunned expression, melted into a radiant smile. "It just may work."

Stephen clapped his hands together. "Excellent. Excellent idea! And you, young lady," he wagged his finger at Moira, "I remember you! You were the Japanese translator for Nishikawa. You can be quite an asset. Do you speak other languages?"

"A few." Moira said, modestly. Paul suspected she could speak every language in the world.

"What about it, Adam?" Stephen turned to look at his newly appointed grand-nephew. "Want the Seattle job?"

Adam blanched. "I didn't know it was being offered to me," he hedged.

"Well, of course it's being offered to you!" his great-uncle bellowed. "You're a Marbank." He glanced at Paul. "Always knew it, too."

Adam looked at his mother, and then at Paul. Finally, he looked at Stephen.

"I need to think about it." Adam said reluctantly.

"Yes, you think about it." Stephen said, twisting himself painfully to get out of his rental car. "Just let me know before we leave Connecticut."

Of course, the dinner conversation was entirely around Paul's new

position as International Representative, with Adam's succession to the Seattle office assumed. Susan was jubilant for them. Moira and Olivia sat silently, side by side, eating their dinner.

After dinner, Susan went back to the funeral home with Olivia, and Stephen drove Paul and his family home. He strenuously tried to get them to stop somewhere for drinks, but they successfully resisted. Stephen left them outside the family home and left to partake of his hotel's twenty-four-hour room service.

It was still twilight and the streetlights had just come on. Paul, Moira and Adam stood outside, listening to the sounds of the evening. There was a chill in the air; nature had not quite let go of winter even as it was about to release spring into summer. Paul slipped his arm about Moira and pulled her close.

"So what do you think, darling?" he asked.

"About our living a life of constant travel?" Moira said. "I think it just might work."

"How, Mom?" Adam interjected. "You not only can't stay in one place for more than three weeks, you can't stay in one time either. Moving from one geographic location to another may temporarily offset earthquakes, but what of the planet during this time period in general?"

"I don't know, Adam. I'll have to ask," she said calmly to her son.

"I don't understand." Paul said. "Are you saying that her continued presence during this time period could also cause problems?"

"We don't know, Paul. I've never done it. I've never stayed corporeal consistently beyond a few weeks anywhere." Moira leaned her head against Paul's shoulder. She felt warm and real within his arms. He pressed his face into her hair.

"If her vibratory level is too intense to remain in one *place* for more than three weeks, what do you think her vibratory level will do to this *planet* if she remains within this time period for more than three weeks?" Adam asked, uncomfortable with their physical affection and impatient with their lack of concern. "Moira is meant to create change. She does so by her physical presence. When the earthquake happened in San Francisco, she had to go to India to balance it. When the earthquake happened in Northridge, it was because she'd been there far too long. Who knows what could happen? Everything during this time period could accelerate, affecting more than just nature. It could affect countries and politics and cultures."

"Adam, let me ask. I'll not do anything without permission. I learned my lesson with Mount Saint Helens." Moira assured him.

"Ask who?" Paul said, wishing he could follow their conversation with less effort.

"God." Moira and Adam both spoke at once.

"Oh," said Paul, and with that they all went into the house.

"So what do you really think of my plan?" Paul asked Moira as they huddled together in the dark.

"About your new job?" Moira's voice came from somewhere below his chin. It tickled his neck and he found it mildly arousing.

"Do you think it will work?" Paul said, snuggling closer to her, if that were possible in the tiny bed.

"Possibly. I will have to ask, and I want to be through this assignment before I do. My main difficulty isn't in staying in one place for more than three weeks, although you know the problems that come up when I do. The real challenge is staying in one time for longer than three weeks, and staying corporeal for that long."

"Staying corporeal?" Paul always had trouble understanding that part of her.

"Well, it's very strenuous maintaining a body day after day. I honestly don't know how Adam does it. Bodies are like psychic receptors -- they receive and put out energy. I tend to be very sensitive to receiving energy. I have to do a lot of meditation to release the energy that I pick up during the day -- you've seen that. But it isn't until I dematerialize and get a tune-up that I'm fully cleansed of the energy I pick up during an assignment."

"Does that mean at the end of this assignment you'll have to dematerialize?" Paul asked, the old anxiety rising in him.

"Normally, yes. I'll have to ask if there's any way around it. Or if there's not, how I can come back to this same time period." Moira paused, breathing softly against Paul's neck. "None of us has ever retired; we keep transitioning from assignment to assignment until our body is done. I'll have to ask if there's a way to stop doing it."

Paul stayed silent for a while feeling Moira pressed against him, enjoying the tickle of her breath, the flowery scent of her hair. It was sinking in to him what a sacrifice he was asking of her. And he hadn't really asked her; just assumed she would drop everything to be with him. He hadn't comprehended, until now, what a complete change in every aspect of her life he was expecting her to make.

"But you're changing every aspect of your life, too, Paul." Moira said, reminding him that she knew his thoughts. "You have shown me that you will give up your job and your home to be with me. Everything that you've worked for, to be with me. How can I not do the same?"



"Well, I'm not giving up my job, just changing it. And I'm staying within my own time frame." Paul pointed out.

"But moving out of your comfort zone." Moira said. "Admit it. Those times when you had to go to India and L.A. you were extremely uncomfortable. You're not a natural-born traveler."

Paul gave her a little squeeze. "How well you know me. Better than I know myself. I've never thought about it before, but you're right. I'd rather go hiking in the Cascades than fly to the South Pacific. I'd much rather sleep in my own home than stay in a hotel --" he stopped himself. That was exactly what he would be doing if he went ahead with his proposed new job. "But, wherever you are will be home to me," he concluded, and meant it. His life would not be complete without her.

Moira lifted up her head, and her lips found his in the darkness. "And wherever you are will be home to me, also," she said.

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## ASSIGNMENT 438: CONNECTICUT, 1995

Hello:

Have I made the right choice? I know there are no right choices, and that everything that happens is meant to. But for the first time ever, I am experiencing fear. It helps me understand why unconditional love is such an elusive concept for most Human Beings, and why so many fall into survival level thinking and lose their spiritual focus. I ask for assistance with maintaining my neutrality and awareness. How am I to continue to do this and stay corporeal?

Response:

Dear One:

You are now evolving to the part of your path where you must operate solely off your own information. You will no longer have the assistance of the Teachers, for their information has ceased be helpful to you. You will now have new Teachers who have more corporeal experience than you. Another is being drawn to you, which you have yet to meet. You will find you will need to double your discipline of meditation to maintain yourself and your focus now that you are on your own and without frequent contact with us. It will no longer be adequate for you to notice something and say to yourself, 'I will work on that later', or 'I can fix that with a tune-up'; the physical now is the only place to make change. For your body, present time is the only existence. Remember you do not create anything you cannot handle, so you are indeed capable of handling prolonged corporeality. Go forward with our blessings, dear one, for you have made the most difficult of choices. All is very well.

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## Chapter 9

After the viewing, the funeral seemed a letdown. Paul sat in the church of his childhood, fighting the urge to squirm in the pew as the minister droned the eulogy. It seemed as if he were talking about someone else; certainly no one Paul ever knew. He looked over at Moira and Adam, who both radiated serenity about them. They sat, looking at the minister with interested expressions on their faces. Paul wondered what they were really thinking -- or were they having a telepathic conversation he was excluded from? Paul looked at his sister and mother. Susan's tear-streaked face contorted in grief, but his mother stared at the minister half-smiling, her eyes a million miles away. In the pew behind them Stephen nodded off, while Ron expended all his energy keeping his crew quiet. The twins repressed snickers while Livvy looked monumentally bored. Only Chuck looked like he was trying to keep up with what the minister was saying, even if he didn't comprehend a word.

Afterwards, a million people came up to Paul to offer their heartfelt condolences. Many were long time friends of his father's who had grown children that Paul had gone to school with. He didn't remember any of them, nor their kids. He spent the afternoon with a frozen smile, at the same time keeping a serious and sad look in his eye, so that he could appear to be both sociable and in mourning at the same time. By the end of the day he had a headache so intense he was ready to pass out.

When the last of the friends and acquaintances left, Paul retreated to the men's room. Fortunately, there was a chair inside, into which he immediately collapsed and put his head between his knees. The ring of pain and pressure went all the way around his head, from the back lobes of his brain to across his forehead. Just as nausea began, Adam walked in.

"Found him, Mom," Adam called as he closed the door behind him. He went over and knelt by Paul.

"Resisting all those people in your head, eh?" he said, and gently placed a hand on Paul's shoulder.

"I don't know what it is," groaned Paul. "I can barely see -- my head is throbbing!"

Adam put his other hand near Paul's forehead, but not touching it. That familiar feeling of gravity came upon him, as Adam touched his shoulder. The pain drained away. Paul's sight cleared and he could see Adam's other hand beside his head, slightly moving back and forth. With each wave of his hand, a layer of pain was released. Soon, Paul was able to

sit up and breathe deeply.

"Thanks." Paul said, not knowing what else to say.

"Don't mention it." Adam said, simply, and stood up. "Come. They're waiting for you."

They left the men's room to find Moira and Olivia talking to the minister. Susan and her clan had already gone home. Stephen was standing to one side, waiting for Paul.

"I'm off to the airport. Call me when you get back to Seattle and we'll put together that new job of yours," Stephen said to him. "Beautiful service, Reverend," he called to the minister. "You take care, Olivia. Call me if you need anything, I mean it. Don't hesitate to call." Then Stephen pointed at Adam. "And you," he said. "Take the job!" He waved, and then headed out the door.

Shortly afterwards Paul steered his mother away from the minister, who seemed to like talking simply because he enjoyed the sound of his own voice. They all thanked him, and left.

Back at the family home, things were chaotic as Ron and the children prepared to drive back to Michigan. Susan had managed another week of leave and planned to stay with her mother a while longer. Paul called to reserve a flight back to Seattle for the following day.

"What about you, Adam? Do you want to fly with us?" Paul asked, while on hold to the airline.

"No thanks." Adam said.

"Do you already have a flight back?" Paul asked. "Do you need a ride to the airport?"

Adam looked uncomfortable. They were in the study off the living room. He glanced out the door to see if anyone was within hearing distance. Then he looked directly at Paul.

"I'm not flying back," he said.

At that moment a reservation agent came on the line, so a startled Paul had to give her the booking information and wasn't able to respond to Adam right away. Adam could have left the room, but patiently waited for his father to finish instead.

As soon as he hung up the phone Paul asked, "Why aren't you flying back? Are you being assigned somewhere else?" He could just see Adam disappearing to some other time just as he and Moira prepared to leave

Seattle together.

"No. I'm going back to my original assignment." Adam answered.

Paul could see he was going to have to ask specific questions in order to get any answers. "How are you getting back, then?"

"The same way I got here." Adam shifted from one foot to the other and stuffed both hands into his pockets.

"And how did you get here?" Paul asked, getting frustrated with the 'twenty questions' game.

"Uh, I transported." Adam said softly.

"What? You mean, like, *beamed* here?" Paul exclaimed, trying to keep his voice down.

"Well, that's a pretty accurate image, although we don't use transporter machines." Adam grinned.

Paul was about to ask for more details when Susan walked in.

"Listen, Paul, I want you to walk through the house with me and Mom and see if there's anything of Dad's you'd like. We'll put your name on it and then it can go to you if Mom ever moves." Susan was fully recovered from the funeral and back to her businesslike self.

"Susan, I don't really care about any of Dad's things. Besides, with my new job I won't be staying anywhere long enough to enjoy them," Paul said.

"Well, you can stick them in the Colvos house. That place could use a little more furniture. And anyway, you probably won't get any of this stuff for years, you know." Susan said impatiently.

Reluctantly, Paul went with Susan and his mother to tour the house and place his name on favored items. He was extremely uncomfortable doing this in front of his mother; it felt crass, even greedy, and also it seemed in anticipation of her demise. His mother didn't seem to care. She had always been a passive personality, but since his father's death she was positively withdrawn. And always a distant look in her eyes... where *was* she?

The moment he asked that question, Moira appeared. He stood with his mother in his parent's bedroom as Susan rummaged through their dad's dresser drawer. Moira came in very quietly, giving Susan every indication that she was simply there as an observer and had no intention of interfering in family business.

"You're remembering, aren't you?" Moira asked Olivia in a whisper.

Olivia smiled and nodded. "That's all I have left now." She whispered back.

Seeing her daughter engrossed in her father's old cuff link, she motioned to Moira to come out into the hallway. Paul wanted to follow, but knew that if he left, Susan would notice. So he positioned himself near the door so he could hear what was going on.

"You see this wallpaper? Charles hung it when I was pregnant with Paul. All by himself. I was in no condition to help him. So I'd lie in the bedroom there and hear him cursing out here in the hallway, getting that sticky stuff all over him and tearing sheets down that had bumps or weren't straight. Learned a lot of words I'd never known before." Olivia giggled.

"And that dresser that Susan is rummaging about in? That came from Charles' mother. Oh, she was a grand lady -- quite intimidating, very self-possessed. I always stuttered around her, I'm afraid. Charles was devastated when she died. It was a good thing Susan was already born, because otherwise we would have had to call her Eugenia, to honor his mother's memory. I promised Charles that we'd name our next child Eugenia if it were a girl and Eugene if it was a boy. But I was nearly thirty then, too old, so I knew we wouldn't have any more."

Paul listened to his mother relate to Moira tiny little things that each triggered another memory about his father. Her voice was wistful as she talked. Each recollection was about some mundane event or another, but his mother told it as if it were the happiest time in the world. All she wanted to do was talk about the man she had been married to for half a century. To keep him real to herself by talking. All the other details she left to Susan; they weren't important to her. Furniture, finances, even staying in the house. Nothing was important any more except the memories.

Moira made a willing listener, an easy person to tell her stories to because they were falling on new ears. Susan would have interrupted with her version of the events, and Paul's eyes would have glazed over. Paul saw Susan lifting her head up out of the drawer and he stepped forward to distract her.

"So, do you care about Dad's cuff links?" he asked, returning her attention to the drawer.

"Well, Ron has a tuxedo that these would look perfect on," Susan murmured.

"Then they're his. None of my shirts have cuff link holes anyway."

Paul said. "What about these?" He picked up a small case of tie clasps.

"Do you like them?" Susan asked.

Paul tried not to wear ties as often as possible, and those he had were too wide and wild for such conservative clasps.

"Not really," he confessed. "Ron should have them; some go with the cuff links."

Susan looked her brother in the eye. "You think this is stupid, don't you?"

Paul adopted an innocent look. "Why no, I don't. What ever gave you that impression?"

Susan's eyes became slits. "I don't want Mom putting all this stuff into boxes and giving it to Goodwill or having a garage sale. These are our only connection to Dad now he's gone."

Except for our memories, thought Paul, but wisely didn't say it.

"I'd rather have a photo album than his personal effects," Paul said gently.

Susan looked down at the box she was holding. She ran her fingers across the tie clasps. "But Daddy wore these." She put them down and picked up a folded woolen scarf that was sitting on top of the dresser. She pressed it to her face. "He wore this. It smells like him."

Paul couldn't think of anything he'd rather not have than something that smelled like his father. Mentally he wrote off all of his father's clothes, and was grateful that he was a head taller and more broad-shouldered than his old man.

"Then you should keep it. It means a lot to you," Paul said as neutrally as possible. He didn't want his sister misunderstanding him.

"I'm going to check on Adam," Moira suddenly announced, and turned to go.

"Wait, I'll come, too," Paul turned to his sister. "Put your name on anything you want. I'll have whatever's left over. I really don't care." He walked past his mother and followed Moira.

"I'm just going to see if Adam is still here," Moira whispered as they went down the stairs.

"Still here? Where's he going?" Paul asked, thinking Adam was going out for Chinese food or something.

"His assignment is over." Moira said.

They got to the living room and Adam was sitting in a chair with his eyes closed.

"Good, you're still here." Moira said.

"I'm going soon, but I'll wait until everyone is asleep." Adam's eyes looked even darker than usual, because his skin had gone quite pale.

"Are you going back to Seattle?" Paul asked; confused about what Adam did when he transitioned.

"Yes, but it will take me about three days. I get debriefed, you see." Adam yawned, and bent over and touched the floor.

"And tuned up?" Paul said, catching on.

"Yes. I'm looking forward to that." Adam smiled.

"Well, when you're back in Seattle, think about whether you want to move to Colvos," Paul said.

"To your house?" Adam asked, frowning.

"Well, I'm thinking of selling both houses, since Moira and I won't ever be staying there..." Paul said, "But if you moved to Colvos, maybe we'd keep that one. It's the best long-term investment, you see."

"Don't sell your Colvos house." Adam and Moira both exclaimed.

"We need a home base." Moira said. "We can come back for short visits."

"I'd rather stay in Ballard." Adam said. "For now."

"Well, it's just a thought." Paul heard his sister and mother coming down the stairs.

"...one less thing for you to worry about." Susan was saying as she came into view.

"Whatever you think is best, dear." her mother replied patiently.

"I'll get this list to Bill tomorrow morning." Susan said, as she put the yellow legal pad she was holding by her purse. "I'm going into the study to write thank-you notes to everyone who came today." She walked by Paul without looking at him.

"Don't mind Susan, dear." Their mother said, patting him on the arm. "She just wants to make sure everything is organized before she leaves."



"Will you be okay, once we all go? Adam's leaving tonight, and we're on an early flight tomorrow morning." Paul asked her.

"I'll be fine, just fine." His mother smiled reassuringly. It was no longer the eerie, detached smile of the previous days, but a tired, real, expression. "I have my friends, and my church, and I'll be well taken care of."

Paul gave her a hug. "I'm glad to hear it," he said, and he was.

"Now, if everyone will excuse me, I'm going to lie down; it's been a very long day." Olivia smiled at Adam and Moira, and gave Paul a little kiss on the cheek. Then she went back upstairs.

"She's doing very well, considering." Moira said to Paul after his mother had gone. "I don't get the feeling that she'll fall apart when Susan goes. I noticed that she had a great many close friends at the funeral, and the minister told me they have a bereavement committee that looks in on people for quite a while after a loved one dies. She'll be okay."

Paul sighed deeply. "I know." He said, and left his other thoughts unspoken. Here he was letting go of the responsibility of the Seattle office and leaving his house and possessions and now his mother behind, all to be with the woman he loved. He thought he was letting someone down, or not fulfilling some obligation. He couldn't figure out who or what it was. It just seemed ... irresponsible ... to put love first in one's life.

Moira grinned. "Duty before love?" she asked.

"I don't see either Susan or Olivia having any expectations of you taking care of your mother or the estate," Adam said, his brow wrinkling.

"Oh, they probably don't. It's just an eldest son thing," he said to them both. "My father always considered me irresponsible, not living up to the role of the eldest son of an eldest son. So I think I tend to overcompensate by taking on more responsibility, emotional or otherwise, than I need to."

Adam glanced at his mother. "Sounds like a major past life to me."

Moira nodded. "Mongol Empire? Ogadai Khan?" she suggested, wryly.

"Cut it out, you two." Paul said, feeling they were only partly kidding.

Then Adam gave an enormous yawn. "Excuse me." He covered his mouth. "I really should be going." He looked over at the study, which had

been his bedroom during his stay, but Susan was still in there on the phone.

"You can use our room to transition, Adam." Moira said.

"Thanks, Mom, I will." He gave his mother a kiss on the cheek.

"We will probably be gone by the time you transition back to Seattle." Moira told him.

"I understand. But it'll be easier for you to keep in touch this time." Adam smiled at his mother.

"That's true! I hadn't thought of that!" Moira turned to Paul and explained. "I can usually contact Adam telepathically whenever I need to, except that during some assignments it's a little more difficult than others. But staying within the same time period, it should be a breeze! And I can see you more often, too!" Moira beamed and gave Adam a hug.

"Well, not *too* often." Adam said to her. "I'd rather you stay out of the Puget Sound area as much as possible. You should avoid the West Coast and the Pacific Rim in general."

"That won't be easy," Paul stepped in. "I'm going to have to do quite a bit of business with the Japanese, now that the Nishikawa account has taken off."

Adam rolled his eyes. "Great! Just what Japan needs is my mother shaking things up."

"Adam, we won't be sent there if I'm not supposed to be there." Moira told her son. "Anyway, I have a feeling that we're going to Europe."

Paul's eyebrows rose. He'd heard nothing from Uncle Stephen regarding any European contacts.

Adam reached out and shook Paul's hand. "Well, Dad, have a good time with your new job. I'll see you when I see you." Then he headed upstairs to transition.

Moira walked into the kitchen and turned on the light. "I wonder what we should fix for dinner?" she said, as she looked in the refrigerator.

"How did you do that?" Paul asked, following her into the kitchen.

"How did I do what?" Moira said, as she nosed about in the cupboards, pulling out various cans and boxes.

"Turn on the light. How do you and Adam do that? If you can't drive a car without the battery dying, how can you turn on light switches, or handle electrical appliances?"

"In general, I don't." Moira said. "Your mother has a gas range, for instance. So do you, on Colvos."

"I wondered why Adam got rid of a perfectly good electric oven and bought himself a gas one." Paul said. "But what about turning on lights?"

"I do this." Moira walked over to the wall and brushed her hand near the light switch. The lights went off. Then they went on again.

"I didn't see that." Paul said, going over to her. "Do it again."

Moira obliged. Paul watched as her hand came within centimeters of the light switch, but didn't touch it, or the switch plate. But the switch moved to the off position. She moved her hand again and the lights turned on. "Telekinesis." She explained.

"Amazing." Paul stared at the light switch.

"It was so hard to teach Adam when he was little. He kept touching the switch and blowing out all the fuses wherever we lived. It wasn't that he couldn't *use* his telekinesis, it's just that he'd forget." Moira smiled nostalgically. "I remember picking him up from kindergarten one day, and he had this really glum look on his face." Moira chuckled at the memory.

"What's the matter, sweetie?" I asked him. 'The teacher told me to turn the lights off in the classroom when we went out to recess,' he said. The whole block lost power. Fortunately, it was at the end of the day, and it was sunny out, so they were able to continue school until the final bell -- oh, which they couldn't ring because it was electronic!" More memories came flooding to the surface as Moira continued. "Then, in first grade everything was computerized, you know, the kids took their spelling tests on PCs, and --"

"Where was this?" Paul interrupted. He knew that schools were starting to have computers in the classroom, but he wasn't sure of any that gave each first grader their own PC.

A look of consternation crossed Moira's face. "I can't tell you. It hasn't happened yet," she said, hesitating before going on. She continued with her story, carefully choosing her words. "I taught Adam to use an eraser to peck out the letters, since the rubber protected the computer from Adam's energy. That was only part of the year, of course. When we were in the fifties it wasn't a problem..." Moira's voice trailed off. "I think I can whip up a casserole with these things," she said, looking at the food on the counter.

"Was it hard on Adam and you, moving so much?" Paul asked, gently.

"Well, I was used to it. Adam only had difficulty when he made friends. A lot of places he didn't connect to anybody. But once in a while he really bonded with someone, and then we would have to leave." Moira shook her head sadly. "I think that's why, more than anything, he avoids personal relationships." She filled a pot of water to boil noodles in.

Paul nodded. "I noticed that. It seems like the only person he's close to in the entire company is... well... me."

Moira smiled. "Before he knew who you were, he used to contact me and talk about you. I knew who you were instantly, since we often communicate through images rather than words ... if we're in different time periods pictures come through more clearly than words ... but I couldn't tell him who you were. Orders from Higher up, if you get my drift."

Paul thought he understood. "Adam had to figure it out on his own?"

"Exactly." Moira was sautéing some vegetables to mix into the casserole. "He felt drawn to you, but he couldn't figure out why. I was so happy to see you two develop a friendship entirely on your own. I think if either of you had started out knowing who the other was, that may not have happened."

"Well, if I'd known he was my son from the start, I certainly would have tried to get to know him sooner." Paul thought of the months Adam had been with the company before they'd met.

"Adam may not have been so eager. He probably would have found another, similar job in the area so he could continue his assignment without meeting you." Moira said softly.

"Why?" Paul was slightly hurt thinking that Adam would have avoided him if he'd known Paul was his father.

"He felt a lot of ... stigma ... in various places we lived because he was without a father. And yet in our organization, he always felt slightly out of place for *having* a father. He got it coming and going." Moira poured the vegetables out of the pan into a big bowl. Then she drained the noodles and added them to the vegetables. She stirred in some seasonings and spooned the mixture into a casserole dish. "Cheese or bread crumbs?" She asked Paul.

"Bread crumbs and parmesan." Paul said, nibbling on a piece of broccoli.

Moira sprinkled the toppings onto the casserole and popped it in the

oven to bake. "That should be ready by the time your mother wakes from her nap." She picked up the dirty pans and utensils and put them in the sink.

"I'll wash those." Paul said, turning on the water and adding soap.

"How domestic of you, darling." Moira said, slipping her arms around him as he began to wash the dishes.

"Ursus domesticus." Paul quipped.

"God, Paul, no wonder you flunked Latin!" Susan's voice came from the doorway.

She came into the kitchen and sniffed the air. "Something smells good," she said, and peeked in the oven.

"Moira made a casserole." Paul said, putting the pans in the dish rack. Moira grabbed a towel and began to dry them.

"Thank you, Moira. I'm starving, but cooking is the last thing I want to do right now," Susan said gratefully. "Is Mom still asleep?"

"Yes, but she only went down a little while ago, so perhaps we should eat without her. I don't think she'd mind," Paul replied as he finished the last pot.

"Where's Adam?" Susan asked, looking around.

Paul looked at Moira, who had a little frown on her face. Then, as if she'd gotten an answer to a problem, her face eased. "He just left," she said.

"Left? Like to the airport? We could have driven him!" Susan exclaimed.

Moira looked her directly in the eye. "He has some friends from out of town who came and picked him up. He'll be staying at their place for a day or so."

Susan bought the slight alteration of the truth. "Well, I guess I'll be seeing him in a week or so anyway, so not saying good-bye isn't such a big deal." Susan said. "And you folks are leaving tomorrow morning?"

"First thing." Paul dried his hands on the dishtowel by the sink. "It's been some week, hasn't it?"

Susan gave her brother a tired smile. "It sure has." She gave him a small hug as she prepared to leave the kitchen. "I'm going to check on Mom; if she's not sleeping, she may want to eat with us." She went upstairs.

"He's gone?" Paul whispered, watching his sister go.

"Yes. I checked." Moira spoke softly.

"Think of all the frequent flyer miles he's missing out on." Paul remarked. Then he looked at Moira. "Want to get married when we get home?"

Moira smiled. "I'd love to. Adam won't be there, unfortunately."

"We could wait." Paul said, hoping they wouldn't have to. He would have preferred his son to witness the event that would legitimize him as a Marbanks, but he had wanted to be married a week ago.

Moira shook her head. "Adam really wouldn't mind. Part of him will know what's going on anyway. Let's just have Coral and Michael witness it. Short, sweet and to the point."

Paul put his arms around Moira, and gave her a giant bear hug. He felt on top of the world. He couldn't have been happier. Everything was perfect. Tomorrow they would fly home, and they could be married the day after. After that... who knows?

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Also by  
**Joan M. Newcomb**

**Transcending Time**  
*Sequel to **Tapestry of Time***  
*(Soon to be published)!*

**Threads of Time**  
*Sequel to **Transcending Time***  
*(soon to be completed)!*

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**Joan M. Newcomb** is has spent her entire adult life facilitating spiritual and personal growth. She is an Intuitive Reader, Spiritual Healer, Spiritual Teacher, Transformation Game® Workshop Facilitator and Certified Professional Life Coach. In 1981, Joan went through 5 years of training with a Mystery School and worked there for 10 years. She has studied at Findhorn in Scotland, with David Spangler and Dorothy MacLean in Issaquah and integrates Perelandra's Co-Creative techniques with Nature and Devas into her spiritual energy work. Joan is also an ordained minister who, upon retiring from her former Church in 1994, has officiated hundreds of weddings and commitment ceremonies.

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