

16 Points of Adjustment

by Daniel John Sullivan

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About ...

This is a story that began as a meditation on depression, and the ways that people, sometimes via technology, science, escape from it. It is probably irregular for a man to write a story where the main character is a woman – and this is probably hubris on my part. I do not claim any special insight into men or women or even myself – frankly, I find everyone, including myself, to be a persistent mystery.

This is a story about technology that is not too far off – the ability to use computers, implants, to replace neural tissue, to repair damaged brains. Are we near the point when a “Dendritica Device” could be created, tested? - this is not a question I can answer. The Department of Defense has a massive “black budget” - some would say it’s measured in the trillions of dollars over the last 3 decades alone. With this kind of money, and a willingness to do anything to “maintain the status quo”, it is not inconceivable that such a device could be created, and that the purpose could be deeper, uglier, than helping heal broken spirits.

Finally, this is a story about life. Sure, this version of life, described in these pages, is exaggerated – as fiction often is – but in its exaggeration, its extremes, lay a tale of confronting the less than perfect existence that most of us find ourselves immersed in, these days. No – most of us don’t deal with the challenges laid out here, but many of us deal with stresses, personal disasters, economic hardship, and strained relationships between human beings, men and women.

I hope you enjoy these words, I hope they speak to you.

Chapter 1: The Injury

“Marriage is a prison”, I would say to myself, over and over, as those dark days of self-pity wore on.

I didn't indulge the negativity often, I had a life that needed to be managed, a child that needed a mom even if her father was more and more distant each day, and I would make the most of it, despite the obstacles.

My husband and I had something good once, filled with love, at the beginning and then bitterness, due to work, money, expectations, impacted it all. George was a good man, he was, hard working, determined, strong – as strong as men of his ilk came. George was also a man haunted by demons that even to this day he would not completely reveal and would likely never be able to reveal. But I knew he still loved me, like the sun breaking through a cloudy northwest day – I could still see that “other man”, and that was enough.

George Barnes worked as a logger in the Pacific Northwest, an industry that was being taken over by corporate tree farming, robots, automation, and with less need for men of his type. The men of strong will, determination, and courage were dying. He still got jobs, for short periods of time, but they were mostly small plots of land, tracks of evergreen owned by friends, family, accidental acquaintances.

If he had a good day? - he would come home, with a grin, grab a beer and watch the news ...

On a bad day he would walk around the house, checking to see “how clean it was”, acting as a terror filled madman where nothing was ever good enough. I, Janice Barnes, had started work again in recent years – our 5 year old child was going to have enough, no matter how stubborn her father was. George could have gotten work in construction, driving a bulldozer, but he would say “I'm a logger, like my dad, I will be one till the day I die.” There was much to be admired and feared in George.

This day I was cleaning the house, before going to my job at the public library. We lived in Arlington, WA, on a small farm given to George by his dad. It was 30 acres, a barn, just above the flood plain of the Skagit river.

The farm was my peace, is my peace. The chickens, the potatoes and carrots we grew, the tulips and daffodils in the springtime, the things we needed to supplement our income and yet they were more for me. I was nearing 40 years old, and it was unlikely we would have another child, and that was ok. Helena, our daughter, was part of the

energy of this place. I home-schooled our daughter, teaching her what I knew and then researching for myself the topics I did not know. The farm was my gentle reminder, no matter how angry and abusive George became to “not give up or give in”. The farm saved my life.

As with most days when George had work, he left early, 4 AM. My ability to maintain a positive attitude was nearing a breaking point. I would talk with my friend, at the library, Patricia. Talk about my fears. Talk about the anger that was growing in my husband. And, recently, talk about divorcing him.

Patricia would ask, “have you found a lawyer?”, and all I could do is cringe and think about Helena.

“No, I haven’t.”

“You really should ...”

“I wouldn’t know where to start”, which wasn’t true.

“Well, I can get you some information.”

“I don’t know Pat, I keep thinking of how it was at the beginning, it wasn’t always this bad.”

“Sometimes a marriage doesn’t work out hun, and the best you can do is end it, start again, good for him too ... it will give him a chance to work on his shit.”

These recent weeks this was the recurrent topic during our lunchtime chats.

Patricia meant well, but I knew if I divorced George now, it would kill him. He would get angrier, I would respond, I would get full custody and George would be dead, in a few years. With all of the pain and misery that I felt, I still loved him ... or ... I loved the part of him that wasn’t being eaten alive by his self loathing.

And, George was still that man, the man I married, around Helena. Sure, sometimes his darkness would take hold around her, but then she would smile, would laugh, and the echo of my former husband, my husband now, would take hold. If only for a day or a week, he was still inside. Helena was magical that way, saving her dad from himself.

The summer of 2014 was one of those, rare, special times. George had found work, steady work, for several months as a “cutter” for a small logging company. George took pride in his ability to “fell a tree” in whatever direction the lay of the land and circumstances required.

We didn’t have a lot of money that summer, but we rented a small cabin in the Cascade Mountains for a week. Helena was barely 2 years old, precocious, unpredictable, and very talkative. We would go on walks near the Skagit River, toss rocks in the water, watch Helena as she stepped so strongly into the nearby ponds to watch the fish, the frogs, the bugs.

We cooked hot dogs and s’mores in the evening. Helena’s first s’more was funny as hell – her hands so sticky, her mouth covered in chocolate and marshmallow, her red cheeks and wide smile. Her smile she got from George. My smile had always been a secret, narrow, closed smile. Since I was a girl I simply kept my laughter as an inside joke between myself and the world. George’s smile, like Helena’s, was a happy, raucous fracture of the world, radiating joy for all to see. George didn’t smile much any more, but that summer he did smile a lot.

At night, once Helena was asleep, we would escape into our room, and it was then that George, my husband, was at his best. His hands were rough, calloused, from years of being a logger. His face weathered, sharp, tanned in the way that a person from the Pacific Northwest can be said to have a tan. I would usually stand there, facing him, he would turn off the lights take off his shirt, revealing the strong, hard, vision of a man who made his life by wrestling with nature – and so, he would wrestle with me.

He walked up from behind, kiss me on the cheek, and whispered, “how are you feeling?”. I would crack my secret smile and turn my head back, “feeling good Georgie boy”. His hands would move down my side, to the hem of my dress, caressing each curve, each patch of my dress-covered bodice, squeezing and massaging me as his touch reached my bosom on the “return trip”. He would undress me, first with his mind, I presume, and then unzipping my summer dress slowly, releasing the dress from my shoulders as it dropped around my ankles. Then, with the strength of 20 years of logging, he lifted me onto the bed.

He was a gentle lover when needed, and usually at the start. His mouth would kiss my body, every inch it felt, and I quivered as this happened. “Are you cold?”, he would ask, and I could say nothing, not wanting to reveal the depth of my desire before such a fiery lover. “Not cold, just trembling”, in the dark, that summer, his touch was wanted and missed later when summer turned to Fall.

His rough fingers would tear and pull at my underwear, my bra, releasing me and showing my heat, my sweat, my desire. Naked, the both of us, he would touch and caress the “secret place”, the name I had for it. His mouth would kiss that place, his lips and tongue pushing me towards ecstasy.

My breasts became full, stiff, and my nipples were erect. After minutes of his touch, he entered me – he was a man who knew his worth, at least in those loving moments. He had nothing to be ashamed of, his virility was like those tall ancient forests on the peninsula, and I was just another object of nature falling before him, cutting me down, laying me into his control and I enjoyed this, I melted and moaned under him.

Sometimes it got rough – but that was nice too. Sometimes, that summer, the angry regretful George was making love to me. But even in his anger, he was patient and perceptive. With each moan there was a pattern, a flow, his love into me and my love returning with the shaking of my body – no longer the 20 year old he fell in love with, but still a full woman, a woman who knew what she wanted and wanted him more than any man in the world.

On those rougher nights, it was scary – scary, exciting, and necessary. His pain was released, and I accepted the burden.

Those rougher nights, in the summer of 2014, he would grab me, throw me on the bed, sometimes tearing my dress off, leaving marks where the tearing pulled at my skin. His gentle touch was a scratching howl of defiance against his life, a life he felt was failed. I would not yet be wet, and he would push into me, like a hot spear, a hard pole, without patience or waiting and only my own erotic struggle making it, eventually, pain and pleasure, then pleasure only.

I wanted him like that sometimes – hard and mean and pinning me to the bed.

I also wanted him gentle, slow, allowing me to take more control.

Even after these 10 years of marriage, I wanted him, and so Patricia’s advice, and our talks, were merely me posing ideas about divorce, playing with impossible ideas. I would never divorce him, he would never leave me. For better, worse, pain, sadness, anger, frustration, we still loved each other, though at times I wondered where my husband was, as he so often retreated into caves of his making, caves, caverns, in his mind.

Afterwards, as we lay there, naked and covered in each other's odor, we would talk about our dreams. He would talk about "maybe next year", maybe next year he would make more money. He thought that's all I cared about, all anyone did, and I would try to say "I love you, and being poor is pretty much everyone, these days."

My words of encouragement worked for minutes, hours, even days that summer. And then came the autumn, the rain, the work that dried up while the ground became soaked.

This October day, the 17th of October, 2017, I was washing dishes, cleaning the house, getting ready for work. Helena was in eyesight, playing outside with the chickens, ordering them about and realizing that the only order they took involved the feed she would toss about in the chicken yard.

Helena was a strange fusion of myself and my husband.

She has my husband's external lightness, when she was happy – but she had my internal joy, a place kept protected from a world that seemed more brutal than it was for me as a kid.

My father, the pastor, was never kind, never loving, and had nothing inside him but evil. For all of George's darkness, he could never be my dad, my dad who allowed so many abuses against me in the name of his God. I had lost my faith for many years because of my father. I had screamed at God, denouncing God, a person who's atheism existed for reasons of emotional survival. When George and I met we were both atheists, and then, a few years ago, something changed for me.

A good friend was diagnosed with breast cancer – too late to do anything, it had spread to her bones and her liver.

I expected my friend to scream like hell – she was 30 years old, a whole life to be stolen from her. Yet, in her grace, in her acceptance, in those loving moments she spent with her children and husband, God revealed himself to me in a way my father never could.

"Why are you smiling?", I would ask.

"Girl, I've done so many things, had so many experiences, adventures, had children, given them enough wisdom for their journey, I hope. I get sad, I get angry, and then my husband and my kids are there and I remember – each day of this life, no matter how shitty, is a gift."

God spoke to me through my dying friend.

On so many days since then, and today, I had hoped the same for George – not that he be a “believer”, but that he see the joy along with the pain. Instead, in these recent years, excepting sporadic moments, all I saw in his eyes, was his rage, his pain.

Late at night, when he was asleep, I would pray “Dear Lord, give my husband joy ...” There were no answers. It was as if the Lord in Heaven were saying, “his joy is his path, his love for you can only be a guide.”

These were the random thoughts on that October day. Then my mobile phone began to ring.

“Janice, this is Paul, George’s foreman at the logging site.”

“Yes”, with a sense of fear without knowledge.

“Janice, you might want to sit down.”

“Just tell me what’s going on.”

“George was cutting a clearcut this morning, the tree he was working on ... it fell back on top of him ... he didn’t break any bones, but one of the limbs hit him in the head ... hit him hard ... and ... well ... he is being flown to the trauma center in Mt. Vernon ... the helo should have landed by now, you should go to him ...”

I dropped the phone, in my purse, grabbed Helena, not saying too much ...

What do you say to a 5 year old kid?

“Honey, your dad is barely alive ... he’s in trouble ... we might be driving to Mt. Vernon General Hospital to say goodbye ...”

I had the old Chevy pick-up truck, with all its engine troubles it still ran, it had to, it drove beneath us, carrying us to Mt. Vernon and the trauma center.

When we arrived 45 minutes later, the nurse on duty told me, “your husband has been taken by ambulance to the University of Washington Medical Center ...” She handed me a piece of paper with a map, instructions on where to park. She asked about insurance, and I could only scream “I want to see my husband!”.

I usually kept my temper, my emotions, below the surface – only in moments of safety, with my husband, would those intemperate spirits jump out.

Helena was quiet, worried, in a way a child gets when she is confused but knows something is wrong. I said nothing to her, the hour or more it took to get through traffic, to Seattle, along I-5, and arrive at the medical center.

“Where is my husband?”, was all I could say when I arrived. I repeated it 50, a 100 times before an older woman, obviously worn by this life of burdens and random tragedies, grabbed me by the arm gently and said, “I will take you to him”.

The walk to intensive care took a few minutes – weaving through the sterile, cold building, up the elevator. It felt like hours to reach the intensive care unit.

The neurosurgeon and other specialists spoke to me of “crush injury”, “brain damage”, and said that it was unlikely that George would ever regain consciousness. Some hospital bureaucrat asked me about organ donation, like a ghoul awaiting some fresh, ugly, harvest. A nurse watched Helena as I walked into the room, seeing George there, his body intact, his head wrapped in bandages, a tube sticking into his skull for relieving pressure, draining blood into a bag.

“He didn’t regain consciousness when he arrived”, the nurse said as if this would make me feel better.

Whatever George was, bitter, angry, he was the man that had stolen my heart so many years ago and I simply wanted to say “I love you, I have always loved you”.

But he was there, frozen, in that bed, more dead than alive, with nothing but the beeps and noises from the EKG to remind me that there was a living thing, just not probably George, residing in that body still so strong.

Helena sat outside with a nurse by her side, she still didn’t know, I could not explain. For her, her dad was the whole world – not perfect, but always constant. How do you tell a child that her father is dying?

How do you tell yourself that the bed you’ll go home to will be empty? – empty of the good and the bad and the whole mess that makes a real marriage what it is. I could not

fathom it, I could not accept it, I simply wanted this day to start over and for none of this to be happening.

“How could I go on?”, kept repeating in my head.

I sat with George for several minutes, touching his arm, squeezing his hand, hoping that some miracle would bring him back to me. The nurse handed me paperwork to sign – we had very little money, no insurance, but she said “that will be taken care of, you don’t need to worry”. Worry? About money? My heart was sinking into nowhere, my mind was racing with anger and sadness. I wanted to shake my fist at God and say, “by what right do you take him from me?” And I knew, God could not answer, would not, it was not something that could be fixed.

Outside the room, I sat with Helena silent and frozen, she grabbed my hand with tears in her eyes welling up – she still didn’t know from an adult explanation, but she knew. She was, even at that age, intuitive enough, smart enough, to figure things out.

“Momma, is daddy ok?”, she said with the last word a gasp of sadness, her young voice cracking.

“Honey, daddy is very sick, hurt, we don’t know ... I don’t know ... we may have to say goodbye ...”, was the best I could figure, and I said these words unable to contain my own tears.

“Momma, I’m scared.”

“Honey, so am I.”

That morning I thought, “marriage is a prison” - and now, looking at him, I knew he was trapped somewhere, someplace, in a prison of his own.

“Momma, will daddy be ok?”

I didn’t have the words, so I grabbed Helena in my arms, squeezing, holding her to feel the piece of George that was in her.

We sat on that bench till both of us passed out from exhaustion.
Marriage wasn’t a prison.

Marriage was a gift, for me, with all the thorns and problems – a gift being taken away.

Chapter 2: The Doctor

“How are you two girls doing?”

An old man, in his 70’s or 80’s, asked Helena and myself in the hospital cafeteria. I didn’t know what to say. Helena would just sit there, staring at her chicken strips. I was moving my fork back and forth over the salad, pretending to eat.

“We’re ok ...”, I responded without much commitment.

“You have someone here, at the hospital?”

“Yes, my husband, her dad.”

“Sorry ... my wife would say I’m too nosy, my wife and I have been married for 40 years.”

To take my mind off things, I decided to engage with this old man. He seemed pleasant, perhaps talking to him would help me forget, for a moment, my dying husband in the ICU.

“It’s ok, my daughter and I have been through a lot in the last couple days.”

“Is it serious? - that’s probably a stupid question ...”

“Yes.”

“Well, my wife is in hospice care ... her heart ... it just doesn’t have the strength any longer ... no transplants are available for someone her age and that’s ok ... it’s just the waiting that is hard for me. I’ve been here a week, staying at a hotel, waiting to say goodbye ... she was always the best part of me, if that makes sense.”

“I think I understand.”

The old man went back to his food, staring coldly at it, then grabbed his tray and made his way to the door. Before he left he said, “there are miracles, every once in a while, don’t give up hope.” I started to cry again, but kept it bottled. Helena simply stared at her chicken strips.

The hospital bureaucrat assigned to our case was keeping an eye on us. She seemed like a kind hearted woman, in her 50's, a few kids, mostly grown up and gone. She could tell I needed some help, not simply with the paperwork – and there was a lot of it – but more so with the terror, the fear, the ability to accept what was happening.

When I was 12 I had a beautiful black lab named “Jerry” - he was the most important thing for me in a household of fear. Jerry and I would go on long walks, he would chase birds, and we would play catch. Jerry was an adopted dog, and already an adult when we got him. My dad said, “you better take care of him”, and I simply nodded. I took great care of Jerry, and then when I was 16 Jerry got sick, we never knew what went wrong – back then when a dog got sick, really sick, was dying, you simply took the dog to the vet and had them “put him to sleep”.

“Put him to sleep”, those thoughts made me wonder about the forms, the paperwork, the ghoulis transplant specialists counting the usable organs in my dying husband's body.

“Helena, wanna go for a walk?”

She nodded, so we took our trays to the counter and made our way out of the hospital. Nearby was Burke-Gilman Trail, a walking and biking path that snaked its way along the inland waterfront and up to the Puget Sound.

It was a typical autumn day for Seattle – a misty rain, cloud cover, obscuring the top half of every sky scraper, obscuring the top of the Space Needle. I held Helena's hand, and she clung to mine. Normally, when we would walk, she wanted to be her own self, free of my grasp, but this day was different – today I had to decide to let my husband go.

The previous evening, the doctors gave me “the speech”.

“Janice, your husband is unresponsive and we are detecting very little brain activity. The damage to the brain has had a cascading effect, impacting the brain stem. Within one or two days his organs will begin to shutdown ... we have to make decisions now ...”

Decisions ...

The ghouls were seeing my George, not as a person, but as spare parts – a heart, lungs, eyes, liver and kidneys ... all of which were “still fresh”, but in a day or two would spoil, be unusable, and for them this was mere waste. They could not sense a spirit, a soul, a mind still in his body, they saw simply the “mechanism” that was George, not the person.

George drank a little, not too much. He didn't smoke. He was extremely healthy, mostly because of his job. His organs could save a few lives, his eyes might allow a blind person to see again. The pieces of his body could help, I thought, but selfishly I did not want to let him go.

Helena and I walked along the trail, as bikers and students whisked and walked and jogged by. We did not smile. We did not say hello. We felt like outcasts in a world where other stories, happier ones, were unfolding. Helena was too young to completely understand that "some" of her father was still alive – but the important part, the part that loved her, that longed for me, was likely gone. I did not know how to tell her, and I worried that I would be unable to.

"Helena, do you know where the soul lives?"

"In the head, mamma ...", she replied with reticence, staring at the blacktop trail.

"Yes, and papa's soul has gone ... gone to Heaven to be with grandma and grandpa ... but his body, his arms and legs are still there ... his heart beats. Do you understand?"

Helena simply nodded.

"Mamma has to make a decision, a tough one, and I'm scared ... more scared than I've ever been ..."

"Mommy, will we get to say goodbye?", a 5 year old, with thoughts like these, ideas which would take away some portion of her youth. Helena's eyes were tearing up, her red hair misshapen from 2 nights of sleeping on a hospital waiting room couch. My heart was breaking, and seeing her like this I could barely stand – but we kept walking.

"Yes my love, before daddy goes we will both say goodbye."

We made it as far as Gas Works Park, then turned around. The sun was beginning to burn through the mist and fog and clouds, as if to mock two forlorn spirits awaiting the moment they would have to say goodbye to someone they could not lose.

"Janice!"

The hospital case worker that had been helping us these last two days, Barbara, found us on the trail – we were near to the hospital, so she didn't have to go very far to find us.

“Yes.”

“Janice, you need to come back quickly ... I don’t believe in false hope, this isn’t that ... there might be one chance in a thousand that we can save your husband’s life, but we have to act quickly and you will need to speak with Dr. Morse.”

I did not know this at that moment, but Dr. Morse was more than a neurosurgeon, more than a doctor. He was a leading researcher in the field of human-computer integration. In 2010 he shook the world of rehabilitative medicine by implanting a chip, in a quadriplegic, that restored motor control and 80% sensitivity to pressure, heat, touch. The case was famous, and the patient, Robert Jaines, was still alive to this day – running marathons, participating in fund-raisers, so that more people stricken with paralysis might also have a “miracle”.

Dr. Morse continued his research, in secret, on something even more radical. The project was called “Dendritica” - an effort to create a device, a neural implant, that would bridge and replace damaged brain tissue. All of this was more advanced than my education, and as I would find out, Dr. Morse was barely able to explain how the device worked.

Since part of the project was being managed out of the computer science department, and Dr. Morse held a position as a professor there, we didn’t go to his hospital office. We went to the compsci building, and waited a few minutes outside his office. He did not make us wait on purpose, he was coordinating all of the resources to quickly take action on my husband’s behalf.

“Janice, I’m Dr. Morse ... and this must be the beautiful Helena.”

Helena sneered. This is what she did when she was upset and someone wanted to engage with her, a stranger.

“Please sit down, we need to talk ...”

Dr. Morse explained there were no guarantees. That the device they would implant in my husbands brain had only been tested on animals and one other person – a young woman, he explained, that had been injured in a motorcycle accident. He described *Dendritica* as a device, about the size of a golf ball, spherical, with 16 leads or pathways extruding from it. It was powered by an additional lead that connected to a lithium battery.

The device itself was, using words I could not grok that well, liquid-crystal-silicon poly-map. The words grated. I was smart enough to figure some of what he was saying, but I mostly heard a whisper in my ear - “hope”.

The device functioned by bridging damaged parts of the brain, and then used machine learning to “adapt” itself as replacement “brain stuff” as Dr. Morse put it.

“You see, once the device is implanted, it will take a few days, perhaps up to a week, for the traumatized brain to integrate the system ... but at some point, and there is not predicting when or if this happens, the brain normalizes and the device acts as synthetic brain which ... frankly ... takes on the same mysterious complexity of the normal brain tissue it is bridging.”

“Doctor, I’m barely following you.”

Helena was intrigued, she had been given a glimmer of hope. Even though her young mind was still grappling with this all, she’d always had her mother’s curiosity and she was smart, perhaps too smart at times.

“The brain is not a machine. There are parts of the brain, the brain-stem, which are very hard-coded and seem ‘machine like’, but it is still a crude analogy to compare the human brain to a computer or some machine. A better, yet crude, analogy is to think of the brain as the root system of a tree. The roots themselves follow rules of growth – seeking out nutrients, water, minerals, etc ... but the roots do not follow straight lines and they respond to changes in their environment. Your husband’s brain has significant damaged regions of his temporal, parietal, and frontal lobe – due to the logging accident and the swelling that followed the impact. These portions were there when he arrived, but they were simply dying and are still dying. This procedure is risky, but since the prognosis for your husband is quite bad, well ... he seemed an ideal candidate for this trial.”

“Are you saying that my husband’s brain will be normal again?”

“No ... but, in a way, yes ... we can’t undo the damage done, but we can insert the Dendritica device into the cavity of these regions, and with drugs and time, restore much if not most of his brain function. With the previous case, the patient was able to carry on normal life activities within a month after the surgery, and her case was in many ways worse than your George. I don’t want to give you false hope, but I do believe there is a chance. To call the brain after this procedure ‘normal’ is a misnomer – but repaired and allowed to continue his life? This is not a false promise, we have every reason to believe he has a chance.”

“Doctor, we don’t have any money.”

“If you accept this offer, the procedure, hospital stay, and all associated rehab and expenses will be paid. And if George does recover and is willing to continue participation in the program ... which I would recommend besides ... we will pay him an annual stipend, certainly enough to replace any income lost due to this event.”

All of this sounded too good to be true.

All of this reminded me of my wretched father and the lies he told from the podium of our baptist church. My mind rejected this, but my heart, perhaps hearing God’s voice, said “Janice, this is hope” and so I reached for it.

“What do I need to do Dr. Morse?”

“For now, I need you to sign this consent form ... we have to move quickly, this procedure will not work if more of the brain dies ... we have, at most, a few hours to take action. Also, you will be able to observe the surgery, from the student viewing gallery.”

“Anything else?”

“Yes, the implant will be located inside the skull, within the brain ... but there will be a small control unit and lithium battery holder located just outside the skull, but flush with it. His hair will grow back, but a small velcro attached toupee or hair covering will be designed by our cosmetic surgery department to cover the unit, matching his hair color ... the control unit itself has 16 precision mounted screws, all of which will be adjusted during the period of recovery ... these 16 points of adjustment are complicated to explain, but, put simply, we will be adjusting the rate at which each of the 16 pathways interact with the human brain surrounding it ... this part is less hard science and more luck, trial and error ... for the most part it takes a while to get this right ... I wish I could say it were simple ... very little about the human brain is simple.”

I was a wreck. Dr. Morse, “the wizard” I would later call him, handed me the consent form and I signed it without reading it. Helena began to smile, I so hoped that her heart would not be broken, twice, because a crazy old doctor believes he is God. But there was something about Dr. Morse, something that gave me comfort. On his wall was a picture, ostensibly, of he and his family when they were all younger. In their eyes I could sense that “this man, he is a nerd but a good man”.

We were taken to the viewing area, above the surgical room. There were students already there, most clearly tired, studying for exams, living the “life” of a medical student. Some professors, older doctors, were there as well. Dr. Morse performed the surgery with the help of 3 assistants. The room was quiet, almost as if some queer opera were about to be performed. One of the students asked me if I were the “wife of the patient”, in that cold way the newly minted doctors often do. I could simply say, “that’s my George down there ... Helena’s father.” The med student, embarrassed by his nonchalant inquiry, went back to reading his book and taking notes.

George lay there, strapped down, and covered in what I would later discover were cooling blankets. He was given anesthesia to eliminate muscle movement and his heart would remain stopped for the entire procedure with a limited bypass blood flow. The procedure, the surgery, required he be cooled to near freezing and the surgeons in “the pit” as the students called it, dressed as if they were going on a polar expedition.

It was hard to watch, and at one point I asked a nurse to take my daughter downstairs, to the cafeteria, to get something to eat – I had to watch. I had to see this. I knew it was likely that this would be the last time I would see “my George” alive. Drills, scalpels, micro-cameras, and other devices I could not understand were being used. Dr. Morse warned me that this surgery could take as long as 6 hours – 8 hours passed before the entire thing was complete.

At the end of the surgery, Dr. Morse looked up at me in the observation theater, and smiled, and gave me a thumbs up. I was exhausted, burnt out, and wanted to go to sleep. Dr. Morse briefed me about what to “realistically expect.”

“The next 10 days are critical ... as his brain slowly recovers, we expect to see normalizing brain activity within 24-48 hours ... if this happens, this is a very good sign. George will remain in a coma, for another 3-5 days ... during this time we will be making micro adjustments to the 16 pathways ... additionally, he will be on a regimen of drugs that enhance neuronal growth and oxygenation of the brain ... we’re not out of the woods yet, but I think the surgery went very well ...”

The case worker grabbed us, Helena and I, as she did the previous days – but this time was different.

“There’s this new Italian restaurant I want to try, in Ballard, my treat if you want to get some dinner ...”

“Yes ... especially if you’ll pay for the wine, and, if possible, a bed we can sleep in tonight.”

“Dear, you two are staying with me tonight ... and with respect to the wine? - I will fill as many glasses as you can drink ... though I wouldn’t recommended drinking too much, given the state of mind you’re in.”

“Barbara, given the state of mind I’m in, I wouldn’t recommend drinking too little.”

We joined Barbara, Helena and I, with smiles that slowly returned, in a limited fashion to our stress hewn faces. Helena lit up at dinner. Explained her interest in the chickens, that she now wanted to be a doctor “when she grew up”. We laughed, we drank, Helena had a Shirley-temple and Barbara and I finished off 2 bottles of pinot noir that I could never afford and I did not push away as well.

At 9:30 PM we made our way to Barbara’s home in Ballard, a neighborhood in Seattle. Her house was about the size of ours, but nicely decorated, and likely 5 times more expensive. The bed was soft, and Helena slept by my side. A year ago Helena had stopped needing to sleep in the parent’s bed, but this night was different. We were not simply “mother and daughter”, we were two whimsical, hopeful, manic girls, too exhausted to stay up, to tired to sleep. We talked about George, focusing on the good, eschewing the bad, and we passed out mid story, somewhere along a “fishing trip” we’d taken a few years earlier.

“Mommy, is daddy going to be ok now?”

“Helena, I don’t know for sure, but I do know that this feels like a miracle.”

Chapter 3: The Sleep

Helena and I made a trip, each day, to the medical center – to check in on George. Each day our impatience was obvious to the staff, to Dr. Morse, and each day Dr. Morse (Larry) would give us his “water boiling” talk.

“Guys, water doesn’t boil faster because you stare at it, and this kind of science is very fuzzy.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means that each patient, each person, is too complex to trivialize with a schedule. So far George is doing great. He’s made it to brain-state normalization, this is the first checkpoint to recovery. In a day, perhaps two, we will reverse the chemically induced coma, and then we will have another checkpoint. Within three days we expect he will be conscious, verbal, and intact enough to talk to you guys ... but I don’t make promises I can’t keep, and this kind of thing, well, it is as much about random chance of life as it is about science.”

Dr. Morse insisted we begin calling him Larry. As I got to know him, I liked him more. He was funny, down to Earth (in his own nerdy way), and Helena was entranced. Larry found out that Helena wanted to become a doctor, so he brought an old copy of Gray’s Anatomy and gave it to her. In between his own meetings, his work on behalf of my husband, he would sit for a few minutes and answer the million questions Helena had.

“Larry, will my dad become a robot?”

Larry chuckled.

“No, my dear, he will not become a robot.”

“Larry, will my dad remember me?”

Larry didn’t immediately answer ...

“Helena, there was significant damage to his brain, some memories were likely lost. I remember performing surgery on this young woman, a concert pianist. She had brain cancer and had to have large portions of her brain removed. After the surgery, only 25% of her gray matter, the plastic part of the brain ... the part that contains much of ‘who we are’ remained. After recovery, there was almost no noticeable difference – without using

specialized tests, you would barely notice that this person had so much of her brain taken out ... she still plays piano for the Seattle Orchestra ... she is a virtuoso to this day.”

Helena didn't understand all of it, but she knew that Larry was being honest. It was a bit of a mystery what would happen next. George could wake up, functional, and yet not remember any of what he had learned – so he would have to re-learn everything. George might wake up remembering everything, and, possibly, remember things he had forgotten years ago.

“The Dendritica implant is almost as mysteriously strange as the brain itself – it is part of the reason it works. It adapts in a fluid, generative, way ... it grows its own silicon neural maps in similar ways to the brain itself ... and we are learning that mapping an intact Dendritica implant is almost as complex as mapping the brain itself. Each map is different because each brain is so very different in critical ways.”

God bless Dr. Morse, “Larry”, but it was hard for him to explain this to a five year old – and yet, in Helena's eyes, I could see she understood some of it.

Day 4 was the scary day.

Day 4 was the day the coma would be halted and they would use drugs to wake George up. Helena and I woke up early that day, we went to the waterfront and had scones for breakfast. Barbara was letting us stay with her this whole time – perhaps because she cared that much, or perhaps she missed the presence of her children, of her husband who had died of a stroke a few years earlier.

We were waiting, in the ICU, for what seemed like hours – it was 45 minutes. The procedure for waking George was simple, it involved minor electro-stimulation to the brain itself, and final “tweaks” on the 16 points of adjustment. Finally, they gave him a minor stimulant, intravenously, and then we just waited.

We stared at George, our gaze was transfixed – and so was Dr. Morse's.

At first, we notice movement in his hands, and Dr. Morse smiled at me as if to say “going according to plan”.

Then the breathing tube was removed, and George was able to breathe on his own.

Finally, startling us all, and causing Helena to cry, he whispered “what was that?”.

He was having a memory of the accident, he was shocked to see so many faces staring at him, and then he turned to look at me, “honey, did I get fucked up?”

We laughed, I cried, I asked Dr. Morse if I could give George a hug, if any of the “stuff” would get damaged, he laughed and said “no, not to worry, these things are built to withstand even hugs from five year olds ...”

Helena leaped onto the bed ...

I leaned over, slowly, cautiously, and gave George a big kiss.

I remember feeling like my heart had started again. I felt like I hadn’t breathed, just like George, in days. My tears flowed harder than any day that week, and yet they were simply tears of great joy, relief, that my imperfect, sometimes broken husband had returned to me from whatever place he had gone to.

The next few days were about rehabilitation. They needed to understand how well the Dendritica device was working, so there were tests, more tests, and still more tests. And each day that passed Dr. Morse would say in his cool way “still going according to plan”. Dr. Morse, like Barbara, had lost his spouse a few years earlier – to Alzheimer’s. One reason for his work, the inspiration, was his desire to come up with some solution to dementia and Alzheimer’s that was more than just “some new drug” that bought the patient a few years. He believed he had done it, and likely he had. What did I know, I was a farm girl from Skagit County – and to me, he was “the wizard”.

Towards the end of the hospital rehab, George was allowed to go on walks, with a nurse in attendance, and Helena and myself in tow. We walked along Burke Gilman, we went up to see the fountain on campus, we stopped for pizza on 45th Street. There was something different about George, but not something bad. I sensed, I felt, that he had come through this crucible, different but the same ... that’s not right ... he reminded me of the George I married, the one that would brag about “water skiing through Deception Pass”. The adventurous, slightly reckless, happy George. I wondered if this were brain damage, so I asked Dr. Morse about it.

“Janice, here’s the deal ... the George before the accident is not there, not in the same way ... this doesn’t mean he’s some different person, it means that with brain trauma ... well ... there are always changes, and these changes can seem scary to a spouse ... I can give you all sorts of scientific and philosophical rationalizations, but none of us, brain trauma or not, ever stays the same ... even in a rut our brains try to find a way out, it’s part of what makes the brain so amazing ... the brain will always find a way through the

maze, and the journey through the maze changes it ... so this change is radical – so what? Maybe there’s space for hope that George is still ‘your George’, and a little different besides.”

The last day at the hospital, I asked Dr. Morse if he could watch Helena for a bit, so George and I could take a private walk, in the Arboretum nearby.

George was quiet, and this worried me.

We walked for an hour, holding hands, but saying nothing.

Then, looking out at Lake Washington, he turned to me and spoke:

“I don’t remember seeing any of this the way I do now. I don’t remember seeing you as I see you now. I know I don’t deserve you. I know I’ve caused you heartbreak, because I’m stubborn and proud and feel like a screw up ... I can’t promise everything will magically get better ... but I can say this – I will never take you for granted again ... never ... not for the rest of my life ... I can’t make up for the yelling, the angry mania and bullshit ... I can’t fix that ... I can try though, if you’ll give me another chance.”

For the second time in 2 weeks my heart stopped.

I let go of his hand, turned away, and began crying.

And then, as quickly as lightning, I turned and grabbed George in my arms and held him like I’d never held him before, almost suffocating him, and then whispered in his ear ...

“I have you back ... dear Lord in Heaven, I have my Georgie back.”

Chapter 4: Washing Dishes

George was released from the hospital, a few days after Halloween. We packed up his stuff, from the hospital. George was given information, from Dr. Morse, and a schedule check-ins on a weekly basis. George knew he wasn't the only one with the implant, but he wasn't really questioning his luck. He smiled, a lot, more than I'd seen in years. He laughed, a lot, quite more than I'd ever seen. Helena couldn't stop staring at him, as we drove home in the Chevy pickup truck, with Helena sitting between us. George would not be able to drive for a while, but I was happy to do this. The ride back was calm, in a way that required no words – for the only words we would say is “thank you”, me to God, George saying thank you to the universe, to luck or fortune.

Back at home some friends of ours had put together an ad hoc “welcome home” party. A few weeks earlier, I expected their to be a funeral, a wake, leftovers, and a winter of curling up into a ball in my room, if I would have had the time to do so. I didn't want to believe, during those dark days, that I would have to be alone again – to be honest, I still didn't know for sure. This “wizardry” from Dr. Morse seemed to fantastic to be real.

Nick, one of George's oldest friends, saw pictures of the accident site that were taken by a less than compassionate co-worker while they waited for the trauma helicopter. The pictures were gruesome, showing George's skull split open, some of his brains sticking out through the cracks. A “broken egg” is what Nick said, and I had to go outside. With all the friends, family, drinking inside it was safer for me to go outside, break my “cigarette covenant”, and be there, at night, that first night home, staring at the stars.

I spent 30 minutes outside and George wondered where I was. When I waved at him, through the window, I think he understood – he had been through a lot, I had been through hell. And I wondered if, even if, he would be ok, was he going to still want me, to be with me. I wondered if he would be capable of being the man that he had always been in the bedroom. I selfishly wondered if all this bullshit was worth it.

Patricia saw me standing outside, and wanted to bum a smoke – her husband never knew she was a “drinking smoker”, but this night she did not mind being discovered, she was drunker than me.

“This is pretty great, isn't it?”

“Yep, Pat, this wonderful”, I said in a wry voice, she could tell that I was worn to nothing.

“I know this has been hard on you, I can’t imagine how hard ... a few weeks ago ... shit, we were talking about divorce lawyers and shit ... now ... heck ... your man is back from the dead ... better than ever.”

“Yes, Pat, it’s a miracle.”

“Is something wrong, I would think you’d be happy as hell!”

“Don’t get me wrong, I am happy ... happy that Helena is asleep upstairs dreaming of going fishing with her pops ... happy that I didn’t have to say goodbye, that way ... but it feels like a whole part of the last few years has been erased, except ... I don’t get to erase my brain ... I remember ... the yelling, the shouting, the obsessive checking on how well I ‘kept the house’ ... the bitter, angry, husband ... that I still loved, but ... that asshole seems to have been replaced with this other man ... or, maybe, replaced with an earlier version of George that doesn’t remember how much of a miserable man he was.”

“He doesn’t remember?”

“He remembers, but he’s skipped all the way to ‘making up’ ... and I really wanted to yell at him for a change, to get my shit on the table ... I feel cheated, in a way ... and I feel like a child for being that way.”

“Well, Janice, there’s still time for a blowout ...”

I looked at Patricia and wanted to scream, at her, at the dark night sky, at God.

I was given a miracle, my husband was home and alive – so what kind of person does that make me? Who was I to be angry about a husband retrieved from the grasp of death? My anger over his verbal abuse? His own darkness that he harbored for the last few years? His unwillingness to change, on his own, so instead nature or fate intervened and whacked some sense into him? I felt something strange, as if I was reversing roles with George. George came home the optimistic, flexible, capable spouse, and now I felt a sclerotic distemper, a rage, at how quickly this “magic” had changed it all.

“Patricia ... let’s talk about this tomorrow, at work, once we’ve both had a chance to sober up ...”

And with that, my co-worker and friend Patricia turned and went back in the house.

By midnight, most of the well-wishers were on their way home. They had all wished George well, congratulated him on his recovery, and they had almost all asked him if he still “felt like himself”.

Nick, who knew the darker, meaner, George, was mesmerized by this “new man”.

“George, you feel any different?”

“I do, I guess ... it’s hard to say since there’s a weird glaze or layer on everything ... it all feels different, but the same ... I know this sounds bizarre, but I can’t remember how I felt before this moment. I remember, have the same memories, but they are different ... more clear ... less confused ... I dunno man, I feel the same but different.”

George was not allowed to drink, at least for the first phase of the study. Once everyone was gone, and the house was quiet, George and I made our way to our bedroom. George took off his clothes, lay in bed, and then very quickly fell asleep. That made sense, he’d been through a tremendous trauma, a horrible injury, he had to be more tired than he had been in years.

I was not able to get to sleep so easily. Perhaps it was the bottle of wine I finished off by myself. Perhaps it was the cigarettes I smoked outside that night. Perhaps it was the anxiety of not fully understanding what Dr. Morse, “the wizard”, had done. I was grateful, exasperated, muddled, mad, and tired – but not tired enough to sleep. So, after I was sure George was asleep, I got up began cleaning up after the party. I was quiet, but it didn’t matter, both Helena and George were so deep in slumber I could have been playing drums and they would have been undisturbed.

I moved all the dirty dishes into the kitchen, dumped the garbage, and then grabbed a random book from the wall – not to read, I couldn’t concentrate, but to stare at as an affectation. I fell asleep that night, in the big leather chair downstairs, as George had done so many nights before. The last thought in my head was: “so I’m the new George?”. And with that dreadful thought, I passed out.

The next morning I awoke to one of the strangest sounds I’d heard in years. Helena and George had finished breakfast and were washing dishes, together. Helena “helping” as children often do, and George, gladly, cleaning each dish with a strange harmony of laughter and discourse in the kitchen. I pretended to sleep a bit more, if only to overhear this unfamiliar banter and exchange.

“Daddy, are you feeling ok?”

“Mostly Helena, I think.”

“How do you know you’re ok?”

“Well, how do you know you’re ok?”

“Because ... cuzz ... cuzz ...”, and Helena laughed, and my husband, and the cacophony filled the kitchen.

Helena and I played the “because game” often. She would ask a million questions, I would ask them in return, and her response would always end with “because”.

“Helena, do you want to for a walk today with mom and me?”

“YEESSSSS!”

When George and I were first married, we would go on the marvelous walks along the dikes that bordered much of the Skagit River where we lived. We would hold hands, he would steal kisses, as I would, and it didn’t matter if it were raining or not – we both loved the rain. Helena hadn’t been born yet. Helena was but a mere suggestion of possibility. George’s world had already begun to turn darker when Helena was born. I know he tried, back then, to find some way through it, but he was so stubborn, so unable to do anything different.

“Honey, you still sleeping?”

I pretended to be startled, sitting in that leather chair.

“Umm, yeah ... I’m still waking up ...”

“Would you like some coffee, I have a pot ready?”

“Yes, heck, that would be great.”

George poured the cup.

Helena transported that hot mug to my chair, smiling, and then like that she turned around and went back into the kitchen to help her dad with the dishes.

By 10 AM the dishes were done, the kitchen was clean, and George was putting on his walking boots with Helena. I got ready as well, wiped the sleep from my eyes, and joined them on the back porch.

“How far do you want to go George?”

“Down to the bend, near the Henry property, if that’s ok?”

“Is that too far, given your ... your accident?”

“Dr. Morse says I need to do as much walking as possible, he says it will help with the rehab ... but what about you Helena, how far do you want to go?”

Helena stood stiff, with her silly smile, and said, “to the moon, to France, to the mountains and the sea!”

George and I laughed.

Helena took the lead, not roaming too far ahead.

I tried to ignore the feelings I had. I tried to remember the fear that I would lose George. We walked, and as we did, I repeated to myself “you have your George, he is alive.” I had always seen myself as better than this, this attitude or confusion I was experiencing. I could not imagine not being happy, but for some reason I wasn’t. Helena’s dad was ok, and perhaps renewed, more like he had been many years ago – so what was wrong with me?

We made it to the bend in the river, near Henry’s farm, and then back towards home. We had seen a few cranes, a bald eagle, and we stopped near a flood-way pond so Helena could stare at the fish. On the way back it began to rain which is not a rare event for Washington State, but it was harder than normal, heavier, or that’s how it felt to me.

Back at the house I started an late lunch – tomato soup, grilled cheese, and I made sure George took the meds Dr. Morse prescribed for him. George and I and Helena sat down at our kitchen’s cubby, most old farm houses had this built in booth, cozy, wooden and creaky. George talked about his upcoming check-up with Dr. Morse, Helena kept staring at him smiling, and asked about whether they were going to Uncle Pete’s for Thanksgiving. I simply sat there, pretending to be ok.

I spent the rest of the day finishing up on the cleaning after the previous night's fête. George settled down to a nap, which made sense. Helena flipped through the anatomy book that Dr. Morse had given her – she clearly didn't understand as much as she desired to, but she was curious. For her, having her father alive was not simply good luck, but some mystery to uncover.

Later that evening, after Helena was asleep, George came downstairs to where I was sitting, in the big leather chair, pretending to watch Netflix.

“What are you watching?”

“Some stupid show about a mother that happens to be cannibal ...”

“Sounds weird, is it good?”

“Meh ... not really ... I just don't feel like watching anything or reading.”

“Are you ok?”

That question, that question he had not asked except intermittently in years. He would ask that question, after drinking a six pack of self-loathing, and I would always answer “I'm fine”. Now, I don't know what overtook me.

“No, I'm not ok ... and I don't know why for sure.”

“The last few weeks have been hard, for you and Helena especially.”

“What about you? Was it hard for you?”

“Honey, I was nowhere ... I don't remember anything but the moment the tree slipped on me, and nothing after that ... I felt no pain, no nothing ...”

“Well, I felt it ... I felt the fear of not knowing if you would end up spare parts for a bunch of jerks I'd never meet ... I felt the fear that I would be raising Helena alone, but really? I've been raising her alone for a few years now. I felt the fear, the ugliness, of hoping God would simply take you away. I wished you would die at times. I remembered the version of you, the you I fell in love with and then compared that person of the miserable spirit that would stalk the home at night ... looking for dust and dirty dishes and any excuse to yell at me ... I felt it all, and those few weeks, days, felt like endless time ... Want to know how I feel, do ya?”

I stood up and was ready to walk upstairs, disgusted with George, disgusted with myself. And as I walked away George grabbed my arm, not in a mean way but simply as a request that I pause.

“Honey ... I know who I was and who I am. I’m not certain I can ever make up for the person I’ve been. I know I scared you at times, my anger, my rage. I wanted on so many days to say ... ‘my dear love, I’m drowning and I don’t know how to swim’ ... I know this.”

“What do you want me to do with this self-understanding you have now, this reflection?”

“I’m not sure I get it ...”

“NO, YOU DON’T GET IT! YOU DON’T GET IT AT ALL!”

I pulled my arm away, running up those wooden stairs, breaking every rule I had about protecting Helena from my and George’s dysfunction. Helena woke up, and crawled into bed next to me. George ... I don’t know what he did. Maybe he slept on the couch. Maybe he went outside for a walk. When I woke the next day I found a note on the kitchen counter:

“Honey, I re-scheduled to see Dr. Morse today ... I took the work truck. I’m sorry about yesterday ... hell ... there’s too much for me to be sorry for ...”

Chapter 5: The Check-up

This wasn't the first time George had taken off without prior notice. In 2015, during a hard year, he would do that a lot – no note, no info, just gone for hours. I thought he was having an affair at the time, so I spoke to his friend Nick ...

“I don't know, does he have someone else?”

“No Janice, that's not it.”

“What is it? He can't tell me? He can't tell the mother of his child?”

“Janice ... he's not going to see another woman ...”

“THEN WHAT ... what's he doing?”

“Janice, you know he gets into these moods ... he talks to me about them ... he told me once he would buy life insurance and kill himself ... that was one of his many plans. I don't think he's doing anything more than figuring things out ... men do this, we're too ashamed of how we feel, so we go off to someplace where the people that we love can't see us ... the only reason I know this is one of those days, I think, I saw him by himself standing in the parking lot ... the old one that oversees the Skagit River as it flows through old Mt. Vernon ... he was just standing there, staring ... I pulled up to say hello, and all he could say was 'I'm thinking' ... men do this Janice, it's not the best way to deal with problems, but probably not the worst.”

That was the conversation I had with Nick, and today, I have a note. I'm glad he's going to see Dr. Morse, I'm glad he is well. I'm glad to know, as perverse as this will sound, that the “old George” is still there – all the cracks, imperfections, demons, that haunted him before. It's ugly to think this way, but it all seemed too good to be true, so, a little reality returning was what I needed.

I decided to call in sick today. With the money coming from the foundation, the money that Dr. Morse made sure we would get, we were doing better financially than we had in years. I could finally get caught up on bills, versus playing “phone tag apology”. I called it phone tag apology because, well, that's what it amounted to – telling the creditors “we're working on it” and “we're sorry” and knowing that I was always speaking to some call center employee that, likely, was in debt themselves.

Helena slept late this day. She was usually up around dawn, but today she was more tired and this was welcome. I loved Helena, but she could be a handful at times. I spent the morning, while George was at his check-up, paying bills, surfing the web about brain injury, and wondering what Dr. Morse and my husband were talking about.

At noon I received a call from Dr. Morse:

“Janice, this is Dr. Morse.”

“Yes, is George still there?”

“No, and he really shouldn’t have driven here by himself.”

“Is he ok?”

“He’s fine, he’s heading home right now ... but I need to ask you about something.”

“What is it?”

“Did George suffer from depression before the accident?”

I did not know what to say. I was not a psychologist, just a wife and mother. I had read about depression and anxiety, a few years earlier, when George’s “condition” got worse. I knew enough to know that, yes, according to some textbook my husband was depressed. But what are textbooks when compared to the human heart? I would have said, “my George, his heart is broken”, but not broken over a person, rather, over a life that seemed empty, pointless, to him.

“Dr. Morse, he had issues ... he certainly was angry at times, very angry, and I think sad.”

“Ok, this is good news ...”

I understand that doctors, health care workers, they develop this detached sense of things – but when Dr. Morse said this I simply wanted to scream.

“HOW IS THIS GOOD NEWS?”

“Listen, Janice, I don’t mean it is good he was depressed before the accident ... it is good news that some of this, not all of this, is returning. Do you remember the 16 leads, the pathways, I described in my office a few weeks ago?”

“Yes.”

“Well, they do more than simply bridge broken communication in the brain, one of their roles is to regulate various neurotransmitter channels ... one of these channels deals with serotonin, do you know what that is?”

“A friend, someone I know, is on an anti-depressant ... I know a little.”

“Here’s what you need to know, George is doing very well ... he reported mild depression, but mostly he is reporting concern ... he believes you are angry with him ... he knows why you have a right to be ... during this recovery process, there will be adjustments.”

“What kinds of adjustments?”

“Some of these are technical, part of my job – the 16 precision screws that adjust the flow of information into the device ... I made one of these adjustments today ... but the other adjustments? - there are no screws for them. These are how the family, friends, neighbors adjust to George ... He’ll never be exactly like he was, but that doesn’t mean he isn’t ‘who he is’ ... he’s still George and, he’s undergone a trauma that will mark him for life.”

“Doc, what about me?”

“What do you mean?”

“What about the screws in my head? Who adjusts these screws for me? I know, I don’t have screws ... I have a child ... a husband who has barely been able to look at me in the last few years ... a mountain of debt ... where are those ‘screws’ for my life, Doc?”

“Janice, no one can know what you are going through but you ... there are therapy groups, that the foundation will pay for, that I can recommend ... clearly, given the nature of the situation, you won’t have a lot in common with the people in these groups ... mostly these are spouses, children, of people suffering from dementia, stroke, other traumatic brain injury ... but it might help.”

“I don’t need a therapy group, Doc ... I just need to believe this is going to be ok.”

“Janice, it’s funny, George said the same thing to me this morning ... I told him what I will tell you – it’s going to be rough. It’s going to be messy. You will wake up and wonder ‘who stole my husband’ ... you will question all of this because it is, frankly, a miraculous thing and only a fool accepts a miracle without asking questions ... I would ask, as hard as this is, that you be patient ... patience and acceptance, that’s what you need, that’s what George needs.”

The call with Dr. Morse became less serious, and he discussed meds, the possibility of seizures which is always a real possibility with any brain injury or surgery. He suggested that George moderate his drinking, assuming he drank more than a few beers a day.

Finally, when the call was over, he said this:

“You can’t rush healing. It’s the case with all of us, no matter the injury, to expect to speed up the process, but you can’t. Just cut yourself some slack, remember that you have a second chance, with George, and that will take time too ... don’t rush it, don’t fear it, treat it as an opportunity. I have to get going, please call if you have any questions.”

The call with Dr. Morse lasted about 30 minutes, I figured George would be home soon. I began to work on dinner, pot roast, one of George’s favorites, and Helena’s, and that was calming. There’s something about that smell, that slow cooking of vegetables, spices, roast, that seemed to lower my blood pressure and relieve the pressure of life.

The door to the mudroom creaked, one of the notifications that someone was here – and it was George. He took off his boots, put on his slippers, and walked up to me as I was still making preps for dinner later that day.

I pretended to not notice, and kept working at the sink ...

He walked up from behind, and with his strong arms reached around me and gave me a hug. He whispered in my ear, softly ...

“I’m sorry for taking off like that, this morning, without waking you ... I needed to see the doc.”

“I understand.” I said this coldly.

“Things will get better, I know they will hun ... I can’t explain why, or how, but today’s check-up with the doc helped a lot ... I won’t pretend that we can go back to the good days ... I can’t pretend that I wasn’t the man I was just a month ago ... I saw the mean spirited man, as if from above, and each time I wanted to shake him ... knock him to the ground ... I wanted to say ‘that’s not me, there’s an alien inside of me’ ... but it was me, that man who took you for granted.”

I don’t know what came over me, but it had to be said.

“THAT’S GREAT ... GREAT ... YOU AND YOUR MAGIC BRAIN ... BUT WHAT AM I SUPPOSED TO DO? AM I SUPPOSED TO SAY: ‘FINE, DEAR, FINE ... IT’S ALL FINE ...’ ... it’s not fine. I am trying to be the wife I’d always wanted to be, before I met you and I’m screwing up.”

“You’re not screwing up ...”

“DON’T TELL ME WHAT I’M DOING!”, I pushed him away and he backed up. “Don’t tell me I’m ok or this will be ok ... I loved a man once named George, then he went away and was replaced with this other angry man, pissed off man, non-communicating man ... and then he almost died ... and I spent a week in hell not knowing what was going to happen, or worse, WHAT I WANTED TO HAPPEN!”

George looked down at the ground, and was turning to walk away ... so this time, I grabbed him by the arm.

“... but here’s the thing ... I never stopped loving you, and I still do ... you need time to recover, to rehabilitate, to heal ... so do I ... so does our marriage ... I know there’s a little girl playing upstairs that sees you as the whole world ... I know there’s a wife, standing here, and all she wants is for you to be better ... I’m tired, I’m a little lost ... can we start from there?”

George looked up from the ground, turned on his larger-than-life smile, and then hugged me. Not the hard mean hug of a man half drunk. Not the whimpering hug of a man barely tethered to this world. Rather, he hugged me in a way that said: “we’re going to make it, you and I, we were always supposed to and we will.”

“Is Helena playing upstairs?”

“Yep ...”

“I’ve got a surprise for her ... the doc said I could bring her along, and, as long as I take my seizure meds I can drive ... Helena is a very smart kid, she gets that from you ... and I think the doc wants to nurture that, would that be ok? You could have the house to yourself ...”

“I don’t want the house to myself ... but, there is a lot of shopping I can do ... I think that would be neat!”

George went upstairs to tell Helena the good news. I decided to relax a bit. It was nearing 4 PM, and the dark grey evening of Washington State in late Autumn was descending upon the house. I grabbed a bottle of wine that had one glass left in it, cracked it open, and poured myself a drink. I put on my jacket and sat outside, staring at the trees that were quickly losing their leaves, pondering the evergreens that never seemed to experience the seasons, staring into that misty early evening dim that surrounded our farm.

Dinner was cheerful, satisfying. George told his tales of that strange doctor, Dr. Morse, of the tests, of the “16 points of adjustment” that the doctor made so delicately. We ate, we smiled, Helena discussed what kind of doctor she would be, one day, when she grew up. For dessert I made black berry cobbler, and coffee for myself and George. Coffee was ok, Dr. Morse told us, just not too much drinking.

Helena fell asleep around 7 PM, and George and I sat on the sofa, near the big leather chair, not talking, just acknowledging that nothing, not one word, needed to be said. We listened to the radio, an old time’y station, and a song came on - “Moon Dance” by Van Morrison.

When “Moon Dance” began playing, George looked up, got up, and grabbed my hand, softly, as if to ask permission. I got up as well. We began slow dancing, to that song, and the others that came on after it. After 20 minutes, he spoke:

“Do you remember that bar in Concrete?”, I chuckled, it was where we first met.

“Do I remember, do you remember that creepy old bar tender that kept hitting on me, ‘hey little girl, want to see my boat’ ... yikes ...”

“I remember thinking to myself ... heck ... that girl, she would never go out with me, but I’ll ask her out to a movie besides ...”

“Want to know what I was thinking, Georgie boy?”, he nodded.

“I thought, ‘that man, he scares me, not because he’s scary but because ... well ... he’s too damn handsome to not have some hidden issues ...”, George laughed, but muffled so as not to wake Helena.

“I don’t know what happens next Janice. I don’t even know if this ‘fix’ in my head will last ... neither does Dr. Morse ... there’s only ever been one other person with this implant, and Dr. Morse doesn’t want us to meet ... he thinks it would ‘violate scientific protocol’ ... and I don’t need to meet her ... what I need, I guess ... is faith. I know I don’t have faith in God ... I do have faith in you ... you have always been the bedrock of my life, of Helena’s, of this home ... in my own way, I thank God for you each day ... though, weird for an atheist to say that, right?”

“Weird ... but not unwelcome ...”

He held me closer, and we danced a little longer, in that strange little ballroom which was our living room. It could have been some magical ballroom someplace I would never go ... and for all the magical faerie tale crap, I had this evening, this modest little room, this man that loved me and I loved and the feeling, not proof, that everything would be ok.

We walked upstairs, we both undressed for bed. George said:

“It’s going to take a few weeks for me to be ... ya know ... ready for intimacy again.”

“George, that’s ok ... it will take me a few weeks as well.”

Chapter 6: The Ship of Theseus

During the weeks leading up to Thanksgiving, George and I began a routine again – a good one. He would watch Helena, and I would work at the library. The money from the foundation that Dr. Morse had established for us was plenty and we knew how to do a lot with a little, but George knew, perhaps now more than ever, that my job at the library was one of the few things I had, for myself, that kept me sane.

Patricia and I would go to lunch, she would ask about George and I would tell her as much as I felt comfortable saying. I was considering going full time as the library's assistant director – Patricia ran the library, and I knew that would make her happy.

One day, just before Thanksgiving, while I was getting ready for work, Helena asked me a question:

“Mommy, is daddy still daddy?”, and I didn't know what to say. The man she knew had been angry, almost all the time, as much as he tried to hide this from her. She never knew the man I met, in that stupid bar in Concrete, WA. She did not know the man I had married, she knew the father who stumbled in life and was unable to pick himself up. She knew the intermittently happy dad, the once in a blue-moon light hearted dad, but she didn't know the George before, and now she was faced with someone who seemed different, even if the differences were mostly welcome.

“Honey, I can't really answer that question, I'm not sure Dr. Morse knows for sure.”

“But he loves us, mommy?”

“Yes, your dad loves you.”

“Is that ... real mommy?”

I didn't know what to say since I was still asking that question, waiting for some shoe to drop, waiting for some event that would disrupt Dr. Morse's miracle.

At the library that day, I wandered the stacks as I often did when my work slowed. I rarely ventured into the philosophy section – not for lack of interest or understanding, but because, as a woman, a mom, you get the hardest lessons in real philosophy that “dusty old men of letters” can only speculate on.

As with so many other days, I would randomly pick up a book, open up to hear its old spine crack, and read a few pages. This book, by Plutarch, had a section labeled “The Ship of Theseus”.

I read the synopsis provided by the editor of these works of Plutarch. The synopsis seemed eerily apropos – it discussed a problem of change, in philosophy, that to this very day, according to the editor, was still paradoxical.

That night, I decided to retell this tale to my Helena, in words both she and I could understand. George had gone to sleep early, once I got home, and I smiled “there you are, learning a bit what it’s like to be a mom.” I told Helena I would tell her a bedtime story if she went to bed, and she complied.

After tucking her in, hugging her, turning down the lights, I pulled up a chair and began to tell the story:

“A long time ago there was a man that built ships, beautiful ships that would travel all over the world. They had sails, they were made of wood, and over time they would get old.”

“Mommy, were there princes and princesses on these ships?”

“Sometimes, sure, all kinds of people traveled on these ships.”

“Dragons? Did dragons travel on these ships?”

“The bigger ones, maybe, but dragons were very large and had wings, so, they didn’t need to sail on these ships Helena.”

I paused for a moment, not knowing if this story would help or confuse.

“... anyways ... the old ship builder had a repair shop as well, and as the ships got older he would bring them into his shop, and replace what needed to be replaced ... one day, one of the owners of the ships he had built asked him a question: ‘builder, how many of the planks in this ship have you replaced?’, and the builder thought ... and he pondered ... this was one of the first ships he had built ... many years earlier ... and it had been to his repair shop many times over the years ... the masts had been replaced ... the sails ... the ropes and other gear ... the inside had been renovated ... and the hull of the ship ...”

“What’s a hull mommy?”

“Well, the hull is the bottom part, the most important part, the part that allows the ship to float ...”

“Ok, mommy ... keep going ...”, Helena’s curious mind had latched on.

“Well ... the builder thought about the hull of the ship, and he looked at it, and he could see that more than half of the planks in the hull were new, and likely very few were original ... so the builder looked at the owner of this ship and said, ‘Sir, I think most of this ship is different from the original, the new ship you bought from me so many years ago ... the owner seemed perturbed ... he had named the ship after his daughter who had died so many years ago ... he seemed upset, because that ship symbolized his love for her ... ‘builder, I don’t care how much it costs, I want my old ship back!’ ... the builder did not know what to say ... ‘Sir, that would be impossible’ ... and with those words the owner of this ship stormed out, indignant, and the builder did not know why.”

“Mommy, do you think it was because he missed his daughter?”

“Yes Helena, as I miss you each day when I go to work ... but there was more to this ...”

I was improvising, based on some philosophy I had read, trying to explain something to my daughter and afraid I was failing.

“May I continue?”

“Yes mommy, I like this story.”

“The very next day the owner of the ship returned, demanding to know where his original ship was, the builder took him outside his shop ... the builder showed him a pile of wooden rubble, and said, ‘some of your ship is there’, the builder then pointed to a home, in the village, and said, ‘some of your original ship is there’, the builder then took him to see an old man, with a wooden leg, and said, ‘there Sir, a piece of your ship went to helping an old man walk again’, the owner, annoyed, demanded ‘PUT MY ORIGINAL SHIP BACK TOGETHER! I WILL PAY ANY PRICE!’, and so the builder, with payment from the owner of that ship, named Theresa, did so ... it took weeks ... it took effort ... all other work was stopped ... after a few months, the original ‘Theresa’ was put back together, ready to be floated onto the seas ... it was bent, twisty, musty, dark and drab ... it was rotten and wasting away ... the owner pulled the rope that sent this ship back onto the seas, and you know what happened?”

“What!?!”, Helena gasped.

“The ship fell apart once it hit the water, like your stack of logs when you whack it with your foot ... it bent sideways, split open, and was a floating mess ... the owner of the ship, for several minutes, just stared out at the driftwood, in the water, that was once his ship, named after his long dead Theresa ... then, after a while, he turned to the builder and spoke, ‘builder, I cannot explain why this had to happen, it must seem like a terrible waste ... but my heart kept hold of something that it needed to let go of ... I loved my daughter Theresa, but I could never let go ... thank you, I will need no more ships’, the builder never saw this man again, but he felt bewildered. It was a puzzle to the builder, why this old man was so obsessed with the original ship he built so long ago. He spent that day thinking, and thinking, and then realized something ...”

“What mommy!”

“He realized there was no good answer, that it was a paradox ... do you know what a paradox is Helena?”

“That sounds scary ...”

“Well, it kind of is ... a paradox is a problem that doesn’t really have a solution, at least not one that will ever make sense ... the old man wanted to remember his daughter in that ship, but the ship, like everything, was never going to stay the same as long as it sailed and could sail ... it would always change ... as each day passed parts of the ship would get old, and if those parts, those pieces, were not replaced, the ship would not work ... for the builder, he did not see the ship as different ... for him, ‘fixing ships’ that were old was normal ... the idea that anyone would see the ship as strange for having new rigging ...”, Helena interrupted.

“What’s rigging?”

“Rigging is the rope and pulleys and stuff that allows the sailing ships to raise sails.”

At this point, Helena was just about to sleep – perhaps for pondering, perhaps from boredom. I had fabricated this story based upon a few pages glanced from some moldy philosophy book, I don’t know if I completely understood.

“Helena, your dad ... he’s like the ship ... we want to hold onto him as ‘being the same’, but he’s had some of his ‘rigging’ replaced ... does that mean he’s different? Like the ship with its parts and planks and other things replaced, as time passes?”

“Mommy, I think dad is my dad and I am kind of tired ...”

“Oh dear girl, mommy is tired too.”

I kissed her on the forehead, and before I left the room she was drifting towards sleep. I was restless. I don’t know if I was telling that story to Helena to help her or help myself, and since it was technically the first home schooling lesson involving philosophy, and since Helena probably grok’d enough of it, it didn’t seem to matter.

“My husband George, ‘The Ship of Theseus’”, a thought in my own head as I sat in the big leather chair, grasping at the forearms, staring into a windy autumn night.

Was he the same or different?

Was he something alien, something that would reveal itself over time?

Did I hold onto his memory as the old man held onto his daughters ghost, in the form a ship named ‘Theresa’?

And as with Helena, with those queer thoughts in my brain, I slowly fell asleep, my grasp on the forearms loosening, pulling up a comforter without thinking, drifting like a ship, built so many years ago, wondering how many of my own “planks” had been replaced, wondering if any of us is ever “the same”.

Chapter 7: Thanksgiving

Helena loved Thanksgiving, and because of home-schooling, was never burdened with the question of “what is the deeper meaning”. I am of the opinion that children should not be lied to or deceived, but I also believe that children should be, to the extent that parents can do this, allowed to be “children”. There is a need for the innocent life, not sheltered, but not confused by ideas that they would eventually confront at the natural pace of life. She loved this time, of being with her aunt and uncle in Stanwood, of turkey, and conversation, and playing with her cousins.

I was reticent this year. I did not know what questions my brother, Terry, would ask. I did not know what fears they would keep hidden under cigarettes and beer. I did not know if someone, by accident, would say something – and that “something” would cause pain for George or any of us. I loved these people, my friends and family, but I knew they were fearful of changes – and what could be more radical than a piece of some person being replaced by a machine.

The ritual for Thanksgiving was a little different this year, as well. George was taking over my role as primary care giver and home-schooling mentor for Helena. I had just started my first week, full time, as Patricia’s assistant at the library.

George woke up early, to do the prep work for the stuffing – our specialty. He didn’t really know how to make it, but he figured he could prepare the ingredients based upon instructions from me. I woke up, put the stuff together, placed the stuffing and other sundry food items into bags. We showered and put on our best clothes, and George seemed as excited as Helena. George was always fearless, except when it came to his demons. In groups he was gregarious, even during the “dark years”. He lit up, probably stealing energy from others to fill a “battery” that had been drained the previous year.

But, this year, George had energy I had not seen in years. He did so much prep before I woke up that it was fairly easy to get on the road, to my brother’s place, by noon.

The drive over, in the Chevy, with Helena between us, I broached a question that I was asking myself:

“Are you scared?”, George didn’t answer immediately.

“I really can’t say ...”

“You must be a little scared, everyone thought you were going to die only a few weeks ago ... I’d be nervous. I am nervous.”

“Nervous about what?”

“The weird questions ... the staring ... you know if Nick shows up he’ll want to pull the velcro off the top and see the Frankenstein device ...”

“That’s just a control panel ... the device, they can’t see that ...”

“You know what I mean.”

“I know ... I am a little nervous, but mostly glad ... it’s hard to explain, but the last few visits with Dr. Morse have been amazing ... it seems like parts of my mind, that had been hidden to me, are clearer than ever ... even stuff like a cheeseburger ... hard to explain ... but I had some cheeseburgers from Dick’s the other day, and, well ... I can’t remember the last time I ate something and it didn’t feel like chalk, like sand ... I wish, honey, I knew how to explain it, but I feel pretty good.”

We arrived at my brother’s place, unloaded Helena and the food, and I made my way to the kitchen where Debbie, Terry’s wife, was hustling to get the food ready. The guys were in the living room, pretending to watch football, mostly drinking beer and chatting. When George walked in there was a moment, a pause, but then George blurted out “who wants to see my robot brain?” and everyone started laughing. Dr. Morse said George could have a “few” beers, but among loggers and farmers a “few beers” usually meant 4 to 6. Terry gave George a PBR, and George sipped on it while listening to the others.

The afternoon wore on, and everything seemed ok, then Terry decided to push the envelope and talk about the accident.

“George, we thought you were dead man ...”

“So did I.”

“What did you see? Did you see anything?”

“I’m not sure I get it dude ...”

“What did you see? Did you see the other side?”

Terry wasn't trying to stress out George, but like Helena he was curious. Terry was a strong-willed Christian, and he knew George was an atheist, so most Thanksgivings he would spend some time trying to convince George to go to church.

“Terry ... guys ... I don't remember anything between when I was felling that tree and when I woke up at the medical center in Seattle ... I'm not saying there was nothing, but I can't really describe it ... it seemed like only darkness. Honestly, I wouldn't make much of it ... I was busted up pretty good.”

Terry was crestfallen. He had hoped that George experienced some “coming to God” event – instead, all George could report was an emptiness, a pause, and nothing more.

There was silence in the room, and then George added something ...

“I don't remember any of it, but I must say ... and this will likely make Terry happy ... I've been doing a lot of thinking about God ... I don't know what part of the journey I'm on, but I am on a journey ... I can't say I've found my faith ... but I believe that my wife's prayers, her thoughts, all of your prayers and thoughts ... these things aren't a waste ... just as much as the stuff they put in my brain, your concern did help ... so no, I'm not 'at God' yet ... but I think I've felt the presence of some benevolent spirit in recent weeks, and for now ... let's call that God.”

George might have said this to make Terry feel better, and so it did work. But there was a sincerity in George's voice, something I remember from when he proposed to me so many years ago. George might not have been to the “afterlife”, but he is experiencing something like that, perhaps getting this second chance is his “coming to God” moment.

Dinner was at 3 PM, partially because the desire to participate in the shopping orgasm that was “black-friday-pre-friday” and partially because most of us had to work in the morning. There was laughter, there was the camaraderie of people like us, people who scrape by, knowing that we made it through another year. My friends and family, we never expected much, and so on these days with our children smiling, our plates full, we felt a kind of richness that no amount of gold could purchase.

After dinner, we ate pie, pumpkin and blackberry, we drank coffee while the kids played board games. George was quiet, but I understood that too. He had always been scared to reveal what was inside, even before his “darkness” - and I suppose between the questions and that strange device in his head, he simply wanted to guard what little privacy he had left.

On the way back home that night, George slept and Helena nodded off as well. At home I prodded them both into bed, putting Helena down was easy – so full of turkey and so spent from playing. George took the slow walk up the stairs.

“Are you coming to bed soon?”, he asked.

“In a while, I want to put the stuff away, maybe look at the paper for any special deals?”

“I love you Janice.”

It had been 2 years since he’d used those exact words. He would dance around the word “love”, afraid of the burden it put on us, I guess. He would tell Helena how much he loved her, but he was afraid to use those words, afraid or confused. Now this, this man, walking slowly up the stairs to our bedroom, tired from a day of nosy, noisy, holiday fun, he was saying something I’d wanted to hear again but could not demand.

The big leather chair, my thinking spot, was beckoning me – but my instincts and desire spoke a different language. After putting the food away, locking the doors, turning off the lights, I went upstairs – hoping George was still awake.

“George, are you asleep?”

“Nah ... just staring at the ceiling ... I had only a couple of beers but man did they go to my head ...”

“How are you feeling?”

“Feeling? ... pretty good ... tired, but kind of at peace.”

This is when my own frustration, confusion, and desire took over. I locked the door to our room, though Helena was unlikely to wake. I stood in front of our bed, in the darkness, slowly undressing. This was different, I was taking the lead. I took off my dress, my underwear, and gently went under the covers with George.

“Honey, what’s going on?”, was all George could say or I would let him. I I grabbed him began kissing furiously, we didn’t have words for this and I didn’t want to ruin it with language. Each kiss I placed he returned, and I managed to get his pajamas off while doing this. We really just hugged each other, held an embrace, and I felt his manhood and I knew what to do.

I laid back, opening myself up to him. He gently entered me, slowly heating me up but I knew I was already quite warm. The bed creaked, as it always had, but we both were in for something different. He had used words I had not heard from him in such a long time, and I was using my body to reply.

My moans were muffled, joyous, and filled with the frustration of all these weeks of wondering “is my George still here?” He covered my body with his masculine power, his muscled and seasoned body, and I felt a feverish passion I had not experienced in such a long time. George was my man, my husband, someone I never gave up on and would not. And he, in this moment, was shrugging off that pathetic isolation – that trap he had fell into, long before the “accident”.

My breasts were stiff and erect, his hairy chest scratching, caressing, increasing my titillation – he pinned me down, reminded me of the old George, but different, gentler. He held me there and I wanted this more than anything, more than all the world.

Before it ended, before he reached climax, I felt a shudder all over – it was more than female whimsy or an orgasm, it was this “exclamation mark” at the end of a sentence:

“George and I had made it through so much, there was nothing we could not do together.”

Chapter 8: The Other

November ended, and with it came a bitter cold – rare for western WA state, but not so rare that we were unprepared. George was home-schooling Helena, as best he could, and I think doing a pretty good job. He kept his appointments with Dr. Morse, and he seemed to be doing well. The novelty of my husband’s “accident” wore off, and my neighbors, friends, family, began asking the normal questions, like “what’s Helena want for Christmas?” or “are you guys coming to our New Year’s Eve party?” Most years we went to Nick’s place, George’s oldest friend, for the New Years. His family would make Chinese food, set off fireworks at midnight, drink the sparkling wine we called champagne.

I felt more normal. The *Hartgen Foundation*, the foundation funding Dr. Morse’s work, had helped out a great deal – essentially paying George, on a 5 year contract, more than he had ever made and this was welcome. I was never much for charity, but I figured George was, in addition to being my husband, a kind of lab rat and that seemed to be worthy of something. George was becoming more and more curious about “what” they placed in his brain. Dr. Morse gave him materials to read, and George devoured it, using it as a way to home-school Helena on biology and science, but also with the purpose of helping him understand.

One afternoon, after I got home from work, he asked me:

“Honey, is it weird that I want to meet the other person, the other person with the same implant?”

“No ... I’d be curious, if only to compare notes and what not ...”

“I’m feeling good, I feel strong again, my balance is back to normal ... in fact ... better than normal ... every week when I see Dr. Morse, he answers all my questions ... but when I ask him about the other patient, he says ‘we need to wait’ ... that’s what’s worrying me, is there a problem? He seems like an honest man, so I can’t imagine he would keep something from me.”

“Honey, it’s probably just part of the scientific process ... you know ... keeping ‘subjects’ separated ... avoiding contamination of the data ...”

“I suppose ...”

“I bet you’ll be meeting ‘her’ soon enough, he did tell us it was a woman ... you’re not going to run off and fall in love with some robot-harlot are you?”, I said this jokingly, I think. George got up, walked up to me, gave me a big hug, and said:

“Girl, you’re the only fembot for me ...”

I wondered too. I wondered if this other person had some illness due to the device. I wondered if George and she met they would find some “kindred spirit” situation between them. I wasn’t jealous – how could I be? Jealous of a woman George had never met, but I’m a human being and I guess I guard, protect, watch over those things I believe are mine. George was mine, I had been there through so much – so even the paranoid fantasy of a “mystery woman” stirred something inside, something I did not like feeling.

On December 8th, George met with Dr. Morse someplace different. Not his office or a lab or the medical center – but a diner near the University of Washington. I took Helena to work with me that day, and she wandered the stacks as I often did. Patricia and I played tag-team keeping an eye on her, but not too closely. Little Helena was coming into her own, at such a young age, a curiosity that had been there and had recently been excited by the miracle of her father’s recovery.

George sent me a text message after lunch, “honey, Morse says I get to meet the other patient.” This made me glad, because he was curious as well. He needed to know how this “other” person was doing, and I did not concern myself with ridiculous ideas about what this would mean.

That day went slow. Helena was asking a million questions, and I was at the desk helping people checkout books as Pat was moving returned books back to the shelf.

“Mommy, can I have something put into my brain?”

“Darling, why would you want that?”

“Well ... I want to be like dad ... have super powers ...”

“Helena, your dad doesn’t have any super powers.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

The book Dr. Morse had given Helena was very advanced, so I took her to a section on human biology and selected something closer to her level – a book on the brain, for middle school kids, talking about the parts of the brain. She sat next to me the rest of that afternoon, perusing the pictures, asking me what certain words meant. She was enthralled by how strange the brain looked, and then she asked:

“Wouldn’t it be weird to see inside your head?”

The question shocked me for its childhood simplicity – more profound a question than she could imagine. What would it be like, to look inside? That mound of fat, suspended in water, attached to the spine, always being moved, shaken, disturbed. So very soft and facile, fragile, and yet so very resilient.

“Mommy, did you know a man was once shot in the head with an arrow and wasn’t killed?”

“That happens kiddo, there are parts of the brain more resilient than others ...”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, there are parts of your brain that are critical and if they are damaged, well, that’s pretty bad ... like the brain stem or lower part of your brain.”

“Is that like the stem of a plant?”

“Sort of, but it’s the part that regulates your breathing, your heart, all sorts of things you don’t have to think about ... so you can think about other things ...”

“What about the other parts?”

“The other parts? They are more about who we are, our identity, our thinking ... your imagination ... big questions my smart kiddo ...”

With this she smiled, and asked Patricia for another cookie. Patricia brought cookies to work, she was a pretty good baker, and I must confess to having binged eaten them more than once. This day she brought “monster cookies” - which amounted to oatmeal cookies with M&Ms, chocolate chip, nuts, and the other ingredients that I did not think about when enjoying them.

I got off work around 5 PM, and went home to make dinner for George and Helena. George was already back from his meeting with Dr. Morse.

George was making spaghetti when I arrived, actually doing a good job of it. The meatballs were in the oven, and he was at the stove, with a timer, nervously gauging when to begin boiling the pasta.

“Honey, I’ll put the pasta on ... but tell me how things went?”

George stepped away from the stove top, willingly, and leaned up against the counter in our kitchen.

“I think it went well. Dr. Morse told me that no further adjustments to the device were required, for now, and that was cool ... cuz ... frankly it freaked me out when he ‘turned those screws’ ...”

“Is it painful?”

“Not painful, just strange ... I never did any drugs, well, nothing more than some weed when I was a kid and beer ... this is something I’d never experienced. Ever slight adjustment and my head would spin ... then it would be like static on a TV set ... a moment later, I snap back in ...”

“Snap back in?”

“Yeah ... that’s how I’d describe it ... you ever have those dreams where you feel like you’re outside yourself looking down?”

“Sure, I think most people have.”

“Well that’s usually part of it too ... I would, for a moment, be outside myself, looking down on myself ...”

“You get to meet the ‘other’, right?”

“Yes, but ...”, and George stumbled, thinking of something to say. He had a worried expression.

“But what?”

“... well, I have this feeling that I’m going to learn something I don’t want to ...”

“Like?”

“Like, what if the other person has side effects or impacts from it ... because she’s further along ... maybe I’m afraid of the good news as well ... I know this doesn’t make sense ... she might say ‘it’s been great, since they put this crap in my head’ ... I know you know me Janice. I know you know I always seem to find the dark cloud in the silver lining ...”

At that, I put the pot of water on the stove top, set it for boil, and walked over to George and gave him a big hug.

“Honey, we’re in this together – you, me, Helena ... we’re in this as a team. And I think Dr. Morse is on our team too ... I know he seems like some nerdy old man, but he has a heart ... I know he cares.”

George and I switched topics. Talking about Helena’s reading list for home school, talking about the math level she’s at, George taking notes. I figured since I was working full time now I would do what I could to help him keep organized, and he was fastidious in trying to be the best “Mr. Mom” he could be.

We settled down for dinner, Helena smiling and talking about our “brains”, George giving her full attention and me, there, with a sense that our family, if not perfect, was whole again.

Chapter 9: The Meeting

Dr. Morse and I would speak on the phone periodically – partially to check in on George, but also to see how Helena and I were doing. These weren't scheduled calls, but happened "as needed" he would say. So, given that George was going to meet the other person with the Dendritica device installed, I was not surprised when he called the next morning.

"Janice, it's Dr. Morse, how are you doing?"

"Good, I'm working full time at the library now and George is doing a really great job of taking my place at home, with Helena ... I check in on him, by phone, during the day to make sure everything is ok ... I've told Helena that if Dad has any problems to immediately call the EMS number for Skagit General Hospital."

"That's great, it seems like George is in good hands."

"He's with family Doc, those are usually the best hands."

Dr. Morse paused for a moment, then continued.

"Janice, I've set up a meeting between George and Katrina Richards, the other recipient of the implant ... the meeting is set for today, did George tell you?"

"He did, he's kinda nervous."

"He shouldn't be ... I mainly kept them apart for research reasons, I know it's cold to look at things this way, but we have to be sure we are seeing the right recovery path before introducing too much ... this technology is radical, and, to be honest, unpredictable. It's not to say we're taking unnecessary risks, but I think you can see how something this new would have risks."

"Doc, you told me the deal a month ago ... in your office ... you didn't make any promises ... I understand. Every day with George is a blessing, I suppose I assumed that this would be like a 'baboon heart' transplant – buying George time, but not a permanent fix."

"Well, I think it could last a long time, decades perhaps, we simply don't know. We don't know if his body will eventually reject the device, we don't know if the materials themselves will be compromised ... and then there are the unknowns ..."

“What do you mean, unknowns?”

“Humans ... they often do stupid things ... they get into situations they don't always completely understand ... believe me, being a human myself I can testify to this. We don't know what will happen if he ever returns to work, as a logger ... one of the reasons the *Hartgen Foundation* provides income for these cases is because we would like, during the first couple of years, for people to avoid too much physical stress, strain. It's not because we think the device is faulty, it's because for all the science and engineering, you never can be 100% sure if something won't fail in any ... well ... particular scenario.”

“Doc, he's basically taking care of Helena, her education, going on walks and not much else ...”

“May I ask an indelicate question?”

“Yes – we started having sex again.”

“Oh ... I think that's probably fine, just be careful and if he exhibits seizure symptoms you need to get him to the hospital as soon as possible.”

“What about this girl, Katrina, what can you tell me about her, if that's ok?”

“She's 26, she was in a motorcycle accident when she was 24. She was in a long term coma, vegetative state, for 6 months and her parent's were ready to give up. In her case, the damage to the brain was much more severe than George and I didn't believe she was a good candidate for the implant at the time.”

“Is she doing ok?”

“She would say she's doing great. Because of the damage, we expected massive memory loss, but the device, it's spooky ... almost like a detective in some film noir classic ... the device has a way of aggregating and bridging the tissue, but more so, saving the parts of the brain that make up who we are. The other interesting thing, in her case, and we expect to see this in George, was the neurogenesis that occurred in the first year.”

“Neurogenesis, what's that?”

“It used to be believed that you had only so many brain cells, and throughout your life you simply lost them ... in recent decades we’ve come to understand that many parts of the brain continuously produce new cells ... we still don’t fully understand how this works, but we do know that, in Katrina’s case, new brain tissue is growing where the old tissue was damaged, destroyed, by the accident. When her parents came to me, 45% of Katrina’s brain was destroyed or missing – some of this in the speech centers. As of now, we’ve noticed that 25% of that tissue has been replaced. As I told you a month ago – the device is so complex, so ‘brain like’, that we’re still trying to understand the mechanism for this. We don’t know if this new tissue is functional, and because of the device we have limited options for conducting brain scans.”

“What about functional MRIs ... I was reading about them at the library the other day?”

“That would be great, except there is copper alloy, silicon, silver, and other conductive metals in the implant. The implant is shielded, but the shielding itself is conductive. Bottom line is we can study this, but it’s difficult and involves low-invasive surgical techniques. One of the advantages to the device is that it does have some limited onboard diagnostics for conducting brain tests ... but knowing if these new parts of the brain are ‘lighting up’ or if they’re just tissue growing randomly ... we simply haven’t figured out a good way to test this yet.”

The next question I wanted to ask was completely off topic, but I would later forgive myself for asking.

“Doc ... er ... is Katrina attractive?”

“Ha! ... I expected that one ... George has been very honest with me about the last few years of your marriage ... He’s also told me that he feels as if both he, and the marriage, have been given a second chance ... He credits this mostly to you ... Yes, she’s young and attractive, she’s also a lesbian ... so I doubt there’ll be any issues there ... and, to be honest, at this stage George needs to speak to the only other person in his situation ... to compare notes ... to talk about transitioning to normal, a normal life ... I think this is going to help.”

Dr. Morse and I finished the phone call by discussing meds, making sure he’s taking the supplements, and most importantly the anti-seizure drugs. He made it very clear that anyone that has undergone significant brain trauma, and surgery, is at risk for seizure during the first few years of recovery.

George was meeting Katrina at a coffee shop in Everett, a half-way point between where she was living and our home in Arlington. He was slow to get going, but I understood why. He didn't say much that morning, and the look on his face reminded me of the look I made before I took math tests in high school – a bit sullen, nervous, and off balance.

“Honey, I'm taking off for the meeting.”

“Good, do you need any money?”, I usually handled the cash in the house.

“Nah, Dr. Morse bought lunch yesterday, so I still have plenty for food and gas. I'm going to take my work truck, if that's ok?”

We were a two truck family – one 1970 Chevy truck, that we kept running with prayers and spit and the other a later model Nissan 4x4 that George used for work.

“Yep, just remember the flooding!”, the carburetor on the Chevy needed to be rebuilt, but until recently we didn't have the money.

“I think I'll take it into the shop next week, what do you think?”

“I think that's way overdue ...”

And with that, George was off. I stood outside watching as the truck disappeared down our empty road, and then went back inside to make myself coffee and head into work. Helena would be with me, again, today, but she was fairly well behaved despite her precocious and inquisitive nature.

Patricia, myself, and Helena planned on going to the co-op for lunch – probably one of my favorite places for this. The morning moved slowly, I tried to put the whole “meeting the other” thing out of my head, and I felt even more foolish for asking the Doc if she was attractive. I knew that George found me attractive, but like Helena I wondered – what is it like inside George's head? What kind of confused thoughts dwell there? This wasn't a new question, it was a question I asked before the accident – during those dark years when I wondered, if at any moment, I would get a call from the sheriff telling me my husband was dead.

I never thought, growing up, I would know someone that committed suicide – and then, after things started getting bad for a lot of people, I started “knowing” them. None of them were personal friends – more like “friends of friends”. Each time this would

happen, and it happened more than I wish to recall, I wondered “what were they thinking?”

I know it’s morbid, to wonder why someone would take their life. In our world today we’re supposed to pretend “everything is ok”, but for men like George everything hadn’t been ok for a while. George grew up believing he would “be a logger”, like his dad. And, as each year passed, the logging industry became a corporate, crony, pig show – and men like my husband, who were too proud to change, were being cast aside, into the dust bin of history.

Something else I always knew, I still know, about George – he loves Helena too much to do it. Even a year ago, when it seemed that all he could do was yell, and scream, complain, and then settle into these silent morose trances, even then I knew he would not do it. I didn’t know if our marriage would survive his sickness, but I did know he would keep trying to find a way out of his personal hell.

It’s fashionable to beat up on men like him. It’s fashionable to blame them for the world’s problems. It’s fashionable to think “well, he could just go back to school, for retraining”, and like so many fads – that too is pointless. I wanted George to consider a different career or job, and I kept believing he would do this on his own. But I also knew others, in my community – farmers, fisherman, loggers, factory workers – who simply didn’t see a way out, so they gave up and killed themselves.

One man, a younger man than George by a decade, had enlisted to fight “terrorists” in the U.S. Army. When he got home he tried to find work, and he did, but because of PTSD, drug abuse, injuries suffered in combat, he couldn’t make it work. There were people trying to help, but they were clueless. It was as if everyone around him were some kind of “fish”, and they could not figure out why their friend was drowning. This young man, several months back, went to the top of Little Mountain, where the observation tower is, drank a fifth of whiskey, and then shot himself in the head. His suicide note was rather simple:

“I’m tired ... tell my family and friends I’m sorry for being tired.”

Self-pity is a drug too, one that we don’t notice until it’s too late. This world has always been hard, but also good, and that’s what I try to remember. As a young woman I experienced abuse, and the details of this I keep hidden. But even in the midst of that hell, of “men of God” using me as a sexual artifact, I kept believing “there must be a way out.” I’ve hardly ever talked to George about this, and in recent years it seemed like

an additional burden he could not carry. So no – I never would have killed myself, but like so many human beings in the early 21st century, I did think about it.

George was moving in a positive direction now, and our family was back on track. Sure, it's weird to consider that some random accident might be part of the reason, but is it so weird? I think women, by their nature, understand tragedy in a way men do not. I think we understand it, and I think we figure out ways around it. Men can be so fragile when it comes to life's failures – men can be brave, they can, as all humans can, do amazing things, but there's something about the female mystique that lends itself to struggle and overcoming.

At lunch, at the co-op, Helena and I had the split pea soup and per usual it was amazing. Pat stuck to her turkey sandwich, and we talked about lighter topics.

“Janice, you guys ready for Christmas?”

“No one is ever ready for Christmas ... but, yeah, I guess we are.”

“Helena, what do you want from Santa this year?”

Helena, a newly minted scientist based upon her families recent history, pondered.

“I think Santa is probably impossible, but ... I've asked for a used computer to use.”

“Aren't you too young for that sweetie?”

“Maybe, but Dad and I are going to learn it together, so it is kind of his gift too!”

And Helena's smiling red cheeks belie the agenda behind her argument.

We had one laptop in the house, that I used. George had never shown an interest in it, and Helena seemed too young. Now, with George taking over much of my role as mentor for Helena, and knowing he needed all the help he could get, the computer idea seemed to make sense.

“Pat, this is going to be a learning project for Helena and George – good for them both.”

“... I didn't mean anything by it ... I guess ... well ... I shouldn't talk about it.”

“Talk about what?”

“It’s not something I should talk about in front of Helena.”

“OK, maybe you can explain it to me back at the library.”

I was terse with Patricia. She meant well, but she tended to live vicariously through others – seeing herself in their dramas. After lunch, I set Helena up in the reading room with some math problems, and then Pat and I had a “talk”.

“So tell me what you wanted to say at lunch?”

“It all seems too perfect Janice. I know that’s good news, but ... well ... it seems like ‘faerie tale’ good news ... George is doing well, you and he are doing better, Helena is happy ... I don’t begrudge you this, I just wonder ...”

“Wonder what?”

“I wonder what happens when the road gets rougher again ... I know I shouldn’t say that, but I’ve seen this before ... people get to some breaking point in their relationship and ...”, then I raised my voice.

“Let me stop you there Pat ... I know we’re friends and I know you’re my supervisor ... I love this job, but you need to know **THIS IS NOT A RELATIONSHIP, IT IS A FAMILY** ... people talk about ‘relationships’, but this is not the stage of life George and I are at. We are raising a child, a precious special person ... we are trying our best to keep the love between us alive ... and yeah ... I wonder ... I wonder when the shoe drops ... I wonder when I find out that ‘the device’ causes cancer or that it’s defective or something else ... I wonder if this is merely a short term thing ... George gets another year, maybe two, and then he dies ... I see myself falling in love with him again, and then what? **HE IS TAKEN AWAY?** ... you’re not the only one wondering Pat ... I love you like a sister, but sometimes ... sometimes ...”, I began to cry, uncontrollably, in a way I had not allowed myself.

Pat comes up to me and gives me a hug, patting my back, “I’m sorry ... I really do put my foot in it sometimes ...”

Sobbing, “... it’s not that Pat ... everything you’re talking about, I’m still feeling ... a confused mess of too many feelings ... I want to be strong, for George, for Helena, but I also want to sleep ... I get tired sometimes, I get so tired and all I want to do is lie down and sleep.”

Then Pat, always keeping hidden secrets, goes back to her desk. We were having this conversation in her office, with Helena in a quiet room next door. She opens the drawer, pulls out some rum, and pours it into two coffee cups. And quietly, without saying a word, we sat there and sipped and spent an hour not saying much. After an hour, Helena came back into the office.

“Mom, I’m done with homework, can I go look at books?”

“Hun, have at it!”

Sometimes we all get tired, and sometimes the best remedy is quiet – and 3 shots of rum.

Chapter 10: The Dinner

When George got home from meeting with Katrina, he was in much better spirits. He said they mostly talked about motorcycles, George had one when he was younger, and then intermittently about being “lab rats”. George said she was “pretty cool”, and he felt it would help if she met our family. I was too curious to say no, as was Helena, so we decided to invite her to dinner on Monday, the 18th of December.

“I can’t believe how funny she is ... she kept making me laugh ... funnier than Nick ...”

“Did you learn anything else?”

“She says the device’s control panel gets itchy sometimes, and Dr. Morse could help with that. She also said some strange things about her own ‘adjustments’.”

“Like what?”

“Well ... she said she saw her grand mother and talked with her one time ... the process of making adjustments, according to Dr. Morse, only took a few minutes ... but she says it seemed like she had a conversation for over an hour.”

“That is weird ...”

“Yeah, but in general she seemed fine ... as fine as a person could be that got the brains knocked out of her on interstate 5 ...”

I was anxious to meet her as well. I didn’t know what to make for dinner that night, but I had a few days, almost a week, to think about it. During that week the routine strengthened, George continued to make progress with taking over tasks at home. I was enjoying more time at work, I didn’t feel guilty for it – Helena was bonding with her dad, and they were both learning together. Some days I would leave the laptop at home, to help out with this – it didn’t matter, I had a work computer.

The winter was creeping in, and western Washington was feeling chillier than normal. I had picked up winter clothes, at the thrift store, for myself, Helena and George. One of the keys to living, these days, is being careful about how you spend your money. I have friends who still “have to buy new” with just about everything, and their debt and credit cards reflect this. George and I have always seen money as a tool, and as such have tried to use it that way – for many, money really is an obstacle, something that causes them more pain than anything else.

The day of the big dinner arrived, and I was going to do something special – my homemade lasagna, some fresh baked bread from the co-op, and a dark chocolate cake for dessert. I also picked up a couple of bottles of a nice red from a winery George and I had visited, a while back, in Yakima. I took the day off and Patricia was cool about it, I got the house tidy, the table set, and George and Helena spent most of the day out of my way – which was good – searching the web and studying whatever random topics caught Helena, or George’s interest.

“Mom, dad I were wondering what you thought about something?”

“Thought about what kiddo?”

“Do you think robots will take over the world?”

It was a few hours before Katrina was supposed to arrive, and that question made me smile. I didn’t really know enough to answer, I think George and Helena assumed, since I worked at a library, that I must know everything – and I guess I knew more than most, but this question was a bit beyond the ken of my education.

“Well ... why would they take over the world?”

“To control humans?”

“Why would they want to do that?”

“To make us slaves?”

“For what, exactly?”

And Helena pondered this, and George sat back in the corner and smiled ...

“Well ... so the humans could make treats!”

And at that both George and I laughed, and then Helena joined in. “To make treats” was a reminder that Helena, despite her curiosity and intelligence, was still just a little girl and with that came the thinking of a little girl.

“I must say Helena, that might be true ...”

Katrina was supposed to arrive at 5 PM, and it was already 5:15 PM. Not that anyone in our house cared much for the “you must always be on time” mantra – we knew that people, real people, in the real world, did the best they could and sometimes this meant being a little late. And at that there was a rumble in the front yard, the long throaty noise that my husband identified immediately - “that’s her Harley honey”.

A knock on the front door, and there she was. A young woman, not bad looking, with a noticeable scar on the side of her face – one of the few not hidden by her shoulder length dark hair, I surmised. She had blue eyes and some tattoos. I never liked tattoos so much, but hers were not that outrageous. When she took off her jacket, she was wearing a short sleeved warm weather shirt, and on her right arm there was a tattoo that said one thing in black - “I am alive”. It looked like a new one, from the reddish skin surrounding it. She was holding a biker in her left hand, and just stood there for a moment.

“I’m Kat!”

“Hello, Kat, I’m Janice, and that little one on the sofa reading is Helena.”

“I love your house, George told me about it a bit, it feels cozy.”

“It’s been in George’s family for a couple generations, I think ...”, George nodded silently. She was shorter than I expected, for some reason I expected her to be tall.

“So, whatever your cooking smells wonderful and I’m hungry as hell!”

And so we made our way to the dinner table, George and I sat across from each other, Kat and Helena sat opposite sides as well. I prepared a salad of local vegetables, dandelion, and my own special blue-cheese dressing recipe. Kat feasted away, not annoyingly so, but a reminder that she was probably a bit of tomboy.

“This is the best salad I’ve had in months, I mostly get the bags of salad from the grocery ... when I eat salad.”

We didn’t chat about much over dinner, mainly because it did seem like Kat hadn’t had a good home cooked meal in a while and I simply didn’t know what to ask first. The lasagna was a hit, and the red wine was consumed – mostly by Kat.

“Sorry for drinking all your wine, or most of it.”

“No apologies Kat, that’s what I bought it for ... do you like it?”

“I usually get the 2-buck-chuck from Trader Joes, so this is a real treat to be honest.”

“It was probably a chilly ride from Everett.”

“Yes and no, I have a lot of what Dr. Morse calls ‘peripheral central nervous system damage’ ... which in geek speak means I have some sensitivity issues with cold and hot ... it’s great, in a way, it also means I should be more careful ... but ‘careful Kat’ was never me ... but, I did buy a motorcycle helmet ... after I recovered from the accident.”

“I can’t believe you still ride ...”

“It’s who I am Janice, even the device doesn’t change that. I might be a little more ... I dunno ... thoughtful than I used to be ... maybe a little more wary of some risks ... but I really can’t help being who I am ... even with 1/3 brain gone ...”, she said that with a grrr, at Helena, designed to make her laugh and Helena did.

George sat back and listened, he was never a big talker – which left a lot of space for me. But I could tell that he was feeling good about this. He knew I needed to meet the other person in Dr. Morse’s mad experiment. He knew I had questions, and so I did.

“Is that a new tattoo?”

“the I AM ALIVE tattoo? - yeah ... when I first started feeling more like myself, several months after Dr. Morse worked on me ... I thought a lot about ... ya know ... life. I’ve never really been one to dwell, always moving a bit faster than I should ... and it occurred to me that I needed a reminder, a note to myself ... ‘I’m alive’, is what I thought about, especially at the rehab center ... one day, during rehab, I started crying ... the physical therapist asked me why ... I said, ‘the breakfast this morning, bacon and eggs, it was one of the best I’d ever had’, he smiled and said ‘girl, everybody loves bacon’ ... EVERYBODY LOVES BACON will likely be my next tattoo ...”

One bottle of the red was finished off, and we were onto number two – Kat gladly draining most of it. I served cake to all, coffee and cake for George and I, and we then moved to the living room.

“George has told me a lot about you Janice!”

“... hopefully the good stuff Kat.”

“Are you kidding me, I started falling in love with you myself the more he talked ... I’m kidding ... you do know I’m lesbian, right?”

“Right, not an issue in this house ...”

“I figured ... any who ... what I wanted to say is, well, it’s clear why he’s doing so well ... you are pretty amazing, Janice ... and Helena ...”

“We do the best we can ...”, it was nice hearing her words.

“Also, I know you probably aren’t into tattoos, I can tell, and if I were as pretty as you ... well ... I’d probably not have tattoos either ...”

“You are very beautiful Kat.”

“Thanks, but what I was going to say is this: if I were to recommend a tattoo, for you, based on what I’ve seen tonight and what George has told me ... it would be the word ‘rock’, written tastefully, someplace hidden or not ... it would be the word ‘rock’.”

“Why is that?”

“Because that’s what you are ... that’s what George calls you ... he’s been probably too honest with me, but it seems to me you’re the rock, the foundation of this family.”

I don’t know why I started crying. I’d only had a couple glasses of wine. But I did. And Kat, in a way that was not lascivious, got up and sat down next to me and gave me a hug.

“Girl, you cry all you want. For the first year after my recovery Dr. Morse was unsure if I could ever drive again, let alone my passion, driving bikes ... there was this beautiful spring day, about 14 months into my rehab, when I went down to my garage, pulled the cover off my bike, and started the baby up ... some smoke, some of that gasoline smell from a carburetor that was sticky, and then she began humming ... beating ... that noise that excited me ... I was wearing pajamas, and those nasty rehab shoes, and I left my cane in the garage and took ‘Emily’ around the block ... and ‘Emily’ didn’t let me down ... she had been rebuilt by a friend, a good friend, a dude who I had known since high school. She had been waiting for me and I for her, and that drive around the block, in my pajamas, with the sun rising and enough warmth to keep me solid ... well ... I got back to the garage and I’d never cried so hard in my whole life ... harder than when I was made fun of in school for being gay ... harder than when I ‘came out’ to my parents ...

harder than that first love that ended ... the hardest I'd ever cried ... and it wasn't sadness ... it was me, saying to the universe, 'thank you' ... thank you for giving me another chance."

"I'm not sad either, just a little overwhelmed."

"Girl, it wouldn't take a genius to figure out that you are the thing that keeps this family alive, George alive, and that rascal Helena ... you cry all you want ... George and I and Helena are here right now, for you ..."

And in this strange woman's arms, a woman I barely knew, I was letting go. I'd tried since the accident, I tried before when I thought my marriage was doomed. But in our living room, surrounded by people who would not judge, I was relieving myself of all that crap ... that festering mound of doubt and anxiety and fear. That monstrous beast of regrets and envy ... all of that crap, that dark chip on my shoulder ... it was melting away. Helena sitting on one side, Kat hugging me from the other side, and George sitting silently, in the big leather chair, as if saying in his own way "it's all going to be ok".

"I NEED A DRINK and the wine is gone!", Kat exclaimed. Sadly, we were out of both wine and we didn't have anything else in the house.

"Oh, I know, I shouldn't have more ... Dr. Morse says I should moderate my drinking and I have ... but ... tonight, with you good folks, it's been a weird and cool evening ... and man I could go for a shot ..."

I don't know what came over me. Normally, I would smile, nod, offer her the couch and go to bed with George. But I think the crying and emotional commiseration had me wanting something I had not wanted in a long time – an adult night out. It was 9 PM, and Nick's wife had always offered to baby sit if we'd asked.

"George, what if I called Kim, Nick's wife, and asked her to babysit? We could go to the 'Dike Bar' ..."

Kat began laughing, I explained it was literally a tavern not far from where we lived near one of the dikes along the Skagit River ... and then I started laughing as well. George was laughing, but grabbed his phone and called Nick. After 5 minutes of conversation, and 10 minutes of packing Helena up for the night, Nick and Kim dropped by, grabbed Helena, and the adults were going to go out for the night. The tavern or bar or hole-in-the-wall was less than a half-mile away, so we bundled up and walked. I made

it clear that if we did this, Kat would sleep on the couch and have breakfast with us – she complied, as long as bacon was involved.

The stretch of road between our house and the “Dike Bar” was quiet. Kat did all the talking, talking about her bike, talking about her latest girl friend who was “unlikely to last”, talking about the various things in her life that gave her joy. George and I walked behind, hand in hand, and he would squeeze my hand, periodically, softly, as if to say “we’re still here honey, we’re still alive.”

We’re here, and we’re still alive – perhaps not the “American Dream” of our parents, but a dream worth preserving, with all the minor triumphs and major setbacks, we were still here ...

And on that lonely road, I hearkened back to the adventurous carefree Janice of more than a decade ago, and I screamed, randomly, up at that starlit night sky ...

“I’M STILL HERE ... I’M STILL ALIVE!”

All three of us knew what I meant, a silent consensus among survivors.

Chapter 11: The Dike Bar

The *Dike Bar* was fairly empty, which was good since it only seated, comfortably, about 30 people. Kat kept making jokes about the name, I was sort of wondering if she might be onto something, but it was simply a name. “It doesn’t say ‘Dyke Bar’ Kat ...”, and she replied, “wishful thinking girl.” There was one old man at the bar, 4 other men sitting around a table drinking PBR, and us. The bar tender was an older woman, I used to know her name, but George and I hadn’t been there in a long while – we hadn’t had a reason to be there. Tonight was a celebration, a weird one, a declaration of life being lived even if over some cheap beer, whiskey, and the fellowship of disaster.

We ordered drinks at the bar, George and I ordered a beer and a shot of Jack, Kat ordered 2 shots of Southern Comfort. At the table, in the corner opposite the other occupied table, Kat made a toast.

“Here’s to having your brains smashed, and still having enough left to get drunk!”

“I’ll drink to that”, George exclaimed.

I waited a moment, and made a toast of my own.

“Here is to new friends, like Kat, to an old and cherished love – my George ... Here’s to Helena, the greatest gift of my life ... and to this wonderful night of not taking anything too seriously ... well deserved for all of us!”

“Cheers!”, Kat exclaimed, as she downed the second shot.

“Well, on that note I’m going to stop by the girls room and grab two more ... does anyone else want anything?”, Kat asked. George and I shook our heads, we were definitely not in her drinking league.

George was silent for a moment, and then he spoke.

“Janice, thank you for not giving up on me ... and I’m not talking about the accident.”

“Honey, there’s no need ...”

“But there is, I need you to know that ... my love was always inside, even when the darkness filled me up ... back before the accident ...”

“What you sometimes don’t get George, is we all have darkness ... the darkness is not the problem, it’s what it can drive us to do or not do ... I’m a little toasted ... so my wisdom might not sound that wise ... I guess I’m saying that we’re here, right now, let’s just focus on that.”

“I’ll drink to that honey ... and that Kat ... she’s kinda of a firecracker?”

“I hope I’ve made a new friend ... she reminds me of one of the best friends I had, a long time ago ... one of those non judgmental, open minded, spirited people ... like my own ‘Peppermint Patty’ ...”

“Like from the peanuts?”

“Yeah ...”

“She’s very much like that ... is it weird that I hope she’s my friend as well?”

I reached across the narrow table, grabbed George’s hand, and said:

“You’re comrades-in-arms honey, how could you not feel a connection ... plus, she’s lesbian, so nothing to fear there!”, we chuckled and were glad Kat was in the bathroom.

Kat was at the bar, ordering two more shots, and chatting it up with the bar matron. We, George and I, were happily, peacefully, sipping our beers. It seemed that the world had carved out a little bit of a safe harbor for each of us. But as with most things, this moment wouldn’t last.

“You gotta boyfriend?”, one of the mooks from the other table asked Kat.

“You mean girlfriend, right?”

“Oh ... you’re one of those ...”

“One of what?”

“A gay.”

“I’m happy, which is what ‘gay’ means.”

“Nah ... you’re a dyke, at the dike bar ... I think you don’t read so well ...”

“Well ... when I’m ready to take instruction from a Neanderthal, I will let you know.”

“What’s that ... neondor-doll? A lesbian thing?”

“No, it comes from reading books.”

“You calling me stupid?”

“I think you’re doing a good job of proving that yourself.”

With that the mook, incapable of saying anything else, pushed our slightly drunk friend to the ground. George got up, and in a moment he was there to get his new friend off the ground. Ashamedly, I was paralyzed, mostly because this night had been so relaxing, so good, I simply could not conceive this turn of events.

“Dude, you need to back off and get back to your table!”

The bar matron was calling 911, and the other men got up, one of them noticed my husband from an article, with picture, in the Skagit Valley Herald.

“You that robot man? ... you’re some kind of freak dude ...”, commented one of the men. They went up to my husband to stare him down. Kat regained her balance, and instead of backing down she pulled out a knife.

“Here’s what’s fun boys ... I know I can’t take you all on ... George and I both probably can’t ... but I’ll guarantee that one of you leaves missing an eye ... and replacement eyes? Those aren’t so easy to come by ...”

Instead of backing down, the principle mook, the one harassing Kat, took a swing at George and he fell to the ground. Kat shoved her knife into that large man’s thigh, then kicked him in the groin. Even with the 911 call, it was unlikely that any cop or deputy would get here in time.

The large, mean, cigarette and beer smelling man grabbed Kat by the shirt and was ready to punch her in the face, when George quickly got up and tackled him. The mook’s other friends ganged up on him. Kat did her best, but was being held back by one of the men. The three men kicked, punched, and beat my husband. I wanted to help, I had no idea how. Then I got up, went to the bar, handed the matron a twenty and asked for a bottle of anything. She handed me some cheap vodka, and I swung and hit the man holding Kat over the head. Kat and I both stood our ground. And then I spoke:

“Why don’t you leave us alone! We came here for some drinks, leave us the hell alone!”

“The men, startled that we stood our ground, seeing our fists, knew that this would not end well for them either. Not that we threatened them, not that we could take them on, but bullies are cowards, and they mostly get their kicks from attacking things that they believe can’t fight back.

“This is our bar ... we’ve come here for years ... we don’t want no freaks and dykes in our bar ...”

“Then you need to leave, because this is our bar now ... this is a place for freaks, and dykes, and messed up people of all kinds who simply want to be left alone ... we didn’t interrupt you ... we didn’t disturb your night ...”

George grabbed a chair, hit the main mook over the head ... and with that his two toadies fled. On the floor were two degenerate sad men, bleeding and bruised, and unlikely to learn the lesson. Kat gave the matron another twenty, got a full bottle of Southern Comfort, and then said: “let’s get out of here, this place stinks right now ... but we’ll be back ... THERE’S A NEW SHERIFF IN TOWN!”

We left, as quickly as we could. We walked back home, but not dispirited, just a little battered. George was a bit shaken – he’d never been a fighter, never had to. He always seemed too tough to mess with, so no one ever did. Sure, Kat could have acted differently, she could have massaged that man’s ego ... but she was her, Kat, and non-apologetic. She stood her ground for the same reason she still road a Harley – no man or woman was going to tell her how to live. And George? - after a few swigs from Kat’s bottle, started laughing: “what a bunch of degenerates!”

The strangest thing about this night – strange for all of us – was that we were still happy, joyful, to be alive. Adult men and women, in a bar fight, shaken but not stirred. I was myself in a way I had never been before, and my guides were my husband and Kat – two misfits, with computers in their brains, who were unwilling to give up ... and why the hell should they? Why the hell should any of us?

Back at the house, nearing midnight, I called Nick and they were still up. They said Helena could stay till the morning, and that was fine with me. I loved Helena, but the adults were going to finish off a bottle, talk, and drink, and reminisce about our tiny adventure, in that tiny musty bar.

We were up till morning, talking – mostly Kat and I. Talking about the weirdos at the bar, talking about the messed up world that sometimes encroached itself upon all of us. Talking about the fact that these men were probably sad and broken in ways they could not recognize, and no amount of science could fix. Then towards dawn, Kat started a kind of monologue:

“Guys ... I was scared to come tonight ... sure, things have changed a lot since we were kids, but ignorance is a state of nature ... ignorance and fear, it’s replaced ‘land of the free, home of the brave’ ... you know, my dad, who I love, freaked when I told him I was gay ... in some ways I think that was more traumatic for him than my accident ... but then a few years ago, right before the accident, he said something that I’ll never forget ... ‘Katrina, whatever force put you into my life, your mom’s life, I spend everyday thanking ... I was a very nervous, very scared man for many years ... it was as if someone, maybe God, who knows, knew I needed more than a daughter ... I needed someone I could look up to as well ... Katrina, you’re so brave you don’t even know it’. I love my pops. I love my mom. They ain’t perfect people, and they don’t agree with everything I do, but by God they’re some of the best people you’ll ever meet ... I’m an only child, so they think ‘no grandchildren’ when I told them – though I’m not sure that has to be true ... I’m not saying I’m ready to be a mom ... probably not for many years, though I think I have a few left to decide ... but I’m going to tell you too what my pops told me – the human race might mostly suck, but you two give me hope ... as messed up and imperfect and scraggly as your lives have been, you two are kind of amazing ... cut yourselves some slack ... I mean ... I’m a bit drunk, so I hope you know what I mean.”

Kat was sitting in the big leather chair when she said this, finishing off the last drops of hard drink. George and I were on the sofa, barely awake, but awake enough to hear. We had seen ourselves, in various forms, at different moments, as failures. Maybe it took a wild young woman, a ‘biker chick’ with a heart of gold, to remind us that we weren’t nearly as broken as we thought.

At 7 AM, Nick dropped off Helena on his way to work. He stopped in for a cup of coffee, and since it was likely he would hear one version of the story, of the bar, we made sure to give him a briefing.

“Damn I wish I could have been there”, Nick said.

“Dude, if you had been, it would have been closer to a fair fight ... as such, we did ok”, George said.

Kat said “ditto”.

And I just exhorted - “Nick, you’re invited next week!”

The sun was rising over our little home, in our little corner of western Washington. The sun, burning away the frost and the cold, was welcome. I made a special bacon and eggs for the family, Helena told us about the scary movie Nick let her watch. She said “don’t be mad at Uncle Nick”, and we weren’t. The adults had their own “scary movie”, but one with a happy ending.

The moral was simple:

“This life is too short to live without friends, especially ones you can depend on in a bar fight.”

Chapter 12: The Conference

December moved quickly – slippery, a little worrisome, like a sheet of ice that you walk on with trepidation. Katrina or Kat visited often, even when George was away. We made a friend – a young, rebellious, unconquerable friend. And Helena continued to profess, “I’m going to be a doctor mom, like Dr. Larry ...”

We chose to have a small New Year’s Eve party at our house this year, inviting a few friends, a couple neighbors, Kat and her new girlfriend. There was music and drinking and George’s smile, which had been regaining strength since October but now was the wide gaping smile I remembered from so long ago. My job kept me centered, and George was doing a pretty good job with Helena’s education, and I think, in their way, they were teaching each other. Helena’s reading was progressing quickly, and she was demanding I bring home some book on science at least once a week. I wanted her to read more fiction, but I think her world was strange enough - “Alice in Wonderland” simply didn’t fit.

In early January, Dr. Morse paid us a unannounced visit. I was making breakfast for the family, and he just showed up at the door.

“Dr. Morse, how are you ... is something wrong?”

“Nope ... but I would love a cup of coffee ...”

“Coming right up”, I grabbed one of our chipped mugs from the cupboard and filled it. He preferred his coffee black, from the interactions we’d had.

“How are you doing Janice?”

“Things have been going great, I think George gets a little stir crazy sometimes but I also think he’s enjoying the time with Helena ... perhaps making up for lost time.”

“Yes ... but how are you doing?”

“Doc ... when anyone asks me that question I wonder what crap sandwich they’re about to leave me with ... I’m doing well, but I have my fears that all of this is going to suddenly end ... it all seemed too impossible to begin with.”

“Well ... no crap sandwich ... but I do have a question for you ... there’s a conference on brain science being held in Hawaii, in a couple of weeks ... I’d like to take George

with me, but it seemed to me that maybe your whole family would enjoy a week there ... it will all be paid for by the foundation, and you would have traveling money as well ...”

“You do realize you’re asking a western Washington resident, in January, if they would want to go to Hawaii ... and what kind of answer would you expect from a non-crazy person?”

“It won’t be all vacation, 3 days will involve George being with me, at the conference, and ... well ... some people don’t enjoy having attention turned on them, especially when researchers, like myself, can be pretty insensitive and cold.”

“But you’ll be with him Doc? Right?”

“I will be by his side that whole time, but there will be lectures and people will think of him less as a human being, and more as a laboratory experiment ... that’s the crap sandwich.”

“I’ll have to ask George ...”, George came down the stairs, wiping the sleep from his eyes. Helena was not far behind. They both sat down in the kitchen, barely noticing Dr. Morse, until he blurted out “GOOD MORNING!” in a loud and authoritative voice.

“Good morning Doc”, George responded at a muffled volume.

“Hello doctor Larry ...”, Helena said half awake.

I decided to jump into it, before breakfast, and see what our “Barnes Crew” thought.

“So ... guys ... Dr. Morse says there’s a conference in Hawaii in a couple weeks ... he was wanting George to go ... but he said the foundation would pay for the whole family ... we would have to spend a couple days at the conference, but the rest of the time would be ours ... what do you guys ...”, before I could finish, George and Helena responded in unison.

“YES!”

“What are you guys saying ‘yes’ to?”

“Yes, honey, I think we should all go to Hawaii for this thing.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes ...”

Western Washington in winter was the land of vitamin D deficiency, so their excitement was not that unusual. I turned to Dr. Morse:

“It seems this is decided, we’re all going.”

I finished making breakfast with George, who volunteered he’d never flown on a plane before. Helena had never done this either. Over breakfast, with Dr. Morse there, we talked about plans, schedules, the package that would be arriving tomorrow with the cash vouchers, tickets, itinerary, hotel reservations. We talked, and talked, and smiled, and it seemed that our family was blessed – and that made me a little nervous, but one of my New Year’s resolutions was to be “more accepting” of good luck. I never really liked “good luck”, it seemed like it was invariably followed by bad.

Being the only one in the family to ever ride on a plane, I gave the speech about how safe it was, that there was nothing to worry about, that it was more dangerous to drive around town than to fly. Helena accepted this, George was a bit nervous still, but he had a few days to get used to the idea.

I told Patricia that I would be taking the time off – but I didn’t give her any details. I kept the details from my friends as well. My friends, my circle, the people in my life had been struggling during these hard years and I couldn’t tell them specifics, I simply didn’t want to rub it in their faces. Maybe I underestimated them, maybe I was projecting my own shame onto them. It just seemed cruel to me.

The night before our flight the whole family double checked baggage. Kat swung by and said Dr. Morse had told her, she’d been to the conference last year. She told us about a really cool restaurant, near the waterfront of Honolulu - “the waiters dress up like characters from movies.”

“There’s this really cool open air shopping center ... Helena will love it ... really cool. And, you know, it’s not cold, dreary, and dark there ... this time of year.”

“That’s the real selling point Kat.”

George and I spent the night, talking about what warm ocean water would feel like. We both grew up on the Puget Sound, and swimming in that water, even in summer, was anything but warm. Helena couldn’t sleep, and that was probably good as well. The

plane was leaving early the next day from SEATAC, and it would be great if Helena fell asleep on the plane ride.

When our alarm went off the next morning, at 5 AM, we had 20 minutes to be ready. We had an airport shuttle picking us up, and we'd be meeting Dr. Morse at the airport. The ride to Seattle was quiet, the SUV shuttle was reserved just for us and it felt like we were royalty. I know that sounds stupid, royalty, but I felt this way for the same reason I didn't tell anyone where we were going specifically.

I can't speak for other people – there are those who, seemingly, felt none of the pain of the last decade. But real people, living down on the ground, have been barely getting by. I didn't know anyone that could afford a vacation, let alone to Hawaii. And here we were, a few months after one of the worst weeks of my life, living some faerie tale crap that sort of made me feel disgusted – with myself. I told myself “lighten up Janice”, but that wasn't so easy for me to do. I reminded myself that George had been through hell, I reminded myself that Helena had never been on an adventure like this before, I reminded myself that I, too, could use a break. Most of all I tried to remember my New Year's resolution – and that my friends would jump on this chance for sun and relaxation, and would probably scold me for over analyzing it.

At SEATAC we checked our luggage, and made our way through TSA. I hadn't flown since before 9/11, and I was a bit shocked by how “handy” the guards were. George winced at how Helena and I were treated, and then was shocked when he got groped himself. “They must be very lonely to grab my junk”, George sneered after we got our shoes back on. I only thought, “this isn't the America I remember as a kid.”

The airport felt deserted. It seemed like some cathedral built for a world that never happened. Sure, near the few terminals that had planes docking, there were crowds – but most of the place was empty, like most of the malls ... like the SPACE AVAILABLE signs that seemed more numerous than Starbucks.

After we boarded, we saw Dr. Morse hurriedly get onboard – he was sitting in first class, and this actually helped. A gentle reminder that as “lucky” as we were, there was always someone a little “luckier”. I've never believed in envy, I didn't care that there were rich – to be rich is a joy, a wonder. What bothered me was that the country I grew up in as a girl, as imperfect and messy as it was, had morphed into some kind of open air prison – even with the “show me your papers” line from some 1940's film noir classic. I ordered

a drink, it seemed a decadently fun thing to do, George did the same, and Helena went to sleep in the seat between us.

The flight was uneventful, the landing a little bumpy. We all arrived worn out, and the conference was starting the next day. So, we made our way to the hotel, a nice one, and put Helena down and George and I went to sleep in the other bed. I don't know how long we slept, but we woke up to the early evening in Honolulu, with a setting sun in the distance, and some clouds rolling by. The temperature was 70 degrees, so it felt like we'd short circuited winter and arrived in summer.

We didn't want to do too much that evening, and Dr. Morse was focused on his lecture the next day – he would be speaking about *Dendritica* (the device), the study outcomes, and other boring crap. I was glad for George to be alive, and glad that others might have a chance as well, but it really did boil down to Dr. Morse's ego too – he had accomplished something amazing in his career, stretching between electrical engineering and brain science. Tomorrow was his day, rightly so, and my husband was a kind of prop, a “visual aid”, I kept thinking of “Young Frankenstein”, one of Mel Brooks' masterpieces ... I wondered if Dr. Morse would dress up my husband in a tuxedo and have him “putting on the Ritz”.

The outdoor market was fascinating. Tons of shops and stands and kiosks. One man sold a mechanical bird that Helena “had to have”, you would wind it up and it could fly 50 feet. The per diem cash the foundation gave us was more than enough to be a little extravagant, and Helena had never been a “give it to me” kid – and I felt like letting her be a little extravagant herself was good medicine. So we paid the 40 bucks, and got her that strange little mechanical bird made in Taiwan.

After strolling through the market, and down to the beach, we found the restaurant Kat spoke of – we were all hungry, and it seemed a great way to cap off our first amazing day in paradise. The food was not as good as the co-op back home, but the waiters and waitresses, dressed like movie stars and movie/TV characters, mesmerized Helena. She knew well enough it wasn't real, but to see her be a child, allowing herself a little whimsy, was worth some overpriced terriyaki steak and over cooked vegetables. The salad I had was well prepared – but, to be clear, I've never considered “making salad” to be one of the great challenges of cooking.

It was 10 PM, Hawaii time, and we needed to get back to the hotel. George would have to get up early, to meet with Dr. Morse. He had asked if he needed to dress up – and Dr. Morse said it was up to him, the conference was a fairly casual environment, but George was nervous, so we laid out a nice shirt, some slacks. George and I passed out, before Helena – we didn't really allow much TV watching at home, and she managed to find the Cartoon Network ... it was nonsense, garbage, but it made her laugh – so that too was acceptable for this strange journey.

George was gone, to meet with Dr. Morse and head to conference, before Helena and I woke up the next morning. They were scheduled for 2 PM, so Helena and I had the whole morning to go to the beach, hang out, play in the water.

“Mom, are there sharks out there?”

“Yep ... but I think it's pretty safe.”

“But what if a shark tries to bite me?”

“Well ... grit your teeth and bite the shark back!”, she laughed, and then looked out again across the endless ocean.

“Mom, how big is the Pacific?”

“It's, I think, the biggest ocean on Earth ... stretches for thousands of miles ...”

“Do people get lost out there?”

“Honey, people get lost in Arlington ... so yeah ...”

That morning, watching Helena, reminded me of my own youth – the days that weren't filled with fear. There are a lot worse childhoods than mine, but I simply didn't have a lot of days that I would call “care free” - between my father's “fire and brimstone” perspective, and the abuse I suffered, the best days were those we spent at the beach. My father would drink, and pass out by noon. I would have the day to wander the beaches, peeking under rocks and logs, wading and wondering. There were times, when I was much older than Helena, that I wondered if I would survive, but the Puget Sound in summertime, despite the frigid water, was enchanting – a sun that glowed and burned away pain, and greenish blue sea filled with life, ever reminding me that if you hang on, hold on, keep trying, something amazing might be around the corner.

Helena made a sand castle, and I helped under her supervision. A local came by to tell us that “you’re not supposed to do that”, and Helena exclaimed “NO SAND CASTLES IN HAWAII! THAT’S CRAP!” It felt like our cue to pack up and get ready for George’s part as “lab rat” in Dr. Morse’s lecture.

Dr. Morse made it clear that people would be dressed casually – but I’d been around “rich casual”, and that meant “dressed up” to people like us. I’d made Helena a sun dress the previous summer, yellow one, light and cotton. I had a dress I bought at the thrift store, pretty much new, just “not the fashion”. We both checked each other, agreed we looked good, and headed to the lecture hall at a local university’s campus.

There was a large crowd outside, and Dr. Morse had given us name tags to wear the previous day. We entered the anteroom, outside the great hall, nervously – as smart as both Helena and I were, in our own way, we could tell by the conversation that a different language was being spoken. A language of “neurotransmitters” and “biomorphic computing” and other terms I did not fully understand. One doctor there tried to pick up on me, not noticing or caring I was wearing a wedding ring. I politely pointed out that my husband was part of an upcoming lecture, and I introduced my daughter – like most lechers, this scared him off.

Dr. Morse spotted us, and walked briskly our direction:

“You guys made it, and you look great!”

“Thanks ... where’s George?”

“He’s in the waiting room, he’s kind of nervous ... he thinks people are going to make fun of him, I tried to explain that was not going to happen.”

“Doc, you can understand this is a long way from home for us.”

“I know ... I know ... but these men and women are here because they too want to help people ... most of the people you’ll meet here are good, if geeky, folks ... you and Helena will fit in just fine, just give them a chance too ... that road goes both ways.”

This was right, what Dr. Morse said – it’s easy to let insecurity become a “frown directed at the world.” Helena was too young to understand how complex these kinds of situations can be, and I was too old to care – that’s what I told myself.

“Listen ... my lecture is up next, so I have some seats reserved for you and Helena down front ... let me take you there.”

“Lead the way ...”

The hall, where the lectures were being given, seated 500 people – and it was packed, with younger people, probably graduate students, sitting on folding chairs in the back. There was a giant screen, for slides or notes I figured, and some chairs on the stage. The podium had a teleprompter, which I’d never seen before except on TV or in the movies. And George was sitting up there, nervously, as if awaiting execution. There were large screens behind George, ostensibly to support the different presentations and lectures.

“Ladies and gentlemen, the next speaker today is Dr. Lawrence Morse of the University of Washington. For over 30 years, Dr. Morse has been a leading figure in the fields of brain science, neurology, spinal repair surgery, bioengineering, and computer science. As you all know, his *Dendritica* device, a revolution in treatment for severe brain trauma, has been implanted in several test animal subjects, and ... in the last 4 years ... two human subjects, one of whom is here, today, on stage with Dr. Morse. Without further adieu, I give you Dr. Morse ...” There was applause for about a minute, it seems he is well known among this group. After the applause ended, Dr. Morse began to speak.

“Folks ... I hate speeches ... mainly because, when I hear a speech my first thought is ‘what is this guy trying to sell me?’ ... perhaps that’s too dark a view of humanity, or maybe this skepticism is exactly correct. I won’t be giving a long speech today, I will be asking my friend George, who is with me here, to tell you a little bit about what it is like to be, to live, with an onboard computer designed to replace the irreplaceable brain ... but before I embarrass George, some preface ...” Dr. Morse paused, to clear his throat and drink water. He didn’t look nervous, but he also didn’t seem to enjoy the attention – something he and I and George had in common.

“The *Dendritica* device was first conceived, as an idea, while my wife Margo was dying of advanced brain dementia due to advanced alcoholism. She was an amazing woman, an aspiring author, and someone trapped by demons ... she drank every day, for years, several quarts of alcohol and this, eventually, caught up with her ... her story is not tragic, at many points along her journey of self-destruction she could have said ‘no, I will not drink today’ ... that never happened. And I? I stood by, as so many of us do, because of love ... because of a warped sense of obligation ... I stood by and helped her

in this, helped her hide the disease ... the addiction ... I accepted her excuses, that it was ‘something she needed’ ... I made up excuses for her ... 20 years ago, when her physician told her to stop drinking or she’d be dead in 5 years, she saw this as almost a call to arms and her drinking became more heavy. During those last 2 years, when her brain was so addled she simply no longer knew what alcohol was or why she ‘needed’ it, I watched my once beautiful, intelligent, vibrant, and deeply troubled wife become a skeleton of her former self ... no, my friends, her story is not tragic because she, unlike George, unlike the millions that suffer from brain dementia and Alzheimer’s ... she had a choice ... she had an amazing life ... and for reasons I still don’t comprehend, she chose to kill herself, slowly, by poisoning her body ... and more specifically ... her brain.” Dr. Morse paused again, I felt as if this was the first time he was being so publicly honest about something he must have felt great shame over as well. And I, like Dr. Morse, understood the narrow thread, the tightrope, that men and women in love balance upon – between being supportive and being honest.

“I am telling this story for the first time, this way ... for years I told friends, family, that my wife had Alzheimer’s ... I considered it a little ‘lie’ ... I did not want to disclose something that seemed to be a mark upon my soul ... that being said, I don’t want to dwell on this either ... at the point that my wife was near death, when her own brain was so diseased that even regulating the body, heart rate, breathing, and all the hundreds and thousands of things the brain regulates ... was breaking down ... it was in that desperate moment I conceived of *Dendritica* – an automated, synthetic, cognitive poly-map ... of course, that’s a lot of gobbledygook ... and because of the nature of this implant, there is a fair amount of computer science background one would need, especially in the fields of machine learning and biomorphic computing, to fully understand what I and my team at the UW have achieved ... so, let’s first do a primer and talk about what machine learning is and is not ...”

Dr. Morse spoke for several more minutes. He covered what were supposedly “basic topics”, but for many of the doctors here, and especially myself, I felt like I would need to go back to school for 10 years to understand. There were parts of his lecture that were semi-intelligible to the uninformed, and I think between the lecture, and the many one-on-one meetings with Dr. Morse, I had a picture of what this implant did ... it was more than a computer, more than just an implant ... it was, in its own way, a kind of “replacement” for brain-stuff ... it wasn’t tissue, it was comprised of materials not

dissimilar from what you would find in an LCD TV set. It was designed to be “squishy” like the brain ... this was a word Dr. Morse used in the lecture, but he didn’t mean “wet an malleable” in any physical sense ... he meant the way the brain seems to shape itself to the world, in weird and sometimes messy ways, not matter how much the world changes. Yes – there was much about this lecture I did not understand, but the last few months have been a steep learning curve for a wife, a mother, that needs to know what’s going on with her husband.

“... so, was that pretty painful or not so painful ...”, Dr. Morse asked, knowing that in a room full of well fed pride and egos, no one would say much.

“At this point, I want to open things up to questions ... these can be directed at myself or George.”

Various geeks, nerds, researchers, of both sexes, made their way to the microphones that were scattered across the hall.

“Dr. Morse, my name is Trudy Phillips, I’m a researcher at UCLA ... my question is for you, is there any way to understand or study what is going on inside the device?”

“That’s a great question Trudy ... probably one of the most interesting ... while it is true that we do, during check-ups, pull a download of what we call ‘machine state’ from the device ... we’re still not quite sure what we’re looking at ... as you know, from the lecture, there are two interesting things that go on in the device ... firstly, the device uses a new kind of topology based computer language, called TOPOS, or topological-operating-system ... the language allows for re-programming all the time ... secondly, the liquid-crystal computational unit is constantly re-mapping itself to optimize computation and memory storage ... right now, George’s device has generated over 50 terabytes code ... and while we understand or can figure out some or much of it, there is still a lot of complexity in our fully understanding how the code interacts ... since TOPOS supports multi-threaded tasks or concurrency by design ... well ... you can’t really understand the code without a logging function and that would use up too much in terms of computing resources ... we thought about off loading a log, via blue-tooth, to some external device ... but the goal was, firstly, to treat the patient ... and, honestly, the logging would not be sufficient as so much of this is encoded in the rapidly changing liquid-silicon pathways ... we are still working on this problem ... but it is an age old problem – a chunk of ‘something’ complicated enough to understand itself might be too

complicated to fully understand ... but we're scientists, so we continue to work on this problem ...”

“Dr. Morse, I'm Dr. Brooks from Carnegie-Mellon ...”

“Ah, we met at last year's conference ...”

“Yes, Sir, we did ... my question is for George ... George, have you noticed or experienced discomfort from the implant?”

George looked at Dr. Morse, and then walked up to the podium ... I could tell he was one hundred different kinds of nervous ...

“Sir ... the most discomfort I've felt has been coming here ... and ... ya know ... being on stage answering questions ...”, there was some laughter in the audience.

“But, to answer your question directly, I've had discomfort, not really any pain ... I've had feelings of being ‘out of control’ of my emotions, especially the first few weeks after the device was implanted ... Dr. Morse would calibrate the device ... the ‘16 points of adjustment’ and then, voilà ... the discomfort would go away ... I haven't felt anything like this for the last 3 weeks ... does that help ... Sir?”

The gentleman from Carnegie-Mellon went back to his seat, as did George.

“The conference facilitators tell me we have time for one more question ...”

The last question came from someone that looked totally out of place. A woman, perhaps 30, beautiful black hair and well dressed, stood at the microphone.

“Dr. Morse, my name is Deborah Norton from the Seattle Times ... could you explain how it is that almost 98% of all the funding for the Hartgen Foundation comes from DARPA ... the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency?”

Dr. Morse froze for a few seconds, a flat gaze, expressionless face, fell upon him.

“Miss Norton, this conference is for researchers, not journalists.”

“Yes, Dr. Morse, I am a journalist and a researcher ... I paid for a day pass ... I'm asking a question ... why does so much of the money for this ‘miracle’ come from the U.S. Defense Department?”

“As you well know, Miss Norton, brain injury has been a significant issue for many of our brave young men and women during these many years of war against terror ... we’ve done great things to provide armor, to protect the body ... but the brain has been the real problem ... the funding is to develop new strategies for treating significant traumatic brain injury, which in many cases has no other solution ... and this will, in turn, help out civilians who suffer the same kind of life changing event ... so ...”, Deborah cut him off in mid sentence.

“But isn’t it true there have been three human subjects for this device, two that are publicly known ... and a third ... who’s identity is secret, classified?”

“Miss Norton, I think you’re indulging in conspiracy theory.”

“No, Dr. Morse, I think I’m asking difficult questions ... a skill out of practice in America, these days ...”

At that point, two security guards working for the university, escorted Deborah Norton out of the hall – there was silence in the place, and since that was the last question for Dr. Morse the facilitators came on stage to introduce the next speaker ... someone from Eli Lilly to talk about a new anti-depressant.

George and Dr. Morse exited the stage, to the back, and Helena and I waited in the square outside the hall. We found a bench, dedicated to someone who gave money at some point ... in remembrance of some thing, for which I did not care.

Across the square, sitting on a similar bench, was Deborah Norton – the reporter who asked some simple questions and received only ire. She seemed pushy, obstinate, rude – everything that had been missing from journalism for a long time. She seemed unperturbed by what happened, chatting on her smart phone ... likely speaking with her editor, perhaps boyfriend. She caught my eyes, I caught hers – and she had done her research, so she got up and walked towards Helena and myself.

“You’re Janice Barnes, George’s wife ... right?”

“I am, this is my daughter Helena.”

“I can’t stay here, I have another meeting ... but I’d like to give you my card, maybe we could talk sometime?”

“Talk ... talk about what?”

“I think there’s a lot, Janice, that the kind old Dr. Morse is keeping from you ... a lot you deserve to know.”

“Well ... I don’t know you ... and Dr. Morse has been a godsend ...”

“Maybe so ... he helped your husband, that’s true ... but there’s more going on here that will impact his life, yours, maybe all of our lives ... so, if you’re curious, and I think you are ... give me a call when you get back to Washington ...”

“I’ll think about it ...”

“That’s all I ask of anyone, Janice, is that they think.”

With that, Miss Norton turned and walked away. She was annoying, in the way a curious cat can be – getting into yarn, papers, stuff that is best left where it stands. “Curiosity killed the cat”, I muttered under my breath as she disappeared behind the corner of a building. But I was curious now – and I was wondering, what else was there to this “miracle” Dr. Morse and the Hartgen Foundation provided?

Helena and I had been waiting on the bench, outside the hall, for about 30 minutes. The weather in Hawaii, at that time, was so mild and pleasant that we simply did not mind. Helena was quiet, looking through a book on “Birds of Hawaii” she had bought at a gift shop. I was staring into the distance, remembering that “character flaw” of mine – never expecting any good thing for free, always believing a price would be paid.

“How are you two young ladies doing?”, Dr. Morse said as he and George came up from behind.

“We’re fine.”

“I hope you weren’t too alarmed by that reporter ... she’s a real nuisance, and probably going to lose her job ... coming to this conference was not a good move ...”

“What do you mean, Dr. Morse?”

“I explained it all to George ... he knows the deal ... don’t you George?”

“I do Sir”, George said with the same dead eyed look he had for those years before the accident ... that depression that wells up in the eye sockets, and causes a kind of blank expression on the face.

“Good ... good ... I’m off to a lunch meeting ... George will explain it all.”

Dr. Morse turned and walked away. George sat down on the bench next to me, with Helena on the other side. He held my hand and squeezed.

“Honey, there’s something I need to tell you. I can’t talk about it in front of Helena ... she’s too young ... she wouldn’t understand ...”

“Ok ... let’s get back to the hotel, we can talk there ...”

It was late afternoon, and a breeze was picking up and clouds were rolling in from the east. Yes – it was Hawaii ... but something told me that the queer darkness of Washington State in winter had followed us here, if not in form, then in function.

Chapter 13: Fugue State

The trip to Hawaii was a needed break, but I had a hard time relaxing. I couldn't stop thinking about what Deborah said, about wanting to meet with me. I didn't know a whole lot about DARPA or why the U.S. Department of Defense would fund the Hartgen Foundation – cover for the research into *Dendritica*. One day, a week or two after getting back, I asked Patricia at work what she knew about DARPA.

“DARPA? ... yeah ... that's weapons research ... really top secret ... I had a boyfriend once, he was ex-air-force ... he told me that most of what is heard publicly, about DARPA, is cover something deeper, darker ... you know those trillions of dollars that magically went missing before 9/11?”

“Yes, I heard about that ...”

“And the other 5 or 7 trillion that is missing from the defense department's budget now?”

“Yes ...”

“Well ... my old boyfriend said that's misdirection too ... they have to admit to the money being gone ... but it never went missing ... it was spent on dark stuff ... stuff so secret most people would be opposed if they knew ...”

“So, it's not that unusual for DARPA to fund a not-for-profit, like the Hartgen Foundation, as cover for something else?”

“Not unusual at all – pretty much standard operating procedure.”

Patricia was a bit of a conspiracy nut, but others I knew who had military experience confirmed what she said – the budget for the U.S. military is huge, lots of bureaucracy, lots of ways of hiding projects and funding them secretly. But why this project? What could be the purpose of developing this implant, other than to treat injured soldiers? It can't be that everything they work on is a weapon, can it?

It was 4 weeks after Hawaii that Katrina paid me a visit. She'd been biking up and down I-5, on a unplanned excursion – she knew we were back, and showed up. The sound of her bike was unmistakable, and the fact that she didn't knock showed her membership in the family Barnes.

“Janice, how’s it going? How was Hawaii?”

“Nice ... it was a nice break”, I tried to sound positive, but my morbid obsession over the secrets surrounding *Dendritica* were impossible to conceal.

“Yeah ... Dr. Morse says that journalist from the Times was there ... I guess that might have freaked you out.”

“It did ... did you know? About where the money was coming from for the implant?”

“I guessed. I didn’t have a choice, obviously, my parents made the decision for me ... given that most of my brains were scrambled pretty hard ... after I started feeling better, I guess I didn’t want to ... you know ... look the gift horse in the kisser ... it seemed like good fortune and I wanted to focus on that. Besides, the government funds lots of shit ...”

“Then why not be up front about it, why hide it in some stupid foundation?”

“I dunno Janice ... maybe it’s for tax purposes?”

“Now you’re just being funny ...”

“Am I? ... you’re looking at this the wrong way is all I’m trying to say ... George has been given a second chance, why does it matter where this chance came from?”

I wanted to agree. I wanted to acknowledge the “second chance”, like Katrina, and ignore the rest. I wasn’t really sure how to look at this “good fortune”. Everybody knows the government spends a lot of money on entirely useless, pointless, things ... this might have been an example of money well spent, and why not?

But then there was the nagging question ... why would a journalist, with Deborah Norton’s credentials, be so focused on this. I did some research on her, when I got back from the conference. She’d won awards, helped to crack a major child abuse ring in Washington’s CPS system (Child Protective Services). She clearly made enemies, and pissed people off, but it seemed like the people she pissed off were not the kind of people anyone would admire. And now, for a couple of years, she’s been relegated to the back pages of the Seattle Times, writing technology articles that no one reads – well, except for me, now.

“Kat ... did you know about the 3rd human subject?”

Katrina froze for a second. She'd been sipping a cup of coffee I handed her when she got in, and she just stared at it ... for what seemed like a minute.

“Janice ... Dr. Morse told me there was no other human subject ... I was the first and George was the second ... and until a complete series of tests are done, there will be no others ... Did that jerky reporter tell you this?”

“She said a lot of things, Kat, and it has me thinking ...”

“Well ... as I always say, ‘don’t think too much’ ... life is too short for so much thinking.”

And with those words, Kat handed me the empty cup of coffee and headed back on the road. I didn’t ask her where she was headed, if I had she would have probably given me some gibberish or absurd description ... she preferred heading in random directions, without much planning or a specific destination.

George had been out walking that morning, when Kat visited – he did this a lot, the last few months of recovery. Something Dr. Morse emphasized as important to his rehabilitation. But this day he’d been gone very long. It was nearing 3 PM, and the winter darkness was setting in.

“Mommy, where’s dad?”

“I don’t know honey.”

“Did he go for a walk?”

“I think so ... I think he should be back soon.”

Helena went back upstairs to her room. I remained in the kitchen, waiting ...

By 9 PM I began to worry, so I called Nick to see if George was at his place.

“Nick, this is Janice ...”

“Hey, what’s up?”

“Is George over there with you?”

“No ... I’m supposed to meet him for a beer next week.”

“Do you know if there’s any place he might hang out, go to ... some place he might have kept secret from me? I’m worried Nick ... he went for a walk this morning but didn’t come back ... usually he just walks for a few hours ... it’s been eight hours ...”

“Did you call the sheriff?”

“I don’t want to do that ... I will in a while ... maybe I should now ...”

“Janice, I’d wait till the morning ... he might have gone some place, needing to be alone ... you know how moody he gets ... used to get ... maybe all this ... this stuff ... has caught up to him?”

“If you can, call some of his buddies ... people George would know ... can you do that for me Nick?”

“No problem Janice ...”

I made sandwiches for dinner, for Helena and myself. I read to her, from “Alice in Wonderland” - she asked me about the strange words that Lewis Carroll used, and I didn’t have anything to say. “It’s what writers do sometimes, kiddo ...”

Helena and I slept in the same bed that night, she asked me where “daddy was”, all I could say is he’s going to be back soon.

The next morning I woke up early to find George passed out on the sofa downstairs. I didn’t want to wake him, but I also needed to know where he’d been. I started making breakfast for myself, Helena and George. Probably it was the bacon, but George woke up and came into the kitchen, wiping his eyes – still tired from his “long walk” the day before. I tried to remain calm, pretending that this was normal – George was recovering from a terrible brain injury. This was normal.

“Where were you yesterday?”

“I went for a walk, lost track of time ... I ended up walking all the way down to the waterfront in Mt. Vernon ... sort of stood out there, for a few hours ... then I went to a tavern and had a few beers ... I didn’t take my phone with me ... I should have ... I’m really sorry about this ...”

I gave George a hug.

“I get it ... the last few months have been overwhelming ... you needed some space ... I get it ... but please don’t do that again ... please tell me if you’re going to be late ...”

“I will honey.”

George went upstairs, took off his jeans and shirt ... it was Sunday morning and I didn’t have work, so I decided to collect all the dirty clothes and do a few loads of laundry.

I check the pockets whenever I’m doing laundry, it’s automatic ...

I check the pockets for change, keys, and most importantly – phones ...

I checked George’s jeans first. It wasn’t suspicion, maybe it was. Inside was some change, a few quarters and a crumpled one dollar bill. There was also a bus ticket, for the metro line, Seattle’s mass transit, with a date stamp of yesterday. George had fallen asleep again, and Helena was playing in her room. I just stood there and stared at that stub. He didn’t take a vehicle, yesterday, so the nearest park’n’ride for Seattle was 6 miles away – not a fast walk, but not impossible for someone like George to do in 90 minutes.

Why would he lie about being in Seattle?

Did he meet with Dr. Morse?

Was it something else, someone else?

George was not a perfect man, but even during his “period of darkness”, his severe depression, he didn’t lie to me – he simply didn’t talk. When he did speak, he would say ugly things, negative things, but it was never lying – it was kind of an absolute and brutal truth. I stopped doing laundry. I went downstairs and found some whiskey that Kat had left behind a few weeks earlier. I grabbed a glass and poured it and sat in the big leather chair, staring out into the nearby fields. I used to smoke cigarettes ... a long time ago ... I quit just before meeting George. At that moment I wished I’d had a cig, to go with the whiskey, and the questions bouncing around my head. I heard a thump, at the front porch, and a truck drive off. “The paper ... it’s here ...”

The local newspaper had an optional “Sunday Herald” only for those on a budget. So, despite being filled with advertisements and garbage, I had the Sunday paper delivered. Print journalism was dead, it had been dying for years. But the local Sunday paper still had a kind of quaint charm to it, and though it never really scratched deeply the reality

around us, it did remind me, comfort me, with echoes of a time when people were still interested in the truth.

I flipped through those pages, drinking my whiskey, and periodically staring into the distance. I poured another glass, and kept flipping the pages. I don't know what caused me to stop at the regional section, usually I went straight for the comics or the crossword puzzle, I was never into sudoku ... but I stopped at the regional section, the section covering general news out of Western Washington. And, on the second page of the section, at the top, was the headline:

“LOCAL JOURNALIST COMMITS SUICIDE AT BALLARD BRIDGE”

I read further, not wanting to ...

It was Deborah Norton. The woman who gave me her card. The woman who asked difficult questions, great questions, at the conference. The woman that had me thinking about the purpose behind my husband's good luck. That intelligent, young, beautiful, consummate reporter was dead. They said she left a suicide note, the details of which would not be revealed to the public.

Helena was playing upstairs ...

George was sleeping ...

I was awake, that Sunday morning, finishing off a bottle of whiskey, staring into the distance. I wish I had a cigarette, a whole pack.

I muttered to myself, “What did Alice see? What did she see, when she wandered down the rabbit hole?”

The normal, conventional, free-range mommy said “pretend you didn't read this, pretend like everyone else.”

The other part, the part that Helena and I had in common, couldn't stop – didn't want to stop thinking, or asking questions ...

“What did Deborah see?”

What was I seeing now?

Chapter 14: “Dear Janice ...”

George was tired, for a couple of days, sleeping most of the time – so I decided to take a few days off from work. I called Dr. Morse about the METRO ticket, and he thought that George had experienced a “fugue state” - a kind of active, memoryless, event. I asked Dr. Morse why he would make up some elaborate lie about where he’d been, and he said “well, that happens too, it’s embarrassment ... nothing more ... George didn’t want to tell you he couldn’t remember.” He said he’d seen it in other traumatic brain injury cases and that we should be watchful, but not to worry and that I shouldn’t mention it to George, “it might impact his recovery.” I didn’t mention the article about Deborah Norton to Dr. Morse, and he didn’t say anything either – which means nothing, but sometimes silence speaks volumes.

I wanted to call Kat, to get her opinion – but what was I concerned about?

What was this nagging question that had little or no form?

People kill themselves, hell, George probably considered killing himself a few years ago. It’s not happy, it’s not joyful, it’s dark and ugly – but suicide happens, at all ages. Journalism was a dying trade, being replaced by smut merchants and corporate propaganda. Deborah was young, beautiful, but she probably had her own demons. People die, people sometimes kill themselves, especially these days. But still, as I heard myself, in my own head, rationalizing this, I didn’t believe it – there had to be something more going on, something was missing.

While sitting there, in my kitchen, pondering this impossible to answer question, a delivery guy came to my door ...

“Are you Janice Barnes?”

“That’s me ...”

“You need to sign for this.”

The delivery guy passed me the digital signature pad, I signed, and he handed me a large package. The sender was “Jane Smith”, address was a PO Box that I didn’t recognize.

Inside the package were files, some flash memory cards, and a letter, at the top, addressed to me:

Dear Janice,

I know that we briefly met, in Hawaii, and I probably scared you a little. The last few months you've seen miracles – like a husband returning from near death. You've received help, support, all of it welcome from your perspective. I have a hard time telling you this, but none of it was about you or George. None of it was assistance out of kindness. It was all a means of continuing an experiment that goes back over 50 years.

These were words, from Deborah, as if she were speaking from beyond the grave. I read on, with trepidation, knowing that each word, each sentence, presented risk.

Janice, you need to know that this “foundation” that is helping you has been around since before you or your husband were born. This foundation was involved in illegal experimentation during the Cold War – the MK-ULTRA project, that you may have read about, was one of the many projects this foundation managed. They are responsible for exposing Americans, unknowingly, to LSD. They are responsible for memory erasure experiments, on unsuspecting men, women, and children, using electro-shock therapy. They are responsible for experiments involving torture. But what they focused on, primarily, was the ability to program, to control, the human mind.

Dr. Morse was recruited, to work with them, a long time ago. The story he told at the conference? About his alcoholic wife? That story was half true. His wife was an alcoholic, she likely died as a result. But there's more to that story. There's the part where she found out what her husband was working on, more than 30 years ago, and confronted him about it. There's the part of the story where she was locked up in an asylum, given electro-shock therapy herself – but her mind was strong. Her mind was not strong enough to push the liquor away, not strong enough to say no to a drink, but strong enough to remember what she had learned about her husband and this drove her mad. She knew Janice. She knew what Dr. Morse was really doing. And Dr. Morse? The loving husband? He simply watched, with expectation, his wife drink herself to death.

This package contains everything I've discovered in the 3 years of researching this story. This story destroyed my career – so what, I don't care. But more importantly, this story has put me “on the radar.” There are people, in positions of power, who would prefer this entire story be nothing but a footnote to the history of technology and medicine, sans the truth. I'm telling you that your life is in danger, your whole family.

Katrina? She is in danger as well. George is a test subject, nothing more – when scientists are done with their lab animals, they destroy them.

If you received this packet, there is a very good chance I'm dead. I set things up, with a private detective, to send this to you and Katrina in the event of my demise. I don't have any good advice, if I'm dead I clearly couldn't keep myself alive. But I will say this: ignore everything you think you know about Dendritica ... read what's in this packet ... get someplace safe, where no one knows you ... good luck.

Yours,

Deborah Norton, reporter

From October of last year, till now, early March, I'd wondered if I were living in a dream world – too surreal to be believed. I had welcomed Dr. Morse's innovative device. I had thanked the lord in heaven for this, for saving George. And now, reading this letter from a dead woman and sifting through the research she left for me, I wondered if I had been cursed.

I did not call Katrina. I did not know who to talk to. George was groggy still, from his "fugue state" or whatever it really was. Katrina was likely still on her road trek, riding along side roads and through forgotten towns. In my whole life I'd never felt more alone. I considered calling Patricia, but then I realized that I would simply be getting her into trouble, the same trouble I was in. Sure – I had friends, friends who saw the world through the prism of their TV sets. Friends who believed the nonsense they were told about "we're the good guys." They were friends, truly, but not for a situation like this.

A week ago, a day ago, I would have called Dr. Morse. Was he the person described by Deborah? Was he this other man? Was he two people or three? He certainly had me fooled, and George, and Helena. Was he a killer? Was he just some scientist who didn't care about anything or anyone, except the experiment?

These questions and others raced through my head ...

I was alone ...

And then, Kat showed up ... as always, no knocking, just the kitchen door swinging wildly open.

"Did you get the package from that reporter?"

“I did ...”

“What do you think?”

“I don’t want to think ... I want to curl up into a ball, next to my husband and not think ... I want to pretend that happy endings are possible ... if that’s not going to happen, I want to get drunk.”

“Well ... it just so happens I can help with one of those problems ...”

The young, brash, biker chick, opened her satchel, pulled out the package that she clearly skimmed, and a fifth of Jack Daniel’s Kentucky Bourbon.

“We talk about this, and we finish this bottle together ...”

“Do you have any cigarettes?”

“Girl ... I love to smoke when I’m drunk ... but only American Spirit cigs ... fewer chemicals ...”

We passed the bottle between us, as we exchanged sides of this bizarre discourse. Were we in danger? What should we do? Was there any place any of us could go to get away from this?

“Janice ... I was thinking ... (burp) ... I was thinking that we need to go some place off the radar ... some place where we can’t be reached ... I have this on again, off again, girlfriend ... she’s a hacker ... a good one ... she hangs out with a tough biker gang near Kettle Falls, in Northeast Washington ... it’s a long ass drive ... real long ... but I figure we can take your truck, I can leave the bike here ... we’d all squeeze in there, likely ... and I have plenty of cash for fuel ... we can hang there until we figure this stupid shit out ... but first, I need to do something ...”

Kat got up, took her phone out of her breast pocket. Then, she put her hand out ...

“Give it to me ... and your husband’s ...”

“My phone?”

“Yep ...”

“Why?”

“Because they can track us ...”

“What about the device, can’t they track that?”

“Short distances, up to a hundred feet ... my girl ... she researched the publicly available info on this tech ... it’s very sensitive to the frequencies required for longer distance transmission ... besides, we’re screwed anyways if they can track it ... better to cover the bases we can is all I can say ...”

“We’ve barely discussed this plan, shouldn’t we talk to George about it?”

“GEORGE? ... he’s gonna follow your lead ... I don’t know if you can tell, but you run this house, this family ... George will go along with whatever you decide ... I’m telling you that I thought this was all weird from the beginning ... but I wanted to treat it as some kind of good luck ... GOOD LUCK FOR KATRINA ... you need to decide.”

Katrina stood there, with her hand out, looking at me with those whiskey bloodshot eyes. I sat at the table, in the kitchen, wondering how the hell I ended up in a John le Carré novel.

“Kat ... are you sure this is the right move? Why don’t we just go to the police? To the newspapers?”

“Girl, I think you knew that was stupid before you even said it ...”

And with that, I handed Kat my phone, grabbed George’s from the nearby counter, and handed them to Katrina. She placed them in the microwave, and set the timer for one minute. I went upstairs, told George what I could, as quickly as I could. He got on his clothes, packed some stuff, while I was helping Helena.

We’d kept our atlas, while most were using their phones for navigation – Nick always mocked us for this.

Kat also knew the roads by memory. “We’ll take HWY-20 ... it opened early this year ... a better pass ... fewer State Patrol ...”, Kat navigated, George drove, and I and Helena sat snuggly between them – sleeping as we could. It was after 11 PM at night, and spring had not arrived yet, so the air was cool, uncomfortable. Kat was bringing George up to speed, and I could sense, as you learn to do when you live with someone long enough, George’s anger building.

We’d brought coffee, food, with us. We stopped a few miles west of Rockport, at a park, to eat and review the plan. Helena was still confused. We told her we were going to visit

friends – which was mostly true, I guess. I didn't like lying to her, but what do you tell a five year old? What was the right answer here? Either the tired, or the hangover, or the fear, but I was too nervous, too anxious to sit down with her and explain the situation. What could I tell Helena? More importantly, how could I keep this a secret from her for more than a day or two ... she was too smart, too curious, too much like me.

After Rockport, we stopped at a small gas station, near Omak, and got fuel. It was already morning, and we decided that only I would leave the vehicle at any time. Yes, we were paranoid, fearful, and trying to be as smart as we could be. Fear is not a great place to be when you also want to be smart – fear can sometimes lead to really bad decisions.

“Kat, are you sure your girlfriend will take us in?”

“Listen ... she knows about all this crap ... she doesn't have any hard line connection to the web, to ... well ... anything ... when she wants to send an email, or go on line, she picks some random spot on the map, with a Starbucks ... and she says that isn't even good enough, but it's the best she can do ... believe me, if you want to disappear for a while, that's the place ... plus ... her cabin is located in the heart of one of the biggest, and most reclusive, biker gangs in America ... they move around all the time ... it just so happens they're at the home base, in Kettle Falls, right now ... hell ... this plan is far from perfect ... but it's the best I could come up with in a pinch.”

“Kat ... I trust you ... lord knows I have to trust you ... but I don't know these people, the biker gang, you're friend ...”

“My friend is named Charlie ... Charlie Cantrell ... and you'd like her ... once you get past her heavy levels of general distrust ... I'm not even sure she'll let us in ... she knows the deal, I think she worked for the NSA once or one of their sub-contractors ... she's older than me, maybe even older than you ... I really don't know what will happen ... if you have a better plan, it's not too late to ... ya know ... change course.”

“I trust you Kat ...”

It was afternoon, in Eastern Washington, and we were only an hour, maybe a little longer, away from Kettle Falls. We drove the speed limit, took a few breaks, here and there. And we arrived around 1 PM.

The compound was 10 miles outside of Kettle Falls. It was surrounded by chain link fence, with strange wire wrapped around the top. I asked Kat what it was, “that’s concertina wire ... you don’t want to screw with that crap without special gloves ... believe me ...”

At the gate, there was a old style call box. Katrina spoke “Big ... big ...”, and out the other side, through the tinny speaker, came “foot”. Katrina explained this was “challenge and password”, one of the many forms of security the gang implemented. They changed it, periodically, we were lucky they had not changed it again.

Inside the fence line were cabins, lots of bikes, bikers, camp fires, drinking, and generally not a great place to have Helena. We drove deeper into the woods, to a spot where the road ended, but there wasn’t a cabin.

“We need to get out here ... we have to walk a quarter of a mile further to get to Charlie’s place ...”

We pulled our bags, food, out of the truck. I’d had the forethought to put boots on myself, and Helena – and George always wore Redwings ...

George drove the truck into the woods a bit, and he and Katrina did their best to cover it in branches.

The trail to Charlie’s was barely noticeable. It wasn’t anything more than some dirt, rock, I could see how easy it would be to get lost out here. The wood were thick, the pine trees closely bunched. “This is a good spot to hide from the world”, I thought. But it was also quite beautiful. It wasn’t quite spring yet, but the sun was high in the sky and the clouds were puffy, white, not menacing.

The cabin looked worn, dilapidated, from the outside – other than smoke coming from a small chimney, it would seem abandoned. Charlie was outside, working in her garden ...

Without looking up from the dirt, Charlie spoke.

“I heard your truck 15 minutes ago ... I hope you hid it off the road Kat ...”

“We did an ok job ... George and I.”

“So that’s the famous George?”

Charlie was closer to my age, attractive, but clearly not one for worrying about make-up or 'products'. Her hair was red, knotty, as if she'd not combed it in years – it was all up in some kind of bun, but looked more like a rat's nest. She was wearing overalls, work boots, and a flannel shirt.

"I have no idea why you're here Kat, but perhaps we can discuss this over a few beers or coffee ..."

"Please, no beer ...", I responded.

"Lady ... you don't have to have no beer, but I'm going to crack open a PBR ..."

Kat walked up to her, and they kissed, hugged. Charlie held Kat's head, in front of her. Charlie was taller than Kat.

"What kind of trouble are you in girl?"

"Charlie ... you won't believe it, and if you do you'll probably kick us out ..."

"Ok then ... whiskey it is!"

Chapter 15: Hiding Out

Charlie's cabin was sparse – mostly filled with computer equipment, a few guns scattered about, books. She had a diesel generator outside, a quiet one, some solar panels, and a propane tank. She gave us a quick tour – which was quick, given that there was one room, one living room – about 600 square feet of space. Charlie made Helena feel at home, found a game that she could play, on one of her computers.

“Little one, you ever play ‘Tetris’?”

“No ...”

“Well ... I've got one computer, set up right over there, and I'll show you how to play ... but then the adults are going to have to talk for a bit, is that ok?”

“Mommy ... is that ok?”

“Yes ... Charlie is a friend.”

Charlie set up a laptop, in the bedroom, and once she'd shown Helena how to play, brought her some water, and cookies ... the adults sat in the living room ... Kat staring at Charlie Charlie staring at me ... and George and I simply staring into space.

“I'll start ... I don't know what this is about ... I told Kat a month ago that I did not like visitors, so if this is some weekend visit ... well ... I really don't know how friendly I can be.”

“Charlie ... you don't know me ... or George ... perhaps the best thing would be for us to leave you and Kat alone ... she can explain it just as well as we can ...”

“Is it related to the gizmo in Kat's and George's brain-case?”

“It is ...”

“Ok ... why don't you too check on Helena ... I can only assume you've played Tetris ... so you can help her with that ... get some sleep if you need to ... Kat and I will talk.”

George and I went back into Charlie's room, where Helena was playing Tetris and simply didn't need our help. George and I sat on the edge of the bed, holding hands, not saying much. What was there to say?

“This is crazy ... a nightmare”, George whispered to me.

“Yeah ... not sure how much of this we should talk about right now.”

Then, Helena looked up from her game, “mom ... is something wrong?”

Helena was not a normal five year old. Her mind raced with ideas and it was doubtful that we could keep this whole mess a secret. So, George and I began, as best we could, to explain ...

“Helena, we need to talk to you about something ...”

“What mommy?”

“Well ... it’s a little complicated ... but we’ll do the best we can ... ok?”

And with that I told a story. I hoped it was a story a kid could understand. A story about people, like us, who find themselves in difficult places. Places where it seems like there’s no way out – and then along comes a magician, a wizard, that helps. But in the process of helping, of providing hope and comfort, the people being helped ... well ... they discover there’s more going on. Much more. Sinister, twisted, facile and obscure. I used the words I thought she could understand, and she laid her head on George’s lap, listening. I don’t know if it was a few minutes or an hour. But when I was done trying to explain this, Helena looked up ...

“... do the bad men know where we are?”

“Honey, I honestly don’t know ...”

“Is daddy going to be ok?”

“Daddy is going to be fine”, George interjected.

There was a knock on the bedroom door, “hey, you guys wanna come out here?”, Charlie asked.

We got up, leaving Helena to play more Tetris – and joined the other adults.

“So George, do you mind if I run some tests on you?”

“What kind of tests?”

“Well ... when Kat first visited me, I discovered that her device gave off a blue-tooth signal, a weak one, and ... well ... she told you I was a hacker, right?”

“She told us you were an engineer”, I said.

“That’s right Janice, in another life ... but I’ve spent most of my career as a computer and software engineer ... I worked for the NSA for a while, as a contractor ... believe me, you don’t want to spend much time around those people ... they’ll suck your soul dry”, while she was talking, Charlie was setting up some equipment. She motioned George to sit down at the table, next to her, and then ...

“Holy cow ... I thought I’d figured it out, but I didn’t expect this ...”

“What’s going on?”, George asked.

“Well ... this is blue-tooth, but it’s very advanced ... it’s an encrypted signal, but only DES ... so ... something I cracked a few weeks ago based on the data I got off of Kat ...”, Katrina shook her head. I think she disliked being a “technological thingy” even less than George.

“It’s weird, but there’s a video stream built into this ... you won’t believe this shit ... George ... would you do me a favor and look around the room?”

Charlie motioned for me and Kat to come over, we looked over her shoulders at her laptop screen. What we saw was strange. We were seeing what George was seeing, as a video, with strange icons and other graphics popping up on the screen.

“George, would you do me a favor and start singing a few bits from a favorite song?”

“I don’t like to sing.”

“Ok, can you hum?”

“Sure ...”

George began humming, what I think was an AC/DC song. Back’in’Black, I think. But what we saw on the screen was bizarre. An equalizer meter popped up, and then a bunch of impossible to read text – impossible for myself, but I had a feeling Charlie knew what she was looking at.

“Ok George, that’s it ... guys, I’m gonna need a few minutes ...”, and with that Charlie began typing away. I considered myself fast – she was lightning fast. George got up and went over to Charlie’s fridge, grabbed a beer, and began drinking – Kat joined him. I just sat and stared at Charlie, not knowing if she noticed or if she cared.

“I’m in the zone guys, give me a few ... I will have some answers.”

For about 30 minutes Charlie hammered away at her computer. George and Katrina drank a couple of beers, and I just sat there, waiting ... not sure what we would learn or what Charlie could tell us.

“So guys ... we need to talk.”

At that, George and Katrina with beers in hand sat back down in the main room.

“I’ve got good news and I have bad news.”

“Jesus Charlie ...”, Katrina muttered.

Charlie smiled.

“The good news, this device seems legit. Frankly, I’m pretty smart and the stuff this device is doing confuses the hell out of me ... it appears to be a kind of generalized ‘fitting function’ ... ok ... too technical ... you guys remember your algebra, right?”

We all sort of nodded ...

“Ok then ... imagine there existed a formula, in algebra, that could solve any problem ... it wouldn’t be able to do it ... not initially ... but it could learn to do it ... given enough data, it could morph into every formula, providing just about any solution ... the code in this thing seems topological ...”

“Hey, that’s what Dr. Morse said once ... he said it was a topological computer ... er something ...”, I added.

“Yeah ... well that’s true ... and from what Kat told me, and from what I researched the last time we were together ... well ... it goes deeper. The computer in Kat’s brain, in George’s brain ... it acts like neural tissue, in the sense that it’s highly plastic.”

It was deer in the headlights for all of us. Not that we were stupid, more a matter of not understanding the topic.

“Ok guys ... I’m not explaining this very well ... the liquid crystal structure of the computer is self-organizing ... you see, all modern computers are based upon something called the Von Neumann architecture ... I won’t go into details, but basically imagine a factory designed for executing instructions ... the factory only ‘knows’ the instructions, it can only execute the next instruction in the list ... but the computers in your brains ...”, Charlie motioned to George and Katrina.

“The computer in your brains doesn’t have a hard drive, or a processor, or RAM, or anything you’d find in a standard, run-of-the-mill, computer. There is no RAM or processor, or hard drive, per se. It’s one big fungible thing, changeable ... when neuroscientists talk about ‘plastic’ or ‘plasticity’ they are referring to the brain’s ability to re-organize its very structure as a means to solve problems ... what Dr. Morse, or whomever, achieved ... shit ... it’s the silicon equivalent of the same thing ... a mass of fluid semiconductors that are capable of forming solutions, erasing solutions, changing, and remembering ... but it’s all one big mass of connections ... memory? Processor? These things are distributed, dynamically, within the computer itself. It apparently has an advanced co-processor ... but that’s probably for diagnostics ... it’s really an amazing feat!”, Charlie smiled.

“What’s the bad news?”, Katrina snarled.

“Kat ... the bad news is that I think the co-processor does more than diagnostics ... I think it’s capable of injecting information ... not the right word ... ‘thoughts’ ... it can inject thoughts into your consciousness ... it’s the bridge between the 16 neural connectors that are bridging other parts of your organic brain ... this is kind of scary.”

“Why is it scary?”, I asked.

“It means that whenever they want they can hijack you ... take you over ... probably control you ... they can download memories from you ... probably during your check-ups ...”

I interrupted, “but Dr. Morse said they couldn’t know what was going on ... they had no way of knowing.”

“Honey, he lied ... after Kat and I started dating, well ... I’m just too much of a hacker to pass on a challenge ... I started peeking into her tech ... I wasn’t sure at the time, because of the encryption on the signal ... but now that I can read the signal ... I can tell you Janice, Dr. Morse, he lied to you guys ... they can look into the silicon brain and, probably, monitor the rest of the organic brain as well ... they can control autonomic systems ... it’s scary shit.”

George became sullen for a moment. He was hesitant to ask a question, but I could tell there was something on his mind. So I hugged him and said, “George, did you want to know something?”

George spoke softly, with a broken voice, almost trembling.

“Charlie ... I’ve been having nightmares the last few days ... I really don’t want to talk about it ... but can you access information yourself?”

“Sure, if I know what I’m looking for.”

“A few days ago, I lost track of several hours ... Dr. Morse told my wife I had a ‘fugue state experience’ ... but I don’t know ... I don’t know what to think ... I’m scared to ask, but can you check my device for any information from two days ago?”

Charlie accepted the challenge. She began furiously tapping away at her computer again, asking George questions, strange questions.

“You see guys, this device, because it works more like the human brain than a normal computer ... you can’t just query it or search it ... it’s almost like a word game ... George, do you remember anything about that day?”

“Not really”, I felt like George was hiding something.

“I found a METRO ticket stub, in George’s pants ... can that help?”

“Do you have it on you?”

“Yes ... it’s in my purse.”

I grabbed the ticket and handed it to Charlie. She took the information off the ticket and submitted it to the device interface. It was a few minutes, and then Charlie’s face turned white. She slammed her laptop shut.

“Kat ... I think you guys should leave.”

“What do you mean? Charlie? Where can we go?”

“I really don’t know, but this is too much for me ... when I retired from the world I chose to get as far away from the garbage as I could ... I can’t really handle this.”

“What’s the problem Charlie?”, George asked.

“George ... these nightmares you’re having ... they’ve been since the ‘lost time’ of a few days ago?”

“Yeah ... I’ve been mostly sleeping, waking up from the nightmare ... then falling asleep again.”

“Can you tell us anything about the nightmare?”

“I really don’t want to ...”

“YOU NEED TO TALK GEORGE! YOU WANT MY HELP, THEN YOU NEED TO TALK!”

George’s hands started shaking.

“The dream or nightmare ... it starts out the same way ... I meet with an old man who looks familiar ... he and I talk, but the words make no sense ... then I keep walking alone ... I’m walking on a lonely road ... I come across a woman, someone I don’t know ... she’s walking along a sidewalk, on a bridge ... we talk ... and then ...”, I held George ... I was afraid but I knew he was scared as well.

“... this bridge is familiar ... there are sailboats below ... it’s the afternoon, but the street is empty ... I talk with this woman, and ...”

“What GEORGE? WHAT?”, Charlie was insistent.

“I THROW HER OFF THE GODDAMN BRIDGE!”, George screamed, tears flowing down his cheeks, I’d never seen him this scared, upset.

The room became silent ...

We could hear Helena playing her game in the bedroom.

We could hear the birds outside, the animals, the rustling of alder trees.

“Kat ... Janice ... I need to show you something ... George ... it’s best if you stay where you are.”

Charlie opened up her laptop. She had a video playing on a loop. It was like the real time view of what George was seeing, but different ... black and white and fuzzy ... it showed a view of the Ballard Bridge ... a woman walking the direction of the video, and it was her – Deborah Norton. She stops to talk to George, and then in a second, too fast to think about ... George grabs her and tosses her off the bridge. A car pulls up beside him, George gets in ...

I began crying.

The good thing, the miracle, the wondrous device that saved George's life was a miserable thing. It had taken his free will, his choices, and replaced it with something evil. George got up and sat across the room, a gloominess returned to his affect that I'd not seen since before the accident. That dour, depressed, sad face of a man in pain – that George had returned. He didn't need to see the video. The video or memory had been replaying in his head for a few days now.

"I killed her ... didn't I ... the journalist ...", George said in a low voice.

No one spoke. I knew George was a good man, that this thing, this device, it had used him – but how do you tell that to a man like George? How can you make him believe it?

I got up, instinctively, out of love, walked over to George and grabbed his hand and pulled him towards me. I hugged him harder than I'd ever done. He was no murderer, but he was used as one ... I knew this.

"Honey ... you didn't kill that woman ... not on purpose, not by choice ... they used you and us and Kat ... they used us and they killed that woman."

George broke down, he was shaking all over now. His legs buckled underneath him, I could barely hold him up, then Kat came over and helped me, and hugged George as well.

Then Katrina spoke, "Georgy boy ... they would have made me do the same thing ... who knows ... maybe they already did ... maybe they had plans to ... but we don't have to be controlled by them ... Charlie, you can help us ... please say you'll help us?"

Charlie sat at the table, staring into space, probably thinking that Katrina was the highest maintenance girlfriend she'd ever had.

"... Kat ... I'm not sure I have a choice ... I don't have the equipment here to help, I might know some people that could help ... people I trust ... but they don't live around here and they live farther off the grid than me ... they, the FEDs, get a hold of you two and they will figure out about me ... so, whether I want to or not, I have to help ... if I don't help, I'm probably dead any ways ..."

"What should we do?", I asked Charlie.

"First, we need to leave ... not right now ... probably better to get a good night's sleep ... I'm assuming that if 'they' knew where you were, they would already be here ... it's

a big assumption ... but I really don't know. How often does Dr. Morse check in on George?"

"Once a week, Thursday usually ..."

"Then we have a couple days. We should plan on leaving in the morning, early, before 8 AM ... good thing you guys are traveling light ... I have an old Ford Bronco parked about 2 miles from here ... it's hidden in a shed just off of the properties ... we get up, at 4 AM ... pack the food we have ... bring what we need ... and then we head out."

Charlie continued to explain the plan – Kat and I listened, George curled up on the couch, he was exhausted. I didn't understand how we got here – I knew, I understood, but I didn't understand. I had always believed "you live a good life, do the best you can for those you love, good things will happen" - so naive, so childish.

It was evening, and Kat and Charlie were going to sleep on a fold out bed in the main room. Helena had been playing Tetris all day, she was already asleep when George and I entered the bedroom. George was still bad, but at least he was talking ...

"Janice, am I a monster?"

I didn't know what to say to this. My husband had killed a woman, tossed her off a bridge. Sure, he didn't have control – but what of his soul? I believed in the soul. I believed there was a part of us, no matter how damaged we might be, that transcended the earthly wickedness – my faith was being tested. I suppose the hard line Christians of my youth would have admonished me to "look to the old testament", but this felt like more contrived crap. George is my husband. George is sick. George was given a "gift" of science to save his life – and we were all conned.

"I don't know why they did this to you ... to us ... but somehow ... somehow we're going to find a way through this ...", I started crying. "George, hold me ...". And George did, we lay there, our clothes on, Helena to my left and George to my right. I could feel my heart beating, my breathing, the noise of animals outside and the rustle of trees from the wind. I could sense it all – and in all of it I felt a panic, and then I thought "is this my life now?" A short time later I fell asleep.

Chapter 16: The Battle of Kettle Falls

“Get up slowly, don’t make any sudden moves ...”

I woke to this, at 2 AM ... 3 men in our room, George already on the floor, hands bound behind his back. Helena crying in the corner.

Charlie and Kat were already tied down to two chairs near the table. One of the men grabbed Helena, pulling her by the arm as she screamed ...

“TAKE YOUR GODDAMN HANDS OFF MY KID YOU SOB!”, the butt of his rifle was swift, hard, and I was nearly knocked out. They grabbed me, Helena, George, and tied us down on the sofa. There were a half dozen men in the room, all dressed in black, combat gear, holding what I could only assume were machine guns – but what did I know, all we had back home were hunting rifles and shotguns.

We all sat there, bound up, for minutes – seemed an eternity.

All I could think was, “Lord Jesus, is this our time? - if so, be gentle to my daughter, grant her peace!” I was prepared to die. I didn’t want to die, but since our flight from Arlington I sort of figured this is where it would end – what were we, ordinary people, no power, no wealth, just objects to be used and then discarded.

“Janice, how are you feeling?”, I knew that voice. That voice had been, only a few months earlier, a welcoming voice, a hopeful one, and now it sounded as if the Devil were speaking – it was Dr. Morse.

“Come on Janice, how are you? How’s Helena?”

“You can see for yourself you sick, twisted, piece of crap.”

“Come on Janice, that’s not how this works ... I pretend to be nice, you pretend to be grateful ... if you had just gone along ... played your part ... this could have ended so very differently ... now ... well, you see ... now we have a problem ...”

Charlie couldn’t help herself, “the only problem I see is a miserable bastard with delusions ... I hope you burn in Hell.”

“Janice ... you should tell your friends to be quiet ... this won’t go well for anyone if you’re rude.”

Dr. Morse grabbed the one empty chair, and pulled it up in front of me, Helena, and George. He placed a satchel on the floor next to him, and pulled out a laptop computer.

“Ok George, let’s just see what’s going on ...”

Dr. Morse started typing on his keyboard, and George, who had been shaking, froze up, a blank expression on his face – not so different when he came home the other day, not knowing where he’d been.

“... hmm ... seems like your friends have been poking around in George’s head ... that’s not good ... which one of you did this?”

“I did you fat asshole!”, Charlie exclaimed.

“Who are you?”

“I’m wonder woman.”

“We’ll figure this out ... what did you do?”

“For one thing, I figured out how the reporter died ... I guess MK-ULTRA never did end, you guys just up’d your game ...”

“MK-ULTRA ... those fools wanted to control the brain ... kind of impossible, really ... not saying you can’t manipulate people ... you can ... but that has limits ... the brain is marvelously good at finding ways around even the most sophisticated controls ... but, what if you could implant another brain ... a brain that could be controlled and was nearly as complex as the brain itself ... that’s not MK-ULTRA ... that’s evolution.”

“What are you saying?”

“What’s your name dear?”

“I said WONDER WOMAN!”

One of the men in black uniform, checking a tablet device, interjected:

“Facial recognition has her as Susan Jones, a.k.a. Charlie Gordon, a.k.a. Charlie Cantrell ... she’s a ‘spook’ Doc ... former NSA analyst ... she’s been missing since 2010 ...”

“NSA ... eh Charlie? ... well, that explains how you cracked the encryption ... bottom line, the device’s data stream is too much for advanced encryption ... we settled for DES, using an update-able one-time-pad for substitution ... not a great solution ... but

an asymmetric cypher would have been too slow ... you can understand that, right Charlie?”

Charlie was silent, and then mumbled ... “I said my name was wonder woman.”

“Folks ... here is what is going to happen ... you were all visiting here for the weekend ... Charlie, who suffers from mental illness ... well ... she was careless and left the propane stove on ... the fire ignited ... very tragic ... the whole family was lost ... this kind of terrible story repeats itself ... George and Kat ... well ... we’ve got too much invested in them, certainly we’ll have to do an autopsy first ... remove the devices ... that should take, what, with the field lab set up? Is it set up?”, Dr. Morse directed his question to the man with the tablet.

“It’s set up sir, ready to go ... a few miles down the road.”

“That’s great ... don’t worry Janice, you will have your whole family, and your friends, around you ... you won’t die alone.”

The room was silent. I remember, as a kid, going to see pigs slaughtered – a 4H thing, something farm kids get to learn about. They were mostly silent. On some level, they knew what was coming.

“Pack those 2 up, gag the rest ... leave 2 men behind to guard them while we’re down the road ...”

“Yes sir ... why don’t we just do them now?”

“I think that can wait ... besides, you never know with science what you need until you don’t have it ... I might need to ask them questions ... the autopsy might reveal something ... let them die together, around 10 or 11 AM ...”

Two of the men began gagging us, roughly, and Helena had wet her pants. I kept thinking, “these men, they must have kids, family, how could they do this?” But then, I realized that most Americans had reached that point – the point of objectifying the world in terms of “friend” or “enemy”. How many innocent men, women, children, had we killed since “9/11”? Hundreds of thousands? Millions? In the horror of the moment, I realized it wasn’t that complicated – they were doing this, following orders, BECAUSE they had kids, families, and that was leverage against them.

George and Kat were being led down the trail, to some ghastly vivisection ...

The rest of us sat alone, in that cabin, with two armed men watching over us, preparing to gag Charlie last. They were getting ready to gag Charlie, and then she began screaming ...

“WONDER WOMAN, WONDER WOMAN!”

The lights in the cabin went out.

Loud music began playing, unbearably loud – Genesis ... ABACAB ...

“Look up on the wall, there on the floor

Under the pillow, behind the door

There's a crack in the mirror

Somewhere, there's a hole in a window-pane

Do you think I'm to blame

Tell me do you think I'm to blame ...”

A thin wire, piano string perhaps, tore out from above the wall ...

“GUYS, DON'T STAND UP!”, Charlie yelled ... with our legs bound, this wasn't too likely.

The wire was connected on both sides of the cabin, to some kind of rail ... the wire moved fast ... so fast I barely noticed it, and in the dark of that cabin it was imperceptible unless you caught a brief glimpse from the flashing LEDs on Charlie's computer.

The wire cut both men, one through the neck – the taller man.

The other man had half his head removed – they both fell to the floor. And then we began hearing gun fire, a lot of it ...

“GUYS ... YOU NEED TO STAY CALM ...”, Charlie wiggled her way to her work table, grabbed a pair of pliers and cut the plastic ties used to bind her. She then quickly cut the ties behind Helena and myself.

“Don't move ... I'll be right back ...”, Charlie said calmly. She grabbed an automatic pistol from behind her book case and went out the door.

She was gone only a few minutes, but when she returned she had George, Katrina, and someone else was with her – a large, burly man, dressed in road slickers, definitely a biker.

“WHAT THE HELL IS GOING ON CHARLIE?”

“I tripped the alarm ... voice activated ... the phrase ‘wonder woman’ has to be repeated a few times, 4 times ... but I don’t know how many times I screamed it ...”

“Is this what you were talking about?”, the biker asked.

“Nah ... this is something different ... hey ... how many of the boys are back at camp?”

“Maybe one hundred ... plus some girlfriends ...”

“Mostly packing?”

“Shit Charlie, how long you been here?”

“Ok, I don’t know how many feds are around here ... how many are coming ... we need you guys to buy us some time ... also ... run this down to ‘Chip’ ... he’ll know what to do with it ...”, Charlie handed the biker a flash drive. “Thanks Bill ... you know I owe you one ...”

“Hell Charlie, this is the most fun I’ve had since Iraq!”

With that the biker, ‘Bill’, left the cabin. Charlie began packing, frantically, and then she paused and looked at us with a quizzical expression ...

“WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU GUYS DOING! PACK YOUR SHIT! WE’VE GOT TO GET THE HELL OUT OF HERE!”

George grabbed Helena, helped her quickly change clothes. I grabbed a box and got as much food as I could find, and tossed it in. We were hearing more gunfire now, not nearby ... further down the road ... I didn’t know how to estimate those things.

“Our boys are putting up a fight ... they know where the choke-points are ... they know what they’re doing ...”, Charlie commented as she tossed a bunch of hard drives into a metal garbage can ... she took the can outside, poured some gasoline on top and set it on fire.

“YOU HAVE 2 MINUTES TO GET YOURSELVES AND YOUR CRAP OUT OF THE CABIN!”

George grabbed Helena, our bags, and the folder containing Deborah Norton’s findings. Katrina was already outside with Charlie. I looked around the cabin, to see if I’d left anything, and then I fled outside as well.

“Ok ... y’all see that cedar stump, down the hillside? You need to move on down there, I’ll be right behind ...”

We moved with haste down the hill, I looked back. Charlie had gone back into the cabin for a moment, then started running down towards us. A few seconds later there was a small explosion and the cabin caught fire.

“It’s funny ... isn’t it ... they threatened to burn us alive ... I’ve had that cabin rigged to burn for years ...”

Charlie stood there, staring at her cabin ... I could tell she loved the place ...

“Alright ...”, Charlie pulled out a walkie-talkie ...

“What day is it Kat?”

“It’s Wednesday, the 12th ...”

“That means we’re on channel 9 ... it’s always the date, minus 3 ... through the 15th ... then treat the 16th like day zero ...”, we didn’t know what she was talking about.

“Gopher, this is mocking-bird ... over ...”

“Mocking-bird, there’s a lot of cops, FEDs and national guard around this place, over ...”

“Gopher, which egress routes are open, over ...”

“Mocking-bird, you need to try path BLUE ... everything else is blocked, over ...”

Charlie looked miffed.

“Guys, it’s going to be a bit of hike ... not a great trail ... but we should get to the Bronco in an hour ... let’s go.”

We started hiking, Charlie up front, George following from behind. Katrina had picked up one of the machine guns, and ammo. She seemed to know what she was doing. It was

nearing day-break, 5 or 6 AM ... we couldn't use flashlights ... the trail was barely a foot across, and rocky.

“Watch your step ...”, Charlie whispered ... “and keep quiet ... that means you too Helena!”

Helena was scared, but somehow she held it together. I'd always been proud of my little girl, no one needed to grow up this fast ... she was so courageous.

As we made our way down the mountain, the noise of gunfire dissipated. What we didn't know was that several hundred men – federal officers, Washington National Guard, and others ... they had set up several road blocks, positions, before Dr. Morse showed up. The path we were taking led to an old logging road, one of those roads that never gets recorded, and no one would know about, unless they hiked the mountains in the area.

Later, as the days passed, we would discover that this event, “The Battle of Kettle Falls”, would become a disaster for the Federal Government – worse than WACO, the biggest embarrassment in recent United States history.

The bikers had been on the radar with the ATF for years, running guns, selling psychedelic mushrooms and synthetic DMT. Weed was legal in WA state, so they had a smuggling operation – buying from local pot shops, off the books, and selling in Idaho, Montana, and as far away as Indiana.

The bikers were mostly VETs, men and women who had been used up by the system, told they were “fighting for freedom”, only to return home to an America that was anything but free. They itched for a fight, wanted one, and prepared for it. The FEDs felt they would simply rollover, play dead, take a deal - “they didn't know my boys”, Charlie would say, days later.

The bikers had scavenged a Vulcan-cannon, which is an electric Gatling gun, and placed it on the slope of a hill – concealed, well supplied with ammo. The cannon took out many of the vehicles, and men, that assaulted the biker compound. I never approved of violence, I didn't know if I liked this, but knowing that a bunch of men and women I'd never meet were providing cover for us, to escape, made me wonder.

After about 45 minutes, we were nearing the spot where Charlie had parked the Bronco. The sun was already rising, the warmth of it, on my skin, was welcome.

“... ok ... we’re pretty close to the vehicle ... you guys hold back here for a bit, I’m going to scout ahead”, Charlie went up ahead, with Katrina. George and I and Helena huddled near the ground.

“Is any of this actually happening?”, George asked.

“My love ... I think this has been happening for a long time ... sorry, too philosophical for so early in the morning ...”, George kissed me.

“Mommy, where are we going?”, Helena asked.

“Some place safe ... I hope.”

“I hope so too.”

Katrina returned, motioned us to follow her.

It was a few hundred feet ahead, the Bronco was running, Charlie in the driver’s seat.

“Folks, we’re on the clock, get loaded ... we’ll be lucky to get out of here without hitting a road block ... but I like our odds ...”, Charlie was circumspect.

The logging road stretched for 30 miles. It had tree cover, most of the way – and Charlie drove slow, 10 miles per hour. It took us 3 or 4 hours to reach a blacktop road, and we kept driving ...

“Where are we going Charlie?”, Katrina asked.

“I have a couple places in mind ... for now we’re going to head through Idaho to Montana ... I have a friend there, off the books friend ... he can hide us for a few days ... then, after that? ... I hate to say it, but best case scenario we will be on the run for a few months ... never staying too long in any location ... but the hard part is over ... chances are my boys are still fighting the FEDs ... that will keep them focused ... the torched cabin will prevent them learning anything useful ... it will be tough, but ... as I said ... I like our odds ... good odds ... 50/50 ... in situations like this, that’s pretty good.”

The Bronco was a gas guzzler, but Charlie had a few gas cans attached to the back and inside. The windows in the back were blacked out, and Charlie made sure we stayed low – in case we were pulled over, there was a canvas cover we could pull over ourselves.

After a few hours of driving we were well into Idaho, and Charlie turned on a news station:

“It’s been reported that an extremist group, accused of selling illegal weapons, has been fighting with Federal Police for several hours ...”, the news announcer said.

“It’s funny ... they’ll probably paint these guys as terrorist or some stupid shit ... not that they were choir boys ... hell no ... they ran guns and did some other things that I didn’t love ... but life is complicated, and sometimes the best allies are criminals ...”

It was nearing one o’clock, and we were somewhere in northern Idaho, not far from the Montana border. The land was more desolate, still hills and mountains, but signs of dry, tan, rocky desert – and pine trees, sparsely populating the countryside.

“Mommy, I’m hungry!”

I grabbed some bread, peanut butter, from inside the box. Made Helena a sandwich, asked George if he wanted something, “no thanks.” Like me, George didn’t have much of an appetite at that moment.

We crouched down in the back of that old Bronco ...

We felt each bump in the road, and listened to 70’s soft rock on the radio ...

The Bronco’s shock absorbers squeaked, groaned, as we stopped at crossroads and ran over potholes ... most of the roads were falling apart, this one was no different.

We were scared, all of us ... even Charlie, if she’d admit it.

We didn’t know what would happen next, since George’s accident that’s pretty much been the story – life, hurtling challenges, chaos, our direction. But I marveled for a moment at this one thought:

“My family, it’s still together ...”

Epilogue

The drive left time for some sleep, George and I taking turns. Katrina and Charlie had conversation and coffee to keep them awake, but I was tired. Crouching in the back of the Bronco, it was hard for George and I to know which direction we were headed in – where we were going. I overheard Charlie say “we’ll go to Mikey’s”, but who that was, and how she knew him, I had no idea.

After several hours, and one stop at a lonely gas station, I saw a sign – barely saw it, “Babb 4 MILES”.

“We’re getting close guys, I’ll need you all to stay inside while I go talk to my friend.”

We pulled off the main road, and drove along an old gravel road for about an hour. It was late, but I’d left my phone in Arlington, and had no way of knowing what time it was. I didn’t want to ask Charlie. I didn’t want to question her. She was helping us – sure, her situation was bad too, so maybe this wasn’t some “great and kind gesture”, but she could have left us by the side of the road if she had wanted to.

The Bronco stopped. I got on my knees to peek through the window, I saw an old farm house, a barn, and an older african-american man with a shotgun coming up to the driver’s side window. Charlie rolled the window down.

“Susan, is that you?”

“It sure is Mikey, can you hide me for a few days?”

“You aren’t involved in that mess in Kettle Falls are you?”

“If I were, I wouldn’t say ...”, Charlie chuckled and so did the old man.

“Well, if you’re staying, you need to park this junk heap in the Barn.”

The old man, “Mikey”, walked ahead of us, opened the main door to the barn and Charlie drove the Bronco inside.

“Grab your stuff guys, and come on in! My names Michael.”

George and I were worn out, Helena was asleep. George picked up Helena, gently, and I moved the bags into the house. It was an old farm house, not unlike ours in Arlington. It

had the smell of a recluse, that moldy smell that happens when someone neither has many visitors, nor wants them.

“I’ll put some coffee on, and then Susan ...”, Charlie interrupted him.

“Ahem ... ‘Charlie’ is my handle, for right now ...”

“Ok ... Charlie can tell me what’s going on ... I don’t know you guys ... just sit down here for a bit, and I’ll get the coffee going ...”

Michael went into the kitchen, turned on his gas stove, filled a coffee pot with water, and rummaged to find whatever food he could provide.

“How do you know him Charlie?”

“Mikey? ... hell ... he was a green beret colonel during the Bush administration ... he got into some trouble, refusing orders, and then had to disappear ... that man is officially dead ... and he likes it that way.”

“Are we safe here?”

“Safe ... girl ... you were never safe ... none us are ... we grow up in this country thinking we’re ‘safe’ because most of the damage done by our government is done to people who live thousands of miles away, in foreign lands, places you’ll never know about ... Mikey there ... he was running ops in Afghanistan in 2003 ... he was ordered to kill a family, according to the CIA they were ‘harboring terrorists’ and providing a safe house ... in reality, it was a random family and the ‘intelligence’ they received was based upon a lie, told by someone with an old family grievance ... believe it or not, that happens ... Mikey told the CIA officer on site to, well, I won’t use that language around Helena ... even if she is asleep ... and Mikey had to disappear ... or, he would have ended up in jail or worse ... ‘or worse’ is usually pretty bad.”

Michael handed us mugs of coffee, and then grabbed a rocking chair.

“What the hell is going on?”, Michael asked Charlie.

Charlie began talking. She explained her situation, not related to ours, and why she was hiding out at the biker camp. She described how she met Katrina, and why she was suspicious of the “miracle device” from the beginning. She further explained the flash drive, and her biker/hacker friend “Chip” - “he’s going to get it everywhere, hopefully

it's already propagating on the TOR networks. The flash drive contained it all, Charlie had stayed up while we were sleeping in her cabin, scanning the files from Deborah Norton's folder, copying the digital video of her murder. Chip had always known about Charlie's "contingency plans", and he had been paid to make sure he could transmit the information to a mass propagation server node in Germany. The bikers had a satellite transmitter, with high bandwidth. "By this time next week, if Chip got the job done, a whole bunch of people will know what happened!"

Michael gave a briefing on the "Battle of Kettle Falls", which is what it was being called in the media. "They're labeling those guys domestic terrorists", he said with a smile. He said that there was no specific info on us, certainly not in the news – and Charlie said that made sense. We were part of a black-budget project, and "the spooks involved would just assume find us themselves without alerting the public."

"You know I don't have any internet here ... no cable ... no mobile phone, no land-line ... just a really good radio for listening to sports and news ..."

"I know Mikey ... that's because you're smart."

"Smart? ... heck ... I can't stand the shit that's out there ... on the web ... on the TV ... but I'll take 'smart' ..."

After Charlie and Michael were done comparing notes, the topic switched to next steps.

"You know you need to change cars, right?", Michael said.

"Do you have anything lying around?", Charlie replied.

"I've got that old station wagon ... it won't run for long, probably only a few months ... but you can use that."

"Do you have the package I left you with, still?"

"Of course, I'll go get it."

Michael disappeared for a few minutes. George and I sat quietly, with Helena asleep on the couch next to us.

"Here it is ... didn't even open it."

It was a medium sized black lock box, Charlie had the key. She opened it and inside was a passport, some other IDs – and I assumed, at this point, they were fake. Most of the

box was filled with small stacks of U.S. twenty dollar bills, Canadian money, tied off with rubber bands. She handed two stacks to Michael, “for your trouble sir”, and he took them.

“What’s your plan, Charlie?”, Michael asked.

“Is that old cattle road still open across the border?”

“Yeah ... it’s a nasty old road, but with some luck you could probably use it with the station wagon ... where will you go from there?”

“I know some people on a reservation, in Alberta ... the natives up there keep to themselves and don’t get interfered with too much ... we’ll head there, and then ... hell Mikey ... I’m doing this improv style ... you need to trash the Bronco ... take it to a salvage yard and trash it ... it’s a ‘clean’ car, but nothing is that clean these days ...”

“Where did you get it?”

“The bikers have connections with one of the cartels in Juarez ... the Bronco was in Mexico for several years ... they registered it to an old couple in Maryland ... so it’s clean ... but you can never be too careful.”

“Nope ... never careful enough.”

Charlie looked at all of us ...

“Guys, I know you’re tired ... so we’ll rest up for 3 hours ... be on the road by 4 AM ... the cattle road isn’t far from here, but it’s deserted ... if this were hunting season, I’d be worried, but it’s not ... if we’re really lucky, we’ll have some cloud cover tomorrow, because we probably won’t get across the border till late morning. At that point, it’s another twelve hour drive to where we’re going ... the reservation.”

Michael collected the empty coffee mugs, showed us to his guest rooms, and we slept – it was only 3 hours in a bed, but those 3 hours helped.

We could smell bacon and eggs when Michael woke us up, “you’ve got to eat this on the road, but the thermos is full, and there should be plenty of gas to get you across the border and to the nearest gas station.”

“Thanks Mikey, I owe you one ...”

“Charlie, you don’t owe me anything ... remember, you’re one of the reasons ‘COL Michael Johnson’ is dead ... we’re even ... but I don’t think you should double back here ... I suspect this is the last time we’ll see each other ... until Hell freezes over.”

“Got that right man!”, Michael and Charlie hugged. Katrina and George loaded the station wagon, and I got Helena ready for the trip.

It was dark, very dark out, when we left the farmhouse – Michael stood outside, smoking a cigarette, waving to us as we left.

We drove along a country road for about 60 miles, and then we reached the cattle crossing, leading the cattle run road – the one that would take us across the border. We drove slow, with no lights on, and Charlie’s keen eyesight to keep us from getting stuck. It was too dark out to see very far, and we progressed at 10 mph ... a good speed.

“It’s gonna be about 5 or 6 hours of this folks, but at least there’s some beautiful country to look at ...”

After 3 hours of driving, the sun began to rise. Unlike yesterday morning, it seemed we had some reason to hope – if not for a smooth road or ride, to hope that we had a chance, that people like us, small, easy to miss in this life, easy to underestimate, had a chance. Charlie said 50/50 – and as the sun rose over the horizon, I felt our odds were better.

Dr. Morse, from what Charlie said, probably got away. During the rescue of George and Katrina, he ducked behind some trees – he might have died during the “battle”, I hoped he was dead. When I first met him, I thought he was a “kind old gentleman”, but now I knew him to be a demon ... perhaps that’s too esoteric, too bizarre a description. He seemed like a demon to me.

For that bastard Dr. Morse, there were 16 precision screws in my husband’s head. 16 places where, with the skill of an evil wizard, he could change my George into a killer, a marionette under his command. But George had a soul. It’s why he couldn’t sleep those few days afterwards – it’s why his heart was nearly destroyed when he came to understand the truth. George was not perfect – before or after the accident – but he was a genuinely decent fellow, someone I wanted, I desired, I loved, and would stand by with every heartbeat, every breath, left in my body.

The cattle road twisted and turned, it was muddy and rugged ...

We saw deer and coyotes ...

Helena spotted a bald eagle overhead.

As we made our way to the border with Canada, I thought a lot about my family, my life, and the myriad of things which comprise it.

I thought to myself, “there are not 16 points of adjustment” for people living a real life, sometimes painful, cracked, blemished life. How many points of adjustment are there? There might be 4 or 16 or 50,000,000. Life unfolds, we respond or we die. We take what God has given us, and we attempt to make the most of it.

Marriage and life, these are not “prisons”, not unless we turn them into prisons. Life is about change, the frightening acknowledgement that we are free, all of us free - and this can be frightening, at times.

I do not know what happens next for me, George, or Helena, for Katrina or Charlie.

I know that men often retreat into their “caves” ...

Women find their own refuge in a whimsical world of fantasy, to heal, to renew, but eventually you have to come out again – to the ever present, and sometimes brutal, reality.

The world was never easy, nor solely hard, but life itself is that constant tension between those extremes – as marriage is, family, everything.

George would not have time to retreat into a cave ... we were all on a difficult path, not likely to provide much respite any time soon.

Helena would not have time to grow up like a normal kid, whatever “normal” means these days ...

I would not have time for whimsical, naive thinking, any longer – I wasn’t giving up on hope, but I had shed the pretense of normality, forever.

We were prisoners beyond the walls, escaped inmates, on the run from forces we barely understood and who saw us as nothing more than footnotes in a research paper – as laboratory animals that can be dumped someplace when the experiment is over. But the prison was behind us – the personal one, and the real one – we were, in our own strange way, runaway slaves.

And then it occurred to me, as we drove down this old dirt road towards Canada ...

“There is no prison except the walls we build around ourselves. There is no escape, no solace for life’s harsh journey, but through love.”

THE END