

Ten Days

Gone

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Ten Days Gone

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October 4, 1582

5:15pm PRIVATE CHAMBERS OF POPE GREGORY XIII

The Pope was pissed.

The final calendar report was ten days overdue and Brother Giovanni was nowhere to be found.

He summoned Cardinal Zinn.

“Yes, Most Holy Father?” asked the Cardinal, bowing as he entered the Pope’s chambers.

“Where the HELL is he?”

“Who, excellency?”

“Brother Giovanni.”

“I don’t know, your Holiness.”

“Do you know what day it is?” asked the Pope.

“Thursday, Most Holy Father.”

“Not the day, the DATE! “

“Oh--October 4th, 1582.”

“And do you know what the date will be tomorrow?”

“October 5th, 15...”

“NO, you nitwit,” screamed Gregory. “It’s going to be October 15th, 1582. October FIFTEENTH, be-CAUSE...”

The Cardinal was panicking.

“...because,” continued the Pope, “we’re eliminating ten days on the calendar...”

Cardinal Zinn caught on— “because the current calendar is way off and we need to take out ten days or else...”

“...at some point in the future,” finished the Pope, “we’ll be celebrating Easter in July.”

“Not good,” said the Cardinal.

“Now find me that DAMNED priest!”

The Cardinal’s Red Robes swished as he scurried out.

Brother Giovanni sat on an oak pew in the last row of the Sistine Chapel—the Pope’s Church, staring up at Michelangelo’s painted ceiling. He’d been there since five in the morning, waiting for answers, praying he had the right questions.

A Papal decree had been formalized earlier in the year—to correct the current calendar established by Julius Caesar in 46 B.C. Over the centuries the clocks ran fast by eleven minutes and fourteen seconds every year--and that now added up to ten days. The Pope’s plan was to cut the ten days from the calendar in one fell swoop to get the earth, sun, and Church holidays realigned.

As Pope Gregory’s most trusted advisor and confidant--and best friend from childhood, the still humble country priest had been asked to review the calendar “JUMP”, as it was called. He was to look for flaws and weaknesses in the plan. The Pope was convinced the JUMP was righteous and fair—and divinely inspired—but he wanted to be sure. That’s why he delegated his Priest friend to see if an alternate plan--like skipping days more spaced out in future centuries might be a better solution.

Some of the expected backlash had already surfaced.

Landlords screamed they would be cheated out of ten days rent. Young maidens thought they might miscalculate the days in their “minstrel cycle”. The biggest blowback came from the Church itself. Priests across the world would miss a week’s Mass and the commingled jingling of the collection plate and other penance payments.

But those problems didn't bother Brother Giovanni. They were human problems.

His was the spiritual world. What would happen during those the ten missing days?

Nothing? —because they weren't really missing?
Or did God have a plan for each day in his universe?

On the practical surface, the JUMP was the right thing to do. Whatever chaos ensued would be short-lived and soon forgotten, but the Priest wanted confirmation from a higher authority. He wondered if his childhood way of "talking with God" should be invoked.

As kids growing up in Bologna, the Priest and his childhood friend and future Pope Ugo Boncompagni opened the Bible to random verses. With boyhood imaginations they put themselves in the dramas that unfolded.

They were David slaying Goliath.
They were Israelites crossing the parted Red Sea.
They were Pontius Pilate letting the rabble choose between Jesus and Barabbas.

They were Jesus and Barabbas.

The Priest stood up from the pew, walked to the front of the Chapel and opened the huge Bible sitting on the lectern.

He closed his eyes, turned some pages, pointed his finger and landed on a verse:

Matthew 27:5

***"Judas cast down the pieces of silver in the temple,
departed and went and hanged himself"***

“Uh---NO”, thought the Priest. “That’s not going to work. Let me try another verse.” He closed his eyes again, turned some pages and pointed:

Luke 10:37

“Go thou and do likewise.”

He slammed the Bible shut and said out loud, “God is NOT speaking to me. My work here is done. I see no reason not to move ahead with the calendar shift. Skipping ten days on a man-made calendar will have little consequence. I must see the Pope and tell him.”

As the Priest went to descend the steps by the lectern, the Tower Clock rang Six Bells. The setting October sun shone thru the arched windows, illuminating the Cross on the altar.

Suddenly he felt dizzy. He grabbed the side of the lectern, and in slow motion slid to the floor.

The Priest looked up at the painted ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. *The figures were moving—David and Goliath were battling on Noah’s Ark—Abraham was sacrificing Daniel in the lion’s den--Eve was handling the forbidden apple to Jesus.*

For the first time, he noticed the crack between the almost touching fingers of Adam and God.

Then he smelled something burning. He sat up, and saw wisps of smoke coming from the Bible on the lectern. He stood, and as he did, the Bible opened itself up.

Pages started turning.

It stopped at a smoldering page.

A verse was glowing.

Ecclesiastes 3:8

***“A time to love, and a time to hate; a time of war,
and a time of peace”***

He looked up at the ceiling, the figures were still moving, and a date flashed before his eyes...

November 24, 2042

A Call to Arms

The TSA lines at Denver were long, but he expected delays the day before Thanksgiving.

As he approached the scanner, he prepared for the usual—shoes, belt, laptop, keys, phone. He already clutched his “Get Out of Wand Free” card in his left hand. The alarm went off and the TSA agent looked at him over her tortoise shell glasses held around her neck by a gold chain.

“Sir, could you please step to the side.”

“It’s my arm, Officer.” He handed her the laminated card that showed he had a surgically implanted rod in his left upper arm. The surgery had gone fine. The rehab nearly killed him. The titanium rod told him when it was going to rain, the arm hurt like hell when he exercised, and it was cold all the time.

“Sir,” said the TSA agent, “please step into the booth.”

He kept an eye on the bin that had his belongings, and stepped into the full-body scanner. The agent looked at the screen, looked at his card, looked back at the screen again, glanced at the card once more, and handed it back to him.

“Thank you, sir,” she said, “you can get back in line.”

He brushed his forehead. No sweat beads.

This was his ninth trip in the six years since the surgery. It usually went like this: He was sent a round trip plane ticket and hotel reservations to various cities around the country. Flights were usually on a weekday morning, often near holidays. He took the flight, stayed in the hotel a few days, saw the sights, and flew back home.

Today he was heading to Pittsburgh for the second time. He liked Pittsburgh, especially in the fall when the leaves changed on the rolling hills. His reservations were at the downtown Hilton. It was within walking distance to very good restaurants, museums, shows, and Heinz Field where the Steelers played. He hated Steeler fans. He wondered how many were on the plane. He found his seat, noting the plane was filling up quickly. Lots of folks heading back home to relatives, Thanksgiving turkey, and backyard football.

He always had an aisle seat, usually near the left wing. An aisle seat was good. It meant only one person could bother him. Though he wasn't instructed to, he kept track of his neighbors. In the past, he'd sat next to six salesmen, two doctors, one detective, three mental health counselors, a phlebotomist, two guitar players and a nun. The nun had been the most interesting. She was an historian at the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C. He hadn't known the Cathedral was Episcopalian, not Catholic. Today, his neighbor was a girl who looked to be about seven or eight.

As he sat down, he felt a twinge in his left arm where the rod was. Since the surgery, he'd had various aches and pains, but never a noticeable twinge. Actually, it was more like a "ping". He rubbed his arm, and it happened again about two minutes later. He strapped on his seatbelt.

The girl next to him smiled. "Hi, mister. My name's Madison. What's yours?"

"What?", he asked, distracted by another ping.

"I'm Madison and this is my sister Ashley. We're going to Pittsburgh to visit our grandma."

“That’s nice,” he said as he turned away from the girl and looked down the aisle to the back of the plane. It was almost full. He turned back around. The girl was staring at him.

“Are you from Pittsburgh?” she asked.

“No,” he said. This was going to be a long flight.

An hour after takeoff, he dozed off, but woke with a start when he felt another ping in his arm.

And then another a couple of minutes later. They started to come at regular intervals. They were about a minute apart. His arm started to feel warm.

It was a simple plan. 50,000 had responded to the Call to Arms. It had taken six years, but in that time surgeons for the cause around the world had successfully operated on arms, legs, and hips. Doctors implanted titanium rods and extra pins. The rods were hollowed out, explosives and electronics placed inside. The extra pins were miniature radio receivers, wired to the rods. They would serve as detonators. A signal from a satellite would set them off.

A flight attendant was pushing the clunky cart down the aisle with soft drinks, juices, crackers and a mini-bar. He thought a Bloody Mary would be good right about now, but had been instructed no alcohol on the flights.

“A beverage, sir?” asked the attendant.

“Just a water, please.”

“Ok, --and ladies, what can I get you?”

Madison said, “I want a Coke, and my sister Ashely would like an orange juice.”

The attendant started passing out the drinks. The little girl grabbed the Coke, and it slipped out of her hand, spilling all over the man's pants.

"Oh mister, I didn't mean to."

"That's OK, it'll dry."

The attendant grabbed a towel from the cart and handed it to him. "Sir, I'm SO sorry."

"It's FINE, I'll just go to the washroom." He felt another ping in his arm. The attendant moved the drink cart back a seat so he could get out.

In the bathroom, the first thing he noticed was his face. There was sweat. Two more pings, this time about thirty seconds apart. He washed his face, dried his pants the best he could and went back to his seat.

PING

As he sat back down, his left arm brushed against the girl.

"I'm *REALLY, REALLY* sorry," she whispered as she leaned against him.

"It's FINE."

"Hey, mister, are you OK? Your arm's awfully warm."

PING

His arm felt like it was on fire. He looked at his watch. The pings were ten seconds apart.

PING

.....

At any given moment, there are more than 10,000 commercial planes in the air around the world, carrying over a million

passengers. He had been told there would be a “soldier” on every flight.

The captain’s voice came over the loudspeaker.

PING

“Folks, we’re about twenty minutes out of Pittsburgh, looks like we’ll be arriving on time.”

PING

“Temperature in the Steel City is twenty-seven degrees, winds out of the northwest, and it’s starting to snow pretty good...”

PING—he felt his arm lurch forward

“...On behalf of the crew and myself...”

.....

Kenny Shoemaker nearly drove his pickup off the road when he saw the flash. At first, he thought it was a power transformer exploding overhead. When he got his bearings, he saw something coming down through the grey sky further away. He couldn’t figure out what it was, but now huge white flakes were mixing in with the snow that was falling on the barren, brown fields.....

...One Day Gone

6:45pm INSIDE THE SISTINE CHAPEL

Brother Giovanni was lying on the floor.

His heavy wool robe was soaked in sweat.

What had he just seen?

Was it the future?

Is that what will happen on November 24, 2042?

It would be a bad day for humanity. But was it fatal? Was the day evil enough to eliminate from the future calendar and forego the radical JUMP set for midnight? His thoughts were interrupted by the shuffling of pages from the lectern above.

He stood up, and gasped.

The Bible pages were whirling again, then stopped, and another verse glowed:

Genesis 4:8

“And Cain talked with Abel his brother; and it came to pass, when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother, and slew him”

The Priest looked up again at the Chapel ceiling, the figures were still in motion. Eve was on the Ark, handing the apple to Moses...

...and then the date—

His knees gave way as he crumbled back to the floor...

May 15, 2007

Let It Burn

Firehouse #7

First day on the job

Alarm at 23:10

Billy slid down the pole, grabbed his gear, put on his coat, jumped on the back of Engine 104 as the station door opened and the truck roared out

Helmet headphones

“House fire--Elizabeth Street”

Billy knew the neighborhood. He knew the street. It was his old street

“House fully engulfed--address--70 Elizabeth Street”

Billy knew the house. It was HIS house—where he grew up. It was on fire

Sirens woke up everyone on Cooper Avenue

Sharp left onto Elizabeth Street

Firetruck felt like it was on two wheels

Billy's left hand lost its grip on the rail, and he was suddenly dangling at a forty-five-degree angle, hanging on for dear life with his right hand as Engine 104 raced to 70 Elizabeth Street

Past boarded buildings

Stauffer's Grocery Store

Packett's Pharmacy

Flower Theatre (Never sat in the balcony)

Past the elementary school where Oily Ollie sold soft pretzels
Ok to buy the bagged ones
Don't buy the singles
Ollie's hands were dirty, singles had too much salt

Crossing Church St. (No churches on Church St.)
Billy saw the flames three blocks away

Engine 104 screeches to halt at 70 Elizabeth
Nothing but fire
No walls
No windows
Just fire

Billy hopped off and heard the chief talking to the lieutenant

"LET IT BURN." said the chief

His house
70 Elizabeth Street

"LET IT BURN."

"Billy—up and at 'em. You'll be late for school."

"Up and at 'em." He hated that. It wasn't bad enough his stepfather brought it with him when he moved in. Now his mother used it too. "Up an atom". Was that like "up a molecule?" "up a nucleus?" "UP YOURS?" That's what Step-Dad-Brad really meant, and now Mom was on his side. Billy rolled out of bed, got dressed for school and went downstairs.

Step-Dad-Brad was just going out the back door when Billy got to the kitchen. No "Morning, Billy". Just a slam that rattled the bluebird chimes hanging from the kitchen window. At the table Mom was finishing her bowl of Cheerios and as usual had half a bowl of milk leftover. Down the sink it went.

Billy made himself an English muffin—peanut butter on one side, Welch’s Grape Jam on the other. He sat down across from Step-Brother-Tad. Billy chuckled — “Step-Dad-Brad and Fake-Brother- Tad. I’ve been had—they drive me mad.”

“Billy, don’t forget--tonight’s Tad’s birthday party.”

It was Mom’s not-too-subtle hint to remind him to stop on the way home from school and buy Tad a present. Brad and Tad had been in the house for six years, and Billy had yet to get either one a birthday present. Tad always got something for him, but he suspected Step-Dad-Brad bought it and Mom wrapped it. The handwriting on the tag looked like Santa’s.

Billy finished his English muffin, slung his backpack over his shoulder and off to school he went. Tad was still at the table, but somehow would get to school before Billy. He wondered if Step-Dad-Brad waited down the street to give Tad a ride.

“LET IT BURN.”

Billy was The New Guy
Billy got the hot spots
A first shift gift
The chief said stay with the fire till it’s all kicked out

Billy aimed the hose at the flame that
Popped at the top of the basement steps

Then down he went
The smoke nearly choked him
He started to cough
The rail broke off
But he knew what the basement meant and down he went

The air was dense
He could sense he was near it

He cleared his visor—
It appeared
Undamaged
Magic Marker ink darker than smoke

“Happy Birthday to you...”
“Happy Birthday to you...”
“Happy Birthday dear Taaa-aaad...”
“Happy Birthday to you...”

The same every year.

*Song--before Brad and Tad, Mom used to sing the Beatles’
version.*

*Cake--this year fourteen candles. Billy’s piece had some candle
wax on the icing.*

*Presents--from Mom, Step-Dad-Brad, Uncle Gil, Aunt Virginia,
but not Billy.*

*Tad was all smiles, because he knew what was next. The
basement. Down they went.*

*Step-Dad-Brad had the yardstick...Mom had the Sharpie and
Black Magic Marker.*

Tad backed into the post.

The POST.

*It wasn’t really a post. It didn’t hold up any wall or important
beam. It was part of the doorway that led to the workroom--
the workroom where Fake-Brother-Tad and Step-Dad-Brad
spent hours fixing things that weren’t really broken. Bonding--
without the Superglue. When Brad and Tad first moved in,
Billy was part of the workroom crew. Gradually, they
descended to the basement without him, and he didn’t care.
He got control of the TV, stereo, and computer.*

Tad stood straight against the POST.

“Heels on the floor!” snapped Step-Dad-Brad.

Tad flinched his butt and his head dropped an inch. Brad put the yardstick of top of his son’s head, looked at the side view to check it was level and barked at Mom: “MARK IT.” With the Black Magic Marker Mom made a mark on the POST along the underside of the yardstick. Then she took the yardstick, placed it on the mark and drew a line across the POST with the Sharpie. Over the line she wrote: “Tad--age 14.”

“Nice”, said Step-Dad-Brad. “Tad--you’ve grown five inches this past year. Billy--next week on YOUR birthday we’ll see if you catch up.”

But Billy wouldn’t. Ever since Brad and Tad had moved in, Billy, just a week younger than Tad, had always been smaller. First an inch, then two, last year it was three. Always smaller, always slower, always dumber. It was Mom who started the “POST-it Party” in the basement.

It was as if she thought Her Billy would never measure up.

“LET IT BURN.”

Most of the house was black and gone but
THE POST
Was intact and in fact he could read
“Tad age 14”
And four inches below
“Billy age 14”

That was the last mark on the POST. In the next year Billy shot up to over six feet. On birthday fifteen Tad asked If we could
“Not do THE POST this year.”

Mom said-- “Fine, you boys are too old for that sort of thing.”

Billy took his time, stepped over the fallen, blackened 2x9 beams and made it to the center of the back wall of the workroom. He reached up and ran his hand over the charred bricks of the top row and pushed hard on each one until he heard the "CLICK".

Brick Sixteen.

Uncle Gil, Aunt Virginia, Mom and Step-Dad-Brad started up the basement stairs. Tad was behind them. Billy grabbed him by his shirt sleeve and pulled him off the first step.

"Tad," whispered Billy.

"Hey--let go of my shirt," said Tad.

"I have a birthday present for you."

"Why didn't you give it to me upstairs?"

"Because it's down here," said Billy. Come on."

Billy grabbed an old broom handle leaning up against the staircase and led Tad back into the workroom. He went to the far left of the back wall and started tapping the bricks with the broomstick, counting out loud as he went along.

("one-two-three...)

I found this a couple a few years ago...

(Four-five-six-seven...)

I was just tapping on the wall like this for no reason at all...

(Eight-nine-ten-eleven-twelve...)

And then I heard it...

(Thirteen-fourteen-fifteen...)"

Billy stopped, and then pushed hard with the broomstick on Brick Sixteen.

Tad heard a "CLICK", then a "SHPRONG". Part of the wall moved an inch or so away from the rest of the bricks towards the room. Billy put his right-hand fingers on the top brick

sticking out and pulled until the section was at a ninety-degree angle to the rest of the wall.

Behind it--a dark hole.

"Wow," said Tad.

"Old Rufus Jones at the bowling alley told me a story one time," said Billy. "His great-great-grandfather was a runaway slave from Tennessee who made it north thru the Underground Railroad. Rufus said some of the houses around here might have served as "stations", so a couple of years ago I started poking around in the basement. I found it about a month before you and your Dad moved in."

Billy reached down for the flashlight on the floor just inside the room and turned it on.

"Come on," he said.

The room wasn't tall enough for them to stand, but there was enough space for both of them to get in. Tad figured it was four feet high, five feet deep and about six feet wide. As Billy shone the flashlight around the room, Tad noticed an aluminum lawn chair up against the back wall.

"Do Mom and Dad know about the room?" asked Tad.

"No, just me--and now, you."

Billy grabbed a frayed rope that hung inside and pulled the wall shut. They heard another "CLICK". Even though the flashlight lit up the room, Tad felt his stomach jump.

"How do we get out?"

Billy shone the light on Tad and could see him sweating a little.

"Easy," said Billy as he aimed the beam on a latch at the top of the entrance. "Just pull it down and you push open the wall."

"What's with the chair?" asked Tad.

"It's my 'Thinking Chair'. If something in my life doesn't make sense, I come down here and think it thru, most of the time in the dark. Usually I figure out the problems that I have don't come close to what the slaves hiding here must have faced."

Tad had more questions.

"What if Mom or Dad knows you're in the basement, and they come down--and they can't find you?"

"I only go in the room when there's no one else in the house."

Billy was asking himself if he made a mistake. Too many questions from Fake-Brother-Tad.

"Billy, what if you get locked in and can't get out and nobody can hear you yell?"

"Then I guess I die here." Enough questions, thought Billy.

"We better get back to the party."

Billy pulled on the latch, and Tad breathed a sigh when he heard the "CLICK". Billy let Tad push open the wall so he could be out first. Billy turned off the flashlight, put it back on the floor, and closed up the secret room.

"Happy Birthday, Tad."

Tad didn't say anything as they went up the basement steps, Billy leading the way.

"LET IT BURN."

Billy cell phone

Fire engine ringtone

"Caller unknown "

Billy thought I'm on duty
don't get it
forget it
let it go to voice

But his gut said "Answer it." He knew if the Chief saw him, his first day on the job would be his last

"Hello?"

"Billy--it's Brad, your Dad, have you seen Tad?
He disappeared three days ago
Your Mom and I always feared someday
He'd be gone"

Billy knew Brad meant
Not went away gone
But gone--gone for good
Too many pills
Too many needles
And never able
To wheedle his way
Back to the dinner table

"YOU GOT TO FIND TAD"
Billy said, "I know where he is..."

He pulled open the wall
The room was dark
He felt around on the floor
No flashlight
He used his lamp and shone it around the room.

There was Tad, slumped in the aluminum chair. Pills and pill bottle on the floor. Billy hurried over to Tad, and felt his wrist; still a pulse. He scrambled out of the room and yelled up the broken stairs--

"I NEED AN AMBULANCE."

The EMT'S strapped Tad to the stretcher and hoisted him up the basement steps. They said he was semi-conscious and dehydrated but likely would survive. Billy figured after the pills took effect Tad was too disoriented to find the latch and open the wall. The flashlight then finally died and Tad sat there in the dark, waiting.

Waiting for help, waiting for death--whichever came first.

After Billy heard the ambulance pull away, he pushed the wall closed until he heard the CLICK.

He grabbed a long, thin piece of charred wood off the basement floor.

His hands started shaking when he realized it was a yardstick. Maybe not THE yardstick, but nonetheless...

He took off his helmet, went over to the POST, put his back against it, and stood as tall as he could.

He placed the yardstick level on his head, and rubbed it back and forth against the POST.

He turned around and saw a smudged, yet visible mark six inches above "Tad age 14".

With the end of the charred yardstick, he drew a line across the POST, wrote "BILLY" on top of it, threw the yardstick on the floor, and climbed back up the basement stairs...

...Two Days Gone

6:55pm OUTSIDE THE SISTINE CHAPEL

Cardinal Zinn had looked everywhere.

The Tower tolled Seven Bells as he entered the Sistine Chapel. It was empty.

Where was Brother Giovanni?

He knew if he didn't find him soon Pope Gregory would demote him to parish priest and banish him to Ireland, or worse, Venice.

His reverie was interrupted by a rustling sound coming from the dimly lit area of the altar—and he noticed an odd burning smell. The Cardinal squinted at the front of the Chapel but saw just the flickering candles. He held his breath and listened again, but heard only a nightingale in the garden, and a rumble of thunder in the distance.

Cardinal Zinn genuflected, turned and left, his long Red Robe brushing against the oak pews.

At the lectern, the pages tumbled and glowed again.

Isaiah 40:31

“they that wait up the lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk and not faint”

The Priest held on to the side of the lectern, and looked up...

August 21, 1998

Backyard Birdbrains

The highlight of the Lancerville Audobon Society Summer Season was the annual Birdwatch Brunch in Gladys Bracken's backyard. The event was a week away, and Gladys was ready. She looked out her kitchen window and marveled how the right flowers were just now coming in bloom--beautiful flowers that attracted every bird that made Lancerville home--thistle for goldfinches, beebalm for hummingbirds, and *trees--*trees for woodpeckers to dig out. There was even a telephone line for those noisy perching mourning doves.

And then there were the birdhouses--all fully occupied. The bluebird house swung from the lowest branch of the Japanese maple tree. She loved how the blue and orange of the bluebird contrasted with the dark red tree leaves. The Purple Martin house thirty feet up was full of tenants. Gladys had wren houses suspended about the yard that served as "castles" for the dozens of wrens that spent most of their days flying in and out of the boxwoods.

The third and most important bird attractor was the armada of birdfeeders. Gladys had feeders of every shape and size. Tray feeders for grosbeaks and sparrows, hopper feeders for cardinals and chickadees, tube feeders for tufted titmice and finches, suet logs for woodpeckers and nuthatches. She filled them up, and the birds emptied them almost every day.

It wasn't a big back yard--but it was deep--plenty of space for all shapes and sizes of birds. On both sides her neighbors were close to her house. She shared a driveway with the Borginda's on the right. They were retired and spent most of their winters in Florida, and most of spring and summer at their son's cabin in Maine. Their nephew Wallace took care of the snow in winter and the grass in summer. Once in a while he had a backyard bash that got pretty rowdy, but he always picked up the stray beer bottles that ended up in Gladys' yard.

The house on the left was vacant. Marla Mansfield was a widow when she passed and left the house to her son and daughter. The daughter lived in L.A., the son in Manhattan, and both had watched way too many house-flipping shows on TV where one room "condos" went for millions. They figured the house in Lancerville was worth a bundle, and priced it accordingly. And so, it sat, and sat and sat unoccupied for a couple of years, until...

SUNDAY

Gladys heard the truck in the driveway next door and rushed to the dining room window. She gently pulled back the lace curtain to get a better look. It was a moving van. "*Try Your Luck Trucking*" it said on the side--Sheboygan, Wisconsin." "Sheboygan", thought Gladys. Could be a bunch of damn Green Bay Packer fans. A rusty orange Toyota Corolla pulled in behind the van. A tall man, at least six-five, and very thin, angled out of the car. He looked to be about forty. He had black rimmed glasses, tan shorts, a Jimmy Buffet shirt, a round straw hat like those worn by Asian rice farmers, and Jesus sandals--with orange socks.

The man waited at the back of the truck for the driver who looked to be about seventeen and was barely over five feet. Two six foot-plus tattoo-covered ex-jocks got out of the passenger side and went to the back. The diminutive driver joined them, wrenched the latch and ratcheted up the rear door. The new homeowner made a motion to the bigger of

the two ex-jocks, who then handed him the first item out of the truck--a large "ready-to-hang-on-a-tree" bird feeder. It was fully loaded with sunflower seeds. He walked over the sugar maple next to the garage, and hung it on a lower branch. Gladys let the curtain fall back into place and then pulled it back again for another peek.

Over the next three hours, the movers trudged back and forth into the house. It was the usual assortment of chairs, bed posts, laundry baskets, stereo equipment--plus crates of LPs and CDs, and a pile of music cases that looked to be an entire orchestra—cellos, saxophone, guitar, drum kit, portable piano and a few smaller cases which were either flutes, or maybe kazoos.

Any other neighbor might think the new arrival was an eccentric college professor or itinerant musician, but Gladys knew better. She saw him as a THREAT, because before all the household items were unloaded, the "WAR MATERIEL" was carefully taken off the truck first.

On the patio were a dozen standalone bird feeders, ten or twelve hanging feeders, five cases of ready to go suet logs, and thirty 50-pound bags of sunflower seeds.

After the movers left, the new neighbor walked around the backyard for about half an hour. He paused at certain spots and looked up at the sun, then ripped up some grass and tossed it in the air like Tiger Woods on the eighteenth fairway at the Masters. He went inside, and that was the last Gladys saw of him that day.

MONDAY MORNING

The robins started around five thirty--half an hour before sunup. From the welcome first sound of spring they had become the tornado of summer. In the spring, there were two or three songs floating in the air, shouting to the world "New Life" is here. Since then, not enough blue robin eggs

had been snatched up by raccoons, snakes, or crows, so by summer the Morning Choir swelled to thirty or forty or maybe a thousand. Gladys wasn't sure. But she was up--and then she heard the banging.

It was still dark, but she could sense a shadow moving in the back yard next door. As the sun came up between the houses, it shone on first one, then two, then an army of birdfeeders scattered throughout the yard. And there he was--next to the garage on the top rung of a stepladder, hammering a pole into the ground for another. By ten-thirty, all the feeders were pounded into the ground and hung on trees, clotheslines, and old satellite dishes. Then he starting filling them up.

He ripped open one of the sunflower seed bags and lugged it over to the feeder next to the back porch. It took him about an hour to fill all the feeders, then he disappeared into the garage and returned with a small white plastic rose bush sprayer. There was something hand-written in green Magic Marker on the side. Gladys grabbed her binoculars. It looked like "Orchid Extract" but she wasn't sure. Maybe it was "Orange Ex-lax". Whatever it was, he sprayed it over all the sunflower seeds. He put the sprayer back in the garage, and went in the house, the morning's work done.

MONDAY AFTERNOON

A short time after her lunch of vanilla yogurt and V-8, Gladys saw a brilliant red cardinal on the feeder just outside her kitchen window. Its "*PRETTY BIRD-PRETTY BIRD*" call resounded through the neighborhood. She was marveling at the sound and color when all of a sudden it took off to the neighbor's yard and landed on the feeder next to his back porch and began feasting. The cardinal let out a few shrill cries, and within minutes his buff-brown mate joined him.

Gladys felt the yogurt shifting in her stomach, and pulled down the window shade.

TUESDAY

The hummingbirds didn't usually arrive until late afternoon. Gladys had every plant known to bird to attract the ruby-throated, broad-tail, and black-chinned beauties. They relished the sweet nectar of hollyhocks, cardinal bushes and columbine. A row of beebalm not far from her screened-in sunporch facing the backyard was always a favorite.

She knew all of them by name. "Ralph Ruby" was on the early shift today. Today his first stop was the cardinal bush, then the beebalm--then she saw his blinding streak head to the neighbor's yard--straight to the feeder dangling from an eye-high branch of a weeping cherry tree. He hovered ten or fifteen seconds, zinged to another feeder suspended from a clothesline, spent a minute there, then buzzed out of sight.

About twenty minutes later, "Barry" --a broad-tail hummingbird, hovered over Gladys' butterfly bush without probing the flowers. After five seconds, he darted to the neighbor's feeder dangling from an abandoned grape trellis. It lingered, lunged, and lapped up for nearly a minute, then darted away.

The pattern repeated itself over the next three hours. Hummingbirds of all shapes and sizes first came to the nectar-filled flowers and feeders in Gladys' backyard, then zapped to sweeter pastures next door. Other birds joined the Exodus. Grouse, grosbeaks, goldfinches all came to her yard momentarily, then made the mad dash to the new neighbor's back yard.

By sunset, his feeders were nearly empty, hers still full.

The final straw was the Hummingbird Moth. Gladys hadn't seen one for years, but there it was in all its ugly bird-mimicking glory. It really was a moth, not a bird. Some considered it lucky omen---a swarm had been sighted over the English Channel during the D-Day Normandy landings in World

War Two. British soldiers saw it as a sign their invasion would be successful.

The moth hovered over her cardinal bush, poking its penetrating proboscis into the flowers. All of a sudden, it lit on the stem, stopped its wings, then took off to the neighbor's feeder hanging from a satellite dish.

That night after dinner, Gladys drove out to the Army Navy Surplus store off Route 73, bought an Army camouflage outfit, body paint, stealth boots, and a pair of night vision goggles.

WEDNESDAY MORNING

She woke up to those unmistakable sounds. First were the high-pitched *Wuk-Wuk-Wuk-Wuk* cries in rapid succession. Then, the *Rat-A-Tat-Tat* of beak on wood. He was back! After a three-year absence, "Pierre", the elusive Pileated Woodpecker was back with his fire engine red crown and foot-long streamlined body. And he was in her yard--just in time for the Lancerville Birdwatch Brunch, now just three days away. Gladys lay in bed in luxurious listening for a couple of moments, then got up, put on her bathrobe and went to the sunporch.

She grabbed her binoculars and settled her gaze on the dead willow about fifty yards straight back from the house. The willow had been rotting away for years, disappearing limb by limb. Everyone told her she should take it down before it fell down and damaged her house. But the birds won out. She had noticed a woodpecker hole on a main branch about thirty feet up. Without fanfare, she knew she had an urban high rise ready for full occupancy. Now, there were dozens of holes in the willow, home to woodpeckers, bluebirds, even a couple of squirrels. The Wonderful Willow would have to come down on its' own good time.

The binoculars scoped up and down the tree looking for Pierre, but Gladys didn't see him. Maybe he was on the

backside not visible to her from the sunporch. She decided she'd look later after she got dressed, but then felt something odd. The "*Rat-A-Tat-Tat*" was coming from a location different than her willow tree. She aimed the binoculars to her left--and there he was--in the neighbor's yard!

Pierre the Pileated Woodpecker was hammering away at a dying maple tree next door.

Perhaps the maple was easier to penetrate than her dying willow. No, that wasn't it.

Perhaps Pierre didn't want a home in her Willow--too many neighbors.

Maybe Pierre had gotten word from the other birds.

The "*Rat-A-Tat-Tat*" echoed through the neighborhood.

The binoculars hung helplessly around her neck.

She went back in the house and wrote down a few more items she needed from the Army Navy store.

THURSDAY MORNING

The Lancerville Birdwatch Brunch was two days away. Gladys' backyard had no birds. All day long her feeders stayed full. All day long her flowers and bushes stayed empty. The birdhouses were still home to dozens of families, but all their meals were now takeout at the stable of deluxe restaurants next door.

Tonight, it would all change.

THURSDAY NIGHT

It was one-thirty in the morning, and the neighbor's lights were still on. Maybe he's a Pirate's fan. They were playing on

the West Coast and he probably stayed up to watch the game. She turned on the radio. The Dodgers were batting in the bottom of the ninth, down by four runs. Twenty minutes later, Pittsburgh finally put it away, winning by a run. His lights went out about fifteen minutes later.

Gladys sat in the dark on the sunporch. And waited.

It was now three A.M. She needed two hours to get everything done. It would be close, but Gladys was confident she could finish before the robins started yammering.

The camouflage outfit was a little snug, but would be OK. She had opted for the Super Gription Kevlar gloves for the assault. The stealth tactical boots were laced tight. She hadn't bought an Army issue helmet but opted for her good luck Steelers cap, worn backwards. The night goggles held the hat in place. The chin strap straddled her determined jaw. The camo face was painted on thick.

She was ready.

She slowly opened the screen door on the sunporch. For once, it didn't squeak--a good sign.

She looked up at the sky--a crescent moon--not a full moon, another good sign.

There were some stars, but more clouds were moving in from the west, and would soon turn the black sky grey--three good signs.

Gladys took a deep breath.

Her Better Beautiful Homes bucket held her gear. She carefully lowered it over the white plastic rail fence separating the two yards, then climbed over herself. She was in enemy territory.

First objective was the stand-alone feeders. The cardinals, chickadees, and catbirds were not going to like the cayenne pepper, paprika and poultry seasoning spread on the “Orchid Extract” --laced sunflower seeds. Gladys lavishly sprinkled some in each feeder. On the last one, her nose started itching and twitching and her index finger stopped a sneeze right outside his kitchen window.

On to the hummingbirds.

Hummingbirds were delicate creatures. Their sensitive sense of smell had served them well for millennia. They would know right away the sweet nectar in their new special feeders wasn't up to sniff. A little Clorox would assure that. Gladys merrily spritzed away. She remembered the third-grade joke: “Why do hummingbirds hum? --Because they don't know the words!”. The Clorox-laced nectar would leave them speechless.

Finally, bringing back Pierre, the Pileated Woodpecker.

She undid the bungee cord in the front of her camo outfit and lowered the plastic owl strapped on her back to the ground. She'd had “Hooty” standing guard in her strawberry patch for ten years. He'd scared off chipmunks, squirrels, even skunks--Hooty had done his job well. Now, he was being drafted for the biggest mission of his long plastic life.

Owls were predators, woodpeckers were food. Hooty would keep Pierre out of the neighbor's dead maple, and the Pileated Woodpecker would be back “home” in no time. She wedged Hooty into the fork of a low branch, then secured him with four bungee cords.

The job was done. The sky started to lighten.

A robin chirped the first chirp of the new day as Gladys crawled back over the fence into her yard. The sunporch screen door made a loud screech, but one could have taken it

for the brakes of the garbage truck making its rounds. Safely inside, she wriggled out of the camouflage outfit, threw the boots down the basement stairs, put the night goggles on the night stand, washed the camo paint off her face, and flopped into bed.

FRIDAY MORNING

The *rat-a-tat-tat* of the Pierre the Pileated Woodpecker woke up Gladys around eleven. She put on her bathrobe and Big Bird fuzzy slippers and shuffled out to the sunporch. There he was, hammering away at the willow tree. She went back to the kitchen, got a blueberry yogurt out of the fridge and slid in to the white Adirondack glider on the sunporch and waited.

As she was finishing up her yogurt, a red flash dashed across her yard--a cardinal. He headed straight for the feeder next to the garage in the neighbor's yard. He pecked at the sunflower seeds, then suddenly few straight up in the air like a runaway helium balloon. The red streak landed on a feeder by the grape trellis in her yard and started breakfast. Throughout the morning, the scene repeated itself. Cardinals, grosbeaks, scarlet tanagers, flocked to the enemy's feeders, only to quickly come back to Café de Gladys.

FRIDAY AFTERNOON

Around three o'clock, Connie's Catering Company arrived to set up the tents and tables for the next day's Birdwatch Brunch. Per Gladys' instructions, the tables were set in the middle of the yard, so the guests would be surrounded by the various feeders and flowers. Any way you turned there would be a bird to observe. The table centerpieces were miniature birdcages, each with a Tweety Bird perched inside. Connie and her crew finished up around four o'clock. Gladys poured herself a large iced tea, flopped back down in the glider and waited for the final piece of the puzzle.

Still out of sleep synch from her overnight mission, Gladys dozed off. She awoke suddenly thinking she was being attacked by a swarm of bees. Then her half glassy eyes gazed outside and there they were--four, yes four hummingbirds fighting for a spot on the butterfly bush. They were back. All the barnstorming birds were back in her yard—just in time for tomorrow’s Birdwatch Brunch.

She ordered takeout from the Chinese restaurant, had two glasses of Manschewitz Blackberry Wine, and crawled into bed around ten-thirty.

All was ready and in place.

SATURDAY MORNING

The alarm woke her at seven. Thank goodness she had set it.

The Robins early morning yakking had failed to summon her as usual.

There was no sunrise chirping and chattering.

It was deathly quiet.

Gladys put on her bathrobe and slippers and hurried to the sunporch.

The back yard faced west, and the Eastern rising sun, still partially blocked by her house, was just starting to reach the ground. The grass was glowing, golden in the first rays. But it was too bright. Something was wrong. She shook off her Big Bird slippers, squished into her Clark Clogs and pushed open the screen door. She took three steps before the first “CRUNCH” under her left foot.

She looked down--CORN!

She peered out to the yard. It was shining and glowing as more rays hit the grass. *Her back yard was totally covered by thousands and thousands of golden, shimmering kernels of corn.* The sun kept erasing the shadows and the golden glow intensified, getting brighter each second. Again, she noticed the silence--no birds anywhere.

She went back inside.

Gladys could fake being ill--bird flu? And call off the party?
NO.

She could start picking up the corn with her Shop-Vac.
NO time.

She would do *nothing*, and hope for the best.

The crew from Connie's Catering arrived at eight thirty as planned to set up the coffee, tea, pastries and fruits for the brunch. Connie herself commented "what a cute idea the corn was" and assured Gladys this would be the best Birdwatch Brunch ever. Gladys smiled.

The Lancerville Audobon Society members started arriving at nine thirty. For a time, all went well:

"Gladys, I love the Tweety Bird centerpieces..."

"...Have you tried the Tangerine Tea?"

"...These sweet rolls are to die for..."

By ten the backyard was filled with tea tipping, pastry popping happy, yakky guests until...

"Gladys, what's with the corn?"

"Where are all the birds?"

"You're right, not even a lousy Blue Jay..."

And then, they heard it--the first distinct caw of a black crow, and then another, and another, as they descended on the

lawn—hundreds of them. The crowing and crunching were deafening. Gladys grabbed a broom off the sunporch and like the Wicked Witch of the West went after them and shooed them away. They flew off in a “caw-caphony”, circled around the Birdwatch Brunch once, then settled in the tops of the oak trees at the back of the yard.

“Did you see that?”

“CROWS—at the Annual Birdwatch Brunch...”

Then they heard more birds, but not what they expected. No cardinal “*PRETTY-BIRD, PRETTY-BIRD*”, no “*Bob-WHITE, Bob-WHITE*”, not even a mourning dove “*COO-COO-COO*”.

No, it was the teeth-shattering sound of a phonograph needle ripping across a worn Beatles LP--PURPLE GRACKLES! —the scourge of Birdwatchers everywhere. UGLY--BULLYISH--and always HUNGRY! PURPLE GRACKLES!

There were thousands of them screeching and swooping, and scooping up the corn. Gladys grabbed her broom again, and this time she had backup. The Lancerville Birdwatchers weren’t going to stand for this! They grabbed spoons and plates off the tables and banged out a racket that drove the greedy, grubby Grackles to the sky. They flew off and regrouped in the oak trees with the crows.

Gladys sat down in a chair by the coffee urn, exhausted.

“Well, that was kind of fun...”

“...A little too Alfred Hitchcock for me...”

“...Gladys, where are the rest of the birds?”

Gladys opened her mouth to reply, but nothing came out.

A couple of the watchers started to leave, but most stayed huddled inside the tents, sipping tea and coffee, not sure what to expect next.

It was utterly still. Only the rustling of thousands of wings broke the silence.

The crows and grackles were still in the oak trees--waiting.

Suddenly, there was a change in the atmosphere, but it wasn't the wind. Gladys noticed it first, and she felt a little shiver. It was like the eye of a hurricane, where there's hardly any pressure, but the air is still oppressive. But there was no storm, no clouds, and then she saw it--off to the south. One massive black cloud in the distance, and it was moving at lightning speed--first left, then right, up, down, swirling swiftly and getting bigger and then nearly disappearing and then coming back larger and more ominous still--and getting closer.

It was heading straight for the Backyard Brunch.

"Look, up in the air..."

"It's a bird..."

"It's a plane..."

"Verry funny..."

"No", said Gladys--"it IS birds--it's a flock of Starlings."

Now, Starlings were no more desired by bird watchers than crows or grackles, but they did have one redeeming quality.

Starlings had beauty in flight.

Coming toward the Birdwatch Brunch was a fabulous sky-filling flock in perpetual motion--this was Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers on a shimmering dance floor--Gene Kelly and Cyd Charisse gliding in a Paris park---a massive, majestic swath of swirl winding a spiral staircase in the blue sky, descending on Gladys' back yard, landing like swans in slow motion on the golden bed of corn. They stared down the Birdwatchers, then began their fabulous feast.

None of the Birdwatchers moved. Nobody breathed. The only sound was the CRUNCH-CRUNCH-CRUNCH of corn for what seemed like hours--but was probably only ten minutes. Then the dance began again, first one bird up in the air, then a dozen, a hundred, thousands leaving the yard and forming another Sabre Dance in the sky. Diving, looping, streaking--billowing over the Birdwatch Brunch--and then they were gone.

The backyard went silent.

No breeze.

No birds.

No words.

Then the stillness was broken.

Gladys couldn't place the sound at first, but soon recognized it. It was the muffled sound of white gloves slapping each other like elementary school erasers being clapped together. At first it was muted applause, then ungloved hands joined them with a louder echoing sound. Then she heard a couple of "Woo-Hoos", and even a few index-fingers-in-the-mouth whistles.

"Gladys—you've outdone yourself..."

"...Best Backyard Birdwatch Brunch ever..."

"...Incredible..."

Tears were running down Gladys's cheeks.

"Who would have corn as the main attraction?"

"Gladys!"

"What a show..."

"A regular 'Corn-Uptopia!'"

Gladys was surrounded by the watchers. They patted her on the back, gave her full squeeze hugs, white glove high fives, and even a couple fist bumps. The rest of the morning passed

with smiles and laughter. Nobody seemed to notice, or maybe care, that no more birds showed up at this year's Lancerville Backyard Birdwatch Brunch.

SATURDAY NIGHT

Gladys woke up, startled by the front door bell. She had fallen asleep watching "The Birdman of Alcatraz" for the umpteenth time. She hoisted herself off the couch, shuffled to the front door and slowly opened it.

There was nobody there. Then she heard a gentle "Coo" and looked down.

It was a silver birdcage. Inside were two white doves. Olive branches were scattered on the floor of the cage. An envelope was taped to the top. She pulled it off, opened it, and read the card inside:

"LET THERE BE PEACE"

--signed, Your New Neighbor.

Editor's Note: No birds were harmed or injured in the writing of this story...

...Three Days Gone

7:10pm INSIDE THE SISTINE CHAPEL

So, the birds still rule the skies. That was good to know.

Better to let God rule the heavens.

Better to let man rule the earth.

Better to let man fight poverty, hatred, disease—the work of the Church.

The pages fluttered again.

John 3 1:2

“I wish above all things thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth”

The Priest was no longer afraid to look at the visions forming and reforming on the ceiling.

God was talking to him.

He looked up for the date...

January 29, 2045

The Cure-All

THURSDAY MORNING—NEW YORK CITY-MANHATTAN-STARBUCKS

They didn't text, email, phone or write. They did everything in person—face to face, side by side, back to back. Today it was back to back, well actually front to back. He was *behind* her in line at Starbucks. He hated Starbucks, but Datrita needed her extra-large-triple-latte peppermint mocha. She had three a day, and still had the figure of a twenty-five-year-old two-hour a day workout fanatic---which she was.

"I can't make it tonight," he whispered into her \$900 Peruvian Alpaca knit hat.

"Why?" she said, tactfully wiping her New York winter induced runny nose into her Persian lamb's wool coat sleeve, her elbow barely brushing his chest. "Is she back in town?"

"No," he replied through clenched teeth. "She's still in the Ukraine on the Farewell Tour for the Lab. She'll be back Sunday—it's the blasted auction"

"What auction?" she said as they moved up a step in the line.

"We have hundreds of donated items we didn't get the chance to use in previous campaigns. The board wants them auctioned off instead of selling them outright."

"Why not give them back to the original donors?"

“They’ve already taken the charitable deduction on their taxes--and because it will look good as the final step in the liquidation.”

“How much are we talking about?”

“Thirty to forty million.”

They moved up another step-in line.

“Add that to the rest of the assets,” he said, “and it’s close to three hundred million dollars total.”

“Wow”, she said. “Where’s it all going to go?”

“The board wants to give it outright to various foundations, or maybe the Smithsonian.”

“and you want the money to go to...?”

“I don’t care—our job is done.”

She was at the front of the line now and ordered her extra-large-triple-latte peppermint mocha--this morning without the whipped cream. He moved to the register that had just opened up on the right.

“Good morning, Mr. Pretov,” said the barista. “The usual?”

He and Datrika would continue their chat tomorrow morning.

THURSDAY EVENING—ODESSA, ON THE BLACK SEA, UKRAINE

Janeen Pretov was forty-two. She was head of the Research Department at the most important non-profit in the world. She was married to Mikhail Pretov, the CEO. Together they had made history. She had the total package--looks, brains, money--and she wanted out. Specifically, she wanted Mikhail out--for good. That’s why on the Goodwill Tour to Kiev she had made a side trip to Odessa.

Janeen had had lovers in college. Not a lot of them, but enough. One of them had been a handsome, mysterious foreign exchange student from the Ukraine, Symon Oleynyk. Symon had money, and he hinted most of it was ill gotten.

They rendezvoused at the Potemkin Steps, not far from the docks where Symon ran a branch of the family business. They had lunch at a café, dinner at cousin Petro's villa in the hills, and a nightcap with no nightgown in Janeen's hotel room. In the spacious marble tub, she outlined her desire to be rid of her husband. She didn't say why and Symon didn't ask.

He only said he knew somebody who knew somebody who could get the job done in America.

Ukrainians hated Russians, and Pretov was a Russian name.

There were lots of Ukrainians around New York City who needed work.

So, it was set. Janeen outlined what was happening at the charity and insisted it happen *after* the finalization of the liquidation, which was set for the following Thursday.

FRIDAY MORNING-NEW YORK CITY-STARBUCKS

This morning *she* was standing behind *him* in line at Starbucks. She stood on her heels to get closer to his ear. "I missed you last night."

Mikhail was one customer away from the counter, so he couldn't turn around even slightly without being obvious.

"You don't have to say anything", Datrita said. "Just cough if you missed me."

He bent over ever so slightly, raised his right fist and hacked into it three times--like Dorothy tapping the ruby slippers. The cop in line in front of him turned around.

"Sorry," said Mikhail, "long winter." Datrita smiled.

SUNDAY EVENING-BROOKLYN-PRETOV PENTHOUSE

Janeen returned in the early afternoon and found a note from Mikhail. He was at the office going over the final plans for the Tuesday auction. He'd be back late--no "WELCOME HOME" in the note.

"At the office, my ass," said Janeen out loud. No matter.

As the top research scientist who had overseen the breakthrough, Janeen had literally dozens of offers. They could wait. She wanted to do nothing for a while, at least until *HE* was no longer in the picture. Mikhail wanted to take the year off and travel, presumably with Datrika. He was brilliant, but naive. Sometimes guys know that she knows that he knows, but not Mikhail.

TUESDAY NOON- NEW YORK CITY-ZAMBITI AUCTION HOUSE

There had been events at Zambiti's Auction House with more historically valuable items with price tags twenty times higher. But none had ever carried more meaning for the entire world. As CEO, Mikhail Pretov was asked to say a few words prior to the proceedings. Janeen was sitting in the front row. There were times like this she would miss him, but not enough to stop the plan.

Mikhail took the microphone off the podium and slowly, deliberately, paced back and forth.

"Ladies and gentlemen, citizens of the world. There will never be another auction like this for a hundred years. We are here today to mark the death of a great institution. Most funerals are somber and sad--but the demise of the National Cancer Society is a bold entry in the timeline of human progress. We have finalized our report. We have indeed after thousands of years of human suffering succeeded--in finding the cure for cancer."

Janeen could feel a wave of excitement from the gallery—a stillness like the calm before a strong wind through a stand of pine trees. Mikhail stopped in front of the podium.

“There have been NO reports of any cancers-- ANYWHERE.”

He paused.

“Every cancer cell in the world is DEAD!!”

Even though the revelation had been known for months, and the shutdown of the National Cancer Society a foregone conclusion, the crowd at the auction still erupted into mad applause, with even a few “Bravos” as if it were opening night on Broadway. Mikhail paused until the room was silent.

“Thousands have contributed to this massive effort, and they’ve been properly noted and rewarded. I beg your indulgence, however, to please one more time honor the Director of our research team--my colleague and life partner-- Janeen Pretov.”

More applause and a slight, polite head bow by Janeen. She deserved the praise, the accolades, the honor--just not from *him*. She hoped this was one of his quick speeches, not the full-blown pomposity so often delivered to potential donors.

“As you know”, Mikhail went on, “the proceeds from this auction and the sale of the remaining National Cancer Society assets will be directed to numerous other charities and foundations.”

He raised his right hand next to his face with a pointed finger.

“There is still much work to be done.”

His lifted his left hand in a tight fist.

“There are still more diseases to conquer.

He paused, then took two steps to the left.

*"I'm proud the National Cancer Society has done its' part.
Thank you."*

The auction brought in nearly twice the original estimate. Millions streamed it live and put in bids--including Datrita watching in her apartment.

THURSDAY EIGHT AM-STARBUCKS

The line was shorter than usual. They wouldn't have much time to talk. He was behind her.

"The auction was a big success," he said, as his hand brushed her extended elbow.

"I watched it on line. I almost bid on the Alexander Ovechkin jersey."

"Why didn't you?" asked Mikhail.

"I'm Ukrainian", Datrita said as she went to the open register on the left. "He's a Russian."

Mikhail shrugged and didn't reply as he stepped up to the center register.

"Good morning, Mr. Pretov—big day today, huh?"

"Looks that way..."

"The usual, sir?"

"Yes, please--with some extra whipped cream."

THURSDAY NINE AM-BOARDROOM-NATIONAL CANCER SOCIETY HEADQUARTERS

Janeen couldn't wait for the meeting to be over. As head of research, she was technically a company officer, and as such had to sign off on the liquidation along with Mikhail and the other board members. There were twenty-seven board members. This was going to take all day.

Mikhail was smart. His CEO company signature stamp was pounding away. And he had his Starbucks.

Janeen's hand was cramping. And the idiot kid at McDonald's had given her de-caf.

THURSDAY ONE PM-OUTSIDE NATIONAL CANCER SOCIETY HEADQUARTERS

The Pretov's left the building hand in hand, even jamming together in one slot through the revolving door in the lobby. Outside, at the same time, they nodded to Hank the security guard, and then both turned around and looked up at the mammoth "National Cancer Society" logo on the building for the last time. They smiled, and put their hands together, and hugged—their triumph making both of them afraid to let go.

But let go, they did.

Mikhail turned and headed across the street toward a lunch rendezvous with some college buddies, Janeen turned back to Hank to have him call her a taxi. She raised her hand and took a breath to speak when she heard the screech of the tires, then the screams from the crowd on the sidewalk.

ONE MONTH LATER-BROOKLYN-PRETOV PENTHOUSE

The police had filled in Janeen the day before, but she read the story in the Times anyway. It would be on CNN tonight as "Breaking News".

"After a month-long investigation, police determined the hit and run driver who struck and killed former National Cancer Society CEO Mikhail Pretov was Datriia Honchar, a Ukrainian National in this country on a work visa. Honchar reportedly has ties to Ukrainian oligarch Ivan Oleynyk and was believed to have fled the country. Police found no connection between Honchar and Mr. Pretov."

TWO MONTHS LATER-MANHATTAN-WAITING ROOM OF DR. SAMUEL SCARLETTA'S OFFICE

Janeen had been back from her Mediterranean cruise for two weeks. The headaches started in Palermo. At first, she thought it was the red wine she drank almost every night. She remembered from undergraduate chemistry days red wines were made from the whole grape, not just the juice, and the grape skins had extra tannins, which could have caused the headaches.

Then she wondered if it was stress. The police had closed the case, but the mention of Symon's father in their report had put her on alert.

Yes, it was probably just stress, and it would eventually lessen, but she was a scientist, and needed the facts for an accurate analysis.

A week ago, Dr. Scarletta had seen her and ordered a battery of tests--blood, MRI, X-Ray, brain scan.

Yesterday, Janeen got the call from his nurse:

"The doctor would like to see you in his office--FIRST THING TOMORROW".

She was the first patient of the day, and only had to sit in the waiting room for five minutes before the nurse took her to the doctor's office.

Dr. Samuel Scarletta had been her family's doctor since she was three. As a little girl, she had seen him as the kindly "Norman Rockwell Stethoscope on The Doll Doctor". Now, thirty years later, he still looked the part. He motioned her to the worn leather wingback chair next to his ancient mahogany desk and straightened his white lab coat.

“Janeen,” he said, peering over his half glasses, “I’ve known you forever, and I know you don’t like people who beat around the bush. So I’ll tell you straight-out--you have a brain tumor.”

She swayed a little in the chair and took a short breath.

“And,” he continued, “it’s cancer. ”...

...Four Days Gone

7:55pm INSIDE THE SISTINE CHAPEL

Brother Giovanni wondered—which of the seven deadly sins was the worst? Lust? Wrath?

It appeared the world in the future would have enough of both of them.

In the distance, thunder rumbled. A flash lit up the stained-glass Madonna and Child.

Eight Bells sang thru the walls.

The pages turned...

Genesis 1:25

“and God made the best of the earth after his kind, and cattle after their kind and everything creepeth upon the earth after his kind; and God saw that it was good”

The Priest saw a rat scurry away from the altar, or was it a chipmunk?...

October 12, 2012

Jerry, The Flying Squirrel

Fritz Newburk got the call at 3:47am.

The Madison Avenue substation was out again.

Third time this month. Probably another damn squirrel.

Fritz swung his legs over the side of the bed and sat up. He turned and looked back at Anna who was snoring away. He scratched his bare beer belly, stood up, and got dressed.

He drove to the Con-Ed Power building four blocks away, grabbed the keys for truck 104 and started it up. Garth Brooks from the radio blasted him out of his semi-conscious state. He looked at the truck's operating log. Last driver was Bubba McKay. "Figures," thought Fritz.

Fritz hated country music—and jazz—and rock and roll. He wasn't sure what he liked. He knew he didn't like getting yanked of bed at 4am so some stockbroker on the Upper East Side would be up in time to catch his limo to the downtown office.

He pulled into the pitch-black substation parking lot and unlocked the gate. He didn't need his flashlight. He sniffed out the problem with his first step inside the fence. Fried squirrel.

He flicked on his SuperLantern and aimed up. There it was dangling from transformer A-10.

Fritz killed the master switch on the control panel, climbed into the truck bucket and guided it to the transformer.

“WHAT THE HELL?”

It was a squirrel, but it wasn't. It looked more like a bat. He scraped the remains off the transformer and took a closer look. It WAS a squirrel, but it had a wing-like thing from its' hands to its foot. A FLYING squirrel? He put the remains in the Con-Ed Eco Bag and sealed it for the lab to look at later. He repaired the burned-out conductor on the transformer, landed the truck bucket on its' post, flipped the master switch and watched the street lights flicker back on up and down Madison Avenue.

Jerry was one of 4,296 flying squirrels living in New York's Central Park. Like many of his furry brethren, Jerry flitted from tree to tree lunching on lichen, feasting on fungi and noshing on nuts. Like many of his nosy, noisy neighbors, he was awake most of the night, avoiding owls, raccoons, and other unfriendly types. Unlike other flying squirrels, Jerry was *not* suicidal.

The flying squirrel death squads usually began in May, and ran thru November. October was the peak “nuts to you” month. Unhappy paratroopers who thought they hadn't put on enough fat to make it through the New York winter, opted for Salvation over Starvation.

The preferred method was electrocution—either by chomping on power lines, or flying directly onto transformers at substations scattered throughout the city. The real showoffs would start at the top of the Empire State Building and glide their way down, aiming for a target in the heart of Manhattan.

Squirrel attacks were the number one cause of power disruptions across the country. Nirvana for a flying squirrel was the lights going out as the juice went in: “Go on a flight--take out the lights!” “Soar and score!” “Fly and die!”

But Flying Squirrel Suicide was not for Jerry. Because he had a friend—Max.

It all started about six months ago—

JUNE

On a hot, sunny day Jerry’s mother pushed Jerry and his two brothers and three sisters out of their nest in the top of a withered hackberry tree. It was time they were on their own. Siblings Jeff, John, Joanne, Jackie, and Jennifer were accomplished flyers, having earned their “wings” with numerous test flights. They glided gracefully to other trees and onto a new life chapter. Not so Jerry.

Jerry was the runt of the family with no flight training to speak of. No matter, Mom gave him a shove. He flapped and flailed and flummoxed his way to the Central Park floor with a thud.

Right next to Max’ bench.

Max Luchinski sat on the same Central Park bench every day.

He brought the same brown paper bag of peanuts every day. He fed the same squirrels every day. But not today.

Out of the corner of his eye he had seen a flying squirrel falling from the sky and then crash-land right next to him. Max was stunned—and so was the squirrel, but it was still alive. Max had never seen a flying squirrel close up, but knew right away

the squirrels' "wing" was torn badly, and his left paw was dangling. He noticed a prominent stripe down the middle of the squirrel's back—a Flying "Skunkel"? Instead of scattering the peanuts a few at a time as usual to fill an afternoon, Max dumped out the whole bag and let the rest of the diners scramble. He gently picked up the Flying Squirrel and carried him back to his Fifth avenue condo across from the park.

Over the next couple of weeks Max brought The Squirrel back to life. His "wing" was now fully healed, his paw good for solid landings. Jerry the Flying Squirrel felt fit to fly.

Max lived alone in a three-story condo. It was perfect for flight school. With a couple of strategically placed peanuts, he coaxed The Squirrel to the second-floor rail which overlooked the kitchen. Jerry crawled up the bannister and feasted on the prize, then looked down. Max was sitting on a stool at the kitchen table. In front of him was a pie—a pecan pie. Jerry had heard of Pecan Pie lusciousness from his Georgia cousins.

Max glowed as The Squirrel glided down—it was the Wright Brothers at Kitty Hawk; it was Apollo 13 splashing down safely in the Pacific. It was Jerry, the Flying Squirrel, all four paws landing square in the middle of the pecan pie. Nuts and gooey filling splurshed all over Max as Jerry dug in.

AUGUST

It didn't take long for Jerry to dive into the whole program—soaring flights from the third floor to the second floor bannister then down to the first-floor kitchen table; from the chandelier on the vaulted ceiling to the leather couch; the wing and paw fully healed, and Jerry now fully flight-tested.

On a steamy August afternoon Max opened the sliding door of his tenth-floor balcony. The Squirrel took a deep breath—so

did Max—and Jerry took off. He landed perfectly on a balcony roof three stories down, then leaped again, gracefully gliding to the awning over the condo building entrance, then floating down to the pavement.

Max closed his eyes as the Flying Squirrel scooted across Fifth Avenue, avoiding cars and narrowly being trampled by the hooves of a mounted New York City policeman. When Max got the courage to look, The Squirrel was safely on the sidewalk. Jerry looked back up at Max, then scooted up a hackberry tree and disappeared.

Max stood on his balcony for a few minutes, looking up at the sky. A late summer storm was coming in from the west. He smiled and went back inside.

After grabbing a beer, Max lumbered up to the third-floor landing. There was only one door on the third floor. He keyed in the numbers to the door lock and it quietly clicked. He lowered his glasses down his nose and positioned his right eye over the scanner and heard the beep.

The door opened.

In the 14' by 14' foot room 76 computer monitors were stacked floor to ceiling humming in harmony. A police band radio sat on top of the mini-fridge. Max glanced at the life-sized Sergeant Pepper mural on the west wall, then set down to work in his Easy-Roll office chair.

Max Luchinski wasn't wealthy. But he was on his way. Max was a computer hacker--for the Good Guys—assuming you thought Bankers and Stock Brokers assumed the position. He had hefty retainers with dozens of Wall Street Banks and Brokerage Houses. He hacked into their mainframes and servers, ferreted out the flaws, and devised a fix-it for the problem. He was paid a bonus \$150,000 per successful break-in and subsequent remedy. So far this year he had pulled in an extra \$750,000.

The easiest money was earned during power failures when banks ran on backup generators and servers. The police radio in his kitchen alerted him to power interruptions. He used the other scanner in the control room plus one computer dedicated to Con-Edison's Service Department to easily pinpoint the blackout areas.

Max spent about two hours cleaning out old files and then went back downstairs. He was on his way to the kitchen when he noticed something out on his balcony. He opened the sliding glass door and saw an acorn perched on the railing.

"What the hell?"

How did an acorn wind up there? The crazy Yoga instructor one floor up? Max flicked it off the rail and watched it bounce off the balcony roof the floor below and then disappear as it fell to the street.

An hour later he was watching an NCIS rerun when the TV screen flickered. So did the lights. He scrambled two flights up to the third floor Control Room and keyed himself in. The police scanner radio was squawking about a power outage at the Cedar Street substation--Max sat down and rolled over to the Con-Ed computer and logged in--3000 customers affected, including Third National Mortgage. He rolled over to Terminal 22—preset to Third National's Portal. He crushed through the secure mainframe in twenty minutes and attacked the servers. It took him just an hour to retrace his path and formulate a fix to present to the bank.

An easy \$150,000 afternoon.

He went downstairs. NCIS was still on the flat screen, but he turned it off and decided to go to the park to feed the squirrels. Maybe he'd see his flying squirrel friend.

A couple days later Max was coming down the stairs from his second-floor bedroom when he saw it again. On the balcony rail—another acorn. He slid open the door and looked down, then up, then left and right, and finally across the street to Central Park.

Nothing.

Nobody.

He plucked the acorn off the rail and put it on the glass coffee table in front of the couch.

He grabbed the makings of a kiwi smoothie out of the fridge and slapped them in the blender. He started it up and then stepped over to the sink to wash his hands when the whirring racket of the blender suddenly stopped. Then the lights went out--and just as quickly came back on as his fifty-kilowatt backup generator on the second floor kicked in.

He restarted the blender. Then he abruptly shut it off and raced to the third floor.

The police scanner said the power outage was centered on Wall Street. Con Ed said 85,000 customers were down, including the Central Park area. The screen showed six major banks and three brokerage firms. Over the next six hours Max made \$600,000.

Power was restored by 9pm.

CNN reported the outage was caused by a flying squirrel frying a transformer.

Over the next three weeks the pattern repeated itself: Acorn on the rail, followed by a power failure a few hours later--usually caused by a flying squirrel--followed by Max furiously hacking and packing away the money.

Acorn-outage-hack-pack.

Acorn-outage-hack-pack.

On the fourth occurrence, Max said out loud, “It has to be the flying squirrel. He’s placing the acorns. He knows when then squirrels will be flying and frying.”

OCTOBER

October was still warm, but the grey clouds looked cold. Max had done some research. October-November were the peak squirrel electrocution months. By now he had earned over five million dollars thanks to his Flying Squirrel friend. He was nodding off to “Casablanca” when he was startled by a “thump”, like a stupid robin flying into his balcony window. He went over the door and looked down. It was the Flying Squirrel sitting on the concrete slab. Max slid open the door and Jerry stood on his hind legs. He had a huge green-shell-covered black walnut, not an acorn, in his mouth. He dropped it inside the glass door, whirled around, jumped up on the rail and soared off into the sky.

A black walnut thought Max.

What the hell does that mean?

He picked it up and put it on the coffee table.

Over the next two hours Jerry made a dozen more trips to the balcony depositing the walnuts inside the slightly open glass door.

Why is he bringing me black walnuts?

And why so many? It’s usually just ONE acorn.

Does this mean an “army” of casualties? A “black” Friday on “Wal” Street? “Nuts to you?”

He happened to glance at the Currier and Ives calendar hung over the sink--and then he knew. It was Friday October 12th—Columbus Day.

The banks were closed, and would be until Monday.
The TV flickered as Bogie disappeared into the airport fog.
The lights went out.
Max heard the generator kick on as he raced to the third floor.

The police scanner said all of New York was down—Manhattan, Brooklyn, the Bronx, even Long Island. Every bank, every brokerage house was on a backup system. Con-Ed was calling for crew members to report immediately. It was a holiday weekend. Only skeleton crews were on duty. Power would be out for hours, maybe days.

Max got to work.

By midnight he had made three million dollars.
Power was still out.

By 6am Saturday he was up to five million.
Power was still out.

He took a break at 3pm Saturday. Power was still out.

He had racked up over nine million dollars in new fees. He was exhausted. He needed a break. Maybe I should go to the park and feed the squirrels he thought.

He went down to the kitchen and grabbed a soup spoon and a pint of lemon sherbet from the freezer. He flopped down and sank into the leather sofa and looked toward the balcony. There was something out there, but it didn’t look like an acorn or black walnut. He opened the sliding door and picked it off the railing.

It was a miniature metal wheelbarrow.

WHAT THE HELL?

A miniature metal wheelbarrow---that's what it was—from a Monopoly game.

A message from the squirrel?

But what?

Leaning on the rail, he looked up and down Fifth Avenue. Some of the street lights were flickering on and off. Power would be coming on back soon.

A wheelbarrow?

Who uses a wheelbarrow? Bricklayers? Gardeners?

FARMERS!

Max put the tiny toy in his shirt pocket and raced back to the third floor. He banged into his Easy-Roll chair and wheeled over to Monitor 74—Long Island Farmers Bank. He had never cracked their code.

Was today the day?

After three hours he had made it through four firewalls. And now he needed a password. Power was already back on in most of Manhattan. Long Island couldn't be far behind. It would take hours to comb thru all the bank's personal computers to track down a password. He needed a "Hail Jerry."

Why had the squirrel brought him a Monopoly game piece instead of an acorn or black wal...

Max typed in “wheelbarrow”.

The screen went blank, then sprang to life.

In **bold** ORANGE letters---**Long Island Farmers Bank Auxiliary Server.**

“Auxiliary Server”?

What the hell was that?

Max hit “Enter”, and the screen went directly to “Fiscal Year Auxiliary Report”. It listed bank assets at three billion, four hundred million, six hundred twenty thousand. That’s a big number for a small Long Island Bank thought Max. He swung his chair over to another computer screen and did a quick search. The official FDIC report on the bank’s website listed assets of four hundred million dollars—a three-billion-dollar difference. It was like Al Capone’s two sets of books—only a lot bigger.

Somebody at Long Island Farmers Bank was laundering money—a LOT of it.

SIX WEEKS LATER

November was usually dismal and dreary in New York City, but sun was promised for tomorrow’s Macy’s Day Parade. Max leaned over on his bench to watch the squirrels chase the peanuts he scattered from his brown paper bag. About two o’clock, as happened every day, Jerry the Flying Squirrel glided down to the bench and Max pulled a few pecans out of his shirt pocket for his furry friend. Jerry stuffed them all in his mouth, puffing out his cheeks to maximum balloonage, then scurried up a nearby hackberry tree.

It had been six weeks since The Flying Squirrel last visited the balcony and Max had devised his plan and set the wheels in motion.

On the Monday after Columbus Day, Max met with the Long Island Farmers Bank board of directors. He informed them hackers from Russia had infiltrated their system but no money was stolen. He plugged the leak—their bank was safe. He left an invoice for \$150,000 with the board secretary.

A few days later, Wally Riggleman, Chief Financial Officer of the Long Island Farmers Bank received a letter with a general postmark from the Brighton Beach Post Office in Brooklyn. It was anonymous, but Riggleman rightfully assumed it was from a Russian, as that area of Brooklyn was home to one of the largest Moscow crime enclaves in the country. Max had fingered the CFO as the perpetrator as Riggleman's laptop was the only one that coughed up the "wheelbarrow" password.

The letter was clear and to the point.

Mr. Riggleman:

Three billion is quite a tidy sum to launder.
Congratulations!

To avoid discovery and continue your financial windfall, here's what you will do:

1. Set up an account in the Cayman Islands or rogue county of your choice.
2. Establish the charity "Friends of Central Park Wildlife."
3. Each January 1st for the next five years the "Friends of Central Park Wildlife" will donate Ten Million Dollars to the park for the express purpose of flying squirrel preservation. Instruct the Park to:

- a. Plant 500 trees of varied species each year for increased squirrel habitat
 - b. Establish a raccoon trap and release program to eliminate flying squirrel predators
 - c. Construct twenty-five FREE Peanut vending kiosks throughout the park for patrons to feed the squirrels
4. You will forward an announcement of this generous donation to the New York Times, Daily News, and Wall Street Journal to be printed on the day of the Macy's Day Parade.

Failure to adhere to these conditions will result in your incarceration by the proper authorities, or your elimination by your criminal associates.

MY choice.

Signed,

Rockoff and Bullwinsky

As the sun made a brief appearance through the dull grey clouds, Max said out loud to the remaining squirrels, "Fellas, the announcement should be in tomorrow's paper, and you'll be VERY happy!"

MARCH

Spring came early to New York. Already fifteen free peanut vending machines were up and running in Central Park. The New York Times reported seventy-three raccoons had been trapped and then released in New Jersey. The first grove of new Hackberry trees was planted across from the Shakespeare Garden.

Max had started a new company— “Trace and Erase”. He had enough money in the bank and didn’t really have to work, but he enjoyed the challenge. As a freelancer, he attempted to break into Government systems around the world. If he was successful, he would contact the proper officials, and depending on his mood, offer his services. Sometimes he got the assignment, sometimes he was threatened with arrest. But he was never arrested, because a little bad hacking publicity goes a long way.

Flying squirrel suicides dropped dramatically over the summer, as did power outages. Jerry the Flying Squirrel took wing from tree to tree, branch to branch--never letting on to his fellow tree toppers HE was the source of their improved lifestyle.

OCTOBER

Max leaned over the rail of his balcony and took in a long deep breath of the crisp cool-blue October air. The trees in Central Park were in full fall bloom. It was Columbus Day—one year since the Flying Squirrel had placed the Monopoly wheelbarrow on his doorstep. He took another deep breath and exhaled, then turned around, slid open the glass door and went back inside.

He was all set to watch his Rocky and Bullwinkle DVD when he heard a “chink”—something hitting against the glass sliding door. He looked out and there was the Flying Squirrel on the balcony rail, and next to him a smaller version of himself--with the same white “skunkian” mark down his back—a son or daughter? The pair stood on their hind legs, then sprung off the rail--soaring over Fifth Avenue and landing in a black walnut tree next to the sidewalk.

Max looked down. In front of the sliding door—TWO
Monopoly pieces: A Scotty Dog--and another wheelbarrow.

What the Hell?

Max put the pieces on the coffee table, sat down on the
couch, and started the DVD. On the screen Rocket J. Squirrel
soared thru the sky as Bullwinkle circled under him, then fell in
the water-filled tub. The sterned-voice announcer came
on— “WELLLLLLLLLL, last time our Heroes...” Max hit “pause”.

A SCOTTY dog...

Scott’s Lawn Products?

Scott Tissue?

George C. Scott?

NO...

Scotty-Scotty-Scot

SCOTLAND?

And a wheelbarrow...

Not farmers again...

What else do you use a wheelbarrow for?

Hauling bricks, cement...

Working in the yard...YARD...

SCOTLAND YARD

Jerry the Flying Squirrel was guiding him to break into to
SCOTLAND YARD!

Max grabbed the Monopoly pieces and raced two steps at a time up to the third floor...

...Five Days Gone

8:30pm INSIDE THE SISTINE CHAPEL

The eternal promise of NATURE's inherent goodness.

The Priest suddenly longed for the days he and the future Pope roamed the fields and hills surrounding Bologna...

He ached to splash in the mirror puddles left by spring rains on the cobbled streets...

To run in the morning sunshine thru the dew-covered vineyards...

To dream again...

1 John 5:21

"Little children, keep yourselves from idols"

Brother Giovanni closed his eyes—to rest for a minute he told himself, and was soon fast asleep...

July 8, 1998

Change of Seasons Game

I AM 38

I WANT TO LIVE

That's why I play the Change of Seasons game. Fall is the easiest, spring the hardest, although summer may prove to be my undoing. If I win each season's game, God keeps me alive, if not--well, I'm not sure.

Winter Change of Seasons is the easiest. All I have to do is catch a snowflake. On the tongue counts, in the hand is preferred--before it melts.

Spring Change of Seasons is the toughest. I call them "Maplecopters" --the whirly bird seeds of maple trees that float down like a backwards tornado. Some years I have to stand outside for hours on a windy day to catch one and wait--and wait--and none fall. As soon as I go inside--whoosh--down they come. The Maplecopters fly for a couple weeks--it always gets down to the last few days of the "season" before I catch one--but I always do.

Fall Change of Seasons is the most fun. My neighbor Wilbur has the tallest tree in town--a two-hundred-foot tulip tree. The Fall Change of Seasons Game is to catch a dying leaf. Sounds pretty simple. To make it challenging, I do it

blindfolded. It's easier than it sounds--a gust of wind knocks off the leaves, a few hit me in the face, and I grab.

Summer is the most delightful, and that's when it all started.

I AM TEN

Every summer when it was too hot and sticky in the city, my mother and I and younger sister Chrissie would go to my grandfather's farm in Pennsylvania. It was surrounded by cool woods near the Pennsylvania Grand Canyon. The farm had a pond you could swim in, with a little dock and diving board. It was muddy, so when you opened your eyes under water you couldn't see anything. On really hot days it was full of algae, but Chrissie and I didn't mind diving in and coming up with gobs of gunk on our faces--it was OUR pond.

Nearby was the Loyalrock Creek, where we had picnics with Grandpa's VFW buddies. The Loyalrock was so cold, you could only swim in it for ten minutes at a time. And it was so clear, you could see the bottom when you dove in, but no one had ever reached it. Legend had it the Susquehannock Indians threw their arrowheads from a successful deer hunt into the creek so the spirit of the deer would stay alive in the cold waters, and come back to provide game again. Like every other kid who swam in the Loyalrock, I tried to touch bottom and grab an Indian arrowhead, but never did.

Beside the creek were the fireflies, always *thousands of fireflies*, the other part of the Susquehannock legend. They usually showed up around July 4th, and flickered in the dusk for almost a month. Grandpa showed me how to catch them, and why it was important to do it the "Indian Way".

"You see," he said, "a lot of folks catch fireflies with a net, put them in a Mason Jar, throw in a little grass, and punch holes in the jar lid so the "lightning bugs" can breathe. Fireflies don't eat grass, and they're so distraught, they usually die in a

couple of hours. The Indians caught them by hand, and then released them.”

“How come?” I asked.

“The Indians believed the lights of the fireflies were spirits that showed the dead the way to the next life. If they *killed* a firefly, they might condemn an ancestor to roam the skies forever. If they *captured* a firefly but didn’t kill it, that spirit would reach the heavens, and then help the living Indians make it through another season. So, every summer, every Indian would catch a firefly with his bare hands and then release it.”

“What about the rest of the year? Fall, and winter, and spring? What did they do then, Grandpa?”

“I’m not sure”, he said, then paused, “but I bet they figured something out.”

So that’s how it started. Every year, I went down to Loyalrock Creek and caught a firefly. I’d keep my hand balled up tight so it couldn’t escape. I could feel it battering my palm. I could have sworn I heard the firefly screaming to get out, but it might have been the blue jays in the trees. I ran back to the farmhouse, opened up my fist in front of Grandpa’s face, and he would nod approval. The firefly would slap its wings, blink off and on a few times and fly away into the night.

I AM TWELVE

At some point, I wondered if Grandpa was pulling my leg about catching a firefly to make sure you live thru the summer. Then my sister almost drowned in the pond.

She was only ten, but was already a pretty good swimmer, and could even do backflips off the diving board at the pond. It was an unseasonably cool, gray, windy July afternoon. A summer storm was on the way. Grandpa, Mom, and I were

sitting in the white, painted Adirondack chairs next to the pond, watching Chrissie. She started a backflip and slipped a little. Her forehead clipped the board as she went in the water. We waited, but she didn't come up.

Mom started screaming.

Grandpa ran toward the pond and dove in.

I yelled at Mom, "Go call 9-1-1", and dove in after Grandpa.

I couldn't see anything in the murky, muddy water. Grandpa and I both went down and then came up for air once, twice, three times, without finding Chrissie. On Grandpa's fourth dive, he brought her up--by her ankles, and together we dragged her over to the edge of the pond and lifted her up onto the grass.

She was pale and lifeless.

We took turns pressing her chest and breathing into her lungs. It worked. She coughed, spit up water, and started to breathe, but her eyes stayed closed. The ambulance came and took her to the hospital, Grandpa and I riding in the back with her.

Mom followed in Grandpa's truck.

She was alive, but looked dead.

After we got home from the hospital that night I caught a firefly. I took it and showed it to Grandpa. Before it could fly away, he crushed it with his thumb and forefinger. "Catching a firefly won't help Chrissie."

I knew he was wrong. I went back to the pond, caught another firefly and let it go.

I AM FOURTEEN

Chrissie has been in a coma for two years. The doctors see no signs of recovery. Mom visits her every day. Grandpa passed away last summer. Before he died, I asked him again what the Susquehannock Indians did in the other three seasons to keep the Spirits and themselves alive.

That's when he explained the Change of Seasons Game.

He seemed embarrassed to tell me, because it sounded so silly, but then he said he had done it every year since he was twelve. Joseph Redfern, an Indian who worked with Grandpa at the Grand Canyon Lumber Company had told him the legend when they were kids, and Grandpa believed it and followed it.

His hand was shaking when he told me, "This spring I couldn't catch a Maplecopter".

Grandpa died a week later. The fireflies hadn't shown up yet.

I AM SIXTEEN

I've been playing the Change of Seasons Game for two years. Chrissie is still in a coma. Mom visits her three times a week. Each season I catch *two* fireflies, *two* tulip leaves, *two* snowflakes, *two* Maplecopters. One for me, one for Chrissie--hoping the extra spirits might bring her back to us. So far, it hasn't worked.

Grandpa's farm was sold to cousins with the understanding we'd still be able to visit for a week each July. This summer was hotter than usual. I hadn't swum in the pond since Chrissie's accident. To cool off, I'd go to the creek. I was at the VFW July 4th picnic on the grounds by the Loyalrock Creek and about to dive in when I heard the commotion.

There was a buzzing crowd by the small dock next to the main pavilion. A twelve-year-old girl visiting from New Jersey had touched the bottom of the creek and brought up what everyone was sure was an Indian arrowhead. When the excitement died down, an old farmer took a look and declared it was a sawtooth--likely from one of the mills upstream that had shut down in the 1870s.

Nonetheless, a swimmer had finally reached the bottom of Loyalrock creek.

And “treasure” had been found.

That night I couldn't get to sleep. The farmhouse had no air conditioning and the bedsheets were clammy from the humidity and my sweat. No matter which way I turned, they stuck to me. It was three o'clock and I was still wide awake. But it wasn't the heat, or the humidity, it was the creek. I was sure playing the Change of Seasons Game had kept *me* alive, but doubling up hadn't released Chrissie from her coma.

She needed something more--an Indian arrowhead.

I stayed awake all night. When the morning orange first glowed in the Eastern sky, I changed into my swimming trunks and went down to the creek. It hadn't cooled off much overnight, and it was deathly quiet. I jumped in off the dock and my splash broke the silence, like a burglar who breaks a window and hopes nobody heard it.

The water was freezing.

It would be even colder if I reached the bottom.

DIVE ONE

I took a huge breath, did my best Junior Life Saving pike dive, and headed down. It was still too dark to see in the clear water. I went as far as I could until my

ears began popping. I did a somersault and kicked back to the surface.

DIVE TWO

I took a *bigger* breath, did a better pike, and kicked harder. I pushed and pushed down and down. My chest felt like someone was tightening bungee cords around me, but I still headed down--and I *touch*ed it--I touched the bottom of Loyalrock creek! I scraped the bottom to grasp anything but got only sand. My eyes burned and my head spun as I stormed back up. I broke the surface and couldn't get any air. I swallowed I'm sure a gallon of water and momentarily went back under. Then I managed to get prone and flailed blindly toward the dock. I fumbled for the ladder, stumbled up, and flopped on the wood. I'm exhausted. I'm frozen. I can't do it again.

DIVE THREE

I'd been sitting on the dock shivering for maybe ten minutes when the blazing red sun started coming over the hill on the opposite side of the creek. I felt another chill, but it didn't go through me--it lingered, and then I started warming up. Bursts of heat flashed thru my chest and flowed down my arms and legs.

Suddenly I was in the water again.

I was heading down--with no effort, almost falling and floating. There was no pain in my lungs, no ache in my arms. Down and down I went with ease--until I touched the bottom again. I moved my hands around in the sand--nothing.

Then, I felt a hand on my right shoulder pushing me to the deepest part of the creek. I jerked around, but there was no one there. The invisible hand spun me back, kept moving me to the right, then pushed my hand down. It wasn't sand, but hard rock--and there it

was. I grabbed it--and now the hand was on my left heel, pushing me up-up-up until I literally flew out of the water and splashed down a couple of feet from the dock. My right hand was still tight around it.

I doggie paddled to the dock, climbed the ladder and collapsed.

I opened my fist--an arrowhead.

I AM TWENTY-SIX

Chrissie is married and has two beautiful children. Janelle is three and Edgar is five. I am teaching them the Change of Seasons Game. Since they live in Florida, the snowflake is a challenge, but they get one when they come north for Christmas. They catch the fireflies at Grandpa's farm in the summer, and a Palm Tree substitutes for a Tulip Tree in the fall. Instead of Maplecopters in the spring, they trap Orange Tree blossoms.

The doctors had no explanation for Chrissies' awakening, but she and I know. Three days after I placed the arrowhead in her hand, she awoke. When she got her bearings and realized she had missed four years, her first question was, "Where's Grandpa?"

I AM THIRTY-EIGHT

It is summer. I'm at Grandpa's farm. I have pancreatic cancer. This summer will be my last. Even though I've been getting weaker every month, I still win the Change of Seasons Game. I got the diagnosis right after I caught the tulip tree leaf in October. The next day it snowed six inches. There's no better fresh air than after the first real snowfall, and I caught a flake without any problem.

As always, the Maplecopter in spring was the toughest, but my niece Janelle was with me, and she caught two at the same

time. We both figured considering the circumstances, it would be OK for her to share the wealth.

The firefly is going to be a problem. I can barely get out of bed, and the morphine dreams take up most of my day.

It is hot. Janelle and Edgar help me get outside to sit in one of the white Adirondack chairs by the pond. I'd give anything to dive in the pond. Janelle does back flips off the diving board, just like her mother Chrissie. I panic when I hear a thud on one of her dives, but it's just the forty-year-old diving board creaking and croaking, "I'm tired, my time is coming--I'm going to break and fail one day."

Chrissie serves us dinner on the deck. Dusk descends. Edgar says, "There's a lot of fireflies tonight." Janelle still embraces the Change of Seasons Game. Edgar, enthusiastic at the beginning, now participates reluctantly. But the way he said, "There's a lot of fireflies tonight", I knew he was going to get one for me.

It is pitch black. There are thousands of fireflies. Chrissie cleans up the dishes. Edgar disappears. The rest of us go inside the house. Janelle gets a Scrabble game going. I am morphine-mad and can't concentrate. I have six vowels and a "C". "CIAO" is the only word that comes to me. Six points.

It is midnight. The fireflies are gone for the night. Edgar has not returned. Chrissie is worried. She wants to call the police. Janelle is winning the Scrabble game, and puts down a triple word/triple letter sixty-three pointer--without a "Q" or "Z".

It is two am. I am in a morphine dream in my bedroom, even though I shut down the drip hours ago. I hear a faint knock on my door. Edgar comes in. His right hand is clenched tight. He comes over to the bed. He puts his fist in front of my face, and opens his hand. It's a firefly.

It is not blinking.

It is dead.

“I’m sorry,” he says, and drops the firefly on the floor.

I am dreaming again. I’m in the cold, clear Loyalrock Creek, swimming toward the bottom. I see arrowheads, hundreds of them. My hand can’t reach them. My chest is aching as it screams for air. My eyes start closing as a hand on my shoulder pushes me toward the deepest part of the creek.

The water is getting colder, and the arrowheads are always just out of reach...

...Six Days Gone

8:59pm PRIVATE CHAMBERS OF POPE GREGORY XIII

The Tower Clock tolled Nine Bells as Cardinal Zinn re-entered the Pope's chambers.

"WELL?" blasted Gregory.

"I've looked everywhere, Your Holiness. Brother Giovanni is nowhere to be found."

The Pope turned his back on the Cardinal, paused, then said to no one, "Then we shall proceed." He turned again and directed, "The decree to change the calendar stands. At midnight it will be October 15th, 1582."

"Yes, Most Holy Father."

The Cardinal spun and hurried from the room, his Red Robe brushing the Bible on the lectern next to the Pope's desk. A clap of thunder rang at the same time he shut the mammoth wooden door.

Pope Gregory XIII pulled out the chair from his desk and sank down. He was exhausted. The Calendar JUMP had been the talk of Rome for almost a year, and finally, it was all but over.

Tonight, it was October 4th, 1582.

At midnight it would be October 15th.

Ten days would be gone, and the world would go on.

He closed his eyes and drifted back to his boyhood. He saw his friend, the Priest Giovanni Farisi laughing as they ran through the wheat fields. He remembered their youthful minds picking out Bible verses, imagining they were the actors in the Holy Plays.

Most of all, he relished the memory of their youthful visit to Rome, and the Sistine Chapel. They marveled at Michelangelo's ceiling, and his Last Judgement Masterpiece on the altar wall, and how his friend had told him, "Someday this will be MY church."

But that's not how it worked out. He, Ugo Boncompagni, ascended to the Church's highest calling. His friend, Giovanni Fabrisi, left behind to become a beloved, and vital Priest.

Gregory was almost asleep in the chair when he heard stirring to his left. He half opened his eyes to see the pages of his Bible turning. Odd, he thought, there had been a breeze from an oncoming storm, but the wind had died down.

The pages were flapping on their own in the stillness. As he rose, they stopped.

He looked. It was open to the Book of Hebrews. A verse was glowing red.

Hebrews 12:29

"for our God is a consuming fire"

A bolt of lightning lit up St. Peter's Cathedral outside the Pope's window, and a date flashed before the Pope's eyes.

He stumbled backwards, tried to grasp the arms of the chair, tripped on his robe, stumbled, and slammed down on the cold marble floor.

The clap of thunder caught up with the lightning flash, and rattled the thin glass windows of the Papal Chambers...

April 29, 2031

“Operation Zokor”

When she met with the recruiter from the Yellowstone Volcano Observatory at the Penn State University Geology Job Fair, Jana Capanatto thought western Wyoming was the last place she’d wind up. “You want me to go from Pennsylvania with family, four seasons, and parties to desert, mountains and near solitary confinement?” she asked the recruiter. “Yes”, the recruiter said. And it turns out “Yes”, it was.

Because Jana loved volcanos.

Yellowstone wasn’t as sexy as Fuji or Vesuvius, or as dramatic as Hawaii’s Kilauea, but it was a Supervolcano that if unleashed would change the face of the earth forever. Yellowstone National Park didn’t have a volcano—it WAS a volcano and now Jana would be standing at center stage.

TUESDAY 6am: YELLOWSTONE VOLCANO OBSERVATORY

“Anything happening?” asked Jim Calder.

Like Jana, Jim was an EQMT (Earthquake Monitoring Technician) and was there to relieve Jana, the acting “YVO” EQMT supervisor.

“A couple of 1.2’s, that’s about it”, replied Jana.

“Sounds like a quiet day,” said Jim. “I can finish the Denver Post crossword puzzle.”

“Don’t strain your brain.”

“What’s a seven-letter word for ‘common boundary’?” asked Jim.

“Abutted,” said Jana.

“A butt-head?”

“Yeah, you are,” thought Jana. “There’s also seven letters in *“asshole”*. She was glad she wasn’t dating him anymore. She spelled it out for him.

“‘A-b-u-t-t-e-d’ ABUTTED!”

“Hey, that fits,” said Jim. “Thanks.”

Jana swung around and bolted out of the chair in one motion, nearly knocking him over.

TUESDAY 6am: LARAMIE POWER PLANT, WHEATLAND, WYOMING

The Laramie Power Plant in Wheatland, Wyoming was operating full tilt and Will Pratt was the man in charge. He was a born and raised Wyoming Cowboy, grew up in Chugwater twenty miles down I-25, and still lived there. Twenty years back when the whole country went solar, the Laramie Plant was the first in the Plains to switch from coal.

Will had overseen the installation of millions of solar panels that now blanketed the Great Plains from Montana to Texas. In the 1860’s, Schuyler T. Pratt had been part of the first Texas to Montana cattle drive. Generations of Pratts had worked on the sprawling ranches and vast coal mines that transformed Wyoming. And now the Pratt family name was pioneering the solar revolution.

Will took a look around the massive Power Transmission Control Room. The power grid output monitor was bigger than the Jumbotron at Dallas’ Sunshine Power Stadium. It was three hundred and forty separate screens, each showing the

output to stations along the Laramie grid. The solar panels across the Plains beaming to Laramie sent power to one hundred million homes across the United States.

Will went back to his office for the first of his ten cups of workday coffee.

TUESDAY 6am: BLACK THUNDER COAL MINE, POWDER RIVER BASIN, WYOMING

Robert Lee was proud of his job. American didn't want the coal. China did. In twenty years, the U.S. had switched to all renewable power, 95% of it solar. China had refused to sign the Clean Climate Concordance, and that led to a simple arrangement. China needed coal; America needed cash. Thousands of Chinese Nationals had been assigned to work in mines across the U.S., ripping out seams and shipping it across the ocean.

Yes, Lee was proud of the work he was doing in the mines of Wyoming, but it had little to do with coal. All the coal at Powder River was surface-stripped mined. His fellow countrymen wondered why a nuclear physicist was part of the Black Thunder Team.

They just knew his job was important, else why would he be here?

TUESDAY 7am: YELLOWSTONE VOLCANO OBSERVATORY

Jana stood by her powder blue Prius in the parking lot as the sun started leaking thru the lodgepole pines on the hills. A Yellowstone sunrise was one of the reasons that even though she was the EQMT Supervisor and made up the schedule, she liked working the overnight shift. Her mind was blank in the reverie when the macadam moved underneath her feet.

She felt dizzy for a second, then ran back inside the building.

“What was that?” she yelled at Jim’s back. He jumped a little and then swung his seat around.

“A 4.7”, said Jim.

“That’s the biggest quake in the park in twenty years.”

“There’s something else,” said Jim. “The Central Location Monitor isn’t showing anything...”

“Meaning it originated *outside* the Park?”

“I don’t know--that’s above my pay grade.”

“I’ll check into it”, said Jana. “Keep me posted. I’ll be up for a while.”

She took a quick look at the printout. Something didn’t look right, but what? She went back outside to her car, walking across the biggest bomb in America.

Yellowstone National Park was a fabulous beauty, but it was also the world’s most dangerous volcano. Under the tourist-trancing geysers and soul-moving mountains was a quagmire of molten magma fifty miles long and fifteen miles wide. The best estimate was it was at least five miles deep. If Yellowstone ever let loose, it would blast enough debris and ash to cover Texas five feet deep.

The ash cloud would darken the sky and block the sun over North America for a year.

TUESDAY 7am: LARAMIE POWER PLANT

Will Pratt was sitting at his desk when he felt the shake. He saw the red light over his office doorway flashing. He calmly walked in double-time, to the Power Transmission Control Room. His office was less than fifty feet from the entrance. That gave operators just enough time to quickly assess the situation and prepare to report. Will punched in the door

code, waited for the beep, and pushed it open. Terry Kopan was at the door waiting.

“Sit rep,” barked Will. Once a Marine...

“4.7 on the Yellowstone on-line monitor”, said Kopan.

“4.7,” said Will, “that’s the biggest in...”

“Twenty years, sir.”

“Damage?”

“All transmission lines are operating,” replied Kopan. “An acre of solar panels near Crawford, Nebraska went down. We should have them back on line in an hour.”

“Very good, Kopan. Put a report together for the Department of Energy and copy me on it.”

“Yes, sir.”

Will walked back to his office and called his niece. He got voicemail. “You’ve reached Jana Capanatto, Active EQMT Supervisor at Yellowstone Volcano Observatory. Please leave a message, and remember, ‘Keep the Old Faithful’.”

“Cute”, thought Will. He left a message.

TUESDAY 8am: BLACK THUNDER COAL MINE

Robert Lee was in the red trailer near the abandoned mine. Big Brutus had shaken and shivered, but stood his ground. The sixteen-story coal shovel didn’t miss a beat as it ripped out part of a hillside a mile away. None of the coal operators suspected anything. Lee was pleased. A 4.7 earthquake.

Test One of “Operation Zokor” was a success.

TUESDAY 10pm: YELLOWSTONE VOLCANO OBSERVATORY

Before her shift, Jana checked her email and texts, and noticed the blinking light on her desk phone--a voicemail. Who calls a landline anymore? She listened to the message and called back her Uncle Will, hoping he’d still be up.

“Jana, how are you?”

“Fine--what’s shaking?” Uncle Will thought he was a ‘cool dude’, so she tried to speak his lingo.

“What’s shaking?” replied Will. “My power plant--that’s what’s shaking. A 4.7.”

“You felt it there? --any damage?” asked Jana.

“Minimal, but my guys tell me it *wasn’t* centered in Yellowstone.”

“You’re right,” said Jana. “From what we’ve found out, the center was the Powder River Basin--near the Black Thunder strip mines.”

“Did Big Brutus dump a load of coal or something?”

“Funny, Uncle Will. Our YVO teams across the region are trying to figure it out. If we come up with something you need to know, I’ll call you right away.”

“Thanks,” said Will. “How’s life treating you otherwise

“Same-old, same-old,” replied Jana.

“You’re too young for same-old, same-old--have some fun.”

“I’m trying, but for now my life is Volcano, Netflix, and stale Cheetos.” Jana suddenly froze. “Gotta go--I’ve got an alert.”

The floor felt as if it was still moving as she slammed down the phone and raced to the control room.

Kamil Ayeeda was on the board--the new kid’s hands were shaking.

“Kamil, talk to me.”

“4.9.”

“FOUR POINT NINE? Here in the park?”

“I can’t tell,” said Kamil.

“Isolate the data and get it to operations and the U.S. Geological Survey headquarters PRONTO.”

“Will do.”

“And Kamil,” said Jana,

“Yeah...”

“No need to panic,” said Jana. “Yet,” she thought.

Back in her office Jana peered at the 1987 10' x 10' black and white map of Wyoming on the west wall of the control room and located the Powder River Basin.

Yellowstone has always had periods of multiple earthquakes in short time periods. Years back, over 300 quakes were reported in one month, none over 2.9, and none did any damage. But there had never been consecutive days of quakes registering more than 4.5.

WEDNESDAY 6am: LARAMIE POWER PLANT

Will stood and looked around the Power Transmission Room. A 4.9--again, minimal damage, maximum panic. He knew broken solar panels meant no power generation. No power generation meant using the backup stored power. Backup stored power would last a month. After that, the grid across the country would be down.

If the quakes were centered in the Powder River Basin, it might be worth a two-hour trip up I-25 to see his old friend Jock Hannity.

WEDNESDAY 9am: BLACK THUNDER MINE

Robert Lee stared at the monitor. The drone was almost at the bottom of the five-mile shaft. He stared at the printout from the Yellowstone Volcano Observatory website that said 4.9, and then looked back at the monitor when he heard the drone hit the floor of the shaft. He activated the searchlight. He knew it had a range of eight hundred yards or so, and he saw nothing but black. The device had blown a hole big enough to drive Big Brutus through.

The rest of his crew and equipment were due tomorrow.

“Operation Zokor” was ready.

THURSDAY 2pm: ON I-25 NORTH

Will looked forward to seeing Jock Hannity again. When Jock was General Sales Manager for Black Thunder Coal, Will was the purchasing agent for the Laramie Power Plant. Over the years, the pair had enjoyed a lot of dinners and often too much whiskey. They became real friends, not just hand-shaking, back-slapping business buddies.

But now, Will wasn't buying coal, and Jock was a tour guide at the Durham Bison Ranch, outside Gillette, a few miles from the Black Thunder Coal Mine. Yes, Will wanted to see his old friend, but his stomach was queasy. Maybe it was the BLT he had at the diner in Glendo.

He glanced out the window of his F-150. On this stretch of I-25 you could still see the North Platte River, and right next to it the railroad tracks that once carried five-mile-long coal trains from the Powder River Basin to Laramie.

THURSDAY 4pm: HOLIDAY INN, BOZEMAN, MONTANA

Driving to Bozeman, Montana was ten times better than *flying* there thought Jana as she checked into the Holiday Inn. Her first flight to Wyoming--to start the job at Yellowstone--was Pittsburgh to Louisville to Chicago to Dallas to Denver to Bozeman. Seventeen hours, two lost suitcases, one blizzard and colicky twin babies in a shared taxi.

The Yellowstone Geologist-In-Charge had designated Bozeman as the go-to town for the emergency meeting. Even though it looked like the tremors were centered in the Powder River Basin, back to back 4.7+ quakes registered near Yellowstone was a concern. Bozeman was central to the consortium from the University of Wyoming, U.S. Geological Survey, University

of Utah Seismograph Stations, and Yellowstone. Plus, Montana State University was just down the street if they needed a lab or data backup.

After signing in, Jana drove toward the University area. There were enough bars near campus that she hoped to find one that had a friendly Pennsylvania-type band. She had the sudden urge to hear a polka. She didn't want to make it a late night, just late enough so she'd be too tired to review the data for the tenth time.

A fresh start with multiple sets of eyes should be able to figure out why two big quakes originated in a place where there shouldn't be any seismic activity.

THURSDAY 5pm: GILLETTE-CAMPBELL COUNTY AIRPORT

The Dassault Falcon 9X taxied off the runway into the private hangar owned by the Black Thunder Coal Company. When the plane was inside, the hangar door rolled shut. Lee greeted a trio of nuclear physicists as they deboarded the cockpit door. They bowed and greeted each other, then piled into a Lincoln Navigator and drove out thru the garage door at the back of the hangar.

As they left, the back ramp of the plane lowered. Twenty uniformed Chinese soldiers double-timed out and formed lines. A tractor trailer backed up to the rear of the plane. Another platoon of Chinese soldiers pushed a tarp-covered palette the size of a Humvee down the plane's ramp. A soldier manning a thirty-six-ton Taylor fork lift slid the huge tines under the palette, turned it a hundred and eighty degrees and gently laid it in the back of the semi. The soldiers followed.

One of them climbed in the cab, waited for the hangar door to slide open, and drove the rig towards the Wyoming Big Sky.

THURSDAY 6pm: JOCK HANNITY'S CABIN, DURHAM BISON RANCH

Supper was on the table when Will Pratt showed up at Jock Hannity's cabin.

"Oh, my," said Will as Jock opened the door. "What the hell smells--somebody die?"

"I love you, too," said Jock.

"What is *that*?" said Will looking at the table.

"Bean sprouts, bamboo shoots, broccoli, and cauliflower."

"No meat? --this is a Bison Ranch for God's sake!"

"Indeed, it is", replied Jock. "But for MY sake, this is a HEALTHY ranch. I gave up meat years ago. Never felt better."

"I'm in the wrong cabin," joked Will.

Jock smiled at his old friend. "Watch you don't trip on the yoga mat."

After dinner and "old times", the two friends sat on the cabin front porch and rocked in time to the crickets and frogs beginning their nightly serenade.

"So, what brings you to the Basin?" asked Jock. "The food?"

"The food was OK—and the beer helped."

"Always does."

Will stopped rocking for a second, then resumed. "Last two days we've had two big earthquakes register at the power plant. My niece Jana works at the Yellowstone Volcano Observatory and tells me they were the biggest recorded there in back to back days in more than twenty years, but they *weren't* centered in the park."

"So, you're not here for the good company?"

"I would be if I could find some!"

"Nice."

"Jana," continued Will, "says they figure the quakes were centered somewhere around here."

"That explains a lot." said Jock.

“How so?”

“The horses.” said Jock. “They know.”

“Splain, Lucy.”

Jock looked out toward the Big Sky setting sun.

“The horses got me up early Tuesday--they were awfully jumpy. They were banging around in their stalls and they wouldn't eat--a couple I couldn't get out of the barn. Then I felt the rumble--'bout seven o'clock or so.”

“That's about the time”, said Will.

“Then the same thing yesterday.”

“Why would horses get jumpy BEFORE an earthquake?”

“Well,” said Jock, “I put that to Tommy Redfoot. He's an old Cheyenne Indian who works here at the ranch. He's about ninety-five. His tribe was on horseback long before John Colter and all the trappers came through these parts.”

“So, what did he say?”

“Horses know,” replied Jock.

“Horses know? That's it?”

“That's it. But I got to thinking. The horses have been acting off for about a year, and I always wondered if it was the mine.”

“Big Brutus has been stripping coal at Black Thunder for thirty years,” said Will.

“True, but about a year ago I heard the Chinese brought in a bunch of new equipment, and another digging crew, and they were digging DOWN.”

Will rubbed his chin. “Didn't you tell me years ago there's no deep coal seams worth going after?”

“I did.”

“So what are the Chinese doing?”

“I don't know, but Sandy at the Diner up on 59 told me about a month ago she noticed a lot of new faces--scientist looking types--even a couple wearing lab coats.”

“Lab coats,” asked Will, “in a coal mine?” He reached in his right pants pocket and pulled out his cell phone. Great, he thought. No bars. “Where's your phone? I need to make a call.”

“On the wall, next to the fridge,” said Jock.

Will dialed his niece’s number and again got her voice mail.

“Hi, this is Jana Capanatto. I’m out of town. I’ll return Friday. Leave a message and I’ll get back to you as soon as I can.” Will noticed no cutesy “Keep the Old Faithful” tag line. He waited for the beep.

“Hey, Jana—Uncle Will. I’m here at my old friend Jock Hannity’s ranch in the Powder River Basin. I may have something for you on the quakes. Give me a call at this number.” He left Jock’s number and went back out on the porch.

He and Jock resumed rocking in rhythm as the purple sky fell to black.

FRIDAY 9am: BLACK THUNDER MINE

The five-mile descent took less than fifteen minutes. Lee was pleased with the morning report left for him in the red trailer. The device had been set up and pre-tested overnight. Preliminary data was positive. “Operation Zokor” was proceeding as planned. The elevator shuddered to a halt and Lee stepped into the cavern.

The final setup took less than twenty minutes. Twenty years of planning. Ten years of extracting American coal that was being stockpiled in China. Robert Lee took a final reading, set the timer, and went back up the elevator shaft.

Sitting on the floor of an abandoned copper mine in the Powder River Basin in Wyoming was seventy-five tons of nuclear power ready to rip a hole in the ground.

It would be a thousand times more powerful than Hiroshima.

The earth would shake like never before--all the way to Yellowstone.

FRIDAY 11am: ON U.S. 20-EAST NEAR OLD FAITHFUL

Jana turned off the radio in her Chevy Blazer. She wanted to think, clear her mind, and Black Sabbath was not a thinking girl's band.

The conference had gone as expected and lasted less than an hour.

“YES” back to back 4.5+ earthquakes was an anomaly, and a concern;

“YES” it made no sense the quakes were centered in the Powder River Basin;

“YES”, we'll continue to monitor and analyze the data;

‘YES-YES-YES’, but no answers--and no plan.

Even though she wasn't scheduled for duty until 11pm, Jana stopped at the Observatory for an update before heading home for a half-day's sleep. Mindy, the daylight EQMT reported a couple of 1.7's centered in the park, but nothing else. Jana stopped at her office to get the coffee travel mug she forgot to take to Bozeman and saw the blinking light on the desk phone. She listened and then called the number.

Uncle Will ran down what Jock had learned about the Chinese. Jana figured she was up anyway and probably couldn't sleep. She might as well make the five-hour drive to Gillette and see for herself. She made arrangements to have her shift covered and got back in the Blazer, pulled a Rolling Stones CD out of the glove compartment and headed back out on 20-EAST.

Ahead of her in the blue Wyoming sky she could see the silver dot of a plane reflecting the bright sun.

FRIDAY Noon: GILLETTE-CAMPBELL COUNTY AIRPORT

They started arriving at noon. The Gillette-Campbell County Airport wasn't big, but the runways were long enough to accommodate the mammoth planes.

It was a precision dance the Chinese Central Ballet Troupe would have envied. Every half hour an Airbus A380 landed, loaded up 750 Chinese Nationals, refueled, then took off as the next Airbus approached for landing. By four o'clock, the entire Black Thunder Mine workforce of over 6,000 was in the air, heading home to China.

Two thousand cars and trucks were left in the parking lot, on the tarmac, and on the approach road leading to the airport, clear back to Wyoming Route 333.

Robert Lee was the sole passenger on the Dassault Falcon 9X on a flight east to Washington, D.C.

FRIDAY 4pm: JOCK HANNITY'S CABIN, DURHAM BISON RANCH

Will opened the door for Jana just as Jock was hanging up the phone.

"That was Louie at the airport," said Jock to Will while nodding at Jana. "He thinks the last of them is gone."

"Is he talking about those Jumbo Jets?" asked Jana.

"Yeah," said Will. "Jana--my buddy Jock Hannity. Jock--my favorite niece Jana Cappanato. So what do the Yellowstone folks think about the quakes?"

"They're stumped," said Jana. "There's a bunch of very bright people in the consortium, but the meeting this morning was mostly blank stares and shrugs. I saw the planes on my way in. What's with that?"

“It’s the Chinese Nationals from the Black Thunder Mine”, said Jock. “Louie said there were eight flights in and out. He figures about 750-800 left on each plane.”

“That’s over 6000 people”, said Will. “And nobody knew about this in advance?”

“Louie said there was no notification or flight plans filed. They all came from a private Chinese fleet based in Vancouver. The tower got wind half an hour before the first plane landed.”

Will flopped into a vintage leather sofa. “That can’t be a coincidence.”

“What?” asked Jock.

“Massive evacuation and two earthquakes from a spot...”

“...that’s not on a fault line,” finished Jana. “We need to go to the mine.”

FRIDAY 6pm: DASSAULT FALCON 9X OVER WHEELING, WEST VIRGINIA

The stewardess nudged Robert Lee’s arm. “Sir, we’ll be landing in Washington in fifteen minutes.”

He was half asleep and startled himself *and* the stewardess as he jerked and shouted out “AAAGHH”.

“Sorry,” he said as she jumped back.

“That’s quite all right, sir.” She smiled and added, “We’ll need you to put on your seat belt.”

“Certainly,” said Robert Lee.

He would miss America; especially the women. Even the Chinese Nationals had quickly adopted Western fashion.

He watched the stewardess as she sauntered back to the front of the plane.

Robert Lee fastened his seat belt, and dozed off again.

FRIDAY 6pm: BLACK THUNDER MINE

“This is creepy,” said Will. “There’s nobody here.”

Jock, Jana, and Will stood under Big Brutus, the six-story tall coal shovel. It had half a load of Wyoming’s finest Black Gold waiting to be dumped in a coal truck.

The main gate guardhouse had been empty. The gate was open, and they had driven Jock’s Jeep right to the massive open pit.

“We need to get out of here,” said Jock. “I don’t think I have any Cheyenne Indian blood, but I bet the horses back at the ranch are mighty jumpy.”

“There’s something here--I KNOW it,” said Jana.

“It’s gonna get dark soon,” said Will. “We can come back in the morning.”

FRIDAY 7pm: DULLES INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT, WASHINGTON, D.C.

The jet landed at a private field at Dulles. A limo *and* his favorite meal were waiting for Robert Lee on the tarmac. He got in and they headed toward the Chinese Embassy just off Connecticut Avenue. Lee enjoyed the chicken enchiladas and French onion soup on the way. It was still rush hour in D.C. and it took them over an hour to reach the embassy.

When he arrived, he met with two senior Party members to review the project. They were very pleased. The official line on the massive evacuation from Powder River would be China was signing on to the Clean Climate Concordance and would *gradually* be converting all coal power plants to renewable energy by the end of the decade.

The meeting ended with a toast to “Operation Zokor.”

Robert Lee retired to his room and turned on the three by six-foot flat screen. He wanted to enjoy his last night in America. He couldn't decide between "The China Syndrome" or "The Manchurian Candidate".

He settled for CNN, falling asleep during the Joe Kennedy the IV show.

SATURDAY 8am: BLACK THUNDER MINE

The Black Thunder Mine complex was vast, so Jock suggested exploring it on horseback. He loaded up a trio of quarter horses. He figured they'd be easier to maneuver than a Jeep on the rocky, coal-strewn terrain. When they got to the mine, all three horses were jumpy coming out of the trailer.

"They know," said Jock.

"What?" asked Jana.

"The horses," said Will. "An old Cheyenne Indian told Jock horses instinctively know when something's not right in the universe."

"So do I," said Jana. "Let's get going."

They rode the perimeter of the mine for about an hour, seeing and hearing nothing--just the wind slapping the cable lines hanging from the idle big shovels. Then Jock spotted the tracks.

At first, it just looked like a swarm of ATV tracks--kids on a Saturday night joyride. Jock got off his horse for a closer look. The tracks were a couple of inches deep, eight feet apart, and each track about two feet wide. They followed them, and about a mile later they saw a red construction trailer--in the middle of nowhere. When they rode up, they saw the tracks continue around the back of the trailer and down a slope.

Jana said, "Let's look inside the trailer first."

Will pried open the locked door with his Marine Ka-Bar knife. He was the first inside and said, "This makes no sense at all." The trailer was full of shredded paper at least a foot deep on the floor. Next to the only window was a blueprint desk; beside that an industrial strength shredder. Nothing else was in the trailer, not even a chair.

"Somebody was in a hurry," said Jana as she kicked at the paper of the floor and sent the confetti flying, a shower of it landing on the two men.

"Will," said Jock laughing, "reminds me of that Coal Convention in New Orleans."

"You never did tell me how you got all those beads," said Will.

"GUYS," said Jana. "This is serious."

"We know," said Will. "Let's see where those tracks go."

They remounted the horses and followed the tracks behind the trailer down a steep slope for about three hundred yards when Jock pulled up his horse.

"Well, I'll be."

"Well, I'll be WHAT?" asked Jana.

"The Deserter's Gold Mine."

"Deserter's Gold Mine?" she asked.

"Halfway up that steep hill over there on the right," said Jock.

"Right next to the sage brush. There's timbers where timbers shouldn't be."

"I don't see them," said Will.

"Me neither," echoed Jana.

"Don't worry," said Jock. "They're there."

"What the hell's the 'Deserter's Gold Mine'?" asked Will.

Jock told the story as they followed the tracks up the hill.

"Supposedly, two brothers, Allen and Buford Northbrush were deserters from Custer's Cavalry and took off to look for gold in the Black Hills. Their luck ran out in Deadwood, but in a poker game they got wind of an old tale about an Indian gold mine in the Powder River Basin. The story wasn't that far off, except it

wasn't gold. The Cheyenne Indians had been working copper mines in these parts for hundreds of years before the white man showed up. By the time the Northbrush boys got to the area, the mine had been long abandoned."

"So what happened to them?" asked Jana.

"Well, the story goes the mine was near sacred Indian burial ground. The Cheyenne caught the brothers digging about a mile down, scalped them, then sealed up the mine."

"I see the timbers now," said Jana.

The tracks led right up to the abandoned mine.

The hill got too steep for the horses, so they dismounted, tied the horses to sagebrush, and clamored on foot up the rest of the slope. The tracks ended at a monstrous double steel door—big enough to drive a truck through. There was no handle on either door.

"The doors must be electronic," said Jana, "or magnetic."

"Well, we'll see about that," said Jock.

He went back down to where the horses were tied and grabbed a crowbar from his pack saddle.

Jock and Will tried for ten minutes to budge the big steel doors, but couldn't even get the bar wedged in the gap. Jock finally threw the crowbar and it clanged off the metal, echoing up and down the hills.

"Looks like this is where the trail ends," said Will.

"Looks that way," said Jock.

"Au contraire," said Jana. "This is where it begins. We better tell somebody about this."

"Yeah," said Will. "But who?"

"I'll start with the Yellowstone Consortium," said Jana, "and maybe the Department of Energy. Jock, you might want to call the local sheriff or Wyoming State Troopers."

When they got back to the ranch, Jana grabbed some of Jock's trail mix and a couple bottles of water for the five-hour drive back to Yellowstone.

Will Pratt hopped on 59-South back to Wheatland.

Jock Hannity noticed the horses had calmed down a little when he put them back in their stalls.

ONE WEEK LATER--FRIDAY

There had been no further quakes centered in the Powder River Basin.

The Volcano Consortium had made a preliminary survey of the area and discovered nothing unusual.

An Army Corps of Engineers crew was due in next Tuesday to examine the mine shaft.

MONDAY 6am: CHINA UNITED COAL COMPANY, BEIJING, CHINA

Robert Lee looked up at the wall of clocks at the China United Coal Company. His watch was still on Wyoming time. The final phase of "Operation Zokor" would start today--in less than an hour.

MONDAY 7am:

Yellowstone Volcano Observatory: Jana rarely fell asleep on the overnight shift, but all night she found herself dozing off and then jerking herself awake. She was drifting again, but this time the jerk came from the floor. She looked at the seismograph monitor: "9.6"

Laramie Power Plant: Will Pratt raced to the Transmission Control Room. Terry Kopan already had the door open. “9.6, sir.” Will winced. “Oh, God.”

Durham Bison Ranch: The rumble woke up Jock Hannity, and knocked the coffee pot off the pot belly stove. He could hear the horses stomping in their stalls. “The horses,” he said, “they know.”

MONDAY 3pm:

Yellowstone National Park: Old Faithful is erupting every four minutes.

Laramie Power Plant: Over 15% of the solar panels are knocked out, but the Power Grid is holding. Plants in Montana, Nebraska and Texas report minor interruptions.

Durham Bison Ranch: Four dozen horses break out of their stalls and herd to the Thunder Basin National Grasslands. The bison stay put like they’ve seen it all before.

TUESDAY 8am: FIRST AFTERSHOCK: “9.8”

Yellowstone National Park: The National Park Service orders a complete evacuation of everyone in a 150 mile radius. In the southwest corner of the park, lava is flowing out all over Yellowstone at twenty miles an hour—faster than Mt. St. Helens.

Laramie Power Plant: 35% of the Laramie solar panels are now out of commission. Every available operator is called in to the plant.

Black Thunder Mine: The six-story coal shovel “Big Brutus” disappears as the ground opens up.

WEDNESDAY 10am: SECOND AFTERSHOCK: “9.9”

Yellowstone National Park: Highest seismic reading ever recorded—Yellowstone Caldera Dome explodes—five hundred cubic miles of debris blasted in the air—entire park on fire—ash plume rises twenty miles—moving east at seventy-five miles an hour.

WEDNESDAY 3pm:

Laramie Power Plant: 90% of the Solar Panels in six states that supply the Laramie Power Plant are covered with volcanic ash. Operators switching to back up sources; best guess is a three-month supply of power for the country.

THURSDAY 6am: YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK:

Sunrise today is at 6:07, except there will be no light on the mountains, and lakes.

There are no trees.

A layer of ash will block the sun.

It will stay night all day long in Yellowstone,

Denver,

Chicago,

Dallas,

Miami,

New York,

Los Angeles,

San Francisco, and even

West Quoddy Head, Maine—the furthest point east in the country.

A blanket of ash will block the sun for the next six months across America.

No sun

No solar power

SATURDAY 10am:

Jana Capanotto is on a train heading to Chicago on her way back to Pennsylvania.

Jock Hannity is bringing in firewood for the pot belly stove and filling his kerosene lanterns.

Will Pratt is sitting in his dark office, chugging a warm Coors, on the phone to China.

Robert Lee is on the phone with his Beijing broker, buying 100,000 shares of China United Coal.

ONE YEAR LATER

JAKARTA, INDONESIA:

Jana Capanatto stands outside the Jakarta Hilton waiting for her ride to the airport. Her bags and equipment are already on their way to the Krakatoa Volcano Observatory. She's very nervous about her new job as head of the Indonesia Earthquake Monitoring Technicians.

She's more nervous about the six-hour flight in a one engine prop taking her to Lampung Province.

The Uber driver is late. Jana begins tapping her foot, and wonders why she ever stopped smoking.

DURHAM BISON RANCH, NEAR GILLETTE, WYOMING:

Jock Hannity sloughs up the steps and flops down on the front porch rocker and lets out a long "Whew". He is too tired to go inside and grab a beer. Jock and everyone else at the Durham Bison Ranch are working double overtime. The three feet of volcanic ash deposited on the ground had thrown off the buffalo's biological clock. It wasn't cold, but to the shaggy beasts it looked like snow, and the hormones were set in motion. Roaming free in the Black Thunder Grasslands and free to their own devices and not the Ranch's Planned

Parenthood, nearly every cow had given birth, tripling the size of the herd.

Jock rocks and wonders: “If the horses KNEW, why didn’t they tell anybody?”

HOHHOT, CAPITOL OF INNER MONGOLIA AUTONOMOUS REGION, NORTHWEST CHINA:

The meeting with China United Coal had gone well. As National Purchasing Agent for the fledgling American Power Company, Will Pratt is in China with U.S. diplomats to negotiate coal purchases. U.S. ambassador David Kissinger tells him not to worry about the U.S.-China balance of trade deficit.

Ash from the Yellowstone Volcano eruption had covered the Great Plains and shut down every solar panel in the region. The sun was blocked for six months. The average global temperature dropped three degrees. The CO2 threat to the planet was temporarily on hold. Power plant operators retrofitted to begin using coal.

Coal was King again.

For ten years, the Chinese had been depleting American reserves, shipping the coal to Asia, stockpiling the new Black Gold across the country. They also had all their mines operating at full capacity. China now had a huge surplus, and was of course willing to sell American coal back to the Americans--at a price.

Will Pratt is back in his hotel room dining on a room-service imported American Bison burger.

HONG KONG HARBOR:

Robert Lee stands at the bow of the “John L. Lewis” as it gets underway. This morning he sold his stake in the American

Power Company for three trillion dollars. Named for the legendary American Coal Union President, the “John L. Lewis”, at eight hundred fifty-two feet it’s the world’s largest yacht--befitting a man who today replaced Mark Newcomb III as the richest man on earth.

Lee remains the majority stockholder in China United Coal, now supplier of 90% of the coal heading to the energy-starved United States.

He goes up to his state room and picks up a book he bought on a weekend trip to Caspar, Wyoming and returns to the top deck. The book is a biography of Robert E. Lee, the Confederate General who lost to the United States in the American Civil War.

The Robert Lee on a billion-dollar yacht heading toward the setting sun in the South China Sea won his battle with America.

He sits back in a deck chair, puts on his sunglasses, opens the book, and smiles as a young, shapely woman brings him his drink...

...Seven Days Gone

9:15pm INSIDE THE SISTINE CHAPEL

The thunder from the oncoming storm rumbled thru the Chapel. The figures on the ceiling continued their slow-motion dance.

YES, reflected the Priest, in the future money will still rule everything--perhaps even his beloved Church.

YES, the earth was lurching toward destruction, with Man leading the way.

But despite it all, mankind would survive April 29, 2031, and all the other days from the future he had witnessed.

A flash of lightning lit up the lectern, and the pages flipped furiously.

I Corinthians 13:7

"Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things"

August 15, 2027

Grandpa's Phone Book

THE ATTIC

Grandpa's attic was a mess. That was no surprise. Grandma passed ten years before he did, and in the years after, he let the house go to pot. Since I was the only living relative still in town, I got stuck with cleaning it out when Grandpa died. I would do all the work, then my three aunts, two uncles, and twelve cousins would swoop into town, pick out what they wanted, and collect the money when the house was sold. Or maybe they'd just have the lawyers send them a check. Anyway, I had a house to clean out, and the attic seemed like the best place to start.

A nice, steady, spring rain on the roof would have been wonderful. But it was summer—by 9am it was already 92 degrees outside and probably 130 in the attic. It was an old house, so the roof only had a small vent on each side. There was no electricity for a fan. The squirrel guard on the north side was missing.

Great.

I took my first look around the attic. How much could I get rid of without the rest of the clan finding out and still be true to Grandpa's legacy? *He* wouldn't care if I sent everything to Goodwill, but *I* would, and *they* might. His Lionel Train set I could give to Ralph Ciambotto over on Seabay Street. Ralph

had a full platform set up in his basement and always invited all the neighborhood kids over around Christmas. The dusty Dickens books I could donate to the library--although I might keep "David Copperfield" for myself.

My grandmother's wedding dress would be a problem. My mother had worn it when she and Dad tied the knot. It had been too big for my wife Tracey to wear when we got married, and way too small for her when we got divorced.

Before Grandma died, she had started to sort through things, putting everything in boxes. Lots and lots of boxes. Unfortunately, most of them were unmarked as to the contents. It would have been easier to sort through everything if she had left everything out in the open. But that wasn't Grandma. This was a woman who never labeled the jars of tomatoes she canned. You had to guess the year it was processed, and hope botulism wasn't the end result.

THE BOXES

So there I was, surrounded by boxes, the temperature rising (*never mind the "Heat Index"*), and nobody to help me but me.

Where to start?

If you're going to begin a big project like going through an attic's life--you need a little warm up time. Something simple and easy. I looked around for a box of old clothes to check out. I couldn't find any. Grandma must have sent them to the church for the annual rummage sale.

There was no big box of photos to go through. All the old family pictures were already in books downstairs or strewn about the country with the aunts, uncles and cousins.

Where to start?

Then I saw the phone book.

GRANDPA'S PHONE BOOK

A phone book's always a good place to lose yourself. If it's old enough, it has pizazzy ads for all the businesses that are no longer around—butcher shops, camera stores, haberdasheries. If it's *really* old, it may have the NAME of the phone exchange--Juniper was ours--JUniper 588-0945—before they switched to all numbers. (*Why is it you can remember phone numbers from childhood, but can't remember what you had for breakfast?*)

This phone book was *very* old--from the year Grandma and Grandpa were married.

First thing I noticed--it wasn't dusty or musty--like somebody had recently wiped it off before looking at it. I opened it up. There were a lot of names underlined in red crayon--most of the names I knew from Grandpa's stories, or people I remembered from my childhood.

THE NAMES

"Carter, Jerome M.D." --he had delivered my father, mother, and also me. He was still practicing when I was in high school.

"Masterson, Bill" --the lawyer that handled my Mom and Dad's divorce, then moved to Tulsa--with my mother. Maybe I'll send Mom's wedding dress to *him*.

"Smithers, Mason" --"No Neck" Smithers--Grandpa's best friend from high school, and the high school football coach for forty years.

"Dumbrosky, Ernst" --"Sparky" --the family plumber (but *NOT* an electrician!)

I must have spent an hour looking through the red underlined names and thought about what each one of them must have

meant to Grandpa. I knew almost everyone in the book who had been a part of his life. It was a good way to start the attic cleanup.

I was near the end--the "W's", when I came across a name that was *circled*--in *blue*. All the other names had been *underlined* in red--this one was *circled*--in blue. It was a name I didn't recognize.

"*Watson, T*" --T. Watson.

"T. WATSON"

Why was this name *circled*--in *blue*, when all the others were *underlined* in *red*? I had never heard Grandpa mention anyone named "T. Watson". Was it "Thomas", "Terry", "Thad"? And *WHEN* had it been circled? Years ago? Last month before he died?

For the second time in the day, I had no idea where to start.

THE PHOTO

It was getting hot in the attic, and I needed a lemonade break, so I started down the steps to get something to drink, when I noticed two small boxes tucked way back under the south eave. They had green Magic Marker writing on them. Maybe Grandma had started to categorize some things after all. I decided to take a look.

The larger box had on the side "*Erma Zinnower*"; Grandma's maiden name--"*Personal*". The smaller box said "*George's Stuff*" -- "George" --that was Grandpa. I pulled his box out from under the eave.

The "*George's Stuff*" box had all the usual items you'd expect to find that people keep "for the next generation" that nobody, including the owner, really wants. Third grade report cards, sixth grade autobiography--"*My Life: So Far, So Good*",

(complete with stick figure pictures), original Social Security card, draft card, birthday cards from the grandkids. Not much else of interest, except at the very bottom--I found a 3"x3" black and white photo.

"ME AND T."

It was a standard Kodak Brownie Starflash picture--of a young Grandpa in swimming trunks, his arm around the waist of a stunning dark-haired girl in a bikini--*not* Grandma. Both looked to be in their early twenties. Both were smiling. The girl's left arm was draped over Grandpa's shoulder. I turned over the picture. On the back, written in pencil --"*Me and T.-- Fourth of July, 1957*" --the summer before he and Grandma got married.

I suddenly realized again how hot it was. I was getting woozy, and decided now's a good time for that lemonade break, and my growling stomach said "FOOD".

THE DINER

The lunch special on the board at Jake's Diner was a BLT, Fries, Applesauce, and a Drink. I sat on my usual stool at the counter and Cindy ordered *my* usual lunch--Grilled Cheese, Chips, and Fruit Cocktail. (*Why is there never any booze in a fruit cocktail?*) I got there between the regular breakfast and lunch crowds, so I had a little more time to think alone without the "Hey, what's happenin' interruptions from friends and acquaintances. I was thinking about Grandpa's Phone Book while the Grilled Cheese was grilling.

Who was "T. Watson"? And what part did she play in Grandpa's, *and maybe Grandma's* life? And, was it really any of my business? I had nothing to gain, and hopefully no one to hurt--but I *needed* to find out who this "T. Watson" was.

Where would I start? The answer was right behind me.

THE PHONE BOOTH

It hadn't occurred to me to check a current phone book to see if "T. Watson" was still in town. Lucky for me, Jake Wessells, the owner of the Diner, refused to modernize. Gravy was still gravy, pie still came with *TWO* scoops of ice cream, and the phone booth, with a phone book hanging from a metal chain, was still in the corner by the restroom. The phone hadn't worked in three years, but Jake always put in the latest phone book anyway.

I opened it, went to the "W's", and there it was.

"*Watson, T.*" --425 Maple Street." And the phone number. I took out my cell phone, started to punch it in, and then stopped. Did I want to do this? Just in time, Cindy showed up with my grilled cheese sandwich.

I put the phone away.

THE GRAND NIECE

I finished up the fruit cocktail, paid Cindy at the cash register, and left to go back to my task in the attic. I started up the car, and in a few minutes found myself not back at the house on Sweeney Avenue, but on Maple Street--in the 400 block. I slowed down. There it was on the other side of the street--425 Maple. Home of one "*T. Watson*". There was a woman in her thirties outside in the yard by the front walk, watering the day lilies. I parked, got out of the car, and crossed the street.

"Excuse me", I said, and the woman looked up. "Can you tell me if a 'T. Watson' lives here?"

The woman looked puzzled at first and said, "Well, I'm T. Watson—*Theresa*--who's asking?"

"Well, the person I'm looking for would be a lot older."

"Oh", she said. "You must mean my great Aunt *Thelma*--my grandfather was her sister."

"Does she still live here?"

“No, not anymore”, she answered, “and you still haven’t told me who’s asking.”

I gave her my name, but I wasn’t sure how much else I should tell her, so I said, “She’s an old family friend. My Grandpa lived over on Sweeney Avenue before he passed away last month, and my Aunt Ruth asked me to get in touch with her to see how’s she’s doing.”

Pretty shaky, but hopefully good enough.

“Oh--OK. I’m sorry about your Grandpa. Aunt Thelma’s living in the Riverside Nursing Home over on Washington Street. She’s been there a couple of years. She wanted to keep the house in the family, so I moved back from Chicago about a year ago to try and keep the place up.”

“Well, you’ve done a good job--the house looks nice. Sorry to bother you.”

“No problem”, she said.

I turned away and re-crossed the street. When I started the car, I glanced back and noticed Theresa Watson was trying not to let me see that *she* was glancing back at *me*. The water from the hose was landing on the sidewalk, not the flowers.

THERESA

It took me three weekends to go through everything in Grandpa’s attic and the rest of the house. Soon the aunts, uncles and cousins would descend en masse to take what they wanted. I could then start the process of selling the house. By this time, I had put aside any thoughts of “T. Watson”.

Until Theresa stopped by the diner.

“Hey, there”, she said as she sat down beside me and ordered today’s special--Liver and Onions, Mixed Vegetables, Mashed Potatoes and Gravy and Cole Slaw. (*Cole Slaw with Liver??*)

Really, Jake?) I was about done with my usual. The grilled cheese was a little soggy today.

“Hi,” I said, “how’s your Aunt Thelma doing?”

“Not so good really, I mean--she’s 92, and the doctor says she’s just wearing out.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Yeah, me too--she’s a grand old lady”. She paused for a second, and then said, “I don’t mean to be nosy, (*that’s what they ALL say*) but I’ve been wondering--you said Aunt Thelma was an old friend of your family, but I asked my Dad and my Aunt Ida and they don’t remember Aunt Thelma ever mentioning any friends on Sweeney Avenue. Is there a story somewhere?”

I finished up the fruit cocktail, and was getting antsy for the check when I heard myself asking Cindy for a piece of Blueberry Pie--with *three* scoops of Vanilla.

“Well,” I said. “I’m not sure if there’s a story or not—I’ve been cleaning out my Grandpa’s house, and I came across an old photo in the attic.”

I told her about the picture, what was written on the *back* of it, Grandpa’s Phone Book and her Great Aunt’s name being circled in blue.

“Wow,” said Theresa. “That might explain something.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well,” she said, “We always wondered why Aunt Thelma never married. She was funny. She was smart. She was just a very likeable, loveable lady--a “Full of Life” kind of person. But when we kidded her and asked why she never married, she clammed up and always said ‘some stories are best left untold’--and that was that.”

“Well,” I said, “for all I know, Grandpa was faithful and true and loved Grandma. He never mentioned any other girl in his life. He adored her.”

“And that’s the way it should be,” said Theresa. “What was your Grandpa’s name?”

“George.”

“George--I never heard Aunt Thelma mention that name either, although she loved the cartoon ‘George of the Jungle!’”

“Watch out for that treeeeeeee!” I said too loudly as a number of heads in the diner turned.

Theresa was laughing, but then said, “I guess we’ll never know the story.”

“If there is one,” I said.

I finished my pie and ice cream. Theresa’s Special of the Day came. I left a tip for Cindy, got up, paid my bill at the counter and went back to Sweeney Avenue.

Well, almost.

THELMA WATSON

I had to know--*was* there a story?

I drove to the Riverside Nursing Home. They told me Thelma Watson was in 223. I found the room and lightly knocked on the door, but didn’t get a reply. The door was ajar a couple inches, so I slowly pushed it open. Thelma was sitting in a wheel chair next to the bed. I started to say “hello”, but saw she was sleeping, so I turned to go. Then out of the corner of my eye, I caught a glimpse of Grandpa’s picture on the table right by the door.

It was a newspaper clipping of his obituary. I backed out of the room, pulled the door closed and went to my car. As I got in, I saw Theresa pull up and park a couple of rows away.

I don’t think she saw me, but I ducked down in my seat, waited until she was inside, and drove home.

OBITUARY

Three days later I happened to glance at the death notices at the bottom of the newspaper's front page, and there it was-- "Thelma Watson, 92". The obituary on page six noted her long career as an executive secretary, organist at the First Presbyterian Church, and lifelong member of the Old English Quilt Society. She was survived by a brother, six nieces and nephews, and 14 great nieces and nephews.

THE LETTER

A week or so went by. I was having lunch at the diner when Theresa Watson came in and sat down on the empty stool beside me.

"Hey", I said.

"Hi--I was hoping you would be here", she said.

My usual had just arrived. The grilled cheese looked extra soggy today.

"Nice to see you--I'm sorry about your Aunt Thelma."

"That's why I'm here," she said. "I've been going through the all her things at the nursing home. I saw the clipping she had of your Grandpa's obituary. Then I came across something else. I don't know what to do with it."

She opened her purse and pulled out an envelope. She looked at it for a moment, and then handed it to me, half holding on to it. It was an unopened letter addressed to "Miss Thelma Watson, 425 Maple St". The return name at the top left was Grandpa's with the Sweeney Avenue address. I could barely make out the faded postmark, but it looked like "November 7th 1957".

"Wow", I said. "November 7th. My Grandpa sent this letter to your Great Aunt Thelma about two weeks before he and my Grandmother got married."

I heard Theresa give a slight, startled breath.

“Oh, my,” she said.

I handed the letter back to her, but she refused to take it.

“NO”, you keep it--I’m afraid I’d want to open it and read it. I don’t think I should do that.”

She picked up her purse, spun around on her stool, stood up, turned around and put her hand on my shoulder for a moment and left Jake’s Diner.

I finished up my fruit cocktail, paid Cindy at the counter, and went back to Grandpa’s house.

GRANDPA’S PHONE BOOK

I went up to the attic, and opened Grandpa’s Phone Book to the page with “*Watson, T.*” circled in blue. I placed the unopened letter in the phone book, put the book in the “*Gary’s Stuff*” box, sealed up the box with duct tape, and went back downstairs...

...**Eight Days Gone**

9:59pm OUTSIDE THE SISTINE CHAPEL

The Tower Clock clanged Ten Bells as Cardinal Zinn re-entered the Sistine Chapel. He shook the water off his Red Robe from the rain that had started falling. A lightning flash lit up the altar.

He saw the Priest at the lectern, both his hands holding the Bible above his head.

Tiny streams of water were falling from cracks in the ceiling near Ezekiel's Chariot of Fire.

"Brother Giovanni," shouted the Cardinal. "I find you at last. I've been looking all over for you,"

The Priest saw him approaching from the rear of the Chapel.

"Your Eminence," replied the Priest as he bowed, "I've been here since early morning."

"No matter," said the Cardinal as another flash splashed stained glass color on the floor. The thunder crack came soon after. The storm was getting closer.

"The Pope was awaiting your assessment," he continued, "but decided the late hour forced his hand. He's going forward with the calendar JUMP as planned."

"It's the right decision," said the Priest, "in spite of all I've witnessed here tonight in this Holy Place." He placed the Bible back down on the lectern.

Brother Giovanni proceeded to tell Cardinal Zinn about the turning Bible pages, the glowing verses, the visions on the Chapel ceiling, and the calendar dates. The Priest was

convinced he was seeing the future, and in it--God, Man, the World, and hopefully the Church survived.

When he finished, the Cardinal smiled, glanced at The Last Judgement above the altar, genuflected and swirled to leave the Chapel. "The man is a loon," he thought. A flash lit up the whole room. As the Cardinal looked up, chunks of painted plaster fell to the floor, one of them coming within inches of his Red Robe as he flung open the doors to exit.

At the lectern, the Bible pages rippled again.

Proverbs 31:28

"her children arise up, and call her blessed;"

The Priest saw the date flash on the altar, then race across the chapel, coming to rest on the Statue of the Virgin Mary...

September 24, 1995

Mother Daughter

Mary Alice McGinty hadn't seen her Mom for a couple of weeks, and that was OK. Now that Mary was in her 40's, they didn't fight as much as when she was a teenager, but there were still moments, and this felt like one of those days. She opened the back door and yelled, "*ANYBODY HOME?*"

"In the basement," came the muffled reply. "Mary Alice, is that you?"

"In living color..."

"Well, COME ON DOWWWWN!"

Mary thought, "Mom, you should have been a game show host." She started down the basement steps and smiled. If a house had a basement, and the basement steps had a carpet runner, it was usually one piece of carpet and one color. Not in Bridgette O'Neill's home.

Each step had a separate carpet remnant. The top step was Frosty the Snowman, next step down was part of a football field, then the state of Pennsylvania, then Bert and Ernie, and so forth. The bottom step was the English flag. Bridgette O'Neill wasn't political, but then again maybe she was.

"What are you doing?" asked Mary as she stepped on the Union Jack.

“Sorting junk,” said her Mom. “I’m glad you stopped by. I was going to call you.”

“What’s up?”

“Let’s go upstairs. I need some coffee.”

Mary hated instant coffee, but that’s what this kitchen served. At least nobody had broken Mary’s childhood-favorite Count Chocula Cocoa mug that so far, her Mom had refused to hand over to her. So, instant coffee it was, with stale Animal Crackers. Mary put the kettle on *HI*, and they sat down at the kitchen table.

“Any newwws?” asked Mom, drawing out the word “news”.

“Nooooooze?” mimicked Mary.

“YOU know.”

“You mean,” replied Mary, “are you going to be a Grandma anytime soon?”

“You’re not getting any younger, you know.”

“Mom, FACE IT! It’s NOT going to happen. Sean and I have seen every doctor in the state. We’ve done EVERYTHING. I can’t have a baby and that’s that! I’m 43. My time is past. I’m sorry, but you are going to die without a grandchild.”

Mary stopped, wishing she could take the last sentence back.

“We can’t let it end here,” said her mother.

“We can’t let WHAT end here?” asked Mary.

The tea kettle suddenly blasted away. Bridgette O’Neill got up from the kitchen table and turned off the kettle. “Sit still, Mary Alice--I’ll make the coffee.”

“MOM,” said Mary. “Can’t let WHAT end here? What are you talking about?”

She didn’t get an answer. Bridgette O’Neill poured the hot water into the mugs and set them down on the table. “I need to show you something,” she said, and headed to the bedroom down the hall. She came back with a leather strap

necklace bearing a tarnished coin with a hole through the middle.

"I remember that necklace," said Mary. "You used to wear it when I was little--around Eastertime. Where's it been?"

"I put it in the safe deposit box years ago."

Mary picked it up and took a closer look. "Mom, this looks like an old Roman coin. Is it really that valuable to keep in a safe deposit box?"

"By itself," Bridgette answered, "not really. I had it appraised a couple of years ago and it's worth maybe a couple hundred dollars."

"So why'd you lock it up?" asked Mary.

"Because it's more valuable than any coin in the world."

"Mom, you're scaring me..."

Bridgette O'Neill took back the necklace from her daughter and ran her fingers over the time-serrated edge of the worn-down coin. She looked past Mary to the Celtic cross on the wall in the living room.

"We can't let it end here," she whispered to herself.

"MOM," shouted Mary, both hands gripping the sides of the gray aluminum kitchen table.

"Mary Alice O'Neill--SIT DOWN."

"Mom, it's Mary Alice *McGinty* now, and I AM sitting down."

"Right--well, maybe you should stand up and then sit down again. I have to figure out how to tell you. It may take me a while."

When you're in your Mother's kitchen, you do as you're told.

Mary stood up, sat down, and waited.

Bridgette rolled the coin between her fingers--not quite like a magician, but close, and then accidentally dropped the necklace on the floor. She stared directly at her daughter as she was feeling around for it on the floor, found it, brought it up, and then slipped it around Mary's neck.

Mary looked down at the necklace, fingering the coin. She glanced up and saw a tear in her Mom's right eye. "Mom--it's OK." She reached across the table and touched her Mom's left arm. "I'm right here--you can tell me."

"We can't--let it--end--here," said Bridgette O'Neill, slowly and precisely. Then she took a deep breath and blurted out as fast as she could:

"The coin is one of the thirty pieces of silver."

"What?", said Mary. "I didn't understand a word you said."

Bridgette repeated it slowly, word by word.

"The—coin—is—one—of—THE—Thirty—Pieces—of—Silver."

"Oh, come on," said Mary. "You mean like from the Bible-- Judas Iscariot and Jesus and the Kiss of Betrayal and all that? Mom, where'd you get this story?"

"From my Mother."

"Crazy Granny Shaughnessy," said Mary. "I should have known."

Bridgette continued. "It's not crazy. Well, maybe Granny was. But HER mom got it from HER mom who got it from HER mom who got it from Mothers all the way back to the beginning."

"The beginning?" asked Mary, who was starting to think her Mom believed the tale she was telling.

"Mom, what, or better yet--WHO was the beginning?"

Bridgette paused for a second. "Mary Magdalene."

"Mary Magdalene--"the whore in the Bible?"

"Yes, and she *wasn't* a whore. And YOU are a descendant."

Mary looked down at the coin hanging around her neck. "Let me get this straight—my great-great-great-great-great- whatever--you're saying I-you-WE are descended directly from Mary Magdalene."

"Yes," replied her mother, "and Jesus."

Mary Alice O'Neill McGinty stood up and sat down again--a couple of times, and walked away from the kitchen table and back again as Bridgette O'Neill unfolded the story and answered questions.

NO, Mary Magdalene was NOT a prostitute, but a wealthy woman and financial supporter of the young preacher from Nazareth.

YES, it is one of the THE Thirty Pieces of Silver. After betraying Jesus, a guilt-ridden Judas Iscariot returned the money to the Pharisees before he hung himself. The religious leaders did not want what they considered "blood money" on their hands, and used it to purchase land owned by Mary Magdalene. That was the beginning of what became known as the Potter's Field--a burial ground for foreigners in Jerusalem.

YES, Mary Magdalene was with Jesus at every crucial hour of the final days--the Last Supper, the Denunciation before Pontius Pilate, and the Crucifixion. She was the first to find the Stone of the Tomb rolled away, and the first to see Jesus risen from the dead.

YES, she had one child, a daughter, born after the Ascension.

How do we know Jesus was the father? That's what Mary Magdalene told *her* daughter.

Mothers don't lie to their daughters.

Mary stood up and sat down one more time.

She didn't know why, but she believed the story.

First, she thought, she was the daughter of a mother. Simple enough. Male family lines and the sacred family names die out when there's no son. Female ancestry goes back millions of years.

There would be no continuation of life if mothers didn't have daughters.

Second, Mary had recently done the DNA discovery test. As expected, she was mostly Irish and Northern European. There had been a small Jewish percentage which she attributed to a Crusades liaison, or a port of call leave by a lonely sailor.

But--it could be something else altogether.

"Mom," said Mary. "Why did you wait until now to tell me this? Why didn't you say something when I was twenty--or twenty-five?"

"I don't know. My mother didn't give me the necklace until I was pregnant with you, and I asked her the same question, and got the answer I'm giving you--I don't know."

Mary looked at the coin. "So that's what you meant by 'We can't let it end here'?"

"Yes."

"Mom, I gotta go."

"It's a lot to take in."

"It's impossible," said Mary as she stood up and headed toward the back door. "I'll see you tomorrow. I'm taking you to Mass, right?"

"Yeah, please--my car's still in the shop--BYE, HONEY," Bridgett yelled as the door slammed.

Mary got in her car, closed the door, turned on the ignition, then quickly re-opened the car door and threw up on the gravel driveway.

Mary's husband Sean McGinty pushed open the left side of the double doors as he exited the Third American Bank downtown office. For the past three years Sean had deposited \$250 a month in cash to a bank account his wife Mary knew nothing about.

Kent Huber, an army buddy of Sean's who had served with him in Iraq worked at the bank. Each month Kent wired the money to another Third American Bank office in Baghdad. It was for Kasim. Sean's son. The boy's mother used it for the basics of life, now scarce and expensive following the pullout of the U.S. troops. Some of the money was set aside for private school when Kasim turned five. A red-haired blue-eyed boy would not fare well in the poor neighborhood school three blocks away from their one room apartment.

Sean and Mary O'Neill McGinty could never have children together, but at least HE had a son.

Dinner that night at the McGinty's was macaroni and tomatoes--an Irish staple from Mary's childhood. Sean had grown up on eighteen variations of boiled potatoes and cabbage, so "M&T" was a welcome diversion. He got up for seconds and stopped at Mary's chair when he noticed the leather strap and old coin hanging from her neck.

"Where'd you get the hardware?"

"From Mom," replied Mary. "Apparently, she's been holding out on the family heirlooms."

He leaned in for a closer look. "Is that a *real* Roman coin?"

"She says it's genuine, and apparently it's been in the family since *forever*."

Mary had conjured up an explanation on her way home and continued--"the story goes that even though the Romans never conquered Ireland, they paid local Chiefs to stop Celtic marauders from raiding Britain. I guess some lucky ancestor must have been a soldier or something."

"Did your Mom ever have it appraised?"

"A couple of years ago--it's worth maybe a couple hundred dollars."

“Might as well keep it in the family, then,” said Sean.
Mary winced. “*We can’t let it end here,*” she said to herself as she got up for seconds.

The next day Mary picked up her Mom for five o’clock Mass. Mary hadn’t been to her childhood parish for a couple of years. She’d forgotten how long-winded Father Farnin was, and today he was in full drone. Her mind and eyes wandered to the Stations of the Cross murals around the nave.

It seemed Mary Magdalene was in almost every depiction.

Mary fingered the coin hanging from her neck and suddenly felt a shiver go thru her body. She got dizzy, and started wavering. Her stomach got queasy. Her mother was sitting next to her. Bridgette O’Neill grabbed her daughter’s arm to steady her and said, “Mary Alice, it’s all right, you’re going to be OK.”

Mary Alice O’Neill McGinty tried to relax on the examination table as the nurse spread the Aquasonic 100 Ultrasound Gel over her stomach. The morning sickness had subsided and she was feeling good.

The doctor looked at the images moving on the monitor and said, “Mary, it looks like you’re going to have a girl.”
“We can’t let it end here,” said Mary.
“What was that, dear?” asked the nurse.
“Oh, nothing,” said Mary, as she clutched the Piece of Silver hanging from her neck...

...Nine Days Gone

10:50pm INSIDE THE SISTINE CHAPEL

The Priest sobbed with joy.
The Church would be safe in the future.

As long as there was the real Body and Blood of Christ in living form, the Church would go on.

A flash hit the stained-glass rosette, lighting the Chapel brighter than the noon day sun. Thunder blasted his eardrums—he was momentarily deaf. Painted plaster fell from the ceiling. A chunk of the Prophet Isaiah landed at the base of the Virgin Mary statue.

He looked up.

The gap between the outstretched arms and almost touching hands of Adam and God was growing.

Rain poured thru the ceiling.

The Priest couldn't hear it through the deafening thunder but the Tower Clock tolled Eleven Bells.

And still, the Bible pages turned and glowed...

Titus 1:2

***“in hope of eternal life, which God who cannot lie,
promised before the world began”***

Father Giovanni saw a date far, far in the future...

March 14, 2314

NANNO NINE

Jack Offenbach wanted to be the first to kill himself.

Ever since Nanobot Nine (“NANNO NINE” as they called it) had been implemented, many had tried, but no one had succeeded. He himself had failed suicide 63 times. The truth was, due to “NANNO NINE”, NOBODY died--from ANYTHING.

The most popular attempted suicide method was the Antique-Car-Head-On-Crash. “Death Wishers” logged on to the “Good Night, Sweet Prince” app, and made an appointment on a nearby Interstate. The driver with the oldest car was the designated “Wrong-Way Driver”. GPS lined them up, Death Wishers switched on the manual override, deactivated the air bags, and drove toward each other at 100 miles per hour. On impact, the Nanobots inside each mangled crash victim went to work.

It took NANNO NINE two nanoseconds (NS) to reconstruct vital organs. Bones and muscles took three NS (fire damage usually added another two NS to the process) Brains required the longest, but usually everything was back in place in six to eight NS. If there were any glitches in the rebuilding process, NANNO NINE switched to the “B.U.B.”, an individual’s on line “Back-Up-Being”, until work on the “PLF” (Primary Life Form) was completed.

Many other attempted suicide methods were tried, but all failed. Overdoses, hired contract killers, even watching 24 continuous hours of “Gilligan’s Island” didn’t do the trick. Plain and simple, you couldn’t die, no matter how hard you tried. You were destined to live forever, whether you wanted to or not. Jack Offenbach didn’t want to. He was tired of life.

It all began with the “God Is Dead” movement of the 20th century. As more and more people became convinced there was no God, and therefore no reason to hope for Life after Death, scientists postulated, “Mankind wants to live forever. If there’s no God, and no Heaven or Hell, we should do something about it”.

And so, they did.

The first step was organ transplants, then artificial hearts, quickly followed by artificial EVERYTHING, except intelligence. The computer age brought more precise diagnoses and evaluation. Then came the Nanobots.

Researchers initially developed Nanobots, miniaturized molecular level machines, to analyze and repair computers. Inserted at machine level, the “Bots” physically halted computer viruses, reversed metal corrosion, and basically cleaned house. The leap to the human body was seamless, and in nine easy steps the human race lost its ability to die:

NANNO ONE: Insertion of micro machines into the bloodstream to monitor glucose, cholesterol, and other levels on a continual basis and relay that information to a personalized attached monitor. Adjustments were made intravenously by medical personnel.

NANO TWO: Bots armed with proper medications to adjust blood levels at the cellular level did it automatically, eliminating bulky monitoring systems and human adjustment.

NANO THREE: Physician directed internal surgery. Doctors determine the procedure and directed Bots intravenously to make repairs.

NANNO FOUR: Radio wave insertion. Bots ride on radio waves rather than intravenously. Repairs, adjustments made from anywhere in the world thru computers and smart phones.

NANNO FIVE: Brain wave connection. Complete monitoring and analysis of every cell in the body. Info now returns to the central CPU at NANOBOT, Inc. Headquarters.

NANNO SIX: Full cell replication. Individual's complete body now copied and replaced thru radio wave insertion.

NANNO SEVEN Introduction of "B.U.B." --the "Back Up Being"—an infinite number of replications of an individual stored for future use.

NANNO EIGHT: Completion of central connection sensors to detect cellular disruption, allowing for complete automatic replacement and repair.

NANNO EIGHT POINT FIVE: Finalization of paperwork and billing procedures.

NANNO NINE: Full implementation, including automatic temporary insertion of "B.U.B." while NANOBOT central makes repairs on original body.

The steps were complete. Now, nobody could die.

Eternal life on earth.

As a teenager, Jack had wanted to be a priest--to help others and to truly communicate with God. NANNO NINE went on-line his senior year of high school. Within five years, all the world's religions shut down. The quarreling factions kept at it for a while, but since they couldn't kill each other, Catholics, Jews, Shiites, Sunnis and Sikhs threw in the towel and religions disappeared. No priesthood for Jack.

That was 215 years ago. Living was fun (he could still "do it" at age 237). NANNO NINE allowed you to choose the age you wanted to stay at. Like most guys, Jack was 35 forever. His weekly on-line Nanobot hookup replaced and repaired whatever his own internal system could not. His memory restoration was at level three—he remembered his first kiss,

but not his first breakup. Jack was a happy soul, except for the not being able to die thing. Ecologists said the planet was good for another seventeen million years. That's a lot of vacation time.

Jack liked his job at Lanchester General Hospital. He was a Level SIX T.L.C. (Testosterone Level Counter). He monitored the "guy" levels of fifteen hundred men in his pod and directed centralized Nanobots to adjust the levels if someone's count was too low. The best part of his job was what Jack called "In Bistro" fertilization. He would crank up the TLC level on unsuspecting bar hoppers who were over the legal alcohol limit but still needed an extra push to *not* spend the night alone. It led to some fun videos for current and future spouses.

It was a Thursday at work when it suddenly came to him. "If I can find a way to die, I'll once and for all discover if there really is a God still in charge somewhere. If there is, he'll want to let everyone know and let ME come back to "Spread the Word". Being a clever guy, Jack dubbed it "Capture the Rapture". Now, all he needed was a plan to *physically* deactivate NANNO NINE. If he could ratchet the system back to NANNO SIX or SEVEN, it should work. Let the dying begin!

As a Level Six operator, he had on-line access to the bulk of "NAN-sense"—the central core of NANNO NINE. But no one below Level Eight even knew where the physical headquarters were. Jack would never find it, but his ninth ex-wife could. He still had her phone number.

Sara: Hello...

Jack: Hi, Sara, it's Jack

Sara: Jack who??

Jack: Jack--your ex-husband

Sara: well, I have *three* ex-husband Jacks

Jack: Oh, right—it's Jack Offenbach

Sara: Oh, yeah, it's been a while

Jack: 'bout seventy years or so

Sara: what's up???

Jack: well, it's not up right now, but...

Sara: Jack Offenbach--it's all coming back to me

Jack: I knew you'd remember

Sara: what do you want??

Jack: I want to die

Sara: Lots of people do. Why are you calling me?

Jack: First, I can't remember why we got divorced

Sara: I'm on lunch break--that's not enough time to tell you

This was not going very well, thought Jack.

Jack: right--well...everybody thinks they want to live forever

Sara: and thanks to NANNO NINE, we are

Jack: but some of us are tired of living...

Sara: or tired of ex-husbands calling on their lunch break

Jack: ...and want to see if death is really as bad as we think

Sara: or as bad as phone calls from ex-husbands

Jack: there's only one way to find out

Sara: pray tell--how??

Jack: pray tell--very funny. We take NANNO NINE back a couple notches

Sara: can't be done

Jack: I figured out how I can do it--with some help--that's where you come in

Sara: Jack, how many times have you tried suicide?

Jack: sixty-three, counting last week's dip in the piranha pool

Sara: go for number sixty-four. I have to get back to work.

Jack: just give me a chance to explain

Sara: sorry, Jack

Jack: a cup of coffee--you can tell me why you divorced me

Sara paused. Aha! thought Jack. What woman doesn't want to dump on her ex?

Sara: Now, that's tempting. My ego could use a boost--Hell, what do I have to lose??

Jack: only your life

Like most women, Sara McDermitt had chosen age 25 as her stopping point. She had brown hair, a decent figure, and worked out to keep it. Forty years ago, she'd had NANNO NINE turn off her reproductive system. Twenty-eight kids over two hundred years was enough. She had been wife number four for Jack--the marriage lasted thirty-two years, better than the NANNO NINE average of seventeen. They didn't have any kids together, but had a combined fifty-two from their previous and subsequent trips to the altar.

One thing Jack remembered about her. She was smart. She had been one of the main Nanobot programmers, and was project manager in the rollover from NANNO Six to Seven. If anyone could turn back the hands of time, Sara could.

When they were married, Jack had always wondered how Sara got home from work so quickly. At the time, they both had jobs in Jakarta--or so he thought. The shuttle transport commute should have been the same, but she was always home with dinner cooking when he came through the door. When he started asking questions, he started getting answers--from her lawyer. Of his nine divorces this had been the most puzzling and the one he wished hadn't happened.

Jack and Sara met two days later at an outdoor café. The tables were packed, as severe thunderstorms were forecast, and many customers hoped to be hit by lightning. What a way to go! It was futile though, because the slowest recovery on record was two nano-seconds--a mere flash in the pancreas. No one would die today.

Jack outlined his three-step plan to Sara.

One--find the NANNO NINE headquarters where the main frame was.

Two--overload the system with Testosterone to permanently roll it back to NANNO Six.

Three--die honorably.

He needed her to find the HQ; he would take care of the Testosterone "infection". Sara would finalize the rollback. His only worry--would she want to do it?

Sara: let me get this straight

Jack: we can get it straight after we roll NANNO NINE

Sara: aaah, the Jack, I remember so well

Jack: thank you

Sara: the testosterone insertion won't work

Jack: it always has for me

Sara: don't kid yourself

Jack: it's all coming back to you

Sara: in a manner of speaking. You can't inject ANY foreign substance into NANNO NINE--there's no physical way to do it

Jack: so, what *can* we do??

Sara: I think we could overcharge the deuterium layer

Jack: I like the way you say "lay her"

Sara: Jack, *enough!*

Sara suggested rolling back to NANNO SIX because of that level's ability to recreate a person's entire body intact. What they weren't sure of--did the system retain the "B.U.B.s" --the Back-Up Beings implemented in NANNO SEVEN. Jack wasn't sure it mattered. He started to say something when a lightning flash exploded at the table next to them. Ten "Death Wishers" were on fire from the strike, and within fifteen seconds, they were all repaired, good as new, standing around the charred table, lamenting at their near miss at mortality.

Sara noticed a husband and wife in their seventies holding on to each other and sobbing.

Jack: So--you're in?

Sara was staring at the couple. They were still crying. She turned to Jack.

Sara: I'm in.

Finding the physical Nanobot Headquarters was the easiest. It was under his feet--literally. It was where Sara worked. Since most transportation was now body transport, the subway was no longer in use--or so Jack thought. He should have guessed the not so secret entrance was a front--Nanook of the North Frozen Foods" --it was just a few blocks from his apartment. The Eskimo standing next to an igloo made of rainbow-colored ice blocks was a city landmark.

Sara went in first and said "Hi" to Alphonse the "Nanny". The guard on duty was watching "Gilligan's Island" on the security monitor. Jack had never made up his mind--Ginger or Mary Ann. Alphonse looked to be about 50--a definite Mrs. Howell kind of guy.

As a Level Eight operative, Sara had access to NANNO NINE, and Jack as a Level Six could tag along, but she had told him getting thru all four security quadrants would take some doing. All were monitored by the same voice Jack had heard for years-- "Your call is important to us" ...

Quadrant ONE: *Standard DNA check:*

MONITOR: *Please remove your shoes and socks*

Jack: Say, what??

Sara: take off your shoes--are those Donald Duck socks?

Jack: ex-wife #6

MONITOR: *use the clippers and place a big-toe nail sample in the tube on the wall*

Sara: nice nail polish, Jack

Jack: once a week at Madam Toejam's

Sara: different color for each toe, I see
Jack: one for each ex-wife
Sara: and I'm...
Jack: "Shimmering Salmon"
Sara: I'm a BIG toe?
Jack: because you were the biggest pain...
Sara: I got it

They saw a laser beam zap their nail clippings. A wolf's whistle came from the monitor.

QUADRANT ONE opened. They stepped forward to the next door.

QUADRANT TWO: *Voice Recognition*

MONITOR: *please repeat after me*

Jack: repeat after me
Sara: Jack, stop it

MONITOR: *two crows were sitting on a fence, Pete and Repeat. Pete fell off. Who was left?*

Jack: Pete
Sara: JACK! REPEAT!

MONITOR: *Two crows were sitting on the fence, Pete and...*

Sara: REPEAT!!
Jack: Two crows were...
Sara: Jaaaack...

MONITOR: *Let's try again. Peter Piper picked a peck of...*

Jack: Peter Piper's Peckers
Sara: OH MY GOD!
Jack: In due time, my dear...

Jack heard what he thought was a chuckle from the Monitor, and QUADRANT TWO opened.

QUADRANT THREE: *Eye Scan*

MONITOR: *please look into the lens with your left eye*

Jack: I've got a glass eye...

Sara: this is never going to work...

QUADRANT THREE opened.

QUADRANT FOUR: *Fingerprints*

Monitor: *please place your right index finger on the blue pad*

Jack: they still use fingerprints?

Sara: they're still unique

Jack: What if I pick my nose and...

Sara: NO!

Jack: or use my middle finger

Sara: don't even think it

Jack pointed thumbs up at the monitor.

QUADRANT FOUR opened. They went through the opening and found...

QUADRANT FIVE

Jack: Wait a minute, there can't be five quadrants..

MONITOR: *Nothing is impossible with NANNO NINE, Jack. Welcome to QUADRANT FIVE.*

This is your Memory Usage Manifestation Simulator

Jack: "MUM'S" the word—cute...

Sara: I don't like this

MONITOR: *please step on the MUMS block*

Sara: It's going to check our memory to see if we're hostile to NANNO NINE

Jack: that's a given--What do we do???

Sara: NANNO NINE probably wants our *past* thoughts--concentrate on something in the future--a *new* memory you want to create

Jack tried to think hard, but his mind went blank. Maybe that was best. He looked at Sara--her eyes were closed. He tried to think harder, and he suddenly noticed images appearing on the monitors in front of them.

Jack's screen was on the left. He saw himself in a church, standing at the altar. No, he wasn't the priest. He was looking back down the aisle, toward the back of the church. He saw Sara coming towards him, wearing a white wedding gown. He looked over at Sara.

Her eyes were still closed. Jack looked at her monitor screen. She was in the same church, walking towards the altar. Jack was standing at the altar, smiling.

The screens went blank.

The QUADRANT FIVE door opened.

Sara opened her eyes, and asked, "What happened?"

Jack said, "Whatever future memories we have are apparently no threat to NANNO NINE."

In front of them was a long, narrow hall. There was barely room for the two of them to walk side by side. The walls of the hall were stark white, and lined with photos of famous inventions, one from each decade starting in the 1900s. The pictures were placed 20 feet apart. To reach the present, it was going to be a long walk. They started walking.

When they got to the year 2240, they could see the end of the hall. There was a table with a big square object on it. As they moved closer, they could see it was a computer monitor of some sort. Beyond the table appeared to be a massive empty room, but it was filled with the sound of a million bees humming. Suddenly Jack grabbed Sara's arm.

They were twenty feet away from the table, but suddenly there was no more floor underneath them.

The table was hovering in midair.

Jack: Sara, look down

Sara: Oh, my God!

Below them, stretching twenty or thirty *stories* were thousands of computer servers, the heart and guts of NANNO NINE. There were no human operators in sight. There were no robots.

Jack looked at Sara.

Jack: so, what's the plan??

Sara: the computer on the table must control everything

Jack: and we have to get to it without first dropping down thirty stories

Sara: right, can you see what kind of computer it is??

Jack: not really--maybe with my phone camera--OK--I can see...it looks...like...a...a...Commodore...

Sara: a Commodore?

Jack: yep--a Commodore 64 to be exact

Sara: *a Commodore 64 controls NANNO NINE?*

Jack: AND, it's 20 feet away, how do we get to it?
Sara: every quadrant had a different task and password to get to the *next* quadrant.
Jack: you're right—DNA
Sara: voice recognition
Jack: eye scan, fingerprints
Sara: brain scan

For a split second, Jack flashed through the wedding scenes they had both “dreamed” before getting access to QUADRANT FIVE.

Sara: what's left?
Jack: LANGUAGE?
Sara: language? Which language? English? French? Brooklynese?
Jack: no--what about the *universal* language--MUSIC
Sara: what--do we sing????
Jack: not you, I remember karaoke nights
Sara: hey, I had a few too many...but what do we sing? “Old McDonald had a farm”?
Jack: don't think so

Sara started singing the “A-B-C” kids' song: “A-B-C-D-E-F-G...

Jack: that might work if the computer was an I-B-M
Sara: but it's a Commodore 64
Jack: that's it! The Commodores!
Sara: who?
Jack: The Commodores--the singing group from the 1970s. I bet it's their biggest hit...

Jack started singing in his best Saturday Night Frat Party voice. “It's a Brick...**House**--it's a Brick...**House**”. Sara caught on and joined at the top of her lungs. IT'S A BRICK...**HOUSE**”. On the fourth chorus the floor started shaking. They held on to each other as it expanded and started moving them forward. The floor lurched to a stop a foot in front of the hovering table.

“Whoa” said Jack between hyperventilating breaths. Sara was still shaking, gasping for air. She leaned against Jack and took a deep breath. They looked down. The floor had extended to the table, but the new section was still only wide enough to hold them both. Now the thirty-story drop was not only in front of them, it was also on either side.

Sara grabbed Jack’s right arm with her left, then extended her *right* arm to see if she could reach the computer keyboard. She could, and hit “Enter”. The bright, blue Commodore 64 logo appeared on the screen, and then disappeared.

Jack: It’s blank...

Sara: I can see that

Jack: NOTHING’S HAPPENING...

Sara: give it time--it’s a Commodore 64 for God’s sake

Jack: what’s with all the “God” references?

Sara: before NANNONINE, I prayed--a lot

The computer made a noise like a coffee pot starting to brew, thought Jack. No, more like a wood chipper. Then a bell sounded, like the end of a round in a boxing match. Letters started slowly filling in on the screen. Sara spelled them out.

Sara: F-I-L-L--fill

Jack: I-N-T-H-E

Sara: fill in the B-L-A...

Jack: FILL IN THE BLANK!

Sara: fill in the blank?? What the hell does that mean??

Jack: no clue, unless...

Sara: you’re not going to start singing again?

Jack: when I was a kid, the album cut of “Brick House” was banned on the radio--I’ve waited two hundred years to do this...

Jack faced the Commodore 64 and started singing...” It’s a Brick SHIT House”

Sara: oh, no...

Jack: come on...(singing) It's a Brick **SHIT** House

Sara joined in—"It's a brick **SHIT** House"

The screen went blank again for what seemed to be a minute, then started flashing in bright green letters:

"Welcome to NANNO NINE"

THEY WERE IN!

Then they saw the timer--ten minutes and counting down.

From past work with the system, Sara knew they had that amount of time to access NANNO SIX. She also knew the extended floor they were standing on would disappear at 0:00, and so would they.

She didn't tell Jack.

Sara: ten minutes--it's not much time

Jack: it used to be plenty of time

Sara: Jack, for once--get serious

Sara started typing in commands she remembered from the NANNO SIX to SEVEN upgrade. The Commodore 64 was not responding. Nothing got her to a screen where she could access previous levels. Whatever key or combo she pushed, the thirty stories of computers beneath them kept churning.

And the countdown continued.

3:00-2:59-2:58

Sara: nothing's working

Jack: you're too smart

Sara: what?

Jack: it was the same problem with our marriage. You never let me be the smart guy.

Sara: I did--you just didn't know it

The wedding scene screen from QUADRANT FIVE flashed thru Jack's mind again.

Sara: when it's down to thirty seconds, we need to get out of here.

Jack looked over the side--it was a BIG drop... "*THINK DUMB*", Jack said to himself--It's a Commodore 64 for God's sake...we want to get to NANNO SIX..."

2:01-2:00-1:59

"THAT'S IT", he said. Jack hit the F6 key.

Thirty stories of computers stopped instantly.

The screen went blank, then started flashing in bright orange letters:

"Re-installing NANNO SIX"

Sara: It's the F6 key? I'LL be damned...

Jack: that might happen if this all works out

They watched the monitor as the computer ran through the re-installation. The timer kept going.

1:02-1:01-1:00

Sara: come on, we've got to get out of here

Jack: hold on--look at the bottom of the screen---

Sara: I can't read it--it's too small

Jack: to...reinstall...NANNO NINE--dial 1-800-U-R-A-L-A-D-Y

Sara: Eura-lady?? Is that a country?

Jack: It's another Commodore's song--"Lady"

:20-:19-18

Sara: Jack--Let's go!!!

They turned around and ran back up the hall. There was no audio countdown when it reached ten.

There's ALWAYS an audio countdown, thought Jack.

:03-:02-:01...

They both leaped...

:00

...and made it back to where the floor had started expanding. They looked back—the floor extension was gone and the table was once again hovering in mid-air.

They were breathing.
They weren't falling.
And NANNO SIX was back.

The QUADRANT FIVE wedding scene flashed across Jack's mind.

It had been three days since the deployment of NANNO SIX.

People were dying. Suicides were suddenly successful.

"Gilligans Island" was running 24/7 on eight channels.

The Animals song "We Gotta Get Outta This Place" was on a continuous loop on the radio.

Jack called up Sara.

Jack: Sara, it's Jack

Sara: Jack who?

Jack: Jack, your ex-hus...funny

Sara: I have three ex-husband Jacks

Jack: verrrry funny. How are you doing?

Sara: OK--I think

Jack: have you decided when you're going to do it??

Sara: do what?

Jack: kick the bucket--take a powder--end it all

Sara: oh, that--well, I've been thinking...

Jack felt his stomach flip. When a woman said, "I've been thinking", it was usually followed by "We've gotta talk", and then, "It's not YOU, it's ME" --but it was really HIM after all.

This time, Jack felt different.

The QUADRANT FIVE Wedding scene hit him once again.

Jack: look, we did this so we could finally die, right?

Sara: right

Jack: so, what's the problem??

Sara: I think I'm in love

Jack: after two hundred years of NANNO NINE, NOBODY'S in love

Sara: and by the way, why haven't you pulled YOUR proverbial plug yet?

Jack: I've been busy at work, and who are you in love with??

Sara: I'm not sure...

After a month of NANNO SIX, hospitals started reopening.

Small meetings of religious groups sprang up.

Funeral homes were running twenty-four hours a day.

Cemetery plot sales skyrocketed.

“Gilligans’ Island” was the top-rated show on TV.

After an initial surge, the suicide rate was steady.

On a crisp, fall morning, Jack was out jogging. He hated running, but he was told it was a great way to meet chicks--except the 25-year-olds all outran him. He was an old 35. He was just about to catch up to a fifty-something redhead when the Oldies Channel on his earbuds played the Commodores song, “Lady”. He stopped in his tracks and called Sara.

Jack: Sara, it’s Jack

Sara: Jack who??

Jack: LISTEN, lady...

Sara: What did you say?

Jack: I saaaaaid, “LISTEN, Lady”

Sara: I heard it yesterday

Jack: What?

Sara: LADY--that Commodores song--I heard it yesterday

Jack: it was on just now--that’s why I called

Sara didn’t say anything. A “pause for the cause” thought

Jack. This is probably bad.

Sara: if there’s a different “next life” waiting--we need to find out NOW

Jack: but what about this “I’m in love thing”?

Sara: I’m afraid

Jack: afraid of what?

Sara: I’m afraid it might be *you*

Jack: It is

Sara: typical Jack--why are you so sure?

Jack: QUADRANT FIVE

Sara: what are you talking about?

Jack: when we were clearing security and we tried to block out any thoughts...

Sara: I was afraid to look at the screen
Jack: I wasn't--and both of us had a vision of a wedding--of US getting married
Sara: well, that could have been our first wedding
Jack: No—on the screen we were in a church
Sara: not Vegas??
Jack: and we were sober
Sara: what kind of wedding is that?
Jack: the *right* kind
Sara: that explains the crazy dreams I've been having about being in a church
Jack: I've had the same dream
Sara: what do we do??

For once, Jack didn't have a quick answer--snappy comeback--easy solution...THEN...

Jack: I-95
Sara: *What?????*
Jack: I-95. Tomorrow.
Sara: You're right. We've got to settle this.

The number of head-on car collision suicide attempts had dropped dramatically since the reintroduction of NANNO SIX. They were too costly and too messy. And too many forms to fill out.

Sara and Jack got a slot right away. They were set for 3:30pm on I-95--right before rush hour. They chose the four-mile option. Jack's Mustang and Sara's Camaro could easily hit 120 miles an hour within the first mile. That would be plenty of acceleration to do them both in.

It was 2:55. Traffic had been diverted.

Jack was ready--radio on, seat belt off, air bag disconnected.
Sara was ready--cigarette lit, seat belt off.

She phoned Jack.

Sara: you're sure about this?
Jack: nobody wants to live forever
Sara: I *hope* you're right--ready??
Jack: I've been ready all my life
Sara: strange way to put it

Sara heard Jack's engine roar.
She tromped down her accelerator.
There was no turning back.

TEN SECONDS

Jack: *I just hit 120*
Sara: *100-110-----120*

TWENTY SECONDS

Sara: *I'm in your lane--I'm coming at you babe...*

THIRTY SECONDS

Jack: *hey, there's someone in my lane*
Sara: *it's ME, you idiot*
Jack: *right*

FORTY SECONDS

Sara: *Jack...*
Jack: *Yeah*
Sara: *I love you*
Jack: *I know...I LOVE YOU TOO*

FIFTY SECONDS

Sara: *what are we going to do about it??*
Jack: *it's too late to get crash test dummies*

SIXTY SECONDS

Jack could see Sara's eyes as they both jerked their steering wheels hard to the right.

Their side mirrors clanged and flew up behind them.

Their car doors scraped as their cars passed each other.

They slammed on their brakes.

Smoke poured out of the tires as they screeched to a halt.

They both threw their cars in reverse, and backed up until they were beside each other.

They couldn't catch their breaths. Finally, Jack spoke first.

Jack: (still panting) well, that was fun!

Sara: are you all right???

Jack: haven't been this good in...what--a hundred years--
You??

Sara: never better

After fighting with their bashed and smashed in doors and mangled door handles, they managed to get out of their cars. Jack leaned back on the hood of his Mustang as Sara collapsed in his arms.

Sara: ever been in love??

Jack: I don't really think so

Sara: wanna try?

Jack: sure, but first things first

Jack pulled out his phone, dialed the number and put it on speaker phone so Sara could hear.

MONITOR: *You've reached NANNO SIX. All our computers are busy. If you'd like to leave a message, please enter the proper passcode.*

Jack and Sara started singing the Commodores song: "LADY-- you bring me up when I'm down--up when I'm down, up when I'm down—LAAADYYYY--you bring me up when I'm down..."

They stopped singing--the phone was silent--then they heard what sounded like a jet plane screaming down the runway on takeoff. A voice came over the roar:

"Welcome to NANNO NINE..."

...Ten Days Gone

11:45pm INSIDE THE SISTINE CHAPEL

“I’ve got to stop it,” whispered the Priest. “We can’t go thru with the Calendar JUMP. There can’t be a March 14, 2314”

His legs buckled as he struggled to get off the floor.

If man can’t die in the future, it’s the end of God.
If there’s no God, there’s no Church.

“I’VE GOT TO STOP IT.”

As he looked up, a roar of thunder filled the Chapel, and a flash stabbed the middle of the ceiling. It exploded--Jonah, Noah, David, Jeremiah, Ezekiel all came crashing down.

Then the face of God broke off...

Falling...

Falling...

Falling--knocking the Priest to the floor--crushing his chest.

Cardinal Zinn rushed to the Pope’s chambers and thrust open the door without knocking.

“Your holiness,” he screamed. “The Chapel is collapsing.”

The Pope ignored the clamor.

He was staring at his Bible.

The pages were convulsing.

“Holy Father—we’ve got to get to the Chapel. Your friend Giovanni Frasini is in danger.”

At the mention of his childhood friend, the Pope shook off his trance and followed the Red Robe out of the chambers. They raced thru the halls connected to the Chapel. The Pope threw open the doors. It was nearly dark. The storm had snuffed out all but a few of the candles, but there was enough light to see rain pouring through portions of the missing ceiling,

He saw the Priest lying on the floor covered by the rubble.

The Pope knelt down to his friend, their faces inches apart. They both knew he was dying.

“You’ve got to stop it,” whispered the Priest.

“You’ve got to stop it?” repeated the Pope. “Stop what?”

“March...fourteenth...twenty-three...fourteen,” gasped the Priest.

“March fourteenth, twenty-three...

“...You...can’t...let...that...day...happen...”

“Your holiness,” shouted the Cardinal over the wind’s roar and the pouring rain. “We’ve got to get out of here. The whole ceiling is going to collapse.”

Gregory looked up.

Adam was dangling by a thread, swaying in the torrent, ready to fall.

“MARCHFOURTHEENTHTWENTYFREEFOURTEEN,” the Priest screamed **“TAKE...OUT...THAT...DAY...”**

Brother Giovanni's empty eyes stared up at his cherished childhood friend, Ugo Boncompagni—Pope Gregory XIII. Then slowly, he exhaled his last breath.

The Pope blessed the Priest as Cardinal Zinn yanked him to his feet. "Let's go, Holy Father—NOW!"

They scrambled over the wreckage, the Pope in front. Just short of the doors, the Cardinal's Red Robe snagged on a pew and he stumbled to the floor. A massive lightning bolt flashed, igniting his garments. He screamed but the Pope heard no words as he flung open the doors.

The ceiling collapsed in a mighty roar.

Safe outside, rain poured down on Pope Gregory XIII, temporarily blinding him. He turned to look for Cardinal Zinn. He was nowhere to be seen.

Through the clamor of the crumbling Chapel and pounding thunder and rain he heard the Tower Clock banging out Twelve Bells.

It was midnight.

It was a new day.

October 15th, 1582

Karl Frederick Brandt is a former radio broadcaster who lives in Mercer, Pa. with his family and twelve groundhogs that refuse to be caught. This is his first collection of stories.

Thanks to his wife Anny Brandt for putting up with and also inspiring his creative nonsense for lo these many years.