

Blocked - A Facebook Tale

by Carl Santoro

"Dialogues with strangers can have a thought-provoking, lasting impression on your soul. They have the potential to change you as a person." From a paragraph cited in a brochure in our story

"Relationships on Facebook don't naturally expire as they do in the real world. To unfriend is drastic, used only in the direst of circumstances—like a bad breakup."

Liz Gannes, All Things D-An Internet blog

Blocked by Carl Santoro

INTRODUCTION

Author's Note- I go to Facebook every day.

I had heard of how some people? became blocked by others and wondered about the psychological fallout from such an action.? So, have you ever had a friend suddenly cut off the relationship? Consider the year 2011. Think Facebook.

This is the story about how Steve, age 58, a good and faithful husband, married to Sarah, age 56, a good and faithful wife, gradually discovered his mind had become intoxicated by a fever of an overwhelming second adolescence. His passions only increased his psychological distress as he ignored the obvious fact that he must come to grips with his ridiculous depth of imagined romance. He became obsessed, depressed and miserable, because he never knew he was looking for love...until it found him. Only thing is though, is that it brought about a side of himself that he never dreamed was possible. Frustrated by this rejection from a female "friend" on an internet social network, Steve gets involved in her real life in hopes of winning her affections.

The beautiful mountainous Ponderosa Pine forests and sky islands of Arizona provide the setting for a myriad of dangerous and complicated ethical decisions played out by odd characters encountering surprising plot twists. The story is rife with wonderful messages reminding us to pay attention to the visible and invisible

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mysteries of how our hearts and our natural environment need respect in order to thrive.

Chapter One - Contact THE END OF THE STORY AS OUR BEGINNING

Facebook Entry, May 14, 2012 Today- Steve Evans MESSAGE:

"I apologize for making you uncomfortable. I had no idea. I have only ever wished the best for you. Even though we never got to reunite, I have felt a friendship I will always cherish. Again, I am very sorry if I have hurt you in any way. I will miss your remarkable intelligence, beautiful images and your kindness. I will stop all communications."

Okay, that was supposed to be the end of our story, ?but things became a little complicated...?It all started out innocently enough until...?

"You made me love you, I didn't want to do it, I didn't want to do it"

Joseph McCarthy

"How did it come to this? I think about you all the time"

Hodges, McEwan, Underwood

"Sometimes it lasts in love, but sometimes it hurts instead."

Adele

"And now I miss a person I never really met"

Steve Evans

HOW IT ALL STARTED ?(14 months earlier)?

Facebook Entry, March 31, 2011-?Peggy Irish MESSAGE :

?I kept thinking there was something familiar about you, and now I remember. We met a few years back. I was at a dinner at the Double Stonewall in Tuscon, Arizona. It was to honor Franz Scholner of Cactus Nursery/Landscape. We sat at the same table. We went through the standard courteous table intros. You were distracted due to your task to have to introduce the honoree and his family. So we really didn't chat. While you weren't looking, I secretly snapped a couple of pictures of your large turquoise and metal bracelet so I could study the image later. I was intrigued by the unusual way it

was made and too embarrassed to inquire as I felt it was too personal after only just meeting. Incidentally, I was totally, silently, annoyed that all they could provide for you was a plate of steamed vegetables. Not very imaginative. It's possible that that was what you wanted, but to me, it seemed they should have offered you more. I don't remember what anyone else had... not even myself. But I remember THAT. I'm thinking this was fall of 2007. Anyway... hello, again!

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Peggy Irish March 31, 2011

Okay, it was bothering me, so I went through some disks, looking for pics I took that day. I actually do have those two images of you at the table before you went up. I'll attach them. Not that they're good pics, but I figure you may want to see them.

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And so began a 14 month long Facebook dialogue.?As we pick up the conversations in November

2011, Steve and Peggy continue their dalliance and share more and more of their interests, thoughts and intimate feelings:

Steve Evans November 7

Just wanted to say two things that have been on my mind. Firstly, ever since you reached out and contacted me, my ensuing online experience has been much more fun and interesting. And educational! You've given me a renewed interest and appreciation for all things nature related due to your wildlife photography and getting to know the organizations you help to support. You have a very kind soul.

Second thing...shouldn't we be live chatting right here, right now? 8-) After all it has been 8 months!

Peggy Irish November 7

I can't live chat, as I'm playing Castle Age and trying to hold a phone convo..while reading the news, lol.

Peggy Irish (seconds later)-?Pssst....taptaptap... Is this thing on??

Steve Evans November 7 - ?This is wonderful! I'm extremely honored to live chat with you! I just hope I can type fast and clear

enough to keep up the conversations. I know you like your privacy. But I have to confess, I've been hoping to see that green dot every time I log on.

Peggy Irish November 7

I'll only come on when asked.. like I said, I'm usually just popping on for a few minutes.

Steve Evans November 7

Now that I have you live, I wanted to say that I love your red door mirror self-portrait series, and, of course that spectacular close-up of your face wrapped by that cobalt blue knit hat. I think you should go a step further and flop the mirror shots to reveal your true face.

Peggy Irish November 7

I don't really like my face.

Steve Evans November 7

WHAT! I do!!

Peggy Irish November 7

People try to get me to use it for my Profile picture (duh) but I feel it is too narcissistic.

Steve Evans November 7

Oh well, now that can always be debated about all of us on here.

Me, I'm the king of narcissism. I have a new face out there practically everyday. But I don't care. I find it fun; after all, it IS called Facebook, no? Should I go grab a beer? Are we here for awhile?

Peggy Irish November 7

Actually, I'm about to get ready for bed. I have to work in the morning.

Steve Evans

Okay, this has been a real pleasure. I'd love to hear your voice sometime. I can't believe we go back to that event and sat at the same table and you had taken my picture! Thanx for your patience tonight. I won't ask for live chatting all the time. It's really up to you.

Before you go, I'm dying to know more about the circumstances surrounding my favorite image of you, the blue hat portrait. Am I right in thinking it is another self-portrait?

Peggy Irish

Yes. I shot that a couple Februarys ago, as I sat in my Jeep, looking out over the canyon. I just held the camera out and snapped a few shots. You might be able to see some of it reflected in my eyes. Barely.

Steve Evans

I LOVE that image! You have hypnotized me with that one! You also have me looking at Burgundy Jeeps whenever I'm on the road, hoping that you may have been passing thru the area.

Peggy Irish

It's not a "Jeep Jeep", like a Wrangler... it's Grand Cherokee Laredo.

Steve Evans

Hey, I just noticed you have a heart on your finger in one of the red door shots.

Peggy Irish

Yeah. :-)?I did that.?Steve Evans?That is another shot you took that I admire and it showcases your graceful hands

Peggy Irish

I wanted a tattoo that was visible every day, but easily overlooked. I never really liked tattoos. And I knew that would be easily removed, if I ever wanted.

Thank you!

Steve Evans

What did you use?

Peggy Irish

For the heart? I don't think you want to know.. lol

I did that when I was 17. A sewing needle, some thread, a pencil, and India ink.

Steve Evans

Ouch!!!?Thread??Peggy Irish?No ouch. I didn't feel much when I was that age..hmmm,

nowadays I suppose I might've done it with Henna paint.?Okay, yeah so the thread was tightly and neatly wrapped down the needle and back up again..

Then the eye of the sewing needle was pushed into the eraser of a pencil, so the pencil was like a handle..

Dip the needle into the ink, and the thread held it. I don't recommend this.

Steve Evans

And...then...?

Peggy Irish

And then, stab yourself deep enough for the ink to go under your skin.

Up close anyone would realize it is a self-done tattoo. It's as imperfect and flawed as the rest of me.?Dumb teenage-ness.

Steve Evans

Don't knock yourself while I'm putting you up on pedestals!

Peggy Irish

I appreciate it, lol.. but I don't belong anywhere near a pedestal.

Thanks so much for the chat! .. and for the very kind words, you're fun. ♥

I do have to go. :)

Steve Evans

(I like the heart...I don't know how to add one, but if I could I'd add two! As I've said, you have a kind soul)

Peggy Irish

To make a heart, use the < character immediately before the number 3. ♥

Steve Evans

♥♥

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CHAPTER TWO - Family?Steve Dec. 24: What's up for Christmas day tomorrow? Any plans?

Peggy: Nothing. I will probably sleep late. Friends are all busy with their families. And I don't really have family.

I may go take a walk.?

Steve:I will be thinking of you as I have been. Is every Christmas similar to tomorrow for you??Peggy: Pretty much. Sometimes I see friends.. not this time. I'm sorry.. I'm a little depressed.

Steve: Wanna talk about it?

Peggy: I would like to, but I think it would be selfish. I never like to bring others down when they're happy. It will pass.

Steve: We CAN talk alot if you wish. I'm usually up late anyway.

Peggy: Ok.. give me a minute? I'm going to go grab a beer... against my better judgement. lol

Steve: Yes! I'm working on one now.

Peggy: Ok, back..?I really shouldn't be drinking, because it makes me more emotional.?But whatever.?I'll just get right to it..?I am sad because I have no family. I have people who are related to me, but they are not my FAMILY. I'm so insignificant to them. This is the time when everyone gathers with those they're close to, and even those they are only mildly friendly with... and I'm not even invited to be with my relatives. I don't get cards from them, no phone calls, emails, nothing. This stupid Facebook allows me to see them all cozy with each other, but not me. Eh, whatever. I should just go to bed.

Steve: Please don't go to bed, I'm "buffering" as the computer says...

Peggy: I'll be more candid..My bro, who has been competing in martial arts for 20 or so years.. always beating everyone, becoming world champion, etc..Then moving on to something else.. Shmoozing with ladies.. putting on airs.. Putting on a facade, really. Doing favors for people, giving extravagant gifts, being everyone's best friend..He treats my mother and me like shit. Excuse my language.He hasn't sent me a birthday card, Xmas card, whatever, for 20 or so years.Never answers or returns my calls.?Deletes my emails.?I hide most of my posts from him, because he only comments with negativity, or mocks me in some way. I occasionally let a photo or something slip by my settings. I have him hidden, because he is always posting things that he knows I'll find offensive or insulting. He follows my comments on public pages, and comments in an antagonizing way. (pauses)

I could go on.? I really shouldn't.? My cousin wrote on his wall, something like... "Merry Christmas, dear cousin! I hope to someday enjoy spending Christmas with you!" but no similar remark to me. My brother has a house full of friends from across the country come and spend the holidays with him each year. I never get invited. To even suggest that he come here and say hello to his own mother is laughable. My mother worships the ground he walks on. She went to visit him for the first time, a year ago.. She was SO excited. He kept calling me (the only time he ever did), just to complain about her. He put her on a train two days early, and sent her home. She was heartbroken.

And all my brothers "groupies" think he's such a great guy.

I'm going to be totally honest with you.. I may be a lousy person for saying this, but... it makes me sick to my stomach that my brother has so many friends over, having a great time, when he is a complete phoney. Phony? I don't even know how to spell that right this moment.

Another thing...he hasn't sent me a birthday card, Xmas card, whatever, for 20 or so years. Never answers or returns my calls.? Deletes my emails.? I hide most of my posts from him, because he only comments with negativity, or mocks me in some way. I occasionally let a photo or something slip by my settings. I have him hidden, because he is always posting things that he knows I'll find offensive or insulting. He follows my comments on public pages, and comments in an antagonizing way.

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And for the icing on the cake.. he has posted pics of all the food he serves everyone..Beef this, chicken that, bacon wrapped shrimp, bacon wrapped hot dogs, and an array of dead animals..

Do you regret asking me to talk about this? LOL

Steve: Okay, where does he live so I can beat the living shit outta him? Only kidding

Peggy: I really could go on, but I've said enough. Steve, I think I am a good person. I try to take care of my mother because it is the right thing to do. I don't kiss anyone's ass or put on a fake mask to appear anyway other than I am. But my cousins all worship my bro.?They think he's great.?I'm the weirdo.?

Steve: Listen...he's out of the equation as far as I can tell...you're doing the work of compassionate care and he is just a player.

Peggy: I realize I've been imbibing, but let me just say here that I feel that at least I have honor and some integrity. You know, a sense of loyalty. He is my only sibling. When I was a kid, he was my best friend. My world.

Steve: Peggy, life is REALLY just TOO SHORT, this is YOUR life. You have to move on. There is something better for you.

Peggy: He really couldn't care less if I dropped dead. Well, I usually don't think about it. But today, it was right there. In my face. It's Christmas, you know? If you don't have family, what do you have?

Steve: I want to put my arms around you

Peggy: Thanks. And thanks for listening (reading, lol). It really has helped, just to get it out.

Steve: You have to move on.

Peggy: Please, enjoy your Christmas. I hope it's with family. It's late. I should probably get going so I could get some sleep. I'm getting a headache.

Steve: Remember the Beatles song, I Want to Hold Your Hand?....I want to...♥ good night hon

Peggy: Goodnight, Steve. Have a great Christmas!

Steve: You too...I can't wait to meet you.We can talk more.

Peggy: Yeah. Goodnight...?I hope you and your family have a very merry Christmas!

hugs

>><<?Steve was becoming something new...flattered by his own flirtations. So much so that he hadn't noticed they were never returned in any of the exchanges. This increasing admiration he felt for Peggy, blinded him from the reality of the situation. The thought of sharing emotions with a stranger, late into the night, using text as if it were whispers, and he shrouded in the glow of a monitor's light, started to make him feel like on some level he was betraying Sarah. He liked to remind himself that technically it was not cheating.

His outpourings of affection were spurned on by Peggy's sadness and what definitely seemed like genuine loneliness, her Mona Lisa non-smile in every image she posted. Hell, she listed herself as "in a relationship". Shouldn't she be happy about that??She once confessed to him that she suffers from Panic Disorders and sent him a link to read up on it. But it was her amazing eyes, soft-jaw, sultry looks, reminding him of that talented singer from Texas, Carolyn Wonderland, which made it extremely difficult to give up on her no matter what disorder she may have.?He pondered often the consequences of actually one day professing his growing fondness, admiration, love for Peggy to her. He wasn't sure, but above all, never would he want it to back-fire and lose her friendship. Instead he used frequent flirtations as a way to avoid his passionate feelings for her. Or did he, he mused? He knew her responses were always well thought out and calculated and articulated extremely wisely. He began to explore their past chats on Facebook. He also perused old e-mails. Surprisingly, her responses usually were sober and almost robotic. However, once she did say, "You're fun!"

>><<?Steve Dec. 25: Merry Christmas Peggy! I hope your day will be filled with everything you wish for to make you happy! BTW-I may have been a bit under the influence of the alcohol last nite. Don't mean to be so annoying. Hope you can free your mind enough to think of all the gifts and talents you have in your life.

Steve was afraid she might harm herself. He read somewhere that people with her condition became so terrified that they sought to end the panic themselves.

Peggy December 25, 2011:

We both had drinks, last night. No biggie. I do apologize for dumping on you. Things that I usually shrug off become important this time of year. It's the typical scenario... it's why people get "the holiday blues".?Thanks for the kind words. And just the kindness, in general. Merry Christmas, Steve.

Steve Dec. 25 e-mail 3:42 a.m.: Peggy, Sleep is dying-to-the- the-day...so I'm up. No, really, I wish you weren't sleeping...I really miss you. I want to make it all right for you. Do you want to share more?

Listen, you are a gorgeous, hard-working gal, and should be proud of your accomplishments. The move you made to veganism is monumental, as I know first hand very closely. That move was a sacrifice, such as the many you make for all the assistance you give your mom.

Don't give your brother so much importance... he has obviously slacked in sharing duties with mom, and it is the way it will be. So that isn't going to change. Focus on your life. What you do and share with her will be a part of your soul forever. He can never match it. She will always know that. Be at peace with your relationship with her...forget him.

OMG-tell me if I'm rambling...

Where in the hell is there a middle ground place in the 40 miles where we can meet over coffee/tea? You know, "You had me from hello!" So... Okay, I know I get inappropriate at times...but we're in an e-mail here. Should we share cell #'s to continue? (Wait, did I just ask that after 3 bottles of beer?) Yes, I did, but that is because I'd love to hear your voice, as I have already said.

Merry Everyday, Love- Steve

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CHAPTER THREE - Pain

?Steve e-mail Dec. 26 2:53 p.m.: I just read the last e-mail I sent

Peggy e-mail Dec 26 8:51 p.m.

Again, I apologize for getting so heavy the night before last. I'm prone to let things get to me, sometimes. Forget I said any of it.?I'm not really in the mood to socialize with anyone.. just want to do some reading and have a bit of quiet time. Hope you had a great Christmas!

>><<?Peggy Irish, e-mail Dec. 27 10:19 p.m.: Would you still like to exchange cell numbers?

>><<?Steve, e-mail Dec. 28 7:40 a.m.: (Sipping his first cup of coffee and suddenly thrown into deep introspection!)?Wow, I didn't expect that invitation! The idea of it really pleases me. I'm very grateful for your offer to reach out more personally. Bottom line though-I don't know...I worry things can become complicated. Of course I'd love to hear your voice in a spontaneous exchange as I've mentioned before. I think now, though, that I should save that treat for when we find ourselves at someevent we both can plan to attend. Too bad we live 40 miles apart. I can't believe I'm saying all this because I know deep inside I want to say yes. The truth is...and I've thought this through seriously- certain circumstances factor-in to a new phase, such as this, and would be for me...for us, well, certainly a kind of awkwardness, for one. I leave my phone in all sorts of places here at home and.....well....I don't know. Do you get what I mean?me

P.S. I want you to know, I have enjoyed every single one of our exchanges. All of them. Perhaps e-mails get close to a phone call and would be best.

Your thoughts?... <3

>><<?Peggy, e-mail Dec. 28 2:15 p.m.: I'm sorry. I thought we were friends now, and thought it would be nice to talk on the phone instead of typing all the time. It didn't occur to me that anything about that would cause awkwardness in your home. I certainly don't want that. I understand.

Steve, e-mail Dec. 28 2:37 p.m.: I love...that you wrote "I understand" at the end, cause I needed that. Of course we are friends and I apologize if I have created a rollercoaster ride of mixed emotional messages. I definitely want to talk live and I know it

would be very nice. I know it would perhaps even be often. However, because it just might be often, I don't know how well received it might be with Sarah being aware of frequent exchanges occurring (the awkwardness factor). Even though they would be innocent enough, just talking about our shared interests. Oh God...I'm such a jerk. (sighing heavily)

Ever since you contacted me in March, I have felt a real fondness for you. There's something about you. Something wonderful. Meeting as friends would be terrific and just what I originally had hoped for. Of course, this is all coming out of MY head.

I really need a super quick response from you on this, as all of this is totally out of character for me, driving me nuts and I certainly don't want to hurt or spoil this growing relationship as I am now quite anxious to keep it alive. Teach me how to photograph birds!...and I'll share my secret and awesome vegan recipes with you!

TTYYS I hope! me

All emails:?Peggy e-mail Wed. Dec. 28:

I don't know how to photograph birds more than any other person with a camera... except that I have a deep interest in them. I feel more connected to wildlife than to humans, so staying focused (with both my brain and my camera) just happens for me. :-) I count birds in my yard for Project FeederWatch. I think Sweetbriar Nature Center in Smithville has butterflies, as well. You could try birding there and possibly get some opportunities to capture great shots. BTW, FYI - As a child I walked with my grandparents over much of Normandie and some of Bretagne. Truly beautiful places with awesome birds and butterflies as well. Possibly how I developed an interest in them.

Steve e-mail Wed. Dec. 28: Wow, you do get around! You are a nice, compassionate person and I admire you for that. Wanna chat?

From FB: "Peggy has not received your last poke yet, because Peggy has not logged in since the poke."

>><<?Steve e-mail - Tue, 17 Jan 2012 7:28 p.m. Peggy, I just realized in one of my e-mails to you I listed all but my home

phone. Call us at anytime. 608-354-3720. I'd love to discuss your struggle with vegetarianism, and other areas e.g. photography, cats, birds, music, books, movies, beer, ...anything!Steve

Peggy e-mail 17 Jan 2012 9:00 p.m.?Thank you, Steve. :-)?Maybe I'll give you a ring sometime this weekend?

>><<?Peggy never does and so two days later, by e-mail-

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Steve e-mail 18 Jan 2012 10:16 a.m.: Peggy, do you play an instrument?

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Peggy e-mail Jan. 27 2012 10:35 a.m.: I play guitar. Not well, as I am self taught, and have only been playing for a few years. I also play recorder. Go ahead and laugh, most people do! It really is a beautiful instrument, and not just for children. I play it rather well, but only by ear. I can't read music. Do you play an instrument?

Steve e-mail Jan. 27 11:10 a.m.: When I was in high school I went for lessons for classical guitar. You know, Segovia, and such. This old guy taught me to read sheet music. Okay, I got the sheet music part down, but instead just found my own rhythm and bought my own, Dylan and Eagles sheet music, and jammed with my friends. I also have bongos, tambourines, and harmonicas that help to lift my spirits. Are you Twittering alot? I sent you a "tweet" awhile ago. And where is your bird blog? I'd love to see it. I hope you are adding all your wonderful images to it. Hey, do you like perfume?

Peggy e-mail Jan. 27 11:17 a.m.: I don't wear perfume or cologne, because I find them too strong and often get headaches as a result. But I do wear an eau de toilette, which is much lighter and less offensive. I tend to like simple fragrances that don't have too many different "layers". I'm more into a basic tea rose scent, for instance. The brand, Tea Rose label says it contains bergamot, rose, and lily. The middle notes are listed as tuberose, jasmine, and cedar while the base of the fragrance is amber, rosewood, and sandalwood. Did I say "simple and basic" and not too many layers? Wow! Yes, I love my Tea Rose! :-) Bottom line- it smells like vintage roses.

I've read that it is also considered unisex!

Steve e-mail Jan. 27 11:29 a.m.: Hey, you know, you're cute! You are becoming a precious friend who is dear to me.

Peggy e-mail Jan. 27 11:31 a.m.: Merci beaucoup, mon ami! - the feeling is mutual. :-)

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Steve Evans e-mail February 10, 2012

I have not really corresponded with you since Jan. 27 and am concerned I might have offended you in some way. ..so I'm sending meaculpas with this note if they will help.

Peggy Irish e-mail February 10, 2012

You haven't offended me. All is well.

Steve e-mail February 10, 2012

Phew, that's good! I'd be lying if I said your absence wasn't noticed. Since you reached out to me in March 2011 I have come to enjoy our friendship, conversations and pictures of you and by you. I'd very much like to continue exploring that enchanted country of your mind. From an essay by Robert Louis Stevenson, "Talk is an instrument of friendship; it brings about a sense of joint discovery...I am I and You are You." Wonderful thoughts don't you think?

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Steve e-mail February 14

Happy Valentine's Day Peggy (from your (non-secret) secret admirer who thinks about you alot,... me...oops!) ♥ ;-)

Just wanted to mention that your tenderness and charm shows greatly in your images...your enchanting portraits with their economy of content cropped just so...and stardust in your beautiful long, wavy brown hair mesmerizes me. ;-)

Steve researched Tea Rose online and considered purchasing and sending directly to Peggy the largest he could find. Then he said to himself, "Isn't that going a bit too far?" The e-mail message would have to suffice. "I'm going nuts," he thought.

Peggy e-mail: I drive a burgundy Jeep with a Sea Shepard sticker on the back window, just so you can be on the lookout, next time we are in each other's neighborhoods.

Steve e-mail: Not only are you a magical photographer, but a really cool person too!

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Steve e-mail February 23

But will I ever, in my wildest dreams, get to meet you or even just talk live on the phone? I really don't bite humans. And I really have felt bad/rude/paranoid/dumb ever since I balked at exchanging cell #'s. So here is my work # instead, 608-421-1377.

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Steve e-mail Mar. 1: Was listening real close to the words of Train's song, "Drops of Jupiter" while watching their video on YouTube, and discovered these lines. Thought it kind of ironic since we had recently discussed the Starbuck's latte you had:

"Can you imagine no first dance, freeze-dried romance? Five-hour phone conversation? The best soy latte that you ever had, and me?" Well, there must be a vegetarian in ?that group!

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Steve e-mail April 10

Are you getting all these messages? I feel like I'm invisible.

Peggy e-mail April 10

Yes, and thank you! I don't check my messages everyday. >><<

Steve e-mail April 19

I'm at my work # for the next couple of hours to chat if you wish.... just would love to reconnect. FB isn't the same without you to talk to.

Steve e-mail April 20:

Hi Peggy,

I seem to think from your FB comments that perhaps lately things haven't been so good for my favorite super creative vegetarian wildlife photographer. It seems that you may have had surgery and are on meds that have changed your taste buds too!

I realize you don't check your FB messages that often (and, of course I always leave you thousands!), so perhaps when you get a chance, I'd love to hear from you by e-mail. Is there anything I can do??Your friend, Steve

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Steve e-mail April 21:

Just want to repeat the comment I left under your fabulous forest photo last December: "You have the courage to find the true and the beautiful and share it generously with the world. The marriage of your images and quotes is profound. Nice work!"

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Steve e-mail Apr 25:

Hello? Peggy?? Peggy, if I have said anything or done anything to hurt you, I sincerely apologize. I know I communicate too often, so perhaps I have become a pest. Please just let me know and I'll deal with it.

I just feel that ever since I balked at giving you my cell number a couple of months ago that you have been very brief with your comments. I think of you as a friend and have greatly appreciated our correspondence. Through you I have learned to appreciate and respect all of nature more than ever. Heck, I find myself staring at birds and their various activities, whereas in the recent past I wouldn't look at any of them for more than a few seconds. Now I try to understand them and admire the beauty in even the common sparrow.

And so, with this e-mail, I'm hoping to see if you will at least respond and let me know how I stand as a friend...or not. I've enjoyed all our "talks" and seeing your work on Facebook....and I have been totally happy that you found me. I would hope that we could continue as friends.

Steve e-mail April 25: "You never said good bye" - I just don't understand. Can you give me a clue? me

>><<?Steve e-mail April 26: I feel invisible again. How the heck ARE you!?

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May 14, e-mail message from Peggy Irish:

Please stop emailing me. I blocked you on Facebook. I stopped all contact with you, yet you persist. It really ought to be clear by now

that I do not want to be communicating with you. You have made me extremely uncomfortable.

Just stop.

>><<?Steve instantly began a sweat and found his fingers frozen hovering over the keyboard. He read it again, " I am blocking you on FB. I no longer want to communicate with you.You have made me extremely uncomfortable."

Steve stared in disbelief. No, this isn't possible. He quickly logged on to Facebook

Facebook Entry, May 14, 2012 Steve Evans to Peggy Irish
PRIVATE MESSAGE:

Fearing he may have triggered another of her her panic disorders, and worried that somehow he might be responsible for any harm she might do to herself, his first response was to write:

"I apologize for making you uncomfortable. I had no idea. I have only ever wished the best for you. Even though we never got to reunite, I have felt a friendship I will always cherish. Again, I am very sorry if I have hurt you in any way. I will miss your remarkable intelligence, beautiful images and your kindness. I will stop all communications."

He clicked Enter to send it.

FACEBOOK: You can no longer message Peggy Irish. Learn more.

>><<?Facebook had no result for her name. She was gone. He was truly blocked.?

Tossing in bed later that night he realized this person meant a lot to him. But what could he have said? Perhaps he became too nagging with all of his requests for a response. He only knew about her existence for a mere 14 months and yet he became fascinated with everything he learned about her. Those months felt like years of correspondence and shared feelings and thoughts. This action of hers was curiously disturbing to him. He got a quick tinge of excitement remembering he has her e-mail address, yet, just as quickly he felt he must respect her wishes and let her go.

He went over the things he knew. She is 39. Single. Living with her mom who relies on her for help. Works in Accounting somewhere. Never revealed her place of work. Has two cats and a rabbit. Plays guitar and recorder. Challenged him often in FB Scrabble and ALWAYS won. Describes herself as "a vegetarian, atheist, musician, birder, wildlife rehabber. Nice person. :-)" Loves photography and Tea Rose Eau de Toilette. Performs bird counts for a national organization. She created her own DIY Etsy-like, on-line custom jewelry business called "Beautiful Emma Stones", being a nod to Arizona native and actress, Emma Stone, as well as her Grandmother, Emma Longstreet Parker who inspired Peggy when she was small, watching her Grandmother create stunning handmade sequined gowns for high society folks. A large portion of Peggy's proceeds goes directly to organizations that help abused, neglected animals. Even though her mom and dad are alive, as well as a brother; at Christmastime she is neglected. She has said, essentially, she has no family. Ironically, he read in a FB comment she made to someone, that she swore that she would never have children.

To Steve she appeared extremely talented and extremely sad. Her bouts of panic made her afraid of new people. They weren't to be trusted until a long, slow process of consideration and familiarization. She always had to give a tremendous amount of thought and analysis to the possibility of being somewhere where she could not control the outcome. Like a woodland bird, if you came too close, a startle response would be triggered. Once startled, the bird is unlikely to allow you within range again.

>>>>><<<<<<?"Could you shut the window?" Sarah asked from the depths of her pillow. His wife's voice shattered his stream of thought so abruptly, he felt a sudden pang of childish guilt, like sneaking cookies from the jar of childhood. Sarah was totally unaware of his somewhat flirtatious correspondence with Peggy. He just felt it was better that way. Peggy was his FB "friend" just like any other. They were as physically close as a fingertip on a plastic

keyboard. There was a kind of thrill in keeping it private. Besides, Sarah had her own friends as well. He never pried about them.

"No prob." Steve mumbled as he got up to pull down the sash. As he reached he noticed his hands bathed in the soft blue moonlight permeating throughout the bedroom. This gave an eerie feeling while thinking about Peggy alone somewhere calling for wolves or birds in her neighboring fields. She often said she could communicate with them.

"Steve!" Sarah's voice cut a sharp slice into his thinking. "What's taking so long? Get back to bed already." Before he could respond, he froze into a state of momentary paralysis. This is the pang of mental injury which also sends Peggy into non-action when faced with decisions. The kind of decisions that weigh the consequences of risk. With the birds, cats, foxes, wolves, she could move effortlessly among thousands of consequences which could suffer any or all of them together through a myriad of life or death trials.

"Steve!!"

"Okay, I'm coming."

Sarah turned over, with a determined half-roll, snapping sheets up around her neck. Steve could only think about Peggy and his loss and what an amazing person she was. But he could not help inquiring of his own mind as to what kind of person he really was as well. Why should he miss her so much? He is completely happy with his life and loves his wife. But Peggy was a new, enchanting mystery, calling herself, The Dryad (forest nymph). His fascinations were endless, but he knew he must cut deeper into his own motives. After all, he is 19 years her senior. Okay, so her talents and kindnesses were remarkable. He couldn't really explain it to himself and so became more ashamed that he allowed himself to let admiration become a kind of love. He closed his eyes to try to sleep and heard himself saying, "I miss you...don't do this to me...don't reject me."

>>>><<<<<

LIFE AFTER BEING BLOCKED

Typing her name still brought zero results. He will not be able to see her images or comments unless she un-blocks him. How likely

that was he had no idea. Only a hope that she would miss his chat enough to realize she made a mistake. He could only hope, and type her name in everyday. Every hour, or more.

This situation almost seemed as though it was all a cruel joke. Maybe other "Steves" had been duped into admiring this talented nymph and dropped at the slightest whim.

Oddly enough, the hurt of this new darkness was slowly making things brighter now. He was gaining a new clarity about himself and all of his personal relationships. Who are the ones who care? Who are the ones that matter? Who are the ones that show compassion?

He didn't know why it happened, it just happened somehow. He couldn't understand what he was feeling. Couldn't grasp if this was a life-changer. He simply became obsessed and desperate to meet her. See her stand near him. Smell her tea rose scented skin.

"If I could pass this point and go beyond the pain;

If I could just pass this point And do away with this pain,

I know I'll go forward smiling?Instead of going insane." Steve

Evans

>><<

Steve began to wonder what really did matter to him. This was a new kind of hurt. He had never been so bluntly discarded before. He couldn't help himself; he looked for her every time he logged on.

Every time. Every day?Although he barely remembered meeting her in 2007, after

months of staring at her face on her FB Photos Gallery daily, he now felt her presence intimately. Her FB images, when they were not of flora, and dryad-related forest scenes, were always mysterious, almost sad, close-ups of her beautiful face. Self-portraits, mostly in mirrors. Many times in mirrors. With a soft, almost imperceptible smile and a stare as though looking way into the future. And looking with her one eye of green and the other iris blue. Now, whenever he caught a glimpse of a female with beautiful long and wavy chestnut colored hair, he hoped it would be her. If it wasn't, he found that he could transform whatever face peeked out

from the hair...into her face. There were Peggys everywhere. He could not control it.

He looked up from the checkout line in the supermarket and the girl at the register three aisles down, smiling at a paying customer, had THE HAIR. Seconds later, she had THE FACE. He was haunted, but he loved the mind game. Maybe someday would be the jackpot. The real flesh and blood Peggy, speaking to him in person. Apologizing for her act.

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Facebook-Steve Evans - About - Basic Info?Married?58 years of age, married 35 years to Sarah, age 56. Suddenly, this year, became fond of long, wavy brown hair and realized he had allowed himself to be stabbed "deep enough for the ink to go under his skin". Peggy Irish was the only person who caused it and who ever taught him how to make a heart appear using text, and, sadly, also make it disappear using text.

"I really fell for you" Train? "Now you're just somebody that I used to know" Goyte

>><<

Facebook-Peggy Irish - About - Basic Info? - In a Relationship?39 years of age. Peggy Irish was (apparently) NOT "in a relationship". She lives with her ailing mother Eudora. Peggy suffers from what has been termed - panic disorder.

"You're fun." Peggy Irish in a recent post to Steve Evans

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CHAPTER FOUR

The longing continued three months into the cut-off. He became aware he was desperate for her affection and couldn't stop himself. Googled her name every day, hoping for a true hit. Some link maybe. Some text. Anything to go on. But the only accurate information that always came up told him who she was living with, their ages and names. Of course, it was her 73 year old mom and her.

Then one day something gave him the idea to log out of Facebook and use the words, "Facebook Peggy Irish Facebook" in a new Google search.

BAM! SCORE! He thought he had completely circumvented the Facebook block algorithm. Upon closer inspection, however, he realized that what he achieved was a list of instances in which she left comments on various Facebook pages. He clicked one of the links to her comment, and was brought to the FB page. He was sent to the actual page, containing her Profile thumbnail image, and her entire comment with the date and time of its posting!

This new triumph meant several things. She was still using FB. Still being herself. And each time he found a different page, her thumbnail image changed. One he actually was able to enlarge and hurriedly printed it out before the earth could move and cause a computer crash. He was very excited to own it. It was a precious gift to himself of an image of her he had never seen before. He would treasure it forever.

Even though, in recent times past, while communicating with her, Steve never realized Peggy never displayed any affection for him. It was purely all in his head at every session. To him Peggy gave him a feeling of hope. Hope that, yes, there is a consciousness among humankind that exists to be good and caring. People such as her, he felt, will be, and now are, the only sane stewards of the earth and all the life upon it.

A thunderstorm was raging both outside and in Steve's mind. He began living a daily mental fog of fictions. He was convinced he should make efforts to restore the relationship. A loud crack of thunder jarred his thinking. He needed to get to her house to talk in person. Yes, in person might work. Perhaps he could bring her flowers.

On the card he wrote, "Dear Peggy, why do you mean so much to me?"

I'm haunted by your absence, my conscience chasing after me for an answer. I guess I had no right to, but as the saying goes, I have fallen for you.

Love, Steve" He wanted to add, but couldn't:

"I don't understand why I was so susceptible. Everything at that very time you unexpectedly introduced yourself to me, everything

was going great for me. Everything. I love my wife dearly. Then you looked at me when I wasn't aware and suddenly one day I'm looking at you. At your beautiful face, filling the entire monitor screen. I check on your face, for new images, more times than I dare to mention.

And I'm thinking this is a weird, new taboo for me. A type of correspondence read about only in supermarket tabloids. The kind of relationship that had the potential to escalate out of control for one or both parties. But you didn't think that at all."

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The house seemed empty. The porch quiet. Steve was aware he was now at the threshold of what could be an extraordinary adventure. A turning point. Actually, he began to now think...a desperate, sad measure. He straightened two of the lilies as he walked towards the door. Before he could knock he saw a poorly-shaved, bald, pudgy man's face being slowly revealed as a hand moved a curtain aside from the door's diamond cut window frame. The face stared glaringly at the flowers in Steve's hands. The door swung open abruptly, revealing a dark interior.

"Who are you flowerboy?"

Steve nervously gathered his composure to answer this intimidating bully, stunned at the angry demeanor.

"Uh, I'm Steve Evans. I'm here to see Peggy."

"Thought so," and with that the topless, overweight and ?sweaty figure stepped out and smacked Steve hard across the face, knocking his glasses off and sending Steve crashing swiftly down onto one knee. The man drove his sneakered foot into the box of fallen flowers, grabbing Steve by his shirt collar.

"Get your flowery ass outta here and never come back, pretty boy. Peggy don't want nothin' to do with you. Get it?"

He shoved Steve's shoulder down hard so Steve lost his balance falling onto his glasses. The door slammed. He could hear the lock being engaged forcefully. Steve quickly gathered his glasses and the mess of flowers, trembling in the process. There was the loud buzzing of cicadas ignoring his immense situation of humiliation,

shock and pain. The same humiliation, shock and pain he felt when his monitor screen burned the final words from Peggy into his eyes. Sitting there that day, that eternal moment, surrounded by co-workers flitting about blabbing about the mundane things important to them. But he, the happy guy, Steve, sitting among the unknowing, caught in an explosion of frozen emotions. His love game extinguished as he watched the text defy him to read anything other than what it said.

He began driving home. Who was that guy? he ruminated as he rubbed his swollen cheek. He decided at a red light to stop first in Shorty's Bar instead. He sat at the bar reading the now crumpled card from the flower box. He must've read it twenty times.... "why do you mean so much to me?" Perhaps he could find the answer in the shots of tequila he lined up on top of a twenty.

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CHAPTER FIVE?The pewter sky gathered leaves and birds, twigs and dirt ,

combining them all in loud windy swirls just outside Peggy's front door. This did not discourage her. In fact, it was going to be a delight to share nature's crisp breath and visit the trees.?Putting more flashcards into her camera bag, Peggy slung her camera and binoculars over her favorite maroon hooded-sweatshirt. Walking to the door, she paused to get her house keys off the hook on the frame of the ornate wooden hall mirror. She hesitated a second to take a final look at her image. She raised her camera in a slow, exacting path up to her eyes, and aiming at her reflection, she executed herself through the immaculate glass lens.

Comfortable in knowing she had pixels of herself with her, she began her long walk into the fern-carpeted forest. The long-haired Dryad was about to, once again, communicate with life forms that meant more to her than humans.

As The Dryad slowly walks, she ruminates about why she loves these walks and thinks to herself: "I like nature photography. I love photographing the birds. It's a kind of solitary exploration...the lone eye, the lone lens, the lone stranger on both ends.

All my learned techniques get applied, but the critical moment laughs at them all, daring me to apply them all to successfully capture and record a prize image. The looking, the timely pressing of a small button, is the mechanics. The results of the endeavor almost always results in a surprise. Sometimes good. Sometimes mediocre. Sometimes glorious. Sometimes failed.

Your heart beats, each one filling with increased hope. Hope that the fluid moment allows itself to become a permanent gift to the world. These animals that have generously allowed me to go home with their images, become a real part of me. Each time I look at the images, it is like appreciating a family album, she thought. I truly respect and love these creatures."

Her walks, like this one, she could handle easily. Her walks, her talks, her relationships with humans were tripped up and never fully nourished because of her anxieties. Her panic disorder.

>>>><<<<?Peggy never knew about the incident on the porch with Steve. Her brother was not even supposed to be at her house. He was there while she was at work, using his old key to get in. At 46, Manny Irish had passed his prime in both Karate and Kendo competitions.

Manny always told everyone he came from a family of humble origins. Had a bit of a rough time in school with bullies and such, so started taking Isshin ryu Karate. Competed in that for several years, won a world amateur championship and held it for a few years. Then he got the urge to learn the sword. Moved around a lot and took Kendo wherever he found a school. Currently, living in Nevada with 8 years of Kendo experience this is the first year he is competing in it and also the first time in the world championships. A recent comment from a Kendo forum online:

("Years ago, in the early to mid 90's there was an amateur, full contact Martial artist by the name of Manny Irish. I saw quite a few of his matches and was in awe of this guy. Anyway he disappeared from the fighting circuit in the late 90's after 11 world title defences. I can't find this guy online anywhere but I have heard rumors he has

resurfaced and is now competing in Kendo. Does ANYONE have info on this guy?? If so please let me know.")

>>>>><<<<<?As Steve rubbed his cheek to feel if the swelling went down, he asked himself "Why, if she was so frustrated with me, did she "poke" me so often on FB? And why did I deserve a "poke" from that guy? And who is that guy?"

The third tequila was producing the desired numbing effect as Steve no longer felt the pain. He ordered a beer and took it with him over to a nook with cushioned seats in a dark corner. After a long pull on the cold brew, he relaxed and found himself mumbling into a tiresome stupor...

An alcohol infused dream brings Steve back to a boy's camp, maybe he was 15 again. Arnold Tropp had challenged him in boxing. It was to be a match to decide who wins the heart of Wendy Steiner over at the girl's camp nearby. They met at the annual summer dance and competed for her favor. Arnold's one fist, the one with only four fingers, slammed its gloved strength into Steve's unguarded temple and sent him flying down into the mats. The counselors said the match was over. Balloons were escaping from an opened car door. Wendy, Peggy and Sarah exited from the car.

They smiled at each other and stared at Steve, now dressed as a clown with plastic flowers sticking out of his over-sized clown shoes. He gazed at Peggy and asked, "Why do you send people to hit?me? Have you been opening my e-mails? Why can't I poke you back on Facebook? What have I done?" The dream abruptly ends as a large, cold, wet beer stain slowly spreads over his shirt and startles him awake.

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At work on the following day Steve is giving blood at the annual company blood drive. Scattered among various pieces of literature on the table with the cookies and juice Steve eyes an Emotions Anonymous pamphlet. "Okay, Mr. Evans, you're good to go," says the attendant. He places the EA pamphlet into his pocket and falls flat on his face...

While unconscious, Steve dreams that despite being self-effacing, Peggy is deliciously dressed in a navy and white polka dotted thin summer dress, hair gently moving in rhythm with a tea rose scented wind. She opens the door to her Jeep. "I've told you Steve, I have relationship anxiety. Panic disorders come unannounced." She touched his face tenderly, outlining its shape with her long, natural fingernails. "I do like you. From the very first time I saw you." He felt alarmingly alive, wishing he could touch her also, but the more the desire heated up, the more she seemed to drift and float away from him. "Can we just go on a photo safari somewhere together sometime? That's all. Just to hang together, shoot, talk, explore?" Peggy slowly extends her shapely leg out from the vehicle and makes a graceful exit. He can distinctly see and hear her high heels hit the cafeteria floor. It seems as though all the workers at the blood stations turn their heads simultaneously to see her get out.

"Mr. Evans, are you okay? Steve, wake up!" >>>><<<<

Back at his desk, Steve begins researching "relationship anxiety" online. He couldn't have been at fault. It must have been a single episode that drove her to end the friendship. Why, he thought, am I tangled up with somebody else's life for no logical reason?

He also wondered who the heck hit him that day at her house. Her father, her brother, a....lover! Oh my God, she is listed as "in a relationship". This whole idea of relationships was getting him nauseous. He forced himself to immediately stop this worrisome train of thought reminding himself of an observation he has been building on. Peggy always posted self-portraits. She never spoke of a close friend or husband. Was always in pictures alone. It has always baffled him, yet he was too respectful of her privacy to ask her about her actual status.

He opened an e-mail from Sarah: "We are going to buy that painting from the guy on Craigslist tomorrow, so make sure we have gas in you car please."?This was a town Steve knew to be close to where Peggy lives.

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CHAPTER SIX?The morning Steve got sucker-punched was when Manny was in town, unannounced, and using his sister's house to get cleaned up after his trip.?Peggy was at work.

Fresh out from a shower and wrapped in his damp towel, scoundrel that he is, Manny could not help himself but to snoop around the house. He found himself lingering near Peggy's computer, intrigued by a yellow stick-em post note he noticed attached to the monitor frame. Written on it appeared to be a shopping list, however, the last item was not avacados or lemons, but the words, "MUST BLOCK from FB - Steve Evans". It was underlined twice and highlighted in neon orange marker. Manny laughed with a short grunt as several water droplets splashed down onto the keyboard. "Humpf" he mumbled, "Must be a real bastard."

Dressed in the latest sweats, but with no shirt on, and exuding the annoying aroma of the Aqua Velva he was saturated in, he placed his Bono-style shades up onto his head, and determined it was time to leave. He lifted up his Fossil briefcase, pausing long enough to lovingly run his hand over the fine grain hide as though it were an obedient pet, then gathered his duffel bag and Kendo shinai case and got ready to leave. A thought popped into his mind, making him snicker. He hesitated at the door and opened the briefcase. Laughing to himself, he pulled out an 8"X10" color glossy of himself. With a Sharpie he quickly scribbled across the chest area-

"Thanks for the use of your shower sis. Your Big Bro-
The Mansta."

?He leaned the photo carefully against a bowl of apples on the kitchen table, grabbed an apple, and almost choked while taking a bite and chuckling to himself. He was about to exit when he heard footsteps on the porch. With a sticky, wet hand, he slowly moved Estate Leather Portfolio aside the curtain to see out the front door. There was a man standing there with a box of flowers.

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Steve e-mail - Mon, 11 Jun 2012:

Steve decided it was time to break the silence.? "I know you won't answer this, and I've told myself I would respect your request to

discontinue communications, however, I made the mistake of trying to apologize in-person and was wondering if you would kindly explain what happened. Just who was that guy that hit me on your porch? He sounded like he knew me? What made him so mad to do that? I really would like to know. And since I have your attention, I just want to say here that I really miss you. Steve? P.S. "It's such a shame our friendship had to end." Prince - Purple Rain"

Peggy e-mail - Mon, 11 June 2012: "After I blocked you, you gave up so easily, not even a verbal fight to defend yourself, to win me back. I do have a great fondness for you. My panic disorder got the best of me then. I get bitchy like that. I do care for you.

What guy? My porch? When?" Steve gasped aloud, shoved away from the computer, and stared

at her words with his mouth open. A gurgle erupted from his stomach. Acid rose to his throat. He headed to the kitchen for a drink of water.

What the fuck!?! "Steve, get a grip. End the obsession", he told himself. He reached into the vegetable drawer, grabbed Tofurky slices, then rye bread, Veganesse, a tomato and a beer. He rubbed his chin and discovered he hadn't shaved in days.

The rain outside peppered his aluminum patio awning with apocalyptic resonance, pissing him off and creating more reflective thinking. He began to shake. He added a shot glass to the lunch and filled it with his favorite 1800 tequila. He cut the sandwich. The aluminum bullets grew louder. He sucked off something from his thumb. Blood? No, the fake mayo stuff. Pausing, he dropped the

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knife and leaned heavily on the cutting board. Bending forward, head down and closing his eyes, he felt himself welling up. The tears rolled down like heavy agave nectar slowly entering into the corners of his mouth. The rain, in contrast, shouted with noisy staccato beat, unnerving him. It felt like a form of punishment. He could not help thinking of the words he just read, going over and over in his head: "...not even a verbal fight to defend yourself, to win me back?" He turned to the sink and threw up.

Deciding instead to get cleaned up, he went into the bathroom to shave, turning on the radio for some music to chill with. But his thoughts still rambled on.

"I was the one who foolishly told myself she really loves me every time I got "poked". I was the one who became addicted. Maybe I'm crazy? Maybe she's crazy! It's all folly!"

Being blocked had tested Steve on many levels; spiritual, emotional, even physical. Her withdrawal from him was teaching him a lot about himself. After all, he reasoned, it started as an accidental, new, different, exhilarating experience. "But...?...if I could've made her stay I wouldn't be wandering, lost, in search of some coherent meaning to my place in life. The fact is, this situation needs closure if I'm going to keep my sanity, my mind and yes, my wife. This new turn of events demands a response. Begs for one! It was as if she had now teased me by confessing there actually was the potential for us to get closer. It's arousing a deeper desire for her friendship."

He lathered his face with shaving cream, picked up the razor and, turning up the volume to a Michael Jackson song, he stared at his image as though for the first time. "Who is this man in the mirror?"

As he uncovered his face with each stroke, he began to recall what a co-worker had said some time ago, and yes, he had to agree with him, that he very much did pass for an older clone of Phil Dunphy from the television sitcom Modern Family. And now he's in a situation and it's not a com...

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He decided to wait before responding to her questions.

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On her belly in red dirt, on the morning she went out on her photo safari, Peggy manually focuses her lens to capture neighboring Colorado's native state bird, a black and white Lark Bunting. "SO elegant!" she thinks, "His call seems to say, "hey-hey-hey-hey-I'M-A-PRETTY-bird-I'M-A-PRETTY-bird-AREN'T-I-AREN'T-I??"

Nearby, out of sight, a deer watches her. Taking a few shots of the bird, Peggy then gets up on her knees to rise just as the deer

attempts to leap over her body. They collide, sending Peggy tumbling twice over in pain as the dust cloud above her

face is pierced by the ghost-like, firm, taupe-haired belly of the animal sailing over her body. Peggy wasn't afraid; only startled, yet disappointed her camera might have been harmed. Her ribs ached sharply for a split second, then not, then nothing...

Peggy fell into a dream where she was talking to herself...? I guess it's been a long time in coming she thought. Rising carefully and slowly, she looked in the direction of the deer. Gone. Turning ahead, Peggy took several steps and was at the edge of the canyon. One of her favorite overlook spots. Holding out her arms she yelled out, "But I'm alive! I'm alive!" Her echo made her smile. Other birds scrambled out of the nearby brush and life was vibrant once again. She turned to checking her camera for damage. Zooming in on the last image revealed a blurry face behind a bush of screaming deers. The image suddenly transforms into a slow-mo video re-focusing the almost-hidden, mysterious face. It was Steve. He fell down, mixing

deep into the layers of forest duff. He began to sink. Peggy screamed in horror. Steve vanished.

She woke. A film of sweat coated her forehead. She felt a lump under her chest stabbing her. It was her camera, now painted in smudges of red clay, dust, and weeds. It was intact. The deer had run off. Peggy was pissed.

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After their Craigslist purchase, Sarah and Steve stopped at a nearby yard sale.

As Sarah lifts a framed print of a bird signed "P. Irish, The Dryad" out of a bin, Steve sees someone in the distance who looks like Peggy leave a hardware store in a burgundy Jeep.

"Steve, this is the one I saw before. I think I want to get it. Do you like it as much as I do?"

Sarah holds the framed print of Colorado's state bird up for Steve to judge, completely blocking his view of the Jeep.

"Steve? What do you think?"

Moving his head slowly to one side he focuses on the Jeep pulling away. The rear window has the Sea Shepard decal. It is confirmed. It is Peggy.

"Steve, I'm waiting. What are you looking at?" "Oh yeah, love it. Let's get it."

Sighing, Steve tries to remind himself that at the end of the day, family is everything. Sarah is the love of his life. She's promised to give him a lifetime supply of happiness. He walks towards the disappearing Jeep, mulling over the words in the Panic

Disorder brochure he picked up the other day:?" ...strangers you interact with in passing may have lasting impressions and even change you as a person."

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CHAPTER SEVEN

Steve decided this statement applied to both parties. It works both ways. He resolved to try another e-mail.

Steve e-mail- Sat. June 16, 2012 8:30 p.m.

Peggy, thank you for responding. Allow this to be the beginning of "a

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verbal fight", not so much to defend myself, but instead to mend any misunderstanding. I do want to "win you back." Sometime in mid- May, about two weeks after you had set up a FB block, and asked me to stop communicating with you, I came to your house to bring you flowers. A guy came out of your house, smacked me and told me to scram. Are you really "in a relationship" as you have posted on FB?

Peggy e-mail- Sat. June 16, 2012 9:45 p.m.

This makes me really depressed, frustrated, embarrassed and pissed off. I learned after the fact, that my big-shot brother used my house as a way-station between competitions. OMFG. I am going to slice him good with his own sword. That bastard! Are you alright?

I do VERY MUCH care for you Steve. Thinking back, I had just reached a point, triggered by my affliction, where our growing,

terrific relationship suddenly erupted into an uncontrollable anxiety for me. I easily become frightened by the fear of losing control. You can't see me, so when it is occurring, I sweat like a pig, I feel faint, I shake, my heart pounds rapidly. It is an intense discomfort that strikes suddenly, even in a safe and familiar place or situation where nothing even vaguely suggests a threat. It makes leading a normal life nearly impossible. But, you know, I do believe people are meant to meet on account of what they have in common.

I apologize big time. Can you find it in your heart to accept my apology and start over? If so, I really think, next to a phone call, the emails work best for me. Give it a go?

Steve e-mail- Sat. June 16, 2012 10:10 p.m.

OF COURSE! I've missed these exchanges with you immensely!

Gulping saliva, Steve reflected about the day he stepped onto Peggy's porch. He was right about it being a new threshold. Now that he traversed it he is deeper into her world of sights, sounds and experiences. The only thing about it all is that he must remind himself each time he sees her image, her face...a mysteriously seductive face with nostalgic beauty and an air of sadness, that this

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friendship is just that. A friendship. His flirtations must stop...but the spell she cast was extremely hard to break. Her every comment or e-mail propels him forward like a horse after a carrot. Only in this case, he chases her chestnut hair, her mind, her soul and, he had to admit...all of her.

So let me bring you up to date with Steve. We actually purchased a framed photo of yours at a yard sale. It's the Colorado state bird, the Lark Bunting. Great shot Peggy. How far from home it was! I read somewhere though, that it does venture into Arizona almost on a regular basis. Sarah was the one who spotted it and fell in love with it immediately. It says a lot about your respect for life to patiently wait to record for us all the wonderful beauty we sometimes either take for granted or don't even notice.

Peggy e-mail 10:22 p.m.

Well as Julia (Butterfly) Hill said during her California tree-sitting protest up in a thousand year old redwood: "I am hawk, I am eagle, I am all birds strong, beautiful and free. I am woman, I bleed, I'm real, I'm all things you want to ignore, but now I'm in your face. I'm loud, you can no longer ignore." She was one smart gal who knew when to stand up, and how, and - for what.

But as for the photograph, I wanted this image to somehow symbolize how all animals need to be recognized and respected as a life form having an inherent right to live unharmed. I remember now one of my favorite childhood memories. Climbing a tree in our backyard. In my backpack, I had my favorite stuffed animal along with me for courage. I climbed as high as the tree had branches. I sat with my stuffie sharing cookies and juice and we watched bird after bird flying by and checking us out. With each new breeze we held each other tight. I woke up to my mother shouting my name from below and we climbed down from such a wonderful magic atmosphere of cobalt blue and neon pink...mmm, I loved coming down from the cool late dusk sky and into mom's warm arms waiting below.

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If that tree was still there, I'd go back and do it again. But I'm getting emotional now and off topic I think.

Realizing she was a little upset, Steve didn't push for answers on his other questions.

Steve

That's alright, it's part of your make up. I love hearing about your experiences. That photo shows a lot of your talent as a photographer and skills as a birder. You do have the eyes of a red-tailed hawk! BTW-How is your mom?

Peggy

Eudora? Oh, she's getting along okay. You're very kind. But hey, before I forget, I wanna give you this tip. Please remember to always snip those closed loops on plastic bags, and tie them in knots so as not to be a danger to wildlife. Promise?

>>>>><<<<<

Sunday afternoon Peggy receives a phone call from her friend Eva, a.k.a Happily Eva Afta, the red-haired, tall, thin, thirty-something hoola hoop gyrator with a smile as wide as the hoops she surrounds herself with. In the back of Peggy's mind, she recalls the text in that brochure, "These dialogues with strangers can have a lasting, thought-provoking impression on your soul. They have the potential to change you as a person."

"Peggy, are you listening closely? You said you were interested in getting involved." Eva was the "PR" gal for VOW, a burgeoning radical environmental group in Tuscon. She is sitting on a dusty rock, a meeting place nicknamed Eagle Rock, outside her house and holding her cellphone to her ear with her shoulder while tying her sneakers for the tenth time today.

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"I mean, we need to get this going. The new person usually makes the big move." she paused. "That's you hon."

"Read her the note Eva," said Winky, her boyfriend leaning on the same shoulder to hear the phone conversation. Winky was always impatient with projects. It was his need to rush that cost him an eye in a monkeywrenching accident three years ago. He refuses to wear a patch and instead has a tattoo of a saguaros cactus on his eyelid so he can give you a surprise needling with every blink.

"Okay. Listen up Peg, Winky wants me to read you the note: "We are gonna be like a hurricane, a tsunami. And we are coming after you! Wilderness has a right to exist for its own sake!"

Eva and Winky, along with friends Earth Buffalo, Kate Justice?and Janet Planet, (since their first meeting each adopted a forest name for themselves) are seasoned with dashes of philosophy, wikipediaisms, art, metaphysics, camping, climbing, kayaking, veganism, clandestine videotaping and more. Their intrepid, combined personalities work seamlessly together. Their moves, thoughts and strategic tactics extremely intuitive. They are a team refusing to be shut out of the decision-making process which

determines the fate of the forests and the land they love. This is a group bonded together so extremely tight that ice-frozen velcro would seem easy to separate in comparison. They see themselves as the voice of a new consciousness. They knew, with Peggy The Dryad along, they could tackle better the pressing issues at hand. Foremost of which was to change human behaviour; consciousness-raising. Disable the clear-cutting efforts and disable the imminent environmental apocalypse. The real eco-terrorists they felt, were the government-sanctioned industries bypassing environmental laws with illegal timber sales destroying wilderness, animal habitats and leaving ugly scars in the landscape. Eva, Winky, along with their friends believed themselves to have a special role to play in history to head off the biological crisis raging in Arizona. For starters.

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Eva cupped one hand over the mouthpiece and quickly whispered to Winky through her full cherry-scented glossy lips, "She's gonna do it!" Winky smiled and after inhaling twice rapidly to capture Eva's fruity breath, said triumphantly, "As sure as nails grow on fingers and toes...we got us a serious activist."

>>>><<<<<

Peggy e-mail 18 June, 2012 7:30 p.m.:

Steve I have a secret project coming up to force myself to do more. To break out of this disorder. Do you want to hear about it? You may want to get involved. I know you like to quote songs so as Fleetwood Mac sings, "you could go your own way. Call it another lonely day."...it's up to you. It might be up your alley.

Steve e-mail 8:17 p.m.

Sounds intriguing. Tell me more.

Peggy email 8:32 p.m.

"I'm going to push the limits of my panic disorder to further a good cause. I think having moral support would be helpful. I've joined a group of eco-raiders similar to what Earth First used to be. Soon, we don't have the date yet, we will...."

Interrupting his reading, Steve's cell phone rings. He looks down and quickly yanks it out from his pocket. It's work. Annoyed, he

slams it on his desk unanswered. Looking up he sees Sarah standing in front of him, hands on hips, robe tightly strapped and brushing her teeth loudly, while managing to ask, "Are -we -going to -bed - now?"?She needed to spit, but waited for his response. Jolted back to guilty reality, he swirls around in his chair, kills the power to the computer monitor and says, "Let's go, I'm beat ."

>>>><<<<?Next morning, at the Irish home, Peggy rolls over into a ray of

sunlight cut sharp by a tiny gap in her pink curtain. Her computer pulsating a bobbing icon indicating a new email made her jump up to respond. Dragging her blanket with her, she shuffled barefoot and sat down and began clicking.

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Steve email 19 June, 2012 9:30 a.m.

Sorry, got interrupted last night.?>><<

Peggy email 20 June, 2012 10:26am Totally, no prob. Hmm, I think I should finally give you my cell number. Can WE handle this?

>>>><<<<

CHAPTER EIGHT - Kenaf

"We have roots both in the past in our ancestors and the future with our grandchildren, and grandchildren and grandchildren. This intersection we find ourselves in, of time and space and consciousness, we must responsibly mediate as we are here now as a lens gathering a diffuse light approaching us which we must focus as a compassionate lens might do, revealing a green world, healthy, peaceful, loving with only an ancient memory of war and waste of resources." Barry Barkan

For Steve, the best thing about going to work was driving the forty- five minute commute in the dark at 2:15 a.m. No traffic hassles. With his shift beginning at four, arriving at 3:00 a.m., with coffee and bagels for him and fellow Meteorologist Jack Simmons, he had plenty of time to debrief on the weather for the current day and Jack's complaints about his neighbors.

Driving over mountain-shrouded highways and tuned always to the news radio station which employs him, KVOA-News 4 Tucson, Steve turns up the volume. "Everything But Love" by Jeff Bridges is playing.

Turning a wide bend, radio static begins, lingering for a half mile and then clears abruptly.

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"...and imagining yourself in a new comfort zone walking in our plush, comfortable moccasins by TeePee Town; only \$125.99!"

Static-

"...continuing our interview with Tucson's own spokesman for the controversial group of local activists known as the Voices of the Wilderness or VOW, we welcome to the microphone Earth Buffalo Brown, or Earth Buffalo as he is called by his followers. VOW members, we are informed, take a kind of marriage oath or vow committing themselves to honor and obey the needs of the Earth. Today we are very honored to have Earth Buffalo with us, who has a thorough knowledge of up and coming environmentally-reasonable lifestyle alternative building methods. Earth Buffalo also has the uncanny ability to hear sounds from many miles away mostly undetected by the average person. He has heard the distressful sounds from a wild horse, lying miles away sick on its side deep in the prairie. The breathing, he has said, was like the sound of a distant thunderstorm, rumbling unexpectedly, fierce one moment and rolling gently along seconds later. He hears his own blood and some say he even hears the earth rotating."

Radio Interviewer Lance Cooper: "It has been said, humans have minds so surrounded and wrapped up neatly by the outer body of flesh, that the needs of the flesh seem to always come first. That is, you know, before the mind gets a say to enforce anything more reasonable. Seems like a constant struggle. What is your take on that idea as it relates, if it does at all, to the actions and relationship of humankind to our planet?"

Earth Buffalo: "The Earth, as primary giver, governs all life systems. Earth is the primary text as it were. The only way to save the planet, and the human population, is to encourage humans to act on a return to a more balanced relationship with other species.

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Humans should regulate their desires. Take time to look inside and out to the habits at work against us. The apathy has to stop. Furthermore, the Earth is so unique that its atmosphere is totally chemically unstable and is maintained only by the continuing action of living things. Trees breathe out what we breathe in."

Lance: Okay, I get that and you know, just recognizing that restoring the Earth will make life better and heal us at the same time as it is, of course, renewing itself , what actions do you recommend we take today?

E.B.: "We can immediately adopt what Albert Schweitzer has termed, a reverence for life. It can and is being done by more and more people putting this into practice today. We, my tribe and followers, are eating plants, instead of animals' parts and by-products. Ending the exploitation inherent in animal agriculture is the first and healthiest and easiest action benefiting mankind and furthering a distinctly moral progress for humanity.

"Right on", Steve thought.

Lance: "Uh, ahem, well, yeah, uh, okay. (pausing). You know, I hadn't thought about that." (awkward silence)

E.B.: Consider this Lance, even in the rain forests of Northern Thailand, there are "ecology monks" actually ordaining trees to be Buddhist monks. The trees they ordain are then protected from being clear-cut. Since most Thais are Buddhist, they wouldn't cut down a tree they think of as a Buddhist monk."

Lance: That is impressive. I was not aware of that.

E.B.: Here's another you may not know. In the Bihar state of India, people are decorating trees with colorful paintings of Hindu deities such as Krishna, Radha and the like. More than one hundred trees

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have already been painted in the hopes to save them from being cut down. They use a mix of lime, glue and synthetic enamel paints that lasts at least three years. The painting style is an art form known as Madhubani. Not a single painted tree has been cut down."

Lance: "Do you mean, Earth Buffalo, that we should stop all wood production? What about lumber for homes, you know, for shelter? I realize that there already are alternatives for paper, such as tree-free kenaf paper.

E.B.: Yes, the kenaf plant, indigenous to West Africa, and related to cotton and okra, and of the hibiscus mallow family, has been known about since 1940. Kenaf reaches 12-18 feet in 150 days while the common tree plantation tree, the southern pine, takes 14-17 years before it can be harvested. Books, such as David Brower's LET THE MOUNTAINS TALK, LET THE RIVERS RUN, is printed entirely on kenaf. There is also the eco-friendly, tree free paper made from the Lokta plant from the foothills of the Himalayas. Handcrafted in Nepal, it is 100% handmade, by women co-operatives, from the bark of the Daphne plant.

And to answer your question regarding house construction, consider the many alternatives to lumber for framing shelters. Each of us must take time to reflect on our own ethical framework and check to see if it is in alignment with the environmental restoration movement.

I don't mean to sound pessimistic or morbid, but like what befell the animal of my namesake on the prairies of the midwest, we do not have the luxury of stripping the body of earth to leave it wasted and rotting.

Lance: So what then are these alternatives to creating the shell of a house??E.B.: Wood is still the predominant material for creating the shell of a house, but a number of builders have abandoned wood in favor of a variety of newer materials.

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Some builders have switched to blocks made from autoclaved aerated concrete (AAC). AAC blocks take the place of wood, insulation, house wrap, and drywall—all in a single product. The

result is a house that's fire-proof, mold-proof, insect resistant, hypoallergenic, sound-absorptive, and engineered to withstand hurricanes and earthquakes.

Blocks can be cut on-site and laid up somewhat like conventional concrete block.

AAC blocks are not the only alternative. Rastra is a type of insulated concrete form (ICF) made mostly of recycled polystyrene with some cement to form a material the company calls "Thastyron." It's made into hollow-core blocks that are relatively lightweight, can be cut with ordinary handsaw, and glued into place. Once stacked into walls, the blocks are reinforced with steel and filled with concrete to form finished walls. The company reports that 10-in.-thick walls have an R-value of 36.

>>>><<<<?Steve pulls up to his reserved parking space, shuts the radio

thinking that the only good thing man can do for the Earth is leave. He sees co-worker Jack getting out of his Land Rover. Jack beckons him to walk in together.

"I know what you're up to Steve" Jack snickers out of the side of his mouth.

"You got me" says Steve.

"Yeah, you think Ellie wants a little somethin' on the side and you two are meeting every week to have you some fun. Aren't you?"

"Ellie is married and so am I. She likes me and I chat when we meet at the copy machine. That's it dude. Your fantasies need some redirection."

"Well I thought I saw some ass-slapping."?"Can I help it if I have a hero's ass?!"?Spinning the large, heavy glass doors to the radio station, they

enter the building and head for their own workstations.

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Hours later, as he pushed through the same revolving glass doors to exit the station, Earth Buffalo noticed mirrored images of his impeccable pale yellow suit, accented with neon green kerchief and

Crocs, and red bandana neatly wrapped around a full head of long brown and wispy grey hair, half of which hanging as a ponytail. His six foot three image flashed before him in multiple whirling six foot three copies. Could make one nauseous he thought.

Stepping out into a sunlight so crisp and rare, as though reflected off a silver platter, he raised his polarized sunglasses onto his aquiline nose and chiseled cheeks and breathed deeply, as though experiencing fresh air for the first time. Lifting one brow, he placed two fingers to his lips and created a loud whistle sound. A new, and uncommon sound, muffled by the walls of the building, could be heard rising in volume beyond the corner. Obscured by the building, the crescendo of horses hooves, actually four horses hooves, approaching at a medium to fast gallop could now clearly be heard.

Slicing through the intersection, surrounded by a dirty cotton-like dustcloud, is a huge Butterfield Line stagecoach commandeered by his longtime leather-faced Cheyenne friend and Father-in-law, Ben Sheriff Charmer. Pulling up to the curb in a ridiculous commotion of horse snorting, metal clanking, hickory wood wheels grinding, and thorough-braces creaking, and finally culminating with Ben screaming "Hooooahhhhhh thereee!" the coach became instantly available for Earth Buffalo to enter at curbside. "How did it go?" yelled Ben, coughing out the words with cigar-brewed staccato spittle.

Inside the coach, his wife, beautiful Kate Justice, aka Phoenix, opens the door as the handsomely-bronzed forty-two year old steps up quickly into the plush cabin area padded everywhere with a deep, soft maroon velvet material. This served as their luxurious office on wheels.

"Yeah, honey, how DID it go?" she asks.

Responding so both could hear, Earth said, "I made some pointers. It was a good exchange."

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"Terrific!" Kate responded. I have a call for you...just came in...it's Winky."

Ben snaps the reins extra loud and yells, "Giddyap ladies. Gooooohh!!! Buffalo's got a victory!!!"

Removing his glasses, and staring across the seats, right through Kate, one could sense a sort of quiet rage tempered by intellectual brilliance. Speaking on the phone to Winky but including Kate, "Yes, but there is so much more I want to bring to the airwaves. We

are working to stop so many more areas of environmental abuses, I worry it will sound like a confused hodgepodge; a jumble of topics and concerns that cannot be sorted out. I never even got to start a conversation on the fracking issues and to show this moment in time in our country, and what happens when big money collides with real people, people who are struggling on the back end of a recession. The films out now need to be also discussed; McAleer's "FrackNation" is a response to anti-fracking films like Josh Fox's "GasLand" and Matt Damon's "Promised Land." The McAleer documentary investigated claims that "fracking," or hydraulic fracturing, the process for removing natural gas from shale deposits, could potentially harm the environment. I want to get the word out about how there seems to be such a lack of vision, creativity and understanding of how our planet works. There's so much, from factory-farming to ethanol manufacturing, dolphin kills, and circus abuses, the fur trade, canned hunting and more".

Kate shook her head, her peace symbol earrings twirling as she did, "You must take one issue at a time. The clear-cutting of old growth and rain forests is a good one for now", she said softly, reaching forward and touching his hand.

"But Kate, I must remind them. As the song says..."nobody's right, if everybody's wrong!"

Winky, however, had news he wanted to deliver. "I'm sorry, Wink, what's this call about?" asked Earth.?"We have a commitment from The Dryad to do the tree sit. She is prepared to go up tonight. Also, the pre-paid cell has been delivered to Evans."

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Earth Buffalo smiled broadly as he leaned back and raised his legs up onto the opposite seat, kicking off his Crocs. He was pleased how

everything was about to proceed. To give himself a reminder of the ironies of life, he began to read, for what must have been the twelfth time, the "Coach Rules" that came with the used vintage stage when they bought it. Rule 4 was especially dear to him:

- RULES FOR PASSENGERS?1.Abstinence from liquor is requested, but if you must drink share the bottle. To do otherwise makes you appear selfish and unneighborly.?2.If ladies are present, gentlemen are urged to forego smoking cigars and pipes as the odor of same is repugnant to the gentler sex. Chewing tobacco is permitted, but spit with the wind, not against it. 3.Gentlemen must refrain from the use of rough language in the presence of ladies and children.?4.Buffalo robes are provided for your comfort in cold weather. Hogging robes will not be tolerated and the offender will be made to ride with the driver. ?

- 5.Don't snore loudly while sleeping or use your fellow passenger's shoulder for a pillow; he or she may not understand and friction may result. ?

- 6.Firearms may be kept on your person for use in emergencies. Do not fire them for pleasure or shoot at wild animals as the sound riles the horses. ?

- 7.In the event of runaway horses remain calm. Leaping from the coach in panic will leave you injured, at the mercy of the elements, hostile Indians and hungry coyotes. ?

- 8.Forbidden topics of conversation are: stagecoach robberies and Indian uprisings. ?

- 9.Gents guilty of unchivalrous behavior toward lady passengers will be put off the stage. It's a long walk back. A word to the wise is sufficient. ?Kate moved over to sit by him, laced her arm under and through his ?

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and smiled into his eyes. He looked down, smiled back and leaned over to reach her lips with his. Above their heads, tacked up behind them, was a message put up by Kate with a much more inspirational tone: "May your good deeds fall like good seed into many hearts, and bring forth future harvests in the great field of humanity."

Lydia Marie Francis Child 1853

2012 5:45am:

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Peggy email 22 June

Steve, when you get home, you need to go the southwest corner of your house and look for a small burlap pouch under a bluestone slab. My friend Winky paid you a visit

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CHAPTER NINE - Oko-Jumi Jimmy

Arriving home, Steve locates the rock and pulls from underneath it the burlap pouch. Inside it he finds a cellphone and a folded piece of paper. Opening it, he reads a note:?"Call me, NOW! 520-261-3850" This is an unfamiliar number he thinks.

Ironically, his very next thoughts went instantly to his wife's face. Her lovely face and her smiling eyes, staring at him across the bed this morning as he dressed to leave for work. His mind swimming now in a river of guilt. The current pulling his thoughts as to why he loves Sarah. Why he loves her - overwhelmingly so.

She keeps her intellect bright by cultivating it with learning. Always alert with hope, her uplifting friendship warm with sympathy, fun and laughter. Her sweet, pure demeanor strengthened by her love of beauty and respect for life. In love with life, her own life, the lives of family and others and the infinitely complex nature of humanity. Raised two beautiful children. A vegetarian veterinarian. How great

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is that!?!)

Meanwhile, Kate, aka Phoenix (the entire VOW network adopted nicknames for use in all their communications with each other) waited while the cell phone she was holding connected her to Janet Planet.

"Why do you sound out of breath," Phoenix asked.

"I just broke loose from the contra dancing to answer your call. I'm at a Flurry and having a ball!"

"Oh gee, I'm sorry to bother you. Just a quick update then."

Phoenix held her hand over the mouth piece and whispered to Earth Buffalo where she located Planet. She continued with Planet, "We have a confirmation from The Dryad. The sit is on and scheduled for Saturday. We need the media to be aware of all the details. You in? You available? If so, we'll meet in Ruby at the base of the Montana Peak."

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Shrouded in a mixed glow of twilight and a warm lamplight from through the near window, Steve notes he can hear a distant train as it winds its way through the cricket-laden sultry night atmosphere. A sound often heard at his home, but now sounding intensely dreamy and beckoning him to follow and escape into something clandestine, mysterious, adventurous and quite possibly bound for trouble. He pecks at the tiny numbers and listens for an answer.

"Hello?" "Who's this?"

"Steve, is this you?" "Who am I speaking to?" "It's Peggy Irish."

With a short gasp, Steve lurches backwards slightly to catch his breath and stares at the device in amazement. Steve: "Oh my God, you sound like a teenager!"

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Peggy: "Well, I am only 39 you old fart." Steve: "The voice and the face don't match in my head. You are, if

I may be so forward, even sweeter than I imagined." Peggy: "You have always showered me with wonderful

compliments and now, hearing you live, you convince me of your sincerity. Your voice actually has more of a nasal tone compared to your broadcasts. More bassy. Stronger."

Steve: "Aw shucks Miss Peggy. And you sound very clear and close. Where are you? Is this phone going to replace our FB and e-mail messages?"

Peggy: "Yes, I was hoping it would."

Steve: "Well, thank you! You know I've always wanted to hear your voice. What do I owe you for the phone and set up?"

Peggy: "Well, actually, it is officially a gift. I felt it could allow us to talk freely without the anxieties attached to your own phone. You know, your "awkwardness factor", remember?"

Steve: "You continue to inspire me Peggy." Clearing his throat, "Yeah, of course I remember THAT blunder. What a blown opportunity that was!" sighing heavily.

Peggy: "Something has come up in my life where I think I can use your help."

Steve: "Name it. What can I do?"

Peggy: "I remember when I was little, I'd walk in the nearby woods and pause to lie down beneath the trees and be still, listening to the rustling leaves shifting overhead in gentle breezes. Within minutes sure enough there'd be bird songs and shimmering sunlight, as leaves and the branches all became a part of this symphony. And in the spaces between the sounds, I could hear myself breathing. I became one with the sacredness of a place."

Steve: "That sounds delightful. We should all take time out to get back with nature"

Peggy: "Steve, have you heard of the term, Dryad?"

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Steve: "No, can't say that I have."

Peggy: "A dryad is a shy nymph or spirit who lives in the woods. Dryads are associated with trees, and many mythologies have some version of the dryad which would seem to suggest that people have long associated trees with supernatural beings and events. The term "dryad" comes from Greek mythology. A dryad is a spirit associated with an oak tree, as "drys" means "oak" in Greek, but over time, these spirits have come to be associated with trees in general.

You still with me?" Steve: "Yes, go on. This is really interesting. I had no idea..."

Peggy: "According to legends, the dryads look after the forest and keep an eye on the health of the trees. They may periodically appear to travelers or assist the gods, but they are primarily concerned with the trees. A specific type of dryad known as a hamadryad actually lives inside the tree, according to legend, and if the tree dies, the

hamadryad dies with it. For this reason, the Greeks believed that it was necessary to ask permission from the gods before felling a tree, to confirm that they would not be killing a hamadryad by mistake. The gods were also said to punish people severely for cutting down trees without permission. Both of these legends may have originated in a desire to preserve a scarce resource in ancient times, encouraging the public to think before they cut by creating a religious association.

And that brings me to my request. My friends and I in the VOW network want more people, especially elected officials, to be more responsible when they make choices that will impact the environment...the Gaia web as it were. Our actions will help to hopefully put a halt to many unnecessary and thoughtless projects rapidly being put in place all over Arizona.

She pauses as Steve puts his ear harder into the device to hear
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better. He catches himself unconsciously swallowing saliva.

Peggy: "Is this too much to take in. Should I stop?"

Steve: "No go ahead. I'm intrigued."

Peggy: "Well, by now you may have guessed I'm talking about saving trees. Especially the ones known as "Old Growth".

Steve: "Oh, I'm with you there on that issue. That is something just so sad and terrible to witness. Sarah and I talk about it, but feel helpless and , well..."

Peggy: "Don't worry. You're not alone. However, I realized I could create lots of time to devote to a possible stumbling block to the so-called progress. The slaughter really, is what it is." Breathing a long sigh, "yes, the sadness." Almost whispering now. "My trees. Our trees."

Peggy suddenly realizes she is lapsing into a daydream and snaps back to her agenda.

"So Steve...we, the Voices of the Wilderness local group here, were wondering if you'd be so kind as to give our quote, "voices", end quote, a little more volume."

Steve: "What do you mean?"

Peggy: "We need people to hear more from the folks who are surrounded by or live within these majestic beauties. Your voice, the trusted pro from radio and television, will lend a huge amount of sincerity to waken people to come out of their jadedness...uh, wait, is that a word? Well are you getting this yet? I mean, people need to see the forests, the canyons, lakes, deserts, and mountains which make up this fascinating region of ours.

Steve: "I'm coming up in my head with a t-shirt design already"

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Peggy: "Hey yeah! That's the spirit!"

Steve: "It shows a silhouette of a guy hanging from a noose from some majestic tree with the caption - Steve Evans asked his boss to hang him!"

Peggy: (quietly)... "That's not funny." I thought more of you than to ridicule this movement."

Steve: "I really thought I'd love the opportunity to do anything, anything for you someday. But this is suicide for me!"

Peggy: "I don't know about you, but where I come from we say what we think and we mean what we say."

Steve: "Sounds dangerous."

Peggy went on, "You know, uh, saying things we mean is about, uh, what's the word? Yes! Integrity. Integrity Steve. It's that simple. It's like when I give my word I am placing myself at a certain level of risk. If I don't feel that risk deep within my bones, my bones, my nerves, my blood...if my whole being doesn't register that feeling of risk, well then, sadly, the likelihood that I will honor my word is small. Have you followed EST or Erhards articles? As I remember him saying about this - for instance, why even choose to honor your word? You know what he said the answer was Steve? Can you guess?"

Steve just shook his head horizontally, numb to the barrage of back ups to her convictions.

"The answer Steve is, as he has said, 'Because that's all you have that makes a difference in life.'" Peggy sighed with a huge exhale as though a great burden had been lifted. "I tell myself this everyday,

what with eco-activism, animal rights and all the other directions on my moral compass that i have to keep in check.?Peggy: "Sooo don't you have the same feelings? Aren't you truly, no wait, aren't you - the meteorologist, the vegan, the husband of a veterinarian, - aren't you the same compassionate human I've been corresponding with for months?" Peggy was becoming somewhat annoyed and angry.

Steve felt some kind of an epiphany coming on. The questions were like matches lighting up latent fires of feelings he had been harboring within him for years. Fires he never had the courage to light himself."Steve: "Of course I am. Now hold on! Give me a second to digest this. Was your group the ones that stormed a ranger station to protest clear-cutting on the Grand canyon's north rim awhile back?"

Peggy: "No, those were from Earth First. My group stays away from many of the more radical actions. We don't pull survey stakes, spike trees, or even disable logging trucks, you know - monkeywrenching. Each member takes a kind of marriage oath or vow, committing to honor and obey the needs of the earth.

Can I tell you more about, hell yeah I should. I need to let you realize for yourself our honorable goals?"

Steve, somewhat embarrassed now, jumps at the question, "Yes, of course. Go on."

Peggy: "Our teams are actually called Intensive Care Units. They are forming up to be dispersed to areas where the environmental stability is being challenged. Forests, Oceans, Air."

Steve: "That's no small undertaking."

Peggy: "Right. Yeah, and now something I've been waiting for, for a long time, is upon me. I don't know if you've heard of this either, but

there exists a non-violent civil disobedience tactic used in the struggle to protect individual forest trees and subsequently neighboring trees as well. We call it a tree-sit."

Steve: "Oh no, you're not going to commit to THAT are you? I've heard where you may be up for close to a year!"

Peggy: "Ohhhhh, I'm definitely psyched to go! Sitters take monthly, or weekly shifts. If there are enough volunteers to take a turn, you may only have to stay a few weeks. I'm soooo excited."

Steve: " Uhhh, I don't know Peggy. People are getting injured all the time with those unpredictable circumstances."

Peggy: "There's that old fart worrying-syndrome coming out from you Grampy," she snickered.

Steve: "C'mon this is serious. And don't call me Grampy."

Peggy: "You know, if we can just convince even one local municipality to allow alternate building materials and methods we will have begun the conversation on figuring out the options to make do with less, to downscale and rescale. We and our children and their children may take pride in knowing our generation helped to restore the balance and the sacredness of places like our Arizona Ponderosa Pines and more. Ugh, this is exhausting just explaining it. My God, we have so much work ahead of us. Does all this "sound dangerous" enough for ya,? she hissed.

Steve: "Wow, you are really into this!"

"I've listened to the words of two messengers and I'm taking them to heart -

One is Oko-Jumi Jimmy or the one who speaks from dreams. He has said,

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"Life shouts out in glory, and eventually struggles to be able to shout"

The other, I just can't get out of my head, is by Michael Jackson from my favorite song-"If you wanna make the world a better place,?then look at yourself, and make a change"

Steve slowly descended into a squatting position. Phone still at his ear, he slid over to a nearby large rock and sat. Gazing out over the vista before him that his property revealed, he had to admit that he certainly was one of the growing number of people who love the

wilderness and love knowing that it is there to visit whenever inspired to do so.

Peggy: "Yeah, well, I have not told the group, but I'm not envisioning staying up more than my two week shift. But if I have to I will. But, hey, enough about me. I suppose you're wondering about the phone, no?"

Steve: "Oh, this, yes. Who is Winky? Male or Female?"

Peggy: "Picture a twenty-somethingish guy who has very little patience. He's all about denim from top to bottom. Skinny. Three years ago he sent a metal bolt flying into his eye while attempting to monkeywrench for his first, and last, I might add, time. When you meet him you will be amazed each time you see him wink as he has a tattoo of a saguaro cactus on his left eyelid.

Pausing to sigh heavily, "Okay, ummm, alright. I'll get right to it. The bottom line is, we need a free public announcement. I mean, yeah, basically that."

Steve: "Huh? In what form?"

Peggy: "We, they, oh you know, VOW, has been observing you doing your TV weathercasts from time to time. We are wondering if you

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could weave into several of them the fact that I will be doing the tree-sit."

Steve became silent. His mind seriously considering for her if he could do it. He becomes aware of the Arizona evening heat. He begins sweating thin ripples from behind his ears onto his neck. There he is in front of a green screen fumbling with the eco-vocabulary he would have to clearly get across. A flash of Sarah now, as he sees her being startled somewhere while watching and wondering what the heck got into him all of a sudden.

Peggy: "Steve? Did you hear me? Steve?? Steve: "What forest name did you adopt for yourself? Peggy: "The Dryad."

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CHAPTER TEN - Grace

A Shaman might say -?"Nature lives in ecstasy. You just go out there and bathe in it."

The early July meeting at Eagle Rock in Ruby was slowly gathering interested activists. Janet Planet was there early preparing notes for Peggy to pass on to Steve if he committed to the task he was asked to do for VOW.

"How does this sound Winky?" she asked. "Only you can prevent forest...Liars!"

"What the...you mean Fires! The bear thing, the Smokey Bear...oh, I get it." he responded with an embarrassed chuckle. "I like it!"

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"Say, who's going up with her? Who is she relieving, I've lost track of who's up there?" Winky asked.

"She's relieving Frendle and Sheila"?"Oh, the couple that lives near the Bob Hope Air Base?" asked Winky "Yes, they've been up almost two weeks and they are spent."

Australian born, bronze-skinned, handsomely agile, Darius with his platinum curly-locks, escorts Peggy to the meeting at the rock.

"Are Kate and EB coming?" he asked as he and Peggy sat themselves next to Eva.

Just as he asked, the sound of gravel being crunched was heard. Bursting into their small clearing was EB on his modified white Royce Union Hiatus 6-speed bike. His wire paneer baskets holding maps and small bottles of water for the group. Right behind

him, Kate burst through the saguaros, nearly nailing herself with the fine needles common to the plant on her 3-speed Ivory Surley Pugsley. Their arrival brought new exhilaration to the group.

As EB passes around the water, he speaks. "I respect the loyalty you all have to this group and its goals. Your enduring commitment reinforces my trust in your devotion to the protection of all the areas of our concern. The plants, the water, the air, the animals...each other."

"We each represent a voice. I will pass the talking stick so we may harvest the thoughts of each us as we feel today. Then we must plan the strategies to extend the saving of our current sister-?tree,

"Grace", a reality. Be mindful, tomorrow marks the end of the efforts we've made for 9 months to keep her alive. Peggy, The Dryad, will continue at a time when our personal schedules prevent any one else from this next shift. Your thoughts please?"

Earth hands the stick to Happily Eva Afta. Eva gets up with her green hoola hoop, places it on the ground and steps into the center.

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Conjuring up movement, she writhes and wriggles, and with a slight kick of a toe brings the hoop to rise slowly around her. "This is the hope. The rise of energy only capable by a group such as this. Centered always on our mission and goals, we can bring consciousness to rise, like this hoop which surrounds me with the good vibrations I, myself, am creating. My hoop reminds me of hope."

Winky raises a fist to the air, closes his eyes and hoots, "Yeah girl" with a wide smile afterwards.

Eva passes the stick to Peggy.

"Well, firstly, I just wanted to say that I am so proud to be a part of this loving group. I can't wait to do my tree-sit and help save Grace."

Everyone applauded and gave welcoming sentiments to her. Eva spun around and gave her a hug.

"My efforts lately have been to try and get the help of meteorologist Steve Evans to..."

"Hey, that's the guy on TV right!?" yelled out Winky.

"Yes, that's him", said Peggy with a big smile. "Him and I have been communicating through Facebook, and as EB and Kate know, we now have put a cellphone in his hand so we can reach him quickly."

I 've asked him to somehow make our plans to save Grace public during one of his broadcasts. I am hoping he will wear our "VOW.com, Protect Your Roots"

t-shirt during his televised weather forecast. I've also been trying to locate footage of the Thai ecology monks and those Bihar Madhubani tree-painters to splice into a PSA." More applause.

Peggy extends the stick to Earth Buffalo.

"The Dryad has already proved to this group what a valuable asset she is. Peggy, you are exactly the spirit this group thrives on. A big THANK YOU!" A few hoots and more applauding began to make Peggy blush.

He went on, "I was wondering, as I heard you speak, do you think this Mr. Edwards can arrange for another interview on his radio

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station? I am hoping to give a more comprehensive picture of what we hope to accomplish and also announce the on-going tree-sits."

"That is a great idea. I certainly will call him on that", Peggy replies.

EB walks over and hugs Peggy. After a brief moment, while parting, he gently rests his hands on her shoulders at arms distance. EB gazes into her eyes, startled at first that her irises display complete heterochromia. "I have a last thought for her and the group - Chief Seattle has said, 'This we know - the Earth does not belong to man - man belongs to the Earth. This we know. All things are connected like the blood which unites one family. All things are connected. Whatever befalls the Earth - befalls the sons of the Earth. Man did not weave the web of life - he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself.'"?Loosening his hold of Peggy they gently backed away as Darius took out his tambourine and laid it in his lap and with a drumstick began to softly create a pow-wow-like rhythm. He handed Peggy her recorder with his other hand and they both began creating a beautiful vibration the entire group began swooning to.

EB raises his hands to quiet down the music. "Kate has something to say also.

Kate: "Ultimately, ignorance is always the friend of oppression. Knowledge is a consistent ally of justice. Kate Justice!"

More hoots and hollers. The group rises and dances around Janet as the hoola hoop's momentum becomes one with them.

>>>>><<<<<?Knowing the alarmist reaction Steve took to her query, Peggy's next

call was poised to tread a little slower and be more friendly. Not, what can I get, but what can I contribute to this relationship. Still, though, it would in the end be a "what can I get" in disguise.

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The 5:30 a.m. Saturday morning air held Steve captive in meteorological thought. Standing on his front porch and

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eating cereal from the bowl he was holding, Steve stared out to the nearby mountains. The pressure to make a decision for Peggy weighed on him like an extreme atmospheric shift. The kind that comes from the feared Gulf stream.

A roadrunner startled him out of his trance flying across his view. His "Peggy cell phone" vibrated in his pocket.?"Wow, you're up early!" he said.?"I know, I hope I didn't wake you. I assumed you'd be up, what with your wacky circadian cycle from your job hours."

"Yes, that's true. I'm already up watching birds fly by. Hey, that reminds me. I've wanted to ask you, Miss Peggy, The Dryad, bird photographer extraordinaire."?He could hear her giggle slightly.

"Is it true that if you really want good bird pictures, you need a 600mm lens??"Oh, you really want to know? I'm impressed with your enthusiasm." "Yes, your talents have inspired my latent interests in photography to come forward into the light, if you will excuse the pun."?"Oh, you are the jokerman! And well, yeah, you should shoot more. The lens? Well, no, you don't need it. I take most of my pictures with a 300mm lens and feel it gives a good reach. Instead I always try to inch closer to the birds. You have to stay invisible though. Try putting some kind of "camo" over the camera and lens. Could be just a brown scarf or hat. I also use my 70-200mm quite a lot though because it allows me to take pictures of the bird within the landscape. You know, more of an environmental portrait."?"Yes, I get it. That's another beautiful approach of yours. Would you say that it is important to also know bird biology and behavior?" Getting somewhat impatient, but trying

not to let it come through in her voice, "I'd say it is very important if you want to be able to get close and capture their unique moments. I'd say all-important."

The temperature began to rise rapidly and where Peggy was, she was feeling the heat.?"Steve have you made up your mind?" She couldn't believe she just

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blurted it out after all the embellishing she applied to his questions to ease the intimidating situation for him. She certainly just now dropped her camo!

The jolt of the question caused him to place his bowl down quickly and look over his shoulder at the house to see if Sarah might be up. "Well, you really are serious aren't you?" She kept quiet. Waiting.

"For the past 10 years I've been behind the scenes for another broadcast meteorologist. This is the first year I am into my own as the one out front. I mean, in the past it was I in the background looking at the forecast models trying to give the right information, you know, predictions about what the atmosphere might do over the next 1 day, 3 days, up to 10 days. Now I'm the guy out front?and people have come to rely on me every day. My story to them each day allows them to plan their lives with a certain amount of confidence. They want to know the facts when they tune in about good weather and any severe, unprecedented and dangerously unpredictable weather events. I know you probably haven't given my field much thought, but the bottom line is, can I say it with confidence? Do I even believe me?"

"Gee, I never thought of it that way. A story, huh?" she said almost as a whisper.

"Uh huh. That's what the job becomes. It's about getting graphics, pictures and more and getting the story out there to them. When a storm is bearing down on us, people want to see what's going on."

"I guess you're pretty concerned about your credibility if you link yourself to us, huh?"

"Well, yeah. The aura of certainty about me and my ability to speak "weather-truth" may be severely compromised.

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"Okay, well I get it. I wouldn't want to see that trust, that bond, corrupted. But answer me this. Aren't your listeners, your viewers uh, let me put it this way. Aren't you telling them what you believe to be true? You are telling them what you believe based on all the data you've collected? Right?"

"Uh, sure. That's one way to put it."

She went on, "Granted the weather is like a slippery snake - here one moment, there the next, a little, a lot - just damn flighty and unpredictable most times. But, you know, it's just like our VOW messages pertaining to trees and the environment, the web of life reveals certain data as well."

"I'm listening. Go on." "I feel this is leading to a grand convincing conclusion."

"I'm winging this, so I hope my points are all lining up. But these are heartfelt and I feel to be truisms, if I can say such a thing."

"Ohhh, I'm sure they are from the heart. And you have such a big one, I'm afraid of how much it loves. Wait, I didn't mean it quite like that. I mean, it is..."

"I get it Steve. Let me finish, if I can just unroll this train of thought and still remain on the tracks."

"Yes. That would be best. Go ahead."

"I think many things just are the way they are and have always been. The weather is an integral part of it. But unlike the whirling dervish nature of it with its sometimes dangerous, sometimes beautiful moody and dramatic flights of fancy...you have to admit, an old growth tree is just that - an old growth. It is part of the scene."

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Mankind has no right to disrespect its longevity and its inherent value to the eco-system. But I rant now. I know, I'll let you go."

"I have much to ponder thanks to you. Thanks to you, always do I have much to ponder."

You're kind...as always."

"They are planning a big to-do to get me up the tree next Saturday. A stagecoach procession and an escort by two seasoned

sitters, Princess Citronella, now keep in mind, theses are forest names...and Prince Firefly. This ought to be a gas!"

"Very colorful. I should be there to take pictures." "After you make the announcement, right?"

"Well, hold on a minute. Everything you said was very insightful Peggy. But you forgot to add one thing."

"What's that?"

"Our goals are the same. To inform people about what is happening to their environment."

"I agree. That is simply brilliant. And I hope YOU give it some serious further consideration. And don't worry, we have t-shirts in medium, large and extra large."

"Have you approached the station manager for a free PSA spot. They would tape it for you, you know."

"Well, I guess I don't have much time left to gather the video clips and notes together for a PSA. Talk to you later. Bye."

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She hung up so abruptly he hadn't a chance to ask if they could meet for coffee or herbal tea.

The porch door opened and Sarah held out a large mug. "Coffee is on the loose. Here's yours."

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Steve took a closer look at the computer screen. "Say Jack," he yelled across the room, "is that a tornado I'm seeing?" "Yeah, ya know, there's a kind of tornado amnesia that most people develop, especially since we've gone so long without one," Jack says. "You know — 'Awwwww, it's not gonna come here.' " I'll be on TV at nauseum telling everybody to get ready, yet so many folks will always wait till the last minute to react. That's what I always work on, how to get people to react, and to stock up on food and water. "

"Yeah, right" Steve mumbles, fully aware of the similarities in his own denials. His own inner voice warning him to get out of Dodge before tornado Peggy hits him hard. But he keeps holding on, not heeding all the obvious messages.

Jack continues, "I remember a day or or two after Hurricane Michelle being stunned at all the people out searching for food or water. I mean, stunned. What had I been doing for the past five or six days except saying, 'It's gonna hit us, it's gonna hit us?'"

>>>>><<<<<?Back in the forest, Peggy is yelling down from the tree top, "I will

take responsibility for this tree. I am its voice!"

The wind became loud and carried with it pods of stinging, bullet-fast, pine needles whipping dangerously close to Peggy's face.?"You have to come down now Miss. It's getting mighty dangerous for y'all and all of us here!" the helmeted worker pleaded as

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videographers panned their cameras quickly from his face to hers. Their small on-camera spot lights becoming pitifully ineffective in their capability to pierce the increasing dark grey sky.

From Peggy's point of view, the man's face, visible only as though emerging from a dark cave below, screamed up again through his cupped hands, "It's gettin dark fast and we won't be able to assist you down to the ground! The forecast is for a tornado! We all gotta git outta here now!"

The spontaneously assembled tribe of mixed media professionals began to tighten up any loose equipment in between glances to each other of mild terror. There was a sound in the air like an angry steam locomotive roaring unsupervised as though plowing loose through the countryside and taking out mountains with ease.

Just then Steve pulled up and came to a screeching halt as his headlights found multiple faces in the dark. Each spun around to see what was happening. Behind his car, three Arizona Police vehicles lunged forward in a raucous mix of out- of-sync sirens and pulsating red and blue lights stopping abruptly behind him..

Peggy could see it all unfolding directly below her. She knew it would soon be a challenge to remain. The emotional intensity grew proportionately with each gust of hot wind, laced with glowing red and blue pine needle darts. Peggy shouted down, "This planned sale of these old-growth trees ignores rules already in place! There are

rules set up to protect the habitats of the birds here that are dangerously vulnerable to extinction. This is a violation!" She brought her hand up quickly to protect her face as the wind sent a small branch into her head. "This tree has been standing here over 180 years. It has a right to exist! Just like you and I!" Her words became garbled, drowned out by the chaotic and loud rhythms of branches brushing against each other, straining and twisting and fanning from the turbulent winds.

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She tried repeating what she said using her megaphone and quickly realized the batteries were dead.

"Peggy! Peggy, it's Steve! We understand your actions completely. I agree with them! But for your own safety you have to come down now!"

The officers eyed each other, acknowledging Steve as a possible accomplice.

"Young lady!" one shouted. "I am ordering you to come down off this tree. We are here to assist your descent." A bucket truck could now be seen approaching through clouds of fine dirt, mimicking mini- tornado funnels. The higher it extended, the more it wobbled threatening to overturn. The officer moved closer, holding his megaphone with two hands, fighting the increased winds.

"We have a report that the tornado is heading directly towards you. Hail has been coming down the size of grapefruits and tree tops are being twisted off everywhere! If you don't come down now we all...- damn!" A featherless baby wren crashed onto his right hand. He began to think he should've finished his coffee back at the station and just waited all this out until the next shift.

"Marty! Get me a rag to wipe this thing off!" "Peggy, please, let us take you down. There's not much time." Peggy could only stare at Steve. His eyes were comforting to her; warming her heart. She was home in his stare. She was grounded. She felt safe. She looked around her temporary shelter and became sad at the thought to leave it. She grabbed her recorder which during her stay allowed her to play soothing melodies to help lull the forest animals to sleep

when she decided to sleep. She stuffed it into her jacket. There was the mobile Winky gave her, with its twelve moons to remind her of the year she

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would be up; Eva's compact binocs and a tin of Wonder Woman bubble gum; Earth Buffalo's Thunderbird blanket; Phoenix's 12" dream catcher; the burlap-bound log book, hand-assembled by Darius with the inscription on the first page which read: "...and the forest will echo with laughter" borrowed from the Led Zep song, Stairway to Heaven.

She chuckled but quickly saddened that all this had to happen. She recalled her disillusionment with the Forest Service as it repeatedly turned a blind eye from responsible custodianship. Mostly, though, her sadness was now concerned with the imminent possibility of abandoning this tree, whose care was in her charge. VOW had lost two other trees, "Almighty 1" and "Knowledge" named, of course, by the group. Peggy's tree, named "Grace" was home to four sitters before her. This day marked the end of a nine-month protection.

The sad thing though, she thought, is how this is a fight with only one company. There are hundreds of other Logging and Mill companies reducing old growth forests to the new appetite - wood pellets.

She recalled Kate's message to the group that "now, more than ever, we need people to - "Repair the earth"...tikun olam".

She untied the rope from its mooring and immediately it become violently alive as the winds tore it from her grip. This sudden loss brought a shriek of desperation from her lips as she tried to reach for the now completely wild line whirling and slapping against everything. With short, quick glances back down to Steve, he saw her once serene, confident face become the emblem for complete fear-filled anxiety and panic.

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During the night, VOW members kept in touch as they kept a close watch gauging the proximity of the approaching tornado to

Peggy's location. The unpredictability of its path gave them grave concerns

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despite the latest weather graphics depicting a path that would miss her by 5-10 miles.

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Unfortunately, the panicked rescuers at the base of Grace, were literally in the dark about the exact path. They had their hands full with equipment and safety concerns and could feel the effects of the nearby 200+mph winds.

The bucket truck came to the base of the tree and extended its arm to the fullest height. Peggy was too high up for it. Suddenly, a wind gust twisted the bucket sideways. The machine stalled. Glass shattered in the driver booth and the operator ran out holding his head, stumbling as he went. The media was in high gear racing back to their vans preparing to leave. The officer with the bull horn received a call to aid in an accident. Pissed off, frustrated and disgusted, he shook his head and spit. Looking at Marty he shouted, "We're outta here! Let's go!" As leaves, branches and dirt swirled heavily about them, he paused while entering the vehicle to grab the horn and give one last shout for Peggy. "We have to go! God help you! We will return if we can!"

They sped off against his better judgement, leaving both Peggy and Steve to fend for themselves. Steve was standing by his half-opened door in total disbelief. Looking on in horror as the entire situation had grossly deteriorated. This might go really bad for Peggy, he thought.

His ears began to decipher a distant shouting. He looked to the abandoned bucket truck with some of its lights still flashing erratically. From out of the dark he spotted a young man quickly climbing the derelict arm of the bucket truck and racing to its top.

"Peggy, its Darius...hold on! I'm coming up to get you! Don't move!" Peggy was shivering and hunched down as her tarp and wild rope ends whipped about violently, flapping treacherously close to her body with their violent stings.

"Darius!! You are amazing! I can't use my rope. You'll have to come all the way up!"?Darius had anticipated such and had with him a harness for them to rapple down with together.

"That's okay! Just be ready when I get up there!"?He threw out a lasso, caught it on a sturdy short branch. He swung over to the tree and began his ascent to her platform.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN - Hero?Now left alone with the oncoming tornado, and Peggy and

Darius in the failing arms of the great tree, Grace, the situation in front of Steve played out as the most bizarre unsettling scene. His options were none. His body, and his arms...were helpless to change anything.

Debris from the nearby town of Ruby began to crash throughout the forest. Pieces of barn, fences, roof tops, bikes, cactus, a stove. A dog.

He watched as Darius met Peggy. They strapped together to begin their descent back to the bucket truck.?Piercing the darkness with his desperate shouts, Steve yelled, "What can I do?"

"Just get your car ready to pull out of here!" Darius replied. The heated winds and flying objects and dirt created a thick gaussian blur hindering their views of each other.?With one last push, Darius swung the two of them out far to anticipate a landing in to the bucket.

Steve was now directly below with his car facing back to town. Reaching inside he quickly grabbed a flashlight from the glove compartment and immediately aimed it up to locate them in the dark grey canopy above.

Just then, as his beam caught sight of them, he heard a loud scream. They seemed alright. It didn't sound like Peggy. Then a crash. It was a horse. A horse had slammed into the bucket, twisting it sideways.

The couple landed on the side of the bucket as the stunned horse rejoined the violent stream of wind.?"Hold on!" Steve shouted as he raced to the controls to try to revive the armature.

Frightened and exhausted, the two now desperately held onto the bucket for dear life. The machine came alive in short spurts as Steve frantically pounded every button and lever. It appeared as though he was going to bring them both all the way down. "Hold on! It only goes in one direction, at one speed!"

It was fortunately, going down. But with a hard thud. It hit ground, smashing Peggy and Darius unmercifully onto the forest floor. Holding tightly to each other, they were thrown rolling several feet until Darius hit his head on a stump and Peggy found herself on top of him exhaling what seemed to her ...a last breath.

Steve could hear the top of Grace twist violently and crack off and with it the entire platform Peggy and others had lived on for months as it got hit hard by another of Jed Thompson's twelve horses and broke away only to join the horizontal quicksand-like stream of ruthless wind. The town of Ruby was now almost all airborne.

Both Peggy and Darius were unconscious. Steve thought he had killed them. He knelt down and felt for pulses. They were breathing. They were alive. He now noticed Darius had a long gash in his right calf and it was bleeding. Taking off his tie, he made a quick tourniquet to stop the blood. He knew he had to get immediate professional help. The nearest hospital was no hospital. It was Sarah's clinic. He called home.

>>><<<?Sarah had been watching closely the path of the tornado on the TV

news. While switching through all the channels for the latest live information, Steve's call came through.?"Sarah, I need you to help me."?"What's the matter, you sound upset. Aren't you at work?"

"No, uh, actually, uh, well I'm at the scene of a tree-sit where, uh, some people fell down. One of them is wounded. He's got a gash in

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his leg that needs immediate attention. Your, uh, your clinic is the nearest thing to a hospital. Can you meet me there?"?"What!? Where

are you?" "Uh, I'm at that, uh, that tree sit that the VOW movement, you know, voices of the wilderness."

"Yeah, uh, okay." "Alright, I'm gonna get over there as soon as I can. I'm putting them in my car now." "Alright. Okay. Meet you there soon?" "Thanks. She needs, he needs, immediate attention. Uh, you're closer than any hospital. I know you can fix this guy up." "Oh, Steve...Is he conscious?" "He's out, but breathing regularly." "I really wish you didn't have to move him. You said, 'she', is that the other person?" "Yes. I don't see any wounds, but she's unconscious too." "Oh, what happened to her?" "She fell...she fell from...Grace." "What are you talking about?" "Catching himself in the midst of a tired metaphor, Steve snapped awake at her question." "I mean, a tree. The tree. The same as him. They both fell from the tree called Grace." "Well, okay, move them very, very slowly. I'm getting in the car now." "See you. Thanks."

Kneeling beside them, Steve comes to the realization that Peggy is right there. Right in front of him. He can't believe how tragic this first meeting had become. He took hold of her shoulders and gently rolled her off of Darius. Her long, luxurious chestnut-colored hair flowed down like a sensual uncaring wave and covered her face. Steve, shaking somewhat from the entire experience, leaned in closer and carefully brushed aside the curtain of hair to reveal her face. She was a beautiful woman. Much prettier than how she photographed herself in many of her mirror portraits on FB.

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The fury of the maelstrom way overhead seemed to be subsiding, but not without one last departing cracking-whip explosion as it disappeared into other unfortunate neighborhoods. The sound startled Steve while he was looking at her face and he saw her slowly open her eyes. Her blue and green irises found Steve smiling.

An incredible silence accompanied Peggy's stare into Steve's eyes. Her brows formed a message of dread. The melancholy whistle of a distant train could be heard winding through Ruby down below. Through trembling lips she asked, "Is Darius hurt?"

Steve leaned in closer to hear her. "I think he will be okay." "I do love you Steve," she whispered. Her eyes closed and she fell into a deep sleep.

>>><<<?Meanwhile, Winky, in Paul Revere-like fashion, was racing towards

the receding rumbling monster yelling out to whoever he could see for them to take cover. His Wizard motorbike buzzed like a fly in distress as he headed off the main road and into the forest towards Grace. Speeding at its top mph of 30, Winky kept on the familiar trail leading to Grace. His mp3 player cranked up with the "Tarantino of Music" - Carlos Santana - blasting Soul Sacrifice. It seemed the right accompaniment under a mad sky of what looked like dark grey dryer lint on steroids. He reached the clearing, dismounting as he threw down the motorbike at the foot of Grace, and tore off the earbuds. "What happened?" he shouted running over to Steve's bent over body.

"We have to get them into my car. Darius is bleeding." "What about the Dryad?" "She'll be okay. No visible injuries. Help me put them in."

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Sarah prepared two tables to work on Darius and Peggy. She had the news on the radio at a medium volume to follow the events of the aftermath. The tornado had left the area as fast as it had arrived. She heard Steve's car pull up and, carrying a folded gurney, dashed to the front entrance to let them in. They lifted Darius onto the gurney and wheeled him up the handicap ramp into the clinic and onto the table. They then fetched Peggy.

Sarah's mind was swirling with questions for Steve, but she maintained a professional demeanor while attending to the leg wound. On the other table, approximately 10 feet away, Peggy was still unconscious.

Steve and Winky began pacing nervously. "Stop moving around-sit! The two of you-sit!" Sarah snapped. Winky found a chair. Steve pulled one over to Peggy's table. His face could not hide his

concerns about Peggy. He held her hand. Sarah pulled a needle up through the leg high up past her head and discovered within that view Steve's back leaning over Peggy's body. Sarah now had more questions in her mind. With his other hand, Steve wiped a slow tear off of his cheek, and then used two hands to hold Peggy's one. Winky looked at Steve, then looked at Sarah. Sarah was still frozen in the raised arm position, needle aiming to the ceiling. Her gaze was fixed on Steve. Winky looked back at Steve, put on his mp3 player ear buds, shut his eyes and shook his head from side to side mumbling to himself that things were going to change for all of them from here on. A news reporter's voice now put a caption on the moment. "So far three reported missing, last seen at the Grace tree-sit; God help them up there."

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PART TWO BLOCKED- A Facebook Tale

AFTER THE FALL FROM GRACE

CHAPTER TWELVE - Hotel

Fighting his own utter exhaustion, Steve managed to get up and walk over to Winky. Sarah was still tending to Darius. Nudging Winky out of his closed eyes music reverie, Steve mouthed the words, - take -out-the-ear-buds - as he demonstrated with his two hands what he wanted Winky to do.

"Can you get in touch with Peggy's mother?" he asked. "And also let Earth Buffalo know about this fella here who saved her?" Before Winky could respond, Steve's body suddenly crumpled under him, folding in stages like a sleepy collapsing accordian. He landed quietly on the cold linoleum floor with his head cupped in Winky's outstretched hands.

Steve's eyes opened to the smell of lentil soup and the sounds of someone eating it. Realizing he was on his back, on a lab table, and still at the clinic, he rolled his head to see where the sound was. Over by the flat screen tv he saw Sarah finishing up the soup as she watched the news about the aftermath of the tornado's destruction. "Four missing, two dead," he heard the reporter say.

The tinkling of the tiny bell atop the screen door makes Sarah look up to see Branch approach.

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"Why have we become so violent?" he queries aloud. "You know, towards our extended earth-bound neighbors. The animals, the trees, the land. Don't people get it that all this is what connects us to each other?"

Sarah leans over to touch his cat, "You are speaking of the glue." "Yesssss, very well put. The glue." Branch remarks. "Hi, I'm Sarah, I run this clinic," she says with a beaming smile. Reaching forward with his one free arm, they clasp hands in a soft, warm handshake that Sarah instantly notices might be a bit too long, but she likes that. "Branch Edwards. Very pleased to meet you."

"Well then I've come to the right place with Lilac here", as he glances down and pulls the orange tabby gently out onto the counter. "I hope your glue can put her back together", he says with a grin and a wink.

"Well, I'm gonna give it a try! What seems wrong with Lilac today?" "A boy who cleans my stables said he found two men poking it with a large wooden sword and laughing each time they drew some blood. Whacking it even! Just terrorizing it right outside my property. The boy said he never saw them before and when I finally rounded her up they were gone." "Wow, that is a terrible and distressing story!" Branch begins to point out the blood-caked wounds as Sarah helps him hold her from trembling.

>>>>>>>><<<<<<<<

Manny and Johnny Two Clicks arrive at the Vulpine Lumber Yard admin office where Vietnam vet ,Two Clicks, is floor manager and Manny , his part-time seasonal employee. They proceed to get coffee and gear to begin another day of logging. "I seen you got some stainin' on your blade Manny. Better wipe it down before your next competition," said Two Clicks while gazing over the rim of his coffee cup thinking to himself that his caring, clever words can help wipe away the image Manny has of him as a loser. "You're a sometimes charming loser friend Johnny", Manny has said on more than one

occassion.?"Shit! My Shinai! Did I cut that cat?" he burst out, rushing his Kendo practise sword over to the sink.

>>>><<<<?On the road - Indn Route 42, Oljato-Monument Valley, UT

I'm crazy. This road is crazy. Where in the hell is this place?

Steve knew he shouldn't go, but this was another chance to meet up with Peggy and to learn more about her. He even felt that an apology was in order for the big slam down that left her and Darius unconscious.

Staring at the seemingly endless stretch of highway allowed him time to reflect. He had read somewhere that when a dryad does make contact you can't be sure whether they are there to help, play, or tease. If they help they are supposed to help you contact divine forces or even work on your magical abilities. This intrigued his feelings about the metaphysical. This intrigued him about their relationship.

The speedometer read 85mph. Not a car insight. An intense orange- pink glow bathed the earth and early July sky. Soon it would be dark. Steve couldn't help but register the low humidity and clear skies and temperature reading of 72. He breathed in the welcome dry air from his open windows and hoped the weather models for the next few days would be calm and stable.

Pulling up to the gravel driveway, he realized the group must've chosen this place for its sacred location. The View Hotel, situated at the four corners of Arizona, New Mexico, Utah and Colorado was a popular gathering spot for many esoteric conferences and workshops. And of course, the view alone, was worth the stay.

Kate answered the door with a warm smile. She swiftly moved out

into the hallway motioning Steve to back up a little. She made sure the door was closed except for an inch.

"Steve, before I let you through this threshold, just a word of friendly advise. It has been said, if you are married you should not be on Facebook. If you do go there you will deal with the anxieties of

this generation. That being said, Earth and myself will make ourselves available to you to iron out any problems you are encountering with The Dryad. Know that to be true." She hugged him tightly and then they walked in together.

As Kate turned left around an inner corner Steve drew in a quick breath as directly in front of him across the room he was able to see outdoors as it presented itself beautifully through huge windows shouting out a vista of the setting neon pink sun. Suddenly, rising gracefully from the floor, from just under the windows he saw the silhouette of a woman. Her head haloed by the bright ball of pink as she stood in front of the view. Somewhere "Samuel Barber's Adagio for Strings op.11" was playing. Everything seemed in slow motion. It was Peggy walking with out- stretched arms towards him. He stood there like a tree waiting for rain.

Totally unaware of this dramatic, meaningful moment, Winky walked between them holding up a bunch of bananas and yelling out, "Eva, they're ready to eat now!" Eva, looked over her shoulder laughing at him as she docked her MP3 player into a speaker set and blasted Marvin Gaye's - Let's Get It On.

Steve and Peggy turned to look at them. Eva grabbed Winky and pulled him to her tightly by grabbing his buttocks. The song invited slow gyrating and grinding, especially for two in love. Steve then looked at Peggy as the song and dance escalated into kissing and groping with the two dancers. Peggy couldn't stop staring at them. Steve couldn't stop staring at Peggy. "If the spirit moves you, let me groove you" Marvin pleaded as the rest of the group in the room focused on the couple with snapping fingers and claps to the beat.

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Steve began to feel profoundly uncomfortable

CHAPTER THIRTEEN - Baboquivari

It was now obvious to all the members of VOW that the tree-sits came with extremely dangerous risks.

"Where are you going EB?" Kate asked.

Bending to put on his moccossins, EB looked over to his wife with a concerned, almost sad, expression. "I have taken this new

situatuion quite seriously. Darius and Peggy...and Steve, all could've been killed. I go now where all my people have always gone when they want the wisdom of the light from the "Great Mystery."

"You're going to the deep forest then, aren't you? On top of Babquivari to the cave of I'itoi?"

"Yes. I need more than human council on these matters. I will rely on the teachings from my ancestors."

"You'll be gone a long time then," she said.

"That depends on what I encounter. If I remember the quote correctly, as Joseph Wood Krutch has said, 'The wilderness and the idea of wilderness is one of the permanent homes of the human spirit.' I now need to go to that home. To go through a vision quest to find a positive and unifying direction on this," Earth said walking out the door and adding, "I'll be damned if I send someone else out there to face what terrifies me!"

Kate, of course, knew of the benefit of seeking the guidance from the sylvan spirits on top of the magical mountain Baboquivari. A

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silent dialogue with The Great Mystery combined with a session with I'itoi, spirit of goodness, would hopefully allow her husband to return refreshed and with new insights as to a safe direction or path to follow next.

"Don't forget an offering!" she shouted hoping he wasn't too far out of earshot.

When EB left, Kate went back in to join the others. She noticed the perpetually gawky Winky morphing into this exquisite dancer with all the right moves. On the window ledge sat Frendle and Sheila killing a bowl of their homemade guacamole which they had prepared at their vegetable farm. Yes, Marvin Gaye did seem right to her ears at this moment with his melancholy bitter sweet strains.

On the carpeted floor is Steve, Darius and Peggy sharing a joint and in a lively discussion about many things with Janet Planet. "I did three fucking Walkabouts" laughed Darius referring to his homeland ritual. They became loud with silly laughter, relieved about the outcome of their latest activities. Kate heard them going on about

places lived, first loves, tragic losses, religious backgrounds and family relationships and experiences.

They all started singing a song fellow activists Cowgirl and Marty wrote (who were on the floor with them) called, " Don't Let The Gravity Get You Down Blues". Marty played the harmonica as Lester and Esther, who just walked in with a tupperware full of new stick-ons, repeated the verse, "It's like the sun on an overcast day, ya can't see it, ya can't see it, but it weighs on ya just the same."

Kate smiled listening to the younger ones unwinding, which is exactly why they invested in a room rental away from cabins and teepees. A neutral ground to rekindle friendships. She mused about EB's anxiety about the incident and him going to sort things out in his mind. Perhaps he harbored fears about overcoming the conflict and the individual assignments necessary to do so. Maybe one

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day mounting hardships would alienate everyone here who needs to work together. She hoped he would return with a robust plan.

As EB walked, he murmured what he kept hearing in the back of his mind. He could not stop repeating an old saying of his people, the Tohono O'odham Nation, "We:S T-We:m 'am B O Ju:" or, "Together We Will." He found a spot to burn sage and hoped he would be able to quickly learn and understand more about the people they are trying to change.

Meanwhile, in the hotel room, Cowgirl and Marty eagerly opened the Tupperware as Esther, the self-proclaimed "Vegan Witch" read the text of the newly-printed labels they came to distribute.

"This animal went through terrible abuse and suffering. The blood shed by these innocent beings is unnecessary when alternatives abound. Google "vegan".

The Truth Labeling Ninja - TLN"

Everyone screamed out in joy and loud applause as Eva wheeled around and blasted "We Shall Overcome" by the Preservation Hall Jazz Band.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN -Visions

It soon became obvious that Peggy and Darius would be spending the night in this room. Steve gravitated to a corner where Kate was following EB with the GPS in her phone.

She looked up at him and motioned for him to sit next to her. "I ordered burritos for the group. Beers and water also. Please eat with us." Before he could answer, a knocking was barely heard at the door. He got up immediately to go answer it. Kate trailed behind him, quickly counting the money fanned out in her hands. The food arrived hot,

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the drinks were icy cold. Steve pointed to where the waiter could place the order down, but was unaware of Eva's boots which became completely invisible under the large flat box the waiter carried. As the waiter tripped and fell, hot burritos slid out, unraveling their molten contents mostly onto Peggy's back and shoulders. In a completely uncharacteristic move, Steve went postal on the Mexican servant and smashed his fist into the young man's jaw shouting raw expletives and, in general, totally absorbed in roughing the poor man up. Darius, Winky, Lester, Marty and Kate rushed to break it up. The room fell silent. Only the voice of Dolly Parton singing, "And I Will Always Love You" could be heard. Eva quickly went to shut it off.

"Get a hold of yourself Steve!" Darius shouted, pulling him back.

"Are you burned?" Steve asked Peggy from across the room. "Did he burn you?" Peggy could not speak. Witnessing this outburst completely upset her. She shook her head slowly to indicate no burn had been encountered.

After things had calmed down, apologies having been made during the cleanup, the tensions in the room dissipating and the generous tip paid to the wounded man, the spirit of their festive gathering lacked luster.

Having eaten, most began to prepare to leave. Peggy walked over to Steve.

As much as this appealed to Steve, it took him back in more ways

[illegible]

Her Jeep smelled like a mix of lavender and cassis, not the woody tea rose he would've expected. There was a store-bought peace symbol air freshener thingy hanging from the mirror.

"Yeah, I am, but look there's still daylight, right? We'll just be an hour or so" Peggy said as she backed out of her spot.

"I'm glad you're in a good place right now, but you basically have fucked up my mind Miss Peggy Dryad Irish, Shy Nymph, Spirit Living in the Woods...whatever!"

"You didn't fuck him up. He was that way from birth, I'm sure."

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"Listen, it all started out innocently enough right? I mean, for my part, you came out of the blue and well, I just, I- got to know you more and more. You impressed me in so many ways, not to mention your youthful free-spirited ways. Hell, I began to think about you all the time. But many days I'd become agitated with you because of your week-long bewildering abandonments. No communications. No replys to questions. I truly suffered both with your resistance and my arrogance at being an attention tyrant. You just weren't conforming to my rules of engagement. Incidentally, on another related note, I don't know if you remember what you said at the clinic, but I feel the same way."

Steve knew he was treading on shaky ground here for both of them.

"You might have been half-conscious, but you said you loved me, and well you know what? You made me love you. I didn't want to do it. I didn't want to do it" he said lowering his head with a sorrowful left and right motion.

The light changed and she was just all over the road, creating dust clouds from riding momentarily on the shoulder.

"Wooaaahhh girl, get a grip!"

She decided to stay on the shoulder and pulled over even further. She put it in park and killed the engine. Spinning her whole body around she started to bite her lip before speaking.

"After what I just saw in that hotel, I think you're the one that needs to get a grip, dude!" She pulled the keys out and tossed them on the

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seat.

"Okay, look. After hooking up, I'd watch you on your broadcasts. I loved watching you. I felt I knew you. I couldn't believe that I really did know you. But I also know Darius, and Marty and Winky and Earth Buffalo...you know? I mean, shit this is awkward."

"I'm starting to feel old again" Steve remarked thinking about the day she blocked him.

"Well, don't! Back then I started to have feelings for you too, but they were different." she said lowering her eyes.?"They are different" she whispered. A silence fogged the space between them.

"You, I could tell, you were flirting. I was playing. I never led you on, but I thought you were cute. I had me a playmate for awhile. We had the mutual thing we loved, our one strong connection...photography. Well, and maybe, yes, certainly for sure-and vegetarianism."

"As a playmate? You used me. I felt you leading me on. I know. I know. You weren't. Hell, I certainly know NOW!"

"I said I loved you right after admiring you for saving Darius and I, but, I know this is weird, but as a friend loves a dear friend."

Steve opened his window and took a pull of the dry Arizona air.

"Listen, we have to go on from here. Go on as friends. This change will rely on full acceptance of status quo." She reached over to touch his hand.

"I was fooling myself that I had a friend I could get intimate with and geesh, why? It all happened in my mind so convincingly. Your unique charm, free spirit...what a dope. I must let go of that silliness."

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"Steve, I never, ever led you on to think we..." "I know, you're absolutely right."

"I'm glad we are here now. Together in this car. I'm glad I have touched you. But God! I had blocked you and you ended up at my doorstep!"

"Yes."

"Part of me became afraid of the intimacy because of my panic disorder it's true. I needed to block you to overcome it."

"Yeah, sure...makes sense."

"It's important to learn the difference between staying with an experience until it is completed and hanging on, trying to get something more from a situation which is either finished or barren."

Her phone rang. She saw it was Kate. "I'll call her later."

"That's kind of you. Please, you don't have to call me Mr. Edwards. Branch will do fine." He started walking ahead and held his hand out for hers. She

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hesitated, began walking faster to keep up, and held his arm instead. The darkness ahead had a glimmer of a fire lighting up the sky which was already rich in purple and neon pink dusk tones. Branch led them through the front gate of the school and around into the back where children were bustling with laughter and activity. From what Sarah could gather, they were about to form a large circle and skip around to a song. Branch looked down into Sarah's face and as he did she looked up at him. The sounds of this happy environment made them both smile at each other. Just then, the teacher clicked play on the cd boom box. "I roamed and rambled and followed my footsteps

To the sparkling sands of her diamond deserts, And all around me, a voice was sounding: This land was made for you and me." The song, "This Land is Your Land" began to blast and the

children joined hands and skipped by the teacher as they went around. Each child was handed two sparklers that the teacher lit up.

One girl broke from the circle and ran a few steps into the field, and stopped to throw one of her two lighted sparklers into the blackening blueness of the sky. It glowered happily, and yet desperately hanging on to its dissipating glow. The last

gleeful sparkledrops painted the child's attentive face with a friendly departing, orange goodbye. The image of the streak from the throw now was taken in by the nearest stubborn low-hanging cottonball-like clouds dotting the evening with their mysterious visitation. The fading contrail, evolving from white to a soft blue, slowly melted into the air. Then it ended as fast as this one act performance started. So fast. Yet, so lovely and very, very long.

"That's simply lovely," said Sarah. The girl ran right into Sarah. "What's your name little girl?" asked Sarah.

necessary provisions and drove out into the country and located Steve on his slow walk.

"One hundred fifty years ago the plains Indians used a device called a travois or pony drag. Are you familiar with that Steve?" she asked.

"Yes. I've seen old pictures of that. The wooden gurney thing that was pulled by a horse, right?"

"Well, kind of. It was a frame slung between two trailing poles and pulled by a dog, horse or sometimes humans. They used it to move their goods and belongings as they looked for better hunting grounds and warmer weather. Well, here's our modern day version for you. It's called the Dixon Rollerpack. It is an old concept brought back to modern days. We did a fund-raiser recently and purchased it. Unlike the wooden version this has aluminum tubing and a ball bearing wheel. The weight of the pack will be distributed between you and the wheel, which, for example, makes a 40 pound pack weigh only 20 pounds. In it you will find the things you need for your vision quest (although she knew that the vision quest is always done naked and without food)."

"Thank you Phoenix (he called her by her American Indian name). I am touched by your concern."

"Can you do this Steve? No, I think the question is - must you do this?" she asked while getting back in her truck. Cold pellets of hail

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began rapidly slicing their views of each other into diagonal blurred colors.

"I only know," Steve began thoughtfully, quickly realizing he'd have to raise his voice to be heard above the clatter of ice?bouncing angrily off her truck. "I really only know that I must change." He pulled out a floppy wide-rimmed bush hat, put it on and cupped his hands to project his voice and began in more of a shout to explain.

"I need to know who I have become and get a clear look at the forecast as they say in my biz," he said with a slight laugh to himself.

"

"Stop it, you're making yourself worse. That's not gonna help anyone. Relax, alright? Can you relax?" Darius was aware that there was nothing so cruel as panic. He hated that Peggy had this condition.

"I turned a devoted husband into a neurotic, sad, confused wanderer."

"His devotion shouldn't be something...what am I trying to say? His, no - devotion. Yes, that's it...devotion. Devotion doesn't wander and still qualify to be called devotion."

Peggy began to sob. "I still think I messed up. I messed him up. I made a mess of a good thing."

"I'm shutting the light now. We both need some rest." Darius reached for the hotel lamp and clicked the toggle switch. The room went quickly black and in two minutes with their eyes still open, they could see a magic hour glow seep in from through the sheer

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curtains.?"Darius?"?"Yes?"?"Do YOU love me?"

"Of course. Now get to sleep." He lifted extra sheeting over to her side and covered her up to her neck. Then he rolled back to his side of the bed.

"That's nice. That's nice that you do." she murmured as she slowly drifted off becoming lost in thoughts and dreams heavy with sorrow and fears.

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The hail drove Steve to find shelter quickly. Climbing up the side of a rather intimidating butte, he discovered a small cutout that provided relief from the pounding pellets. It seemed as though it had been used before as there was a remnant of a small fire tucked near its entrance. He soon was able to start his own fire, unwrap the modern day pony drag and pull out a blanket. The sound of the storm in the far distance droned on, creating a mood of soft terror and isolation.

Steve was of course hoping that new insights and choices would emerge that may have been latent or short-circuited. He was looking for the transformative power of a vision to change or charge him up.

He knew this was completely selfish of him to disappear. Was he about to realize though that a new option would appear telling him to re-invent himself; to destroy his ties? Was all this instead some kind of frantic delusional process of self-destruction? From the first contact with Peggy right up to this lonely moment?

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Although his desire for a "vision quest" was well intended, looking down now at his shirt and tie, and suit, he realized it is totally unrelated to his own culture or upbringing. Despite all this he has high hopes. His longing to discover life's purpose, confront fears, find spiritual power within, and heal emotional wounds, may not be the experience he will have at all. Afterall he is merely a provisional - a guest - encouraged by Kate and her gift of a handful of mescal buttons. This then is more like a guest quest.

He knew from prior research that during June and July, when the crowns of peyote are cut off and dried, they form the so-called mescal buttons which are eaten in the ceremony. They can be ordered over the internet. He reached for the ziploc given to him by Kate.

Being his first encounter with peyote, he hoped the things he learned about it from a Wikipedia description were accurate. He recalled that "peyote-intoxication is a period of contentment and over-sensitivity, and a period of nervous calm and muscular sluggishness, often accompanied by hypocerebrality, and colored visual hallucinations. Consciousness is not lost, control of the limbs and senses is maintained, there is no tendency to commit acts of violence, and seldom do uncomfortable effects accompany or follow it."

Sitting in his little nook of shelter, of peace, of radiating peace, Steve began using this inner adventure to think about his faults and virtues. His obligations to wife, family and job. He soon found himself staring at an unusually large diamond-shaped hailstone which landed near the fire. His eyes began to cross as the icy jewel took on the orange and yellow hues of the flames. He lost focus and

slowly fell back onto the supplies and went into a dream heavy with sorrow and fears.

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Cowgirl, Marty and Esther each took twenty label stickers and hit different supermarkets. The new versions were much larger and harder to conceal. Cowgirl peeled one off and cupped it in her palm, sticky-side down. Moving to the meat section she picked up a package of ribs and tossed it into her shopping cart. A minute later she was in a darkish corner and stealthily applied the label, looking around for cameras and store workers. Using the same approach Marty and Esther were simultaneously accomplishing in their respective stores, she then went back to where she first picked up the meat and tossed the package back. The "Truth Labeling Ninja" had made his/her statement again!

Posting images of the newly-labeled packages to Facebook completed the victory.

"Hey," Marty's daughter began, "Dad...you're gonna get arrested." "For what?" "That's considered TAMPERING. You could be accused of poisoning food, whether you did or not!"

[illegible]

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"Thanks, mom. Bruce is proud of our choices and commitments."

It is now dawn. Baboquivari is visible for a hundred miles around. Jaguars, an endangered species in the Southwest, can appear at anytime...famished. Steve's left cheek feels wet. The faint sounds of the gentle after storm drizzle reminded him he might be getting wet. He can feel his cheek sink into his mouth cavity as though being pushed in by a warm, wet rubber knob. He opens his eyes, to

find himself looking into the intense stare of a wolf only inches away from his face. Steve is shivering. A deer runs by. The wolf takes off.

It has been hours and Sarah has not heard from Steve. His cell phone has lost its charge. Jack couldn't get him to answer his cell, either.

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EB is now half way up Baboquivari.

Surrounding himself within a circle of fist-sized rocks he has gathered and placed, Steve sits with eyes closed listening to his breath. He's determined to sweep his mind clean as though with a stiff broom and kick off the habits clinging to a precipice in his head that have caused others pain. It is a surrender. Not the runaway kind...fleeing from himself, but TO himself. His improved self.

It is anger, however, that wells up as the actions and motives of his recent past make him realize his foolishness. He begins to get more thoughtful, more angry and not just at himself. Why in the hell did that woman have to interrupt my life? Can I find my way back to who I was? Is that good enough, he thought.

Reviewing the entanglements of a false longing, judging himself, his pointless yearnings and finally his hatred of himself right now?he begins to feel a welling up inside. How could he even have thought to consider betraying his loyalty to his wife? Why was it so easily accepted in his mind? Thank God he was put in his place. By the very object of his desire. He starts to weep deeply but his meditating calls him back to simpler thoughts.

Outside his shelter, he begins to hear the sounds of the wilderness he so often ignores.. It reminded him to strive to be free from the limiting sense of habits and reactions. He must find a balance with

everything in his life. He realizes now that this quest experience is the singlemost significant thing done in his life. He will change. He will.

He must.

[illegible]

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"There are no obstacles where there is Will with firm Determination."

Basil the Great

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Tucson's Mountain Men did not sanction the behaviour of their namesake offshoot, well known in much of Arizona. The radical full-time survivalists called themselves the Real Mountain Men and were outliers who refashioned the part-time hobby of some to instead actually live the life only others had been re-enacting for years. They claimed, and many believed it to be true, that they were equal to, or better than, the ability of the Indian to survive using traps and flintlocks.

Steve, awakening an hour later to a cold damp film on his flesh, all his senses not in tune yet, begins to detect noises in the distance. Around a nearby bluff, descending on horseback down a tricky hill, the "Real" Mountain Men were in the neighborhood yipping and whooping it up, most assuredly stinking of whiskey, a revered libation. They are galloping back from being their obnoxious, arrogant selves harrassing all day the more serious participants at the annual Henry's Fork Rendezvous north of Tucson on Mt. Lemmon. Townsfolk always avoided them and mostly feared them for their notorious reputation as equals of the Indians in survival skills and just as savage even in battle. Actually, their savagery was unmatched even by Indian standards. As it is getting dark, the group of thirty or so follow their leader waiting for him to chose a perfect spot for them to bed down and set up camp.

TWO MONTHS LATER

John Imagine Brown, cousin to Earth Buffalo, leader of the Real Mountain Men , naturalist, tomahawk-throwing expert and river

guide among other hard-earned talents, shares tobacco with Steve in his large tepee. His penetratingly peaceful deep blue eyes and Brad Pitt face belie his mad-dog adventures in desert badlands. His

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long, blonde hair, hanging in so many dirt flecked curls waves gently back and forth over his bare shoulders with every gesture. Steve partakes of the pipe as Imagine continues.

Imagine has actually lived in places few travelers would dare enter. He's dined on roadkill, wild game, nuts and plants. He can usually be found balanced on one foot on some precarious rim overlooking upright jagged rocks far below taunting him and him taunting them. He has bragged about his skill in finding and squeezing into places where even animals can't access. Steve, now two months a member, has learned much from him and received a Mountain Man name after a grueling nine hour ceremony/trial worse than the Vision Quest he endured months ago. Known now as Drops Eyes (after repeatedly dropping his eyeglasses each time he mounts his horse) Steve is comfortable in his new skin and respects Imagine for his honesty, experience and friendship. They have given him a white horse, Steve has named Sugar because she was so sweet, right from their first meeting.

Imagine has been trying to make his followers read and understand the great book he has lived by for many years. He found it many years ago on a shelf in a dusty, dark, cob-webbed corner in a Tucson bookstore. It is the Writings from the Philokalia on the Prayer of the Heart. As a nomad of the desert himself, it is a collection of writings written by the Desert Fathers containing instructions concerning phenomena of spiritual life. The Greek Philokalia was compiled in the eighteenth century by Macarius of Corinth and first published in Venice in 1782.

It is a 1794 translation in English from Russian from Greek. So we're talking old here.

"Let me explain a little about my relationship with Earth Buffalo and our different mental medicines. In O'odham language, the

language, as you know of my cousin?EB, "Tohono O'odham" means "Desert People." Him and I have

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different means of getting along on our desert journey. There is a symbol, an icon if you will...The Man in the Maze. It is one of the symbols of the Tohono O'odham. The figure seeks a deeper meaning of life. The center of the circle stands for that deeper meaning. The journey through life is often puzzling and difficult, but the People must struggle and work hard to reach that deeper meaning. He goes his own way with all of that deep stuff and I found mine.

The word, Philokalia translates to "Love of Good", a far cry it would seem from the day to day antics of this band of brigands. But I believe in it. If the group won't adhere, and I have given them two weeks to decide, I have promised myself to immediately go off on my own. Perhaps take you, new student, Drop Eyes, with me."

"The love of good should be easy," says Steve. "I ride with Sugar across these plains and am overwhelmed by its beauty and wonders. People I have met smile and offer me food. Every outing with you has only strengthened my belief in people and, very recently, myself. Do I need this Philokalia?"

"If you stay with the practices within this book, you may first go through periods of excessive sorrowing of the heart, as it darkens and disturbs the mind," Imagine quietly warns as candle light makes mysterious shadows dance along the inner walls of the large teepee they are in.

"Are you willing to go these next steps? The ones you and I will both walk together to go beyond our whiskey and flintlock ways of debauchery and ego? This profound yet practical path of transcendence has a name. It is hesychasm, from a Greek root meaning "to be still" to encourage individual experiences of the divine."

"YOU...are going to be STILL!?"?"Do you know your Bible, Drops Eyes?"

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Steve hesitated, and avoiding eye contact replied, "I haven't skimmed through it in years." He felt a tinge of moral lethargy shivering through him.

"No mind, as I can share a passage from Matthew's gospel for us to meditate on."

Steve moved in closer to allow himself to hear every word over the crackling noise from the flames between them.

"For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened."

"I've read that for the last millennium, hesychasm has remained shrouded in obscurity in the West. Why? One reason is that hesychastic texts preserved by the Orthodox Church were written in Greek. This made them inaccessible to most Westerners. Only recently has it been translated into English.

It gets better. The shift from ego-centered to ego-transcendent consciousness is called metanoia in Greek. The literal translation of this term is in hesychastic terminology...God-centered consciousness! Are you hip to that? Can we get there? Can anyone?"

"This is a bit much. You sound close to making your move away from the group. Does your wife, Fire Blade, believe in this or practice the Jesus Prayer as much as you?" "Hold on, wait, there's more. Practitioners of hesychasm, known

as hesychasts, as I said, speak about two types of consciousness: ego-centered and ego-transcendent. The former is a state dominated by attachments to the senses, emotions, intellect, and imagination. The latter involves detachment from those faculties."

Steve, reaching out and touching Imagine's arm, "You, Imagine
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Brown, detaching yourself from imagination? Is that what you said? Leaving behind the attachments to the senses involving emotions, intellect and imagination?"

"I know, right. It's crazy, but it feels right."

After a pause where their mutual heavy breathing became the new pulse replacing the fire's roar Imagine continues.

called deification or perfect union with God! Steve, we can do this!"

"You know, I remember a book that quoted a guy named Arizmendi. What he said has changed my life." Lifting his gaze directly up to see into Steve's eyes he gave the quote.

"To live is to renew yourself."?Steve suddenly recalled the haunting words from the Panic

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handed her a note. She had volunteered to deliver Steve's message, a letter actually, to Sarah, to the re-enactors camp in hopes they would get it to Sarah. In it he apologises for his recent abandonment and hopes she will understand this period of transformation he is going through. He explains his need for an extended time away. "I realize it is problematic." Perhaps she would contact his job and have them sign him out on vacation or sabbatical. Of course, he loves her, now more than ever, and will return a better person for both of them. He asks for her forgiveness and hopes she can overlook his many flaws.

CHAPTER NINETEEN - Hummingbird

Tohono O'odham cosmology and the home of I'itoi, their Creator and Elder Brother.

There comes many a time, especially for Earth Buffalo, when a primordial urge to know oneself becomes necessary; find solitude and perform a profound withdrawing into himself to collect thoughts. A place of pure silence, to quietly concentrate to rid self of ego, eliminate obstacles, and desires. Although no river is visible, this monastic time becomes filled with a boundless and endless mental river that quenches a thirst as no other can. And besides, if he climbs high enough, he can consult with I'itoli.

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EB speaks with the I'itoi spirit who advises "confrontational politics" as practiced by the American Indian Movement, but cautioning to guide people to retain the delicate balance with the world and interact with it as intended. EB confesses he wants to know when he leaves this earth that he tried his very best for meaningful changes. He is reminded that the Zunis speak of a stone which beats the heart of the world. He, Earth Buffalo, must be that stone for his people and all human beings.

I'itoi speaks, "Have you not thought it a coincidence the buffalo was provided by the Great Mystery for your peoples' every need? That the buffalo sustained them during the very same years they

tried to survive there? So too you, Earth Buffalo, are here now to provide for their every need with your voice. With electronic-spirits it can reach ears far and wide. Unite those who wish to keep the land sacred. Be there for them. Talk the words they need to hear. Supply them with earth-friendly resources."

EB prostrates himself into the dirt floor and begins a quiet song of thanks. "Oh Sun you remain forever, oh earth you remain forever.

May all earthlings, sun and earth make you smile on us who are grateful. As we share this time together. May it please you."

I'itoi speaks again, "It is said that the Buffalo teaches us that true prosperity comes when we are grateful for what we have and when we live in harmony and love with all other beings. A Buffalo symbol represents abundance, generosity, strength, and survival. Go now."

"You and Phoenix will own and operate a supply yard of Rastra, the Insulated Concrete Forms, and AAC, the Autoclaved Aerated Concrete blocks you have knowledge of and have spoken to the people of Tucson about over the airwaves. You two will become the philosopher-naturalists and voice of conscience for every Tucson environmentalist movement. You must start a movement to save the *Quercus arizonica* sargent, the Arizona Oak, the native wood of Arizona used extensively, as you know, by neomigratory birds for foraging during the breeding season. I know you can do all this."

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EB's head is spinning with new plans to introduce the young to the wonder of trees in that they provide shade, oxygen, clean water, food and homes for many beings. Mostly he wants to give children the ability to explore, use their imaginations, discover new wildlife and engage in unstructured and adventurous play by spending time outdoors. His campaign will seek to raise awareness of these benefits, inspiring young people to discover the joy of exploring the natural world, and encouraging families to experience nature first-hand.

On his way back he phones Phoenix to begin producing a detailed flyer for handouts to the locals he will be speaking to.

She begins with some familiar and maybe not so familiar information:

"We, the Tohono O'odham (TOH-na Oh-tahm) American Indians or simply O'odham, "the People", live on approximately 3 million acres southwest of Tucson, Arizona.

There are three primary parts to the reservation. The total size is larger than the state of Delaware. Tohono O'odham also live in northern Sonora, Mexico.

Tohono O'odham belong to our own nation, separate from the United States. We have our own flag, government, and police."

She enters another Tohono O'odham Nation search in Google on her iPad and finds:

"There are about 20,000 members of the Tohono O'odham Nation. The Desert People didn't have a written language until the 1970's.

We have always passed on our stories, traditions, cultural, and spiritual beliefs by the spoken word. About 10,000 members of the nation speak the first language. Our language revival is growing, and many children and adults are now learning to speak Tohono O'odham."

Oh yeah, she thinks, the cactus. Google again:

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"Many O'odham practice the saguaro fruit harvest. "

[illegible]

"I can tell you that understanding begins with love and respect. It begins with respect for the Great Spirit.

All things -- and I mean all things, have their own will and their own way and their own purpose.?This is what is to be respected."

-- Rolling Thunder, Cherokee

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CHAPTER - 20

You Were Part of My Growth

and I Want to Say Thank You

Typically, for Imagine and Steve the days in the desert have been composed of minimal repetitive activities in and around their improvised cliff shelter. Daytime, with its scorching heat, unexpected winds and jeggos, those unexpected duststorms that ended up in your mouth while you are asleep, demands that they save energy and combine sleeping with foraging and conversing. Nothing too strenuous so they could travel in the evenings if they wished to find a better shelter or more abundance of food resources.

Steve was impressed with Imagine's extraordinary sense of harmony with the forbidding landscape and hoped to learn more about the many mysteries and surprises these tortured landscapes were capable of killing you with. Like water, that elemental sustainer of life. Where in the hell was it? Fortunately, Imagine knew how to seek out the locations he called "charco", the low areas

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in the desert that actually hold rainwater. Steve learned the hard way that the horses always were given any available water first.

"I will find this Manny person for you someday and remind him of your hurt," Imagine said with a big smile, knodding his head up and down indicating a big 'yes'.

The news team were let into the View Hotel and directed to Peggy's room. When they got there they were let in by Darius who was the only one there.

[illegible]

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In a minute she disappeared.

Drop Eyes and Imagine didn't make it to Eva and Winky's wedding. Of course many others were there to help them celebrate - Frendle and Sheila with their signature Avocado Dip, Earth Buffalo and Kate, Kate's father Ben Sheriff Charmer, Cowgirl, Marty, Esther, Sarah, CoryAnder, Branch and Remember Wonderful, and a colorful array of EB's friends - medicine man, Henry Raven Dog, Blue Thunder Hoof, and the next couple soon to be wed, Mary Long Bone and Peace Blossom. Kate's friend, the mysterious Robirda Raven Hair brought Entennmens.

[illegible]

EPILOGUE

Steve was last seen weeks later by Ben as he drove the stage to Tempe, Arizona to pick up supplies for his daughter's business. He met him in the streets and after a brief exchange of words, Steve said he was off to enter the Rinzai Zen Buddhist Temple and Monastery in Tempe, Arizona.

"That's enough assholes!"

The two men became startled and froze in their tracks, looking first at each other for confirmation that they actually did hear the remark they thought they heard.

Standing some forty-odd feet away was the silhouette of a tall man looking as though dressed in rags.

The cats scattered. The man walked in long, slow strides towards the men.

Turning slowly to face him and challenge his outrageous comment, they tightened every muscle. Manny spit and caught a cat on the ear as it ran.

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"What's it to ya, ragman?" shouted Manny. "Are you Manny Irish - the famous Kendo Champion?"

Raising his sword to rest in his other hand, Manny looked at Two Clicks as he slowly slinked away into a dark corner leaving Manny by himself. Staring at Two Clicks, shocked and pissed at his sneaky escape, Manny turned his attention back to the stranger

saying, "You want an autograph or somethin' dipshit?"

The man was no longer there. Manny took a gulp of saliva and as beads of his sweat rolled down into the corners of his mouth he took a low crouching position and squinted into the sunlight looking left and right.

Suddenly he felt very warm and very bad breath rushing into his face. Ragman was nose to nose with him. A huge clenched fist coming towards Manny's face was the last image Manny saw, followed by tremendous pain.

"That's from flower boy."

THE END

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