

Assiduity Six

by J. Mykell Collinz

She sits next to me at the kitchen table, sips from her tea cup, and then says: "You know, John, it is so ironic that you, the archetypical landowner, should arrive to stake your claim at this time. Don't get me wrong, I mean no disrespect. It is what it is. We are who we are. I feel better knowing it's someone like you rather than a transnational corporation. We thought they were planning to build a shopping mall here. Not any time soon, of course, because shoppers have no money to go shopping."

"You had it right, Uzma," I say: "I bought the land from a transnational corporation. They had plans to develop the area but since the global economy has taken another nose dive they are now selling all their local properties, literally dirt cheap. They see the houses as valueless assets. Standing alone on an otherwise empty block, I'm surprised these three houses haven't been gutted and vandalized by now."

"You can thank us for that, John," she says, smiling broadly, looking at me as though I had just handed her the Oscar for winning an academy award.

"What do you mean?" I say, smiling back reflexively.

"I mean my parent's generation worked to preserve this property since long before it was abandoned by some obscure professional association, the founding members of which, after being indicted for investment fraud, mysteriously disappeared. Talk to my parents if you want a more detailed report. It's a convoluted story, going way back. I'm part of a new generation. We're focused on a more immediate situation, how to stay alive in a crumbling, violent society."

"Every generation is a new generation, isn't it? What's so different about your generation?"

"We have no hope of employment, no income, and sometimes not even a secure place to sleep at night. Vast numbers of homeless children and young adults have a difficult time finding food on their

own, staying clean, remaining healthy. We're trying to do something about it."

"How?"

"Through organization, through power in numbers, through cooperation and sharing."

"Sharing what?"

"It begins with sharing your effort. Great effort is more important than great progress at this point in our evolution to a new world order."

"I'd be careful about using that phrase, new world order."

"We need to reorganize around new priorities if we plan to survive into the future."

"I still don't know how you intend to do something about the vast numbers of homeless children and young adults who have a difficult time finding food on their own, or staying clean, or remaining healthy."

"Rather than trying to explain it, John, let's walk around. You can meet other people, check out some of our projects. We're really still at a beginning stage but, just as this neighborhood was once a showplace, back in the days of a booming economy when it's residents were wealthy industrialists, our plans for a cooperatively operated and maintained urban farm community could transform this neighborhood into a showplace again."

"What variety of food plants can you grow in this climate?"

"More than you might think. Plus, with indoor growing technology and affordable electricity, we could grow almost anything we want here, including exotic fruits and vegetables. And, with locally generated renewable sources of energy unconnected to the power grid, we could achieve sustainability."

"Do you have growing operations in any of my houses?"

"No. There was a marijuana growing operation in one of the basements but they moved. They needed a bigger space. Some of our best farmers started as marijuana growers. It's what got them into plants and growing other things."

"You say it's a cooperative but you must have some form of leadership."

"A bottom up leadership. If you see something that need to be done, then do it. If it's important enough, others are likely to be there with you because they see it too. I'm a strategic planner. It's a position I inherited through my parents. They were leaders in the previous era. To me it's a burdensome responsibility. Yet I do it because I see it needs to be done."

As we walk through the backyard toward the middle house, I'm wondering if she's fooling herself about leadership roles and strategic planning.

A tall, stout, young man with curly red hair, ruddy skin, and rosy cheeks appears from the basement doorway, and says: "Who's this dude?"

"He's the new owner," Uzma replies.

"Owner?" the tall, stout young man says as he pretends to suppress a giggle by placing two fingers together over his slightly pursed lips.

"John," Uzma says: "I'd like you to meet Don. You two should get along real good together."

The sarcasm in her voice and the expression on her face tells me otherwise. I sense an ongoing conflict between them. Like he's muscles, she's brains. She tactfully defers to him as we walk into the middle house.

"What's your plan, John?" Don says.

"That depends," I say: "If enough small, local, and independent developers like myself can manage to purchase the neighborhood again, piece by piece, I see a possible rebirth in the not too distant future."

He gives me that same gesture, suppressing a giggle.

"What's funny?" I say.

"You," he replies: "That's what's funny, stupid funny."

Uzma steps between us, and says: "There is someone else I'd like you to meet, John. Follow me upstairs. I'll introduce you to Rasheed."

