

October

Arecibo PR. The postmark was unmistakable, and the reasons for its appearance at Freddie's address two months before Christmas were clear: Something either was happening or had happened to his mother, and perhaps she would not be around to send out her annual greetings at the usual time of the year. Freddie had grabbed the envelope from his mailbox just before hopping into his Miata for the commute to Hartsfield International Airport for another day of work among the Streamlined Doves. He dreaded opening it, but when he had perched himself on the toilet in the gate agents' men's room, he pulled the envelope out of his pocket, ripped it open, and read his mother's faux-aristocrat handwriting. In Spanish or English, every word was a dagger.

Hijo mio:

These many years I have kept you very much in the dark about what caused me to flee New York for my native soil. I will reveal the reason in this letter, but there are other things to reveal first.

For nearly twenty years I was very happy to be with your father, who I understand has passed on. May he sing with the angels. He always had a beautiful tenor voice. But I was not happy being away from my island, and rather than appearing to be ruled by geography, I must have taken out my frustrations about life in New York on your father. I had a lover, a very handsome, younger man, who himself was very promiscuous. This man, whose name was Héctor, was what they call a "scenester," always at the Downtown clubs dancing, drinking, picking up women and sometimes men. He worked in a restaurant in the Village where some lady friends from work and I used to eat lunch about once a week. Eventually I got bold and went to that restaurant by myself. He was there, and I asked if he had some time after work to go look at some art

galleries with me. Of course, by the time he got off work the galleries were closed. We never saw one piece of art that night.

Just as I realized that your father would find out about us, Héctor and I decided that we should leave. He suggested New Jersey; I said, "No, Puerto Rico." He had never even been to Puerto Rico, though his Spanish was magnificent and he had often dreamed of going. We went. Just a few months after I arrived here, though, I started having these illnesses that I could not explain, illnesses that even the best santería doctors did not recognize. A medical doctor tested my blood and found nothing the first time. The second time he decided to look for HIV, even though I was not in a high-risk group, because, after all, Héctor was.

Freddie, the reason that I have never told you how I am doing on this island is very simple and very complex. Simply speaking, I have the AIDS virus. The complexity comes from the emotions. How can I tell my husband and son that I caught a deadly virus from my adulterous affair? Now that your father is gone, it is easier to tell you. So now you know. I guess I should feel some relief from finally informing you.

For a long time my body was able to fight the virus. I was never ill after my diagnosis. My immunity did not suffer. Only occasionally I had periods when I had to lie in bed for a few days, unable to move, but with no real symptoms, and then I would return to normal.

Recently the same doctor tested me again. The results were amazing, Freddie. The antibodies were gone. GONE! And so were all the other signs of the virus! But my body had fought the virus so hard, eventually succeeding, that it was worn out from the struggle. And that is why I am now dying.

I'm so sorry that we never got to see each other these past few years, and that I could not be there after your father passed away. But understand that I could not face you, and I don't think I can yet. But I figured that you must know. By the time

you read this, I will very likely be on the other side. Have courage, my son. All will be well. I think the earth will be glad to be rid of me.

My deepest love to you,

Mom.

Freddie finished and flushed. So that was it. She had HIV, she beat it, and it was a Pyrrhic victory at best. Did anyone in Puerto Rico grasp the significance of this discovery? She had cured herself of the AIDS virus!—probably without changing her lifestyle one iota, since she was much too set in her ways to take up a new diet or exercise regimen.

Well, now he was truly an orphan, with no one left to place his or her hopes in him. It was oddly liberating to cast that maternal albatross from around his neck. But he himself didn't feel much like living, much less fighting the same fight as his mother. And though he felt a sense of filial obligation to fly to Puerto Rico to attend his mother's last hours and her funeral, he decided against it, even though he could fly cheaply on Delta due to family emergency. He just didn't care enough to go.

A glance at the monitor in the concourse informed Freddie that the afternoon flight from New York would arrive 20 minutes ahead of schedule. But there it was, making a bee-line for the J-line at Gate 74, his gate; he watched the 737-300 roll toward the terminal a full 35 minutes ahead, with no ground crew in evidence on any of the four Grace gates. Yes, there were now four pearly gates, one of which would soon be modified to accommodate jumbo-jets when necessary, but was eventually intended, he knew, for Grace's 777, not due to begin service until 1997, for chrissakes. *What's everybody's big hurry, anyway?* he thought.

Waiting until the last practical moment, Freddie called one of his co-workers, the goofy kid who'd creamed in his BVDs back in July (Tyrus, but "they call me Skip at home") to operate the

Jetway while Freddie zipped downstairs to the ramp to park the plane. There was very little risk of spilling blood in parking a jet, assuming that the brakes were working properly. There was a large "tackle box" containing all the tools of the ramp trade: wands, vests, headphones, eye masks, bandages, extra earplugs, scattered odds and ends that they never seemed to use but could come in handy in a pinch. Freddie grabbed a pair of plugs, a mask, a pair of fluorescent orange wands, and he very smoothly brought the craft to rest, nosegear right on the mark. *Ramp experience pays off in the clutch*, he thought.

OK, so it wasn't the smartest move he could have made that day.

"*Balaguer!*" Joshua Terry's shout was a faint voice of grandly pissed-off disappointment, barely heard over the whine of the twin turbines. Freddie chose to feign deafness and place the chocks around the proper wheels. Terry, however, would make himself audible in whatever manner necessary. "*Balaguer*," he grabbed Freddie's left shoulder and spun him round, "what the fuck are you doin', man?!"

It was an easy question. "Parkin' the plane, Mr. Terry." *Asshole*, he added to himself.

Three rampers walked swiftly behind Terry and set to work belatedly, connecting the cables and hoses, rolling the beltloaders and tugs into position, and the whole routine. Terry went to work on the wayward gate agent, practically shouting him up the Jetway stairs.

"As of a few weeks ago, you are a gate agent. Does 'gate' sound like 'ramp' to you? Does your job description mention anything about parkin' planes? Did your trainin' and orientation involve the use of day-glo wands?!"

"There was nobody on the ramp."

"Does that give you the authorization to become a temporary ramp agent? It sure as shit does not, Mister Balaguer. If that

plane has to wait for a crew because it's in too early, let the damn plane wait, do you understand?"

"Perfectly."

Terry was nowhere near finished. "You signed an agreement statin' that you'd be a good boy and toe the line, did you not?"

"I think so."

"I *watched* you sign that agreement, don't tell me what you *think*. See that office over there?" Terry pointed at the gate agents' break room, which housed the gate supervisors' office. "Go have a seat in there while I take care o' somethin' an' pick up some more papers for you to sign." The chief of terminal operations probably meant an excretory errand was on his immediate agenda, to be followed by the issuance of a pink slip.

Freddie made himself as comfortable as he could on the entirely functional sofa in the break room. He slouched defiantly, rebelliously, youthfully, though nobody was there to see him. Busted—for contravening policy by doing the right thing. He wouldn't be the first or last employee discharged from Air Grace, nor even the most famous, since this would never make even a frivolous case for a discrimination lawsuit, compared to the legitimate litigations of Grace's early history (all settled out of court). However, he might become the most spectacularly discharged employee, through a plan which he had been concocting for six or seven weeks.

Freddie was not a standard issue Georgia Tech geek, physically speaking. His regimen with the weights had brought him almost even with Horace Foxe in terms of musculature, and he wore it well. He looked *good*, especially his shoulders and pecs. If all one does is work, eat, lift, and sleep, then one can turn decent raw material into an astounding anatomic sculpture in just a few months.

The sculpture grew impatient, sitting like a Rodin with chin on hand and elbow on knee, through fifteen identical and interminable minutes. He rose to grab his lunchbox out of the refrigerator and eat, returned to the sofa, eating at an unaccustomed *tempo lento*, actually tasting the ingredients of his turkey sandwiches, sipping and savoring the god-awful protein solution's attempted carob flavor. Lunch demolished, still no Terry. *That plane must be about loaded by now*, he thought.

Enough thinking. Time for action.

Out of the break room strode Freddie, slowly and purposefully, wearing his expression of bemused exasperation. He still had his badge, and he used it to gain access to the jetway and the ramp.

"Holly!" he shouted at his best friend in the company, who was still down in the dumps after losing his lead-agent duties and the bonus that accompanied those duties. Holly parked the tug that he had driven to the bag chute and scampered to greet Freddie. They exchanged the typical "heydude/whassup?" handshake and felicitations. Finally Freddie requested, "Let me kiss off one last jet."

"Kiss off, yer-ass; that's *my* job."

"What, ya got a patent on it? Look, man, they're gonna fire me for parkin' this beast, they'll prob'lly arrest me for doin' this, but I don't care, I really don't give a shit."

"You think they're gonna stay in love with me if I let you do this? It'd be a kick, but *Fred*, read the smoke signals. I'm not even the lead on this gate, but if you fuck up here, with my say-so, I'm responsible. I love ya, but fuck off!"

There was no way in hell or Georgia that Ezekiel Halden would just carte blanche Freddie into getting both of them canned for gross insubordination. Freddie Balaguer was on his own, the way true superheroes like working best.

There was one opportunity for Freddie to make a definitive statement. A 737 two gates over was being pushed back, slowly, tentatively, by a new hire with next to zero experience driving the pushback tractor, flustered even more by the lead agent's incessant and quite unintelligible hollering. Freddie race-walked in the direction of the pushback, covering a healthy distance before the plane reached the necessary position. Holly's sense of foreboding received a real wake-up call as he watched Freddie's arcing path and easily predicted his destination and ETA.

Without saying a word but dry-mouthing *Oh, fuck!* Holly ran. He had run only once before on the ramp, where running is forbidden: the time a homophobic agent was trying to run him over with a tug, way back in his first year on the job. This time, instead of zig-zagging to evade a tug, Holly ran a perfectly straight route at the speed of panic. An agent with reflective wands gave the signal to start the port engine. Freddie let the engine spool for fifteen seconds before he shifted from his walk...to a trot...to a jog...to a flat-out run...right at the spooling engine. None of the four agents on that gate saw what was happening—except the rookie driving the pushback back to its resting place, and he was too far away and tangled up in a headset cable to do a damn thing to stop Freddie's run toward the meat grinder. It was up to Holly.

Through the foam-rubber plugs in Freddie's ears, the roar and whine of the spooling turbo seemed like the sympathetic vibrations of a heavenly choir of crystal goblets all aswirl with the myriad deftly musical fingers of God. The tunnel that awaited him was dark within, but somehow the light at the end beckoned through the rapidly rotating fan. About ten feet from the maw of that tunnel, his head suddenly met and slid on rough concrete, thanks to a shoestring tackle by Ezekiel Halden.

But that tunnel wasn't giving up so easily. As Freddie felt the warmth of the blood dripping from his forehead, he simultaneously felt the hair on his head going horizontal,

tightening like 80,000 leashes that yanked him toward the tunnel. As Freddie tried to get up, Holly was already scrambling to gain enough footing to pounce on his gatemate, hold him down, and use his aikido training to punch his fuckin' lights out if necessary.

The need for fists never arose, as the agent with the wands gave the *cut engine* signal, removing the imminence of a conversion to steak Tartare. Holly, who had been into weight training much longer than Freddie and a black-belt for seven years, gave Freddie a caustic glare that whispered, *Cooperate or die!* then hoisted the young man onto his right shoulder and trotted toward the restroom by the aircraft maintenance depot, ostensibly to administer first aid.

Once inside the restroom, Holly dropped Freddie right on his ass and locked the door. "*What the fuck was that?*" Holly screamed. "You're about to lose a job, so you decide to kill yourself, *and* delay a hundred people's flight, you fuckin' dickbrain? I thought you were smarter than that!" He refrained, just barely, from slapping Freddie and sending him sliding like a hockey puck across the slick tile floor.

Freddie's mind drifted in several different directions while Holly stepped over him and relieved himself in the nearest urinal. The adrenaline had done its job, awakening all Holly's organs and bodily fluids so they could make their contribution to the rescue effort, and now the bladder could stand at ease. Finally Freddie's mind made the connection for which it was searching:

"Your turn to be a hero, eh, Holl?"

"Do *whut*?"

"I was a hero in Connecticut when I stopped those stupid-ass gangster motherfuckers robbin' the pizza joint. I was a hero when I saved that stockbroker with a deathwish. Now you save my ass when I decide to dive into the blender. You're a hero, man."

Flush. Holly zipped and turned about-face. "Fuck that shit. Everybody's a hero, everybody's a bum. It just comes with bein' human: You have your moments o' glory and your moments where you show just what kind o' shitheel you can be. Right now my superhero brain thinks retreat is the better part o' valor. I'm gonna get you outta here."

He did, after grabbing a wad of paper towels to stanch Freddie's blood flow. Moving and acting as if nothing abnormal were happening, he led Freddie up a stairwell into the terminal, past the horde of collegiate Christians and others flying home—or to Miami—for midterm break. There was nothing unusual about a pair of sweaty customer service agents emerging from secured stairwells to grab a snack in the concourse, but usually if they walked together they would at least be gabbing about one of the five major topics: weather, sports, cars, money, or sex. These two just looked straight ahead, hungry-eyed, with a hint of anxiety on their faces that could be mistaken for doubts whether the airport Chick-Fil-A would still be in business when they reached it. They said nothing.

If Holly had been brave earlier, he was downright ballsy now, risking his job by, first, going AWOL and, second, aiding and abetting this troublemaker. Loyalty to a friend, even one whom he saw only at work, towered unchallenged above loyalty to the company and even to himself. Holly knew that Grace would have the airport security detail after Freddie's well-defined beige buttocks, but he also knew ways to evade security, ways that he had discovered years before, in high school, while earning pocket money as an airport chicken.

Not that he bragged about it much, but in certain nooks and crannies of Hartsfield Airport, young Zeke Halden had sucked some of the wealthiest cocks in the country, working quickly as those wealthy cocks endured brief layovers between business flights, working carefully to avoid leaving drips of shpooze that could mar the thousand-dollar suits he routinely unzipped. Holly allowed himself to snicker about those days,

remembering how his mother had given head to trailer trash just for a case of beer per blow.

On the tram to the satellite parking lot, where they hoped Freddie's Miata remained unmolested, Holly confided, "I'm doing this because, more than anything, I want to keep you from getting fried—and if it's worth their while, the company will fry you, but if you get beyond their reach, they'll write you off. I can't continue to work for a company that would drive you to pull the kind o' shit you just tried to pull—and I know you must be really fucked up in a way you haven't told me yet."

Freddie nervously shifted his weight on the hard plastic seat. "Didn't I tell you about that stockbroker guy whose life I saved? He said that—"

"I know what he said, and I've got a sneakin' hunch it's true." Holly glanced around for possible unwelcome ears; Freddie's ears stood at attention. "Got this friend in accounting who came across a miscellaneous expenditure last month. Now usually, *miscellaneous* refers to shit like emergency purchases o' soap and paper towels for the planes, 'case they run out before the month's end. Penny-ante expenses. This one was six figures—*high* six figures. It may not be guns, but it sure ain't butter, 'less they plan to plook every passenger in the ass with a quarter-pound stick.

"Look, buddy, I've got some money, enough to get us away for a while to have some fun and keep the Air Grace dove from shittin' on us. Let's ditch your ragtop at my place and take my truck on the road."

"Where to?"

The tram reached the end of its line, the employees' satellite lot. They would now have to reach their cars, use their security badges one last time, toss them into a convenient ligustrum by the gate, and kiss their airline employability *adieu*.

"I dunno," Holly puffed. "How's the Outer Banks sound?"

The routine was comforting. Andi knew that Paterson South, barring unforeseen acts of terrorism, would be there each working day. She knew that the kids would display the usual mix of innocence, enthusiasm, and vulnerability shielded by street-honed toughness, like soft-shell crabs that take shelter in the estate of a recently departed nautilus. She knew that she would hold the dread prospect of flunking Health over the heads of students who did not take her CPR unit with the proper degree of seriousness. (Actually, in some circles, flunking Health bought the respect of peers as a nobly defiant accomplishment, a way of telling the whole public education conspiracy where to stick it.) She knew, and here was a brown leaf on the green tree of routine, that Lashondra Turner, big as a duplex, would blithely ignore her each time she passed her classroom.

Lashondra had missed the first week of classes, then materialized on the Monday after Labor Day as if...well, as *if*. Andi had tried five times to flag her down in the hall with a friendly howdy-do, but cool seniors don't chit-chat with teachers, lest they be perceived as suck-ups. Andi had then tried a less friendly, "Lashondra, come here—I need to talk to you." No luck. Ms. Sichler just clung to her non-personhood in the girl's universe. Andi considered getting in her face with, "Shondra, you stubborn little bitch, git yo' black ass over here 'fore I kick it for you!" But...no.

Circumstances demanded extraordinary measures. The time had come to enlist Lashondra's counselor in the conspiracy to grab the girl's attention and expose her to the wondrous opportunities awaiting her in magical North Carolina. (Yeah, right. The girl had never been farther south than Wilmington, *Delaware*, and now she would just go along with an early senior trip to give birth in a strange state?)

Andi already owed counselor Mavis DuRapeau half a dozen favorettes for requests she had carried out the previous year, and settling that account would require at least a year of

humiliating household chores if she tacked on a favor of this magnitude. Mavis, a very-large-very-dark-very-Lesbian 40-year-old with badly ironed hair and humongo-frame spectacles, listened raptly one chilly Monday morning to Andi's summary of the situation. The conversation was occasionally interrupted by clanking noises from the nearby boiler room, as maintenance personnel were busy stoking the boiler to ward off the chill of autumn's surprise assault, which had caught the whole Northeast with its trousers down.

When Andi reached the coda of her summary, Mavis languidly leaned back in her rolling chair, hands behind her head, eyes fixed on the acoustical tile, and unleashed a grin that raised the temperature of the room a few centigrades. The grin became a titter, a chuckle, a whoop, and a cough.

When she had recovered her breath, Mavis spoke, Barbara Jordan-esque, every word potentially bursting with importance. "Number one, you must appreciate how ridiculous this whole scenario appears. Number two, not that I'm the kind of person who holds such things over people's heads, but...you...owe...me. Big-time."

Counselors can always play the karma card, Andi mentally gulped. "Look, whatever it takes: money, sex, babysitting for your nephews, I'll provide it. I wouldn't even bring this up if I didn't think it was important. And it's not just important to me. This is...this is the revolution, Mavis. This has the potential to be the next Martin, Malcolm, JFK, or Jesus, or all of the above—if we fulfill the prophecy. We're talking about a leader of the revolution, one who's born to a working-class African-American girl—young woman, I mean—from Paterson New Jersey!"

Mavis batted her eyes behind those twin windshields that magnified her coffee-colored irises. "Malcolm? As in... 'by any means necessary'? Hmm. Look, this is insane, but you're right, I can't imagine how or why you'd make up something like this. I'm willing to indulge you, not because I want your money (you have none), and not because I want you to give me...any of

the other things you mentioned, and not even because I like you, Andi. I mean, I *do* like you. You would probably go to extremes to accomplish this...little caper, with or without my help. Without my help, you'd suffer unnecessarily, so I'll help, in a limited way. I'm gonna summon Lashondra during your conference period tomorrow, but I won't be in the office. You two work out the details on your own. I'll be an enabler, but not a contributor, let's say. Frankly, I'm doing this because...during Malcolm's time I was too young to participate in the movement, and whatever contribution I can make to reviving that revolution would be...very rewarding. And you can thank me by continuing to do your best out there in the trenches, and making your best a little better each day. You have second-period conference?"

"Third." Andi was positively giddy and not too burdened with cool to show it. She stood up, leaned over, kissed the still reclining Mavis on the left cheek, and whispered, "Maybe I can give you some of the other thing, just once. I've gotten really good at it, y'know." Mavis chuckled once more, sat up, and returned to her omnipresent paperwork.

Calendars don't lie, as a rule, and Tuesday followed Monday as predicted, slightly cooler, but with skies the purest azure. If the deciduous trees had any doubts about donning their fall colors, those doubts were dispelled in a hurry. Andi took the clear skies and the trees' new apparel as good omens.

The obnoxious electronic tone sounded to begin third period, and Andi waited spider-like in Mavis DuRapeau's cramped, windowless, paper-piled web for her formerly fleet-footed special preggo project to arrive. Lashondra may have been aloof for the past month, but she was not the type of student to evade a summons from the office, especially with the any-day-now anxiety of the post-inversion stage of pregnancy invisibly consuming her from within, and with the comfort to be derived from a chat with the Eastern Seaboard's largest tough-love teddy bear, Ms. DuRapeau.

The young duplex moved slowly but gracefully from geometry class to the guidance office—slowly enough to make Andi start biting her nails while waiting. Andi had not bitten her nails since her parents' funeral. She figured correctly that Lashondra must be stopping by the restroom and taking her sweet time. When the left hand had been completely dentomanicured, Andi heard the subtle squeak of the hinges as the door opened wide enough to admit Lashondra's protrusive abdomen. With no hesitation, Lashondra calmly inquired,

"Where's Ms. DuRapeau?"

"This is between you and me," Andi replied, at least appearing calm, though beneath the desk her knees and ankles operated the invisible pedals on an inaudible drum kit. Lashondra maneuvered herself into a large leather chair; Andi took up the discussion. "You might not believe this, babe, but...teachers have feelings, and right now, mine are hurtin'. I've tried to flag you down to ask how things were goin', and you just avoid me like the polka every time. What's the deal?"

Lashondra's eyes seemed to grow darker, dark enough to absorb all the light in the room. "Why'd you wanna talk to me? You think I'm stupid."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean what I say. Everybody think I'm stupid. You look at this skinny black girl, 's got nothin' goin' for her, gets herself knocked up, wanna keep it 'n' all—that spells stupid to someone like you. Besides, you wanted me to get an abortion."

"What—?"

"That doctor you sent me to, he was all ready to gimme the big scrape." She was gradually jettisoning that veneer of calm. "He just, like, assumed I was there to get it done."

"Hold it! Look, I had no idea he would just, like, *assume* anything. I wanted you to have the same *choices* I had when I

turned up pregnant, something a lot of the girls around here don't seem to give themselves. I never said, 'Hey, Doc, I'm sendin' you another scrapette!' And anyway, he told me you were high-risk, as in, if you try to have this baby, you both might not survive the experience. So that's why I needed to talk to you, find out how you were doin'."

Lashondra's glare softened, but only a fraction. "I'm fine. Everythin' just fine. Can I go now?"

"No! No. I've got news for you."

Andi apologized for not having the foresight to imagine how important Lashondra's offspring might be—after all, if Jesse Jackson could be born to a poor, young, black girl with nothing going for her, who's to say Lashondra Turner couldn't be the mother of another Martin, Malcolm, or Jesse? But then, after apologizing, Andi had to get to the weird part:

"This child has to be born in North Carolina in order for the prophecy to have a chance of coming true. It was originally *my* child that was to fill this role, but now it's on you, 'cause I lost mine."

"I'm sorry."

"I've learned to live with it."

"No, I mean, I'm sorry I can't do this. 'Cause now I *know* you think I'm stupid. You wanted me to abort this baby a few months back, and now you want me to carry it to North Carolina? Now, you know I'm not s'posed to travel, but you wanna drag me off to some strange place to have my baby? You trippin', Ms. Sichler."

"I wouldn't have even suggested that you go all that distance, at this stage, if I didn't believe this was all true. Not just true, but vital to our future, and to generations to come. This whole thing, I know, is so unbelievable, but...look, I could lie to you and say that if you stay here, you'll have a really rough birth

that might kill you, and if you go to Carolina, everything will turn out peachy-keen, but I think you know I'm into truth. And this is the truth: I heard what appeared to be a voice from beyond the grave, talking through a living physics professor, naming you as the mother of...an important person! Now, how in the world would this physics professor in North Carolina know there's a girl in New Jersey named Lashondra who's pregnant with—hey, are you having twins?"

"No, just one."

"Well, she said you're gonna have two. Maybe another one later."

"Oh, I plan on it."

"Good. Planning for this sort of thing is good. It also means, if it's predicted that you're going to have another kid, that you'll very likely make it through this birth. Do you think your parents would agree to a trip like this?"

"They ain't got nothin' to say about it. They kicked me out the house, 'cause they found out who the father was. They hate Kenny."

Andi could see why: Kenny had spent most of his summer vacation in jail for various minor offenses. "How about you? Could you agree to it?"

"I still don't like it. It's just too weird. My first thought is, *no*."

Thoughts of bribery and blackmail crossed Andi's consciousness, but she had little to give, and the girl had nothing to lose. "Okay, Shondra. But we'll talk some more, before it gets too late. You're due at the end of the month, so think about it, all right?"

Fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh periods crawled by. After-school cross-country practice was a torture chamber, with time itself on the rack. Andi was overtaken by weighty thoughts,

such as, *Why am I trying to pull this off? The whole thing seems so bogus to anyone who wasn't there to hear what Virginia said. I'm beginning to doubt it myself. Why am I so concerned with saving the future from what's probably inevitable? The rich have been powerful, the powerful have been assholes for thousands of years; can we really expect to change that? What has the future done for me lately, anyhow? And why does Virginia Dare give a fuck?*—she's dead!

The ride home was mercifully short. She found a message from Wilf on her machine: "Andi, this is you-know-who." He sounded tipsy. "You're not even gonna believe this. Alf says the Chinese translation of *Self, Incorporated* has sold 50 million copies. *Fifty fuckin' million!* I didn't know there was a Chinese translation. Anyway, I may not be Lenin yet, but I'm catching up with Mao: It's the second biggest book sale in Chinese history, behind the Little Red Book. Anyway, call me in Saint Louis, 314-382-5968, room 101."

She called, but Alf answered, since Wilf was getting some badly-needed rest. Alf explained that an accountant from San Diego, who had immigrated from Shanghai a few years back, liked the book so well, he had practically demanded a translation contract from the licensing department of Plaid Flamingo. The licensing department was Turpentine Taft's sister-in-law Angelique, who immediately thought, *A billion potential readers...why the hell not?* and agreed to a five-percent royalty, but only if the Ministry of Culture in Beijing approved it and printing could be arranged on the cheap in a third country. Printing had to be cheap, since the book's market price in the People's Republic would be about 35 cents, compared to the U.S. hardback price of \$19.95.

Beijing either had overlooked some of the inflammatory comments about repressive governments or read a translation that was considerably softer than the English version, but the good folks at the Ministry were unanimous in their praise. They saw the book as a suitable instruction manual for good-workerdom in their workers' paradise, but with a cynical

enough tone to appeal to the maverick element in the populace. One deputy minister had stated for the record that he wished he had thought to write such a book in 1977, for if he had, the economic dynamo that China had grown into by 1992 would be so tremendous that it would be exporting jobs to the U.S., just like Japan.

As for Wilf, he got his usual percentage, which worked out to about a nickel per copy. Multiplied by 50 million...well, imagine a semi trailer filled with nickels. And a few million more copies would likely be sold in the current quarter. Leapin' lo-mein!

"Wilf's already decided where he's gonna put the bulk of his money," Alf continued, before the whole story had a chance to sink in at the Jersey end of the line. "He's got a Realtor in Carolina negotiating to buy a chunk of Roanoke Island."

For most of her 48 years, Paige Travertino had considered weather to be the public obsession of small minds. Early big-minded individuals had found ways to cope with adverse weather, beginning with the move from trees to caves, and culminating in the invention of such marvels as Tyvek and Ripstop. Only hurricanes and floods had kept Paige from living her life as normal—until the bursitis began to set in. Her bursae had begun to give out in her shoulders and hips in late 1987, during which time she could offer no sympathy for Nick with his pissing and moaning about the stock market's belly-flop.

Each autumn Paige would dread the onset of the first northerns that brought her hips and shoulders to their proverbial knees, whereupon their incessant chanting for divine intervention was heard over the consoling hum of the pain pills. October 1992 was the sixth consecutive worst October of the good professor's life. At last she capitulated around midterm break and took an indefinite leave of absence from CCU, hermitaging herself at the Scooter Blenny Chalet.

Not that Paige would sit around like a bitter retiree and talk to the walls, though. She had plenty of activities with which to busy her voracious mind. For one, she did advertise herself as a trance medium in some Outer Banks publications, just in case anyone wanted to ferry out to Ocracoke for some celestial vibes, or, better yet, receive her admittedly hazy prognostications by electronic mail.

There were also queries from a variety of magazines and newspapers concerning predictions of a totalitarian state in 21st-century America. She was unfailingly polite in her responses, even to the kookiest off-center conspiracy mags, but had to tell them, "I'm sorry, but those are the predictions of an acquaintance of mine, recently deceased, who has yet to contact me since his passing. If he does contact me, it will probably be in the form of a telegram; I'll let you know as soon as I get one from him."

But her major activity involved Hank Truber's 46-volume history of aviation, which had been bequeathed to Andi in the will that Hank had actually brought with him in his overnight bag on his final visit back in September. The 46 old-fashioned photo albums, stuffed to bursting with hundreds of pages of clippings, barely fit into the trunk of the Lincoln Town Car of the probate attorney who had delivered them to the Chalet himself. The last volume contained a handwritten note which was intended for Paige's consumption, but read like a message to all posterity—indeed, to all mankind:

Paige—

Man is an arrogant son of a bitch, as you and I both know. He derives a fairly sound theory of evolution based on careful observation of the natural world, then concludes himself to be the end-product of that evolution. Meanwhile he forgets that not-so-scientific side of himself that wants to swim like the dolphins, fly like the falcons, or even burrow like the termites—all noble aspirations, not just empty fantasies. It's gonna be slow, but mankind must evolve in some direction, perhaps in several directions, but I hope he'll evolve into something not so

constantly at war with itself and its environment, something more dolphin-like.

Man is also an impatient bastard, always trying to force issues. If anybody gets the notion of forcing or speeding up evolution in the name of instant gratification, the consequences will be calamitous, to say the least. That is part of what the little messiah we've talked about will help prevent: namely, the use of genetic science to tinker with what nature has taken millions of years to develop, our basic genetic codes. Man will evolve because he has to, and because he has the will, not because science can do the dirty work for him and do it more quickly.

But on the subject of my life's work, which you now have in your temporary possession, never forget that aviation is man's natural way of emulating Aves, the birds. The fact that we have the cleverness and the opposable thumbs to create powered flight is a gift of nature—though as warfare in the 20th century illustrates, the gift can be misused, like the gift of curiosity that the gene scientists must restrain. But what I theorize is that aviation is a step on an evolutionary ladder that leads to non-powered flight, like those pre-Columbian shamans you talk about; we may some day regain a trait that we've lost or suppressed. Also, that we can imagine ourselves flying is probably a vestige of genetic memory of ancient flight.

Too bad most of the world wants to believe it but won't or can't. We just have to establish a society of people willing the cultivate the notion. Maybe you can put that idea in motion.

Don't just sit there; evolve!

HT

If I could evolve out of my bursitis, Paige thought, I wouldn't be just sitting here. She entertained his theory, like most others, as true by virtue of somebody's believing it, and because it's entertaining for the rest of us to entertain. She invested her own belief in many metaphysical theories, independently formulated, which were bipolar contradictions of each other.

After all, in a universe this big, there's room for contradictions and paradoxes of all types. God is; God ain't. The universe is bagel-shaped; the universe is a brick of cream cheese. What's the difference? Why not both?

Her pain all but disappeared suddenly, signalling an imminent communiqué from the Spirit World. Virginia, probably: She had become one damnable talkative child since Hank's last day. Every day, at no particular time since time means squat to the Spirits (hmm, maybe heaven and Las Vegas have more in common than previously thought), Virginia would bend Paige's ear on topics of little consequence. Sometimes the messages would contain answers to clients' questions, but Paige had to match the answers to the correct questions, as in a cosmic game of *Jeopardy!* after decoding Virginia's long-winded strings of iambic pentameters.

At last, on the 15th, Virginia spoke six words that had more meaning than any of her sonnets:

"They're coming. It will happen. Seventeen."

Seventeen people would be present at the births, which would occur, as predicted, somewhere on the Outer Banks. But giving birth is not the easiest job in the world, and Paige's grin was reinforced by the expectation of the seventeen's celebration after many obstacles and adversities had been overcome.

The greatest benefit of Paige's communication with spirits was that, during the contact, she was conscious of no physical pain, which made sense, since the spirits that invaded her body had no physical anything. They moved into and out of her body somewhat randomly, so she could not initiate contact; no medium should ever forget that the spirits are always in the driver's seat when they decide to go for a ride on the fleshly highways.

Paige could answer Andi's question about why the very deceased Virginia Dare cared about earthly struggles. Think of

the earthly plane as an astronomically huge football field, the Spirit World as the grandstand. The teams at play on the field are always the same; subjective realists might refer to the teams as Good and Evil, but each side has reasons to claim itself the Good, so objective idealists dispense with those terms and call them Team Alpha and Team Omega. Each team has its loyal supporters among the spirits. Paige committed what she considered a well-written expression of the concept to the hard-drive of her Compaq that very day:

The Alphans represent the forces of creation. They want to fill their world with beauty of every kind. But like the kernel of *yang* inside every *yin*, the necessity to destroy is implicit in acts of creation: We must cut down trees to make guitars, we must mine the earth to make metal sculptures, and we must sometimes destroy bits of ourselves to write particularly poignant prose or poetry (Poe leaps to mind). In the saddest and most extreme cases, Alphans can be so obsessed with decorating their world that they sacrifice the cohesion of their family units to the creative process.

Omegans represent the forces of destruction, always stopping short of complete destruction, since after that there would remain nothing more to destroy, and thus their lives would be hollow and purposeless. Like the kernel of *yin* inside every *yang*, creation is a part of destruction: We continually find novel tools for destroying people, cities, institutions, and the natural environment, extending from the first paleolithic billy club to the fusion bombs of today. In the most extreme cases, Omegans create new enemies and other reasons to maintain a panoply of destructive technologies.

Alphans far outnumber Omegans, the way wildebeest outnumber lions, and their relationship is analogous to that of predator and meat. If a proper balance is maintained, both sides benefit, even though the struggle continues. If however, that balance is tipped to favor either side, the result is disastrous. With too many predators, the prey are thinned out

too quickly, and eventually the predators have nothing to eat but each other; if there are not enough predators, the prey overpopulate and starve. What we face in the 21st century is an overabundance on both sides, which I believe will culminate (and the logic behind this theory is most complex) in a period of Omegan ascendancy so severe that the Alphans will defend themselves effectively for the first time in our planet's history, like the vigilante sheep in the Pink Floyd song ("Sheep" from *Animals*, 1977).

Simply put, Virginia was a fan of Team Alpha. Spirits play multiple roles in the game, dividing their time as fans, coaches, officials, and even players when it's their turn to inhabit a body for the cosmic eye-blink of one human lifespan. Virginia had enjoyed limited playing time, but now she was trying to ensure that the Alphans remained in the game.

A forest green 1989 Dodge Ram pick-up with an off-brand camper top sloshed into the driveway of the battleship grey five-plex condo on the Virginia Dare Trail in Nags Head just as the rain let up. Holly Halden got out on the driver's side; Freddie clambered out over the tailgate. They both just stared at the house for a minute, as if preparing for something dramatic to occur, or as if to absorb the fact that they were the only humans occupying the building for that week, since the tourist season was quite finished.

Holly called the middle apartment his, though the owner was in fact an older, richer friend who had granted Holly free use of it at any time (with three days' notice, which Holly had neglected to provide on this occasion) in exchange for a few favors back in his airport chicken days. This apartment was the only one of the five that did not bear a "For Lease" sign in a front window. It was also the only one with a Jacuzzi and a fully stocked liquor cabinet.

"I'm gonna crank up the hot tub," Holly announced. "It'll take about the rest of the night to get it warm enough. Meanwhile, do what you have to, and I'll make some phone calls."

"Can we go up the street and get some seafood?" Freddie's tone bore a hint of *Can we, Dad? Huh? Huh? Can we?*

"Stop it with this sex thing o' yours; you're makin' me ill."

"Perfectly innocent question! I'm hungry!"

"I'll bet you are."

They took turns showering and grabbing victuals of questionable recency out of the 1950 Norge refrigerator (still working!), got dressed, and arranged to meet two of Holly's friends at the Bottlenose Café.

Jacq and Hilde were year-round Outer-Bankers who operated a no-white-flour bakery, called the No White Flour Bakery, in Manteo on Roanoke Island. Most of their business was commercial, serving restaurants and emporia up and down the Banks, but their non-commercial customers might drive in from as far as Corolla (the edge of the world to Carolinians) to score a dozen muffins or bagels. With a few alterations in genetics and environment, Marilyn Olin might have turned out to be Hilde or Jacq: Like Marilyn, they were girthy and earthy, though not as rotund, with stringy blonde tresses, and large bifocal spectacles, but they also had matching Joan Jett "Blackheart" logos tattooed on their right biceps. They had been lovers for just shy of twelve years, having met at a new wave club in D.C. during a 1980 election-night wake.

Dinner at the Bottlenose was ritualistic: salad featuring Old Bay-seasoned, home-made croutons and a choice of three house dressings; titanic seafood platter for four with a choice of cold, fried, or cold and fried critters of the marine invertebrate persuasion, not to be served until after the guests were fitted with Bottlenose bibs featuring watercolor reproductions of Betsy Bottlenose the Daredevil Dolphin artistically portraying

the guest's birth sign; then a choice of four pies à la mode which would convince the most hard-core atheist that God created vanilla ice cream just to sit on the face of those pies.

"Your sign, sir?" the cute but clearly clueless waitress asked Freddie.

"Libra. Oh, wow, holy shit, is today the 17th? Tomorrow's my birthday!" In the midst of his personal maelström, Freddie had forgotten that he would soon turn 23; the day might have come and gone without his noticing it.

"How old, Freddie?" Jacq lit her post-salad unfiltered Camel.

"I'd guess...26," Hilde lit hers.

"What, is workin' for Grace puttin' the grey hairs on me? I'm turnin' 23."

"A bay-bee!" Jacq croaked.

"A tyke-let!" Hilde chirruped.

"Get off it, please. You're as old as ya feel, and tonight I feel, well, *Tyrannosaurus rex* got nothin' on me, age-wise."

Holly explained, "He's goin' through a rough spell, and the less said the better."

"Screw that, Holl!" Freddie felt old, but energetic enough to speak his mind. "Long story short, I got a letter from my mother in Puerto Rico, who ran away from New York seven years ago and hasn't been back since. She said she was on her deathbed, and I had no real interest in traveling to Arecibo just to view the corpse. Meanwhile, I'm runnin' away from Air fuckin' Grace because I pissed off the CEO by wavin' his secret plans to build a dope-and-guns empire in his face. Holly says they won't come and get me here, 'cause even if I go tellin' the tale, nobody'll believe it."

"Hell, I believe it," Hilde looked him straight in the eyes.

"Yeah, ol' Hank predicted it," Jacq corroborated. "Hank said years ago that a man purporting to be Christ's number one capitalist would use planes, weapons, and drugs to finance a Christian dictatorship—"

"—which, of course, would maintain the appearance of a democracy—"

"—uh-huh, but anybody in government or the media who got in the way of makin' America suitable for the Second Coming would be purged—"

"—gently, of course."

"And, of course, there's no way of stopping him in the meantime, because he has all the right politicians and media dupes in his pocket."

Freddie took a few seconds to absorb all this as the waitress ceremoniously bibbed the foursome: an Aquarius, a Libra, and (what a surprise) two Gemini bibs, with two-headed Betsys jumping through flaming hoops. Freddie's bib had Betsy on one side of a balance scale, offset by an open chest of gleaming treasure; Holly's had Betsy tumbling out of the water-bearer's amphora toward a Roman-style swimming pool with a dolphin mosaic on the bottom. Too cute for words.

"Who's Hank?" Freddie finally asked.

"Local celebrity, clairvoyant, full-time pain in the ass," Jacq summarized. "He died last month."

It was fresh news to Holly, who had once had the privilege of watching Hank give a sunbather some unsolicited advice on the beach a few years before, after which Hank had turned his steely gaze toward the gawking Holly and snapped, "What the hell you lookin' at, jizm-breath?" and shuffled away.

"Sounds like a guy I heard about from this girl I met in New London, Connecticut." Freddie recalled. "She said he was one

scary dude. So, like, what else did he predict?" Freddie's mind was suddenly hungrier than his stomach.

"Oh, little things," Jacq waved her smoke away from Freddie's face. "Vietnam, Nixon's Presidency and resignation, the Concorde and its limited success, the fall of Skylab, lots of other things about aviation and space, uh, the '87 market crash—hey, wasn't that exactly five years ago today?"

"Close," Hilde took over. "And, uh, George Bush's two little adventures against his old CIA friends in Panama and Iraq."

"Da-amn!" Freddie's eyes grew to seafood-platter dimensions.

The seafood and the pie disappeared quickly amid resolutions to chew and savor on the next visit. Of course, the off-season bill was extremely reasonable, and Hilde happily paid it. Then the foursome drove in their two pick-ups back to Holly's hideout, where the Jacuzzi was just reaching 100 degrees Fahrenheit. Everyone got thoroughly naked—Freddie hesitantly, the others as if their clothes were on fire—and plopped in. There was enough cognac in the bar to fill their snifters several times each, but how many snifters can a person sniff in a half-hour hot-tub dip?

Hilde and Jacq sat cheek-by haunch, each with an arm around the other's shoulder, feeding each other warm swallows of the luscious liqueur. "Feel like putting on a show?" Jacq inquired of her lover and business partner.

"Oh, Jacq, you know how queasy that makes little Holly."

"Fuck him! He can close his eyes."

"Wouldn't be much of a show then, would it?"

Freddie had missed the group dry-hump in New London; the singular eye of his willie sensed a new opportunity, and he felt the willie craning its neck for a better glimpse. The thought of real dykes doing real dyke tricks had less appeal to Freddie

than those pictures of well-paid, well-drugged ultra-vixens doing simulated Lesbosities on those glossy pages or in glossy movies—those girls with labia of impossible shades of air-brush pink, the girls with unnaturally firm macro-mammaries....

Freddie's mind drifted toward thoughts and memories of Corinne, his sad angel: *What would she be doing now?* Perhaps she had moved to Valdosta to be with the man who had shared his affliction with her so liberally—gawd, what a pair they would make in Valdosta, the quarterback and the cheerleader with their upright, Anglo, apple-pie faces and their dirty little secrets! Hell, they'd probably fit right in. Perhaps, Freddie imagined, even hoped, Shane would ram into her tiny vagin'y with all the length and breadth and anger and love and vindictive glee that he could muster, for as long as it took to hurt her badly—

"How do you like the South, Freddie?"

Jacq's question came from left field. Freddie almost reflexively crossed himself, his presumably late mother's response to being caught in a reverie of evil thoughts, but resisted the urge and replied, "Over easy with a side o' bacon." The womyn cackled and snickered. "Actually," Freddie elaborated, "there's things about it I'll never understand, like why so many Southerners are so proud o' their ignorance. But a lot o' things are just like the North with a different accent."

"Wasn't always that way," Holly recalled. "Television is makin' the whole country more homogeneous—and as a homo genius, I should know—but 30 years ago you could watch Yankees fallin' down dead from culture shock on the streets of Atlanta. Nowadays Atlanta's so damn sophisticated, we know how to get five dollars out of a Yankee's pocket for a bagel and a cappuccino."

They celebrated the arrival of Freddie's birthday at midnight to the sound of Westminster chimes and twelve *bnnnnngs* of the grandfather clock. Shortly thereafter, another set of chimes was heard, pitched an octave higher. The foursome froze in

the 100-degree water, feeling a chill that had nothing to do with the norther. "Um, did anyone hear a doorbell?" Jacq whispered.

Holly, the host, did not want to leave the tub to answer the door, but curiosity and decorum drove him to find out who the fuck might be ringing at such a late hour. He grabbed a terrycloth robe and opened the second-story window in the front bedroom. "Who's there?"

"Name's Terrell Daniel. I live just up the Trail in Kitty Hawk. I'm afraid my jack broke while I was fixin' a flat on my Fury jus' now. Do you have a jack I might use?"

"No, just a coupla Jills, but they might could hold up your car for ya! Hee-heel Sorry. Uh, will a Dodge truck jack work on a Plymouth?"

Holly, clad in just the robe and sandals despite the chilly wind, watched old Terrell maneuver the jack into a compatible position under the left front quarter panel to facilitate changing the corresponding tire, swapping out the punctured Firestone for a full-size spare, not the doughnut-size prosthesis with which more recent models were equipped. All the while, Terrell, not usually given to lengthy discourses on any subject, related how he and his wife Natalie had gone to Ocracoke to visit their new friend Paige Travertino the famous channeled and discovered her ill, undernourished, and drifting into trances at irregular intervals, whereupon Natalie volunteered to stay with her and help out in the kitchen, since Paige, normally a helluva *chef de cuisine*, was useless if she kept hopping astral planes and losing track of terrestrial time for minutes on end, and Natalie was certainly no slouch with a spatula. In the midst of everything, Paige allowed how she was having her first menstruation in five years, and it was a doozie, almost enough blood to make up for all that lost time, which Terrell insisted was none of his business but figured might have some connection with all the spiritual traffic Paige was hosting.

"Anyhow, on the way back up to K.H., I get this-here blowout, and normally I wouldn't think nothin' of it, but around Paige ya start to thinkin' everythin's got a significance which we might not see right away, but if ya look at it as spiritually influenced, it all kinda fits together. Y'know, like, maybe I was meant to have a blowout in front o' yer house here—"

"It's not my house. I'm just borryin' it."

Holly's cold pronouncement finally stopped Terrell's excited monologue, and the grandfather of Andromeda Sichler stared so hard at Holly, it seemed that the eyes of every lure on his khaki fishing hat were staring, too. "Then again, maybe it's all bullshit," Terrell guessed, cranking the jack back down.

"Or maybe everything *is* significant." The thought was Holly's, but the voice was Freddie's. If fish out of water wore borrowed Polo shirts, khaki shorts, and top-siders, they'd look like Freddie on the front porch of that condo in Holly's oversized preppy clothes.

"Uh, right," Terrell pretended to agree, though he wasn't sure himself. "Anyhow, with Natalie gone for a while, I gotta get the house spruced up myself, startin' early tomorrow. Granddaughter's comin' down from New Jersey with a few friends next weekend."

"Did you know Ol' Hank, too?" Freddie asked.

"Oh yeah, we went way back."

"What about your granddaughter? Did she ever meet him?"

"Matter o' fact, she did. Just twice."

"I mighta met her. Is her name Andromeda?"

"Yeah. Look, I gotta get on up the road. Ya wanna come by some time this week and talk some more, just look me up. G'night."

Freddie watched the taillights of the Fury until they disappeared over a rise in the road half a mile up the Trail. Yes, maybe everything *is* significant.

Two weeks' worth of engagements had been canceled. Wilf knew where his priorities lay now. Class consciousness took a back seat to the most important task in the world.

On Friday, October 23, at Newark's Continental terminal, Wilf looked out from the Jetway entrance and saw Andi and Cindy Lou in their nicest classroom attire, perfumed and poised, though a tad uneasy about what lay ahead, thus emitting vibes of vulnerability. Immediately upon seeing them, he was overtaken by a desire to make children with both of them, losing what poise he normally had. (How peculiar that in his long career as a literary stud, Wilf had never fertilized a single ovum, nor particularly wanted to. Two not-so-sweet young things had tried the pregnancy trap, but he'd managed to call their bluffs by matter-of-factly offering to pay for their abortions.) Before he could walk all the way to where his dual squeezes stood in wait, he collapsed into the nearest seat.

"I'm all right!" he insisted to the solicitous sisters as they rushed to his sides. "Skipped the in-flight meal, it looked too nasty to consider putting in my mouth—chicken and mac 'n' cheese in unnatural colors. So I just need some carbos, and I'll be okay."

"Squad 51, start an I.V. with pizza lactate, 500 cc, stat," Cindy gave her best impression of Robert Fuller from *Emergency*. "What are his vitals, 51?"

"Nicest damn vitals I've ever seen, Doc," Andi winked.

Over a mushroom pizza, which Wilf ate despite the sticky ersatz cheese, the strategic session began.

"First, we have to get to New London," Wilf told them with a perfectly straight face. "Turns out we have an 'in' with Carolyn, the New London mother. She lives with that big guy who helped carry me out of the club after I got pounded. His name is Charles Martell—I remember thinking that was a familiar name, Charlemagne's grandfather or something, Charles the Hammer—but he goes by 'Chub'. He was so knocked out by what he saw that night, he'll probably convince her to get on the bus."

"*The bus??*" Both teachers looked as if they'd found silverfish in the pizza crust.

Cindy Lou managed not to snarf her pizza and said between chews, "You cannot...be serious—drive the bus to North Carolina with two preggoes? Two nine-month preggoes? You'd be better off renting a donkey like Mary and Joseph."

Andi piped up, "Any kind of travel is uncomfortable when your belly is out to here with a small passenger—so the quicker, the better. Send the bus ahead to Kitty Hawk, have it meet us at the airfield there, and we can drive to the hospital if we need to."

"Okay, okay, I'll meet you in Kitty Hawk, 'cause I'm not flyin' there with you," Wilf stated categorically.

"Any particular reason," Cindy pressed.

"Well...you know. I'm...scared shitless of flying."

Actually, Cindy, who was something of an aerophobe herself, did not know that. The subject of his flying anywhere had never come up, since he rarely even left Manhattan.

Wilf continued. "Alf had to wrestle me onto this plane that I just got off. If they didn't have the Jetways here, I'd have run down the gangplank and kissed the concrete, Pope-style, as soon as I could get through the door, or sooner. The rest of the crew of the Dharma Bus, none of whom has any problems with

powered flight, gets to ride back to NYC on the ground, while Wilf has to fly. God, if he exists, is laughing now."

Truth to tell, even the Pulaski Skyway between Newark and the Holland Tunnel was a daunting thoroughfare for the Enlightened One, as it provides that sensation of soaring high over the industrial parks below. It didn't help that Cindy took the Skyway at her usual insane speeds as she piloted her Toyota Camry back to the Manhattan side just after sunset, between the evening rush and the nightclub crush.

When the Camry emerged from the tunnel, Wilf noticed immediately that Downtown was not its usual self. The cafés were practically devoid of life despite the unseasonably warm temperatures and the end of a tough midterm exam week at NYU. The number of pedestrians scurrying from curb to curb was smaller than typical. It seemed that something in the wind that swirled through the parks making brown leaves Caucus-Dance about was telling everyone to *stay indoors*. Wilf's serious jitters got seriouser and seriouser; he was returning to a lower Manhattan that was not the one he had left in July. It was a ghost town, the opposite of the fabled anecdote about the night three million drivers all got the idea to cross the Williamsburg Bridge at the same hour on the same night.

As if to enhance the unusual atmosphere, just as Cindy Lou pulled her Camry into a tight space a block from Wilf's building, the Jimi Hendrix tape in her dashboard reached the second verse of "The Wind Cries Mary." The trio sat, listening to the entire song, as if casting for clues to a set of omens, while the V-6 engine idled more or less in time with the song.

And nobody in that car was on any psychotropic substances, except possibly Jimi.

Without a word amongst them, the three locked up the car, walked the block, climbed the stairs (which still did not squeak under Wilf's feet, Andi noticed much to her consternation), and dropped Wilf's bags out of the way for unpacking at a later time. Cindy and Andi set to work undressing Wilf and making

the shower good and hot; Wilf did not resist, even as the women carried him to the bathroom and laid him crosswise in the claw-foot tub. In five minutes the two teachers had disrobed themselves, scrubbed him well with loofa and sponge. As a finishing touch, they rubbed, stroked, licked and nibbled at his groin until he shuddered and ejaculated into Cindy's patiently waiting gullet. If Wilf had any more strategies to discuss, it could wait for breakfast. As he would soon learn, his lady friends had taken care of everything already.

Andi tiptoed to her purse after Wilf had been tucked into his old four-poster bed and Cindy had curled up beside him. She pulled out her recently acquired cellular phone and dialed a Paterson, New Jersey, number.

"Yo," she heard a dark voice say.

"Kenny, it's Andi Sichler."

"Who?"

"Coach Sichler, Lashondra's coach."

"Oh. Yeah."

"Tomorrow morning at nine o'clock, bring her over to the Knickerbocker at 4th and Broadway. Get here whatever way you can, but get here on time, you hear me?"

"Do I get my money then?"

"Fifty dollars plus transit fare—save your receipts!—and ten extra dollars if you're on time."

"I'm down wit' that."

"Peace out, K-Dog."

"Whatever."

She disconnected, reconnected, and dialed a New London, Connecticut, number.

"Nancy Glancy speaking."

"Dr. Glancy, this is Andi Sichler."

"Who?"

Don't leave home without your AmEx card, Coach. "The teacher from New Jersey—Carolyn's friend."

"Oh, yeah. I talked to Carolyn; she said she don't know you from Adam and Eve's stool samples."

"Well, I've never laid eyes on *her* shit, either. But when all this is over, we *will* be friends—all of us."

Nancy P. Glancy was determined to make Andi prove herself trustworthy, loyal, brave, clean, reverent, and willing to pay for her extraordinary services. "How much is Mr. Adamante willing to pay, Ms. Sichler?"

"We haven't discussed an exact figure, but he wouldn't blink at five thousand bucks."

"Cash on delivery, no pun intended?"

"No," Andi stifled a giggle, "in advance. And he'll cover all our transportation. Will you have her at your office tomorrow at two?"

"I heard his book sold big in China. That hippie is a millionaire by now. He shouldn't blink at ten thousand, either. We *are* talking two babies here."

"Fine, if you'll take it in two cashier's checks, one tomorrow when we meet, and one post-partum."

"Great. Ten thousand should buy a lot of Invertebrate Chow for my reef tank. Now, how are we getting to Kitty Hawk?"

"We're chartering a plane out of Groton. The faster, the better."

"Yeah, I guess, except...I'm scared shitless of flying."

"Oh, no, another one?" Andi buried her face in her free hand.
"We'll knock you out if we have to. See ya tomorrow, Doc."

Five times on Friday night Freddie dreamed about fire. The fire was so real—its glow, its heat, its sound—that he would jolt awake each time he approached the fire in his dreams. It was never the same fire twice, nor the same location, nor the same time of day. These were dreams of the type that sends lapsed Catholics running for their rosaries.

Freddie was grateful to whatever god sowed these fiery dreams in his head that none of the dreams involved his penis—a welcome change of theme.

The fifth dream convinced him that the fire bore a message. In this dream, he stood atop the hill in the shadow of the Wright Brothers Memorial obelisk, admiring its phallic qualities, when to his left, just within his periphery, a young woman in a running bra, shorts, cross-trainers, and sweatbands ran to him, grabbed him, kissed him hard on the mouth, and wouldn't let go. He never got a good look at her face, which was blurry, as if he were looking through someone else's far-sighted vision, but he knew who she was by her shape. What he did get a good look at was the grass fire that started small, grew rapidly, and soon made a perfect ring around the monument and Freddie and the woman. Freddie also saw within the ring a man, easily past 80, but standing as erect as the monument. When the oxygen level began to hit *dangerously low*, a suffocating Freddie pried himself out of the labial embrace and jerked awake again, with four words imprinted on his consciousness:

"Get to the monument."

Despite the lack of quality sleep, Federico Balaguer felt as awake as he had in years. He showered, ate some cereal, donned his sweats, watched some Saturday morning cartoons, and around eleven o'clock began hiking up the Virginia Dare Trail.

He encountered Holly and his truck about a mile north of the condo; Holly pulled into a parking lot to make a big U-turn and pulled up alongside his fellow ex-bag smasher.

"What's the story, morning glory?"

Freddie thought carefully before answering. "How high is your tolerance for weirdness, Holly?"

"I can take anything that doesn't involve small, furry animals in my rectum. Why?"

"These fuckin' dreams, man. I figured out what they're tellin' me."

"That you're not in Kansas any more?"

"I've never even been to Kansas. I had a whole series of dreams that added up to one conclusion, and I'm not even sure how I arrived at this conclusion: There's something I have to do at the Wright Brothers Monument."

Holly rubbed his stubby chin. "Don't you, like, wanna stay the fuck away from airplanes for a while?"

"Yeah, but this is important. If I don't do this, I'll lose every bit of self-confidence I have left. And I don't even know what I'm supposed to do. The key to the rest of my life will be there, at the park, some time in the next 24 hours. That's all I know."

Holly knew that Freddie had been right about Hezekiah Hamilton, though nobody in his or her right mind would believe it without solid evidence. It seemed that the time had arrived to trust another of Freddie's hunches. The psychic energy in the air was palpable and daunting.

"Look, the sisters and I were gonna go there later today. Why don't you go with us. I'll pick them up after the shop closes, and we'll all go together, so that when you get your manhood back, we'll all be there to witness it, all right?"

"I don't know if I can wait that long, Holl."

"Well, if you were to keep walking, you'd probably get there at about the same time. It's another seven miles. The bakery closes at 2 p.m. C'mon, get in the truck."

In the morning, after some well choreographed sexplay, a pillow fight, and a shower, the Adamante "family" dressed and walked to the Knickerbocker for fresh-baked croissants and scrambled eggs or tofu, steaming coffee whose flavor the incipient drizzle enhanced, and special juice blends from the tiny eatery's half-dozen juicers. At 8:55 they could see, through the smoke-glazed windows, Kenny and Lashondra emerging from the subway hole across the square, Kenny urging his gravid paramour to waddle faster lest he miss out on his ten-dollar bonus.

He earned it. They crossed the threshold at 8:58, by Andi's watch.

"Whatcha want for breakfast?" Andi sang after introducing Wilf to the parents-to-be.

Kenny, unaccustomed to fresh food, hadn't had a real breakfast since middle school. "We grabbed a Egg McMuffin on the way," he lied, "in case they didn't have nothin' we like on the menu here. But I could go for some pancakes."

"Me, too." Lashondra, despite the exercise of climbing into and out of the subway, was barely awake. For her, of course, coffee was not an option. A lot of her friends consumed far worse things than coffee while pregnant; Lashondra had been

the beneficiary of the some good advice and had actually followed it.

After breakfast, Andi handed Kenny a fifty and a twenty, told him to spend the money on some groceries, rent, or baby items, assuming he would then piss off back to Paterson.

"You mean I can't go with you?" Kenny looked genuinely disappointed.

Cindy put a motherly hand on the nape of her former student's neck and gave a gentle squeeze. "Sorry, Ken, but you're, uh, non-essential personnel. It's a chick thang."

"Have you forgotten something, Ms. Hu? Like, for instance, I'm the father? Women always complainin' that the men ain't around for the big moment, and now you tellin' me 'Hit da Road, Jack'? I wanna *be there*, man! This kid is mine, too." He stared into three pairs of eyes, seemingly simultaneously.

"Cindy," Wilf said slowly, "he does have a point."

"And not just the one on top of his head," Cindy added. "That would put Andi, Kenny, Lashondra, and me in the Camry, no room for Wilf, but that's all right, 'cause Wilf is going ahead to Carolina—"

"—but now we'll need Wilf to go to the bank and get the cashier's checks to pay the obstetrician and the pilot," Andi finished, as if Wilf had somehow divined that she'd planned to spend his money on this adventure. "Are any Downtown banks open today?"

Wilf swallowed hard. "Think mine is. How much do we need?"

Andi whispered five digits in his ear. He lost his composure as completely as Andi, or even Cindy, had ever seen.

"Are you yankin' my chain here?"

"Wilf!" Cindy grabbed his arm, "it's not like you're buying everybody breakfast. Do you know how much it costs to deliver one baby under normal circumstances? Well, we're talking about two deliveries, on strange turf, possibly on the road, possibly with complications. What would *you* charge?"

"For the privilege of delivering the most important babies born this decade, I'd do it *gratis*, but then, if I were interested in money, I'd've become a doctor instead of a writer, I suppose." He sighed and rose from his seat. "Let's go to the bank, boys and girls."

Kenny was thoroughly confused. This was the first time he'd heard anyone refer to his offspring as "important." Black kids from Paterson were never "important"; only their problems were "important" insofar as they affected white folks in North Jersey. Outside the bank he pulled Lashondra aside, huddling under his L.A. Raiders umbrella, while the adults went in to do their business.

"Jus' what did he mean by our baby is 'important'?"

"I don' understand' it. Coach says it's somethin' to do with politics."

"Sounds borin'."

"She says our baby's gonna help eliminate poverty or somethin'."

"Sounds like she been hittin' the pipe."

"Yeah, but we ain't got nothin' to lose, and we get a free field trip out of it."

The two kids with nothing to lose silently watched the traffic and the rain intensify on Broadway. They had no idea that the rain was an offshoot of a vicious, early winter storm that was reminding everyone up I-95 what a bitch Mother Nature could be; no one would vote these teens, or their adult sponsors

inside the bank, Most Likely to Zone Out to the Weather Channel. One wouldn't find them speaking reverently about the Arctic front that had already brought fresh powder to the slopes of western Montana, or the latest tropical storm to threaten the Florida Keys. If they traveled, weather was just something to deal with once you reached it.

As Cindy Lou's Camry reached New Haven's infamous Quinnipiac River Bridge, the combination of wind, rain, and dropping temperature made the normally sturdy vehicle practically quiver in fear. The defogger could barely keep up with the fog that grabbed at the windows with suction-cup fingers and shrink-wrap hands. The nastiness of the weather had a uniquely New English attitude, different from any other regional nastiness, since it came from the North Atlantic; perhaps the reason that Vikings stopped exploring west of Greenland was their well-founded dread of crossing those most pelulant of oceanic plains.

Despite the wicked wind, rain, and fog, the Camry and its four-and-a-half passengers forged into New London, the in-dash music having switched from Jimi to Ice Cube, courtesy of Kenneth Farrish's extensive tape collection. Not many other cars were on that stretch of I-95 past New Haven; New Englanders who were accustomed to weather most fickle and foul stayed in, heeding the warnings of local TV and radio weathercasters. Only tourist, business, and emergency traffic continued.

"There's our exit—Broad Street!" Andi shouted, the first to see the sign announcing Exit 82.

"You can see that from here?" Cindy Lou squinted. "All I see is 'B-S.' But then, that's something I know when I see it."

"I've always had good eyes, especially with my contacts in," Andi beamed.

"Yeah? Contact this!" Cindy almost made a gesture that would have seriously diminished her role-model status in the eyes of

her rear-seat passengers. She wondered at that time why they had been so (relatively) reticent all the way up. She wondered what impact a steady diet of gangsta' rap might have on a fetus's growth and development.

Broad Street in New London is not very broad—four lanes at most, with no room for expansion. Houses, many built before the invention of the driveway, have just a sliver of lawn and sidewalk separating them from the asphalt. Businesses have limited parking set apart from the street or on rises behind their buildings. Fortunately, near Ledyard Avenue, there was a driveway for Cindy Lou to swing into when a cement mixer made an abnormally wide right turn, taking up most of the width of the lane that the Camry occupied as it tried to stop for the red light.

Cindy Lou braked exactly as she should, without locking the brakes, but collision with the truck was a given unless she could change lanes P.D.Q. The right lane was occupied by a Jeep Cherokee—no room there. She jerked the helm leftward, and her left wheels found the driveway of the Pizza Pit. Now for the *Unfortunately*: Her right wheels had to jump one of New London's ubiquitous, squared-off granite curbs. *Smash* went both rims. *Bye-bye* went control of the vehicle. *Slam* went the side of the vehicle into the south wall of the restaurant—the wall with the eight-by-fifteen-foot picture window affording a view of picturesquely narrow Broad Street. "Shit" went everybody involved, simultaneously.

The noise of the collision was worse than the impact, which happened at less than ten miles per hour, and both front airbags served their purpose. The worst injury came when Lashondra's left elbow somehow found Kenny's right temple. The picture window, however, shattered—120 square feet of collateral damage. And, of course, the automobile was mobile no longer.

The Pizza Pit's owner, a burly, mustachioed, first-generation Greek-Sicilian immigrant in his kitchen whites, yelled gutter Greek at anyone and everyone. He had just chased away the

chronic headaches he had suffered after some kids shot his plate-glass doors and east windows to fragmentary oblivion back in May. Now there he stood, a 220-pound walking aneurysm, livid over the latest loss. Cindy Lou, buckled from the impact, emerged from the wreckage, pulled herself and her purse into the restaurant through the driver's side window, crunching bits of glass as her feet hit the soft booth seat below. She regained her balance, straightened her back, and pulled \$3,000 in cash from the purse.

"How far are we from the corner of Broad and Lincoln?" she handed the owner 30 100-dollar bills.

The owner relocated his English and his wits. "It's the next light down the hill, not even half a mile."

"Thanks. Large pepperoni and mushroom, three Pepsis, one OJ."

"And a Greek salad!" Andi added as she squeezed out of the shotgun side.

The Toyota was quickly towed to a dealership in Groton where the wheels might be replaced and the appropriate body work done. The pizza was passable, the salad full of those chunks of feta that Andi adored. The kitchen staff found a tarp to place in the window frame to keep the swirling rains away from the clean-up operation. The owner intimated that his insurance policy was, well, dead, and he was grateful for the instant infusion of cash, knowing better than to ask of its origin. For all he knew, Cindy Lou was a New York drug-runner who was ready to upgrade from Toyota to BMW, anyway.

Fortified and rehydrated, the unusual quartet walked down the hill a stretch to Dr. Glancy's New London office, located in the Eugene O'Neill Professional Building, which was actually a transmuted Victorian residence. There was a rear entrance by which patients could circumvent the haughty front steps; the office was actually on the basement level.

"So what's our itinerary?" Dr. Glancy was all business, her usual reaction to stressful situations.

"We're chartering a plane—already reserved one out of Groton that'll get us straight to Kitty Hawk, assuming we can land there." Andi tried to appear calm and rational as she outlined the details.

"The assumption is that you can *take off from here*," Dr. Glancy informed them.

Carolyn, stretched out on the exam table in Room 1, explained more gently. "The airport is closed due to the fog and ice on the runway. Happens frequently. They're diverting all flights into Bridgeport and Block Island. Of course, the way things are shaping up, Bridgeport's closed by now."

Andi was miffed. "Since when does weather stand in the way of destiny? This whole thing is prophesied—it's supposed to *happen*, dammit!"

"No, we're supposed to *make* it happen," Cindy Lou reminded her. "We must overcome the obstacles to put it in motion. Still, I think we have a right to bitch."

"Bitch or not," Andi breathed, "we have to get going. Maybe we can get to Teterboro Airport—but in whose car?"

"What happened to yours?" asked the obstetrician.

Cindy Lou told her of the wreck in fifty words or less.

With a few blinks of her bespectacled eyes, the doctor offered to drive Carolyn and her sister and the "father" of Carolyn's child in her Mazda MPV, but of course she had no room for the rest of the entourage, and no other road-worthy car was available. Carolyn had a suggestion: "Call a cab."

Amazingly, the thought had not even crossed the mind of native New Yorker Cynthia Louise Hu. A cab would cost a few

hundred, in cash, in advance; for the first time in her life she was in a position to pay for such a ride.

It must have been destined that Purple Cab 36 was the one that squeaked to a halt on the Lincoln Avenue side of the building ten minutes later. When Andi saw the smiling face of Tommy Luczinski, she yearned to crawl under the nearest exam table and curl up like a sowbug. The last time he saw her, she was leading a group dry-hump in his breakfast nook.

"Hi, Tommy," she said through her fingers.

"Hellllll-lo!" Tommy tipped his Red Sox cap. "How's your hand, Handi Andi?"

She resisted saying, "Tommy, shut the fuck up." But just barely.

It took Tommy a minute to decide whether taking a \$300 fare was worth missing the Braves-Blue Jays World Series game for. He decided that as long as he could listen—or perhaps watch from a bar in Jersey—he could use the bucks. As a bonus, spending a few hours with Andi could be very interesting, though he doubted that she would repeat her performance from Chez Stray in the back of his cab. He had no idea that her attractive Asian companion had recently got to third base with herself in a public place, as well.

The attractive Asian companion gave the attractive Asian obstetrician a \$5,000 cashier's check, exchanging with her the steeliest of glares, as if personifying the age-old enmity between Chinese and Vietnamese, as if the enmity were instinctual, as between rival cats claiming overlapping pissing-grounds. "Shall we?" Cindy Lou offered.

"Yes," Nancy accepted. "Let's."

They picked up Marilyn and Chub at Chub and Carolyn's place, dropped the check in the ATM at Nancy's bank, and began the long and perilous journey.

Cherise McCray expected her man back any day. She had already received the notification that Horace and Lester had survived the Rainforest Ramble, and that they would spend a few days getting re-oriented to society and enduring the inevitable press conferences. Just surviving did not guarantee the million-dollar prize, since there were two other events in the Primal Man Triathlon to be completed and adjudicated, but they were closer to it than the 31 contestants who had withdrawn for various reasons and the eight who had succumbed to snakebite, poison fruit, dehydration, a hundred-foot fall from a tree, or the Ebola Zaire virus.

Cherise also expected what she saw on ESPN that Sunday afternoon at the Sea Monkey: a rebroadcast of a press conference held in Kinshasa the previous night (which was Sunday morning in Central Africa). Horace, Lester, and about a dozen others were displaying their best smiles of exhaustion and relief, answering typical jock questions asked by typical sportswriters concerning their performance, making statements about how connected with nature they felt for the first time in their lives.

Then came the part that Cherise *did not* expect, when the survivors were asked what they wanted to do first upon their return to the states. Lester answered for Horace and himself when it was their turn:

"Well, I don't know if I can answer that, 'cause, like, Horace and I really got to know each other out in the rainforest. No, it's not what you think! Heh-heh. I mean, he's a handsome guy, but I'm not attracted to him in that way. What happened is, one evenin' after we'd had some good fish and roots cooked over an open flame, Horace looks at me and says, 'sure beats workin' for Electric Boat, don' it?' And I says, 'Hell, yeah. I'm gettin' to like it here.' Horace says, 'I'm thinkin' 'bout stayin', Lester.' I says, 'Great minds think alike, Horace.' So, in a nutshell, me and him and our two Amazon friends here, Linda

and Hortensia, are gonna just stay in the jungle and maybe start a new tribe on the banks of the Congo."

The camera panned to Hortensia, a Latin bull-dyke from El Paso, and Linda, her stunningly femme lover from the West Texas ranch country. Hortensia did the talking. "One of the things we learned from our month in the rainforest is that reproduction is the way of Nature, and denying that is as crazy as denying that death is part of Nature. So even though Linda and I are Lesbians and will continue to enjoy our relationship, we plan to reproduce with Horace and Lester so the tribe can continue in future generations. Our offspring will join with the native tribes to protect the forests from greedy developers and timber companies so that we will always enjoy the many benefits of the African tropical forests, such as precious oxygen...."

Half-way through Hortensia's speech, Cherise was already extinguishing her cigarette, picking up her purse and her paycheck from the manager's office, and click-clacking on her stiletto heels out the door into the daylight. Myron Rosenbaum, quite certain that he would never again lay eyes on his Sweet Peach, could do nothing but watch her go as he sat at his customary table.

Catching a Purple Cab that had just made a drop at Ocean Beach, Cherise rode all the way back up to Truman Street without a word other than *Thanks* to the driver. She click-clacked up the stairs, changed into some leather gear, packed all her most valuable possessions into two small bags that would fit in the cargo compartments of Horace's Harley. While Horace expounded to ESPNdom about finding the best ganja he'd ever smoked right there in Zaire, Cherise was loading up the Harley, driving to the nearest ATM, withdrawing her funds, and commencing her ride all the way back to Georgia. She vowed never again to venture farther north than Washington, D.C. Her 115-pound frame could barely hold the Harley upright, but her anger gave her the extra weight she needed. She stopped only for food and fuel.

Hurricanes have eyes, but North Atlantic storms have homing instincts and sharp teeth. The weather seemed to follow the two mothers-to-be and their escort straight down I-95 to New Jersey. Tommy and Kenny seemed oblivious to the conditions as they talked about sports while the women napped in the back of the Caprice. Kenny confessed that he was never a big baseball fan; Tommy rattled off his 17 reasons why baseball is the best game on the planet, number one of which was Carl Yastrzemski.

"No other game could produce a Carl Yastrzemski. He was and is the epitome of athletic heroism. Now, I don't know who your heroes are, but when I was growing up, there were plenty of heroes in sports, and Yaz just made them all look like mere mortals, you understand? Similar to the way Babe Ruth was admired in his day, only Yaz didn't have that same dark side that the Babe had, no bad habits, no big ego. Where I was concerned, of course, it didn't hurt that Yaz is Polish like me. Every Polish kid in New England wanted to grow up and play left field for the Red Sox when, God forbid, Yaz finally retired."

Nobody told Tommy to shut the fuck up this time, but Kenny tried any strategy he could to steer the conversation in some other direction. *Any other direction would do.*

After arriving at Teterboro, Cindy Lou made short work of chartering a 20-seater, a plane flown by a clean-cut Vietnam-era vet named Pete Rochereau. Pete filed a flight plan that would take his plane around the weather if possible, but the weather seemed to adjust and follow his flight—those homing instincts again. Flying at night was scary enough, but being chased by unforgiving black clouds that spat electricity made their flight the stuff of legend. Most prominently, a legendary quantity of upchuck—some from everybody, in a variety of colors and textures—made the trip memorable.

Just when the whole airborne circus couldn't get any weirder, it did anyway: Carolyn's contractions began.

Half an hour later Lashondra had her first contraction.

Nothing else feels like a contraction of the uterus, and nothing else sounds like the cry emitted from a woman experiencing that mix of pain and bewilderment that the uterine contraction produces. Nancy sprang into action and into a professional panic of sorts, improvising ways to check the mothers' dilation while muttering about finding a place to land as close to a hospital as possible.

Carolyn reached four centimeters just before the plane reached the DelMarVa Peninsula's southermost tip, just after midnight. She sat with her feet propped up on the arms of an empty seat in front of hers—surprisingly comfortable. Lashondra, on the other hand, lay in the aisle, aft, alternately on her back and her left side, occasionally puking into a plastic-lined bag even after the plane had left the foul weather behind. She had neglected to tell anyone that this was her first flight on any aircraft of any size or type.

"Excuse me, folks," Pete's best *This Is Your Captain* voice emanated from the P.A. speakers in the cabin. "We have begun our descent. However, I have contacted the air field in Kitty Hawk, and they tell me they're havin' problems with their runway lights, so, uh, we'll have to land either in Elizabeth City, or—"

Andi flew into the cockpit. "No! They have to be born on the Outer Banks, or— Um, ask about landing at the Wright Brothers Monument."

"I beg your pardon, miss, but that strip's too short for a plane this size."

"No, you can do it. I've seen planes this size land there. Just go in nice and slowly." She was lying through her teeth.

"I was about to say that your other alternative is Manteo on Roanoke Island. That's still Outer Banks."

"But it's nowhere near the hospital we want. And the ferry's stopped running by now. I don't even know if there's a hospital down there that can handle childbirths."

"The other thing you must know is that the park closes at 7 p.m. There's nobody there to help us land, and nobody to open the gates to let us drive to the hospital."

"Then...then get on the radio, and...I dunno. Tell 'em we'll pay somebody to open the gates for us so we can get these mamas to the hospital. This is important stuff!"

"I'm sure it is, miss, or you wouldn't be dragging their asses all the way to North Carolina. I'll see what I can do."

After Andi returned to the cabin, Captain Pete rested his mid-60s crewcut head on the back of his seat, closed his eyes for a few seconds, and relayed Andi's idea to the regional Air Traffic Controllers. The consensus on the ground was that a fool's errand was definitely in progress. "Look," Pete insisted, "I'm just telling you what my passengers told me: It's vital that these babies are born somewhere on the Banks; they say America's future depends on it." He heard a good ten seconds of nothing from the other end; he assumed, correctly, that the controllers were laughing.

"OK, Two-Three-Nine-A, we're gonna call the EMS to take care of the moms, the Park Service to open the gates, and Mental Health to haul away the loonies. We'll make sure there's a crew standing by to help you land that ship safely. If I'm not mistaken, the lights are working there, but, ah, nobody hardly ever lands there after dark."

That was when the port engine decided to quit for the day. The fuel gauge read one-third full, but a major part in the turbine ceased to function. "God-damn piece o' German shit!" Pete cursed the Grumman family name before informing his passengers. "You, uh, may have noticed that we've lost function of the port engine. This will make it a little harder to make our approach to the Wright Brothers Monument landing

strip, but it will actually make it easier to achieve the slow speed we need to land a 20-seater on a strip designed for four-seaters."

Nonetheless, the landing took three attempts. A few of the passengers, who didn't think that they had anything left to upchuck, puked prodigiously as Pete had to pull up, circle, and point the nose down more severely each time, narrowly missing the surrounding trees. After much wailing and gnashing of teeth, literally, Pete pulled his mini-jet with one surviving Grumman engine to a halt just ten meters from a stand of pines, having overshot the end of the landing strip a bit.

Andi poked her head around the cockpit curtain. "See? I told you it was easy."

Behind her a screaming and moaning match got underway—between Carolyn and Nancy.

"Jesus Christ, woman, you're eight centimeters dilated!"

"Oh, excuse me, I'll pull myself back together! You talk junior into staying in me a while longer, okay?"

"Any minute now you'll be at ten, and you'd fucking better be ready to push!"

Chub, who hadn't said much the whole trip, finally flew off the handle. "If this is the way you treat all your patients, I'm surprised you're still alive! I'm about ready to belt ya one, myself!"

"You Irish motherfuckers really chap my labia!" Nancy replied with a Clint Eastwood squint. "My husband threatens to get physical every time he gets a little upset about something. Well, go ahead and hit me—see what that'll accomplish."

"Chub," Carolyn intervened, "just let women be women, all right? This isn't real hostility here; this is just hormones talkin'."

Andi peeped through the windows on both sides of the fuselage. She saw no flashing beacons, no brightly painted ambulance, no all-American EMTs waiting to escort them to Dare County Hospital. Perhaps they just hadn't arrived, or were already handling another emergency? Then... whoa, Nellie! A well-built young man in a grey jumpsuit with reflective red appliqués strode up to the port engine to take a look at what might be wrong. It was clear from his face that he not only knew bupkis about aircraft engines, but also was at least related to that guy she had met in New London back in August.

"*Freddie?*" she mouted when she finally got a fix on his name.

The port stairway settled hydraulically to the ground, and Andi's feet hit the ground not a second later. "Freddie? What the fuck—I mean, how are ya?"

"I have no idea. It's...good to see you again while I'm awake."

"Do *whut*?"

"You were in the dream that told me I had to be here tonight. So I came, walked around, had a picnic dinner, and hid in the men's room of the Visitors' Center while they were closin' up the park. Then some dude from Air Traffic Control comes along and asks if I can help park a plane. He's all ready to give me a quick training session, and I tell him I used to be a ramp-jockey. I just quit Air Grace last week. Anyway, looks like your pilot found a good parking spot on his own."

"Yeah, in the grass. Well, damn, it's good to see you, too. But we don't have time to chit-chat. There's two preggoes in there, very ripe, ready to drop, and we need to get to a hospital stat."

"Hmmm. We might be able to load them in the back o' Holly's truck. Holly's a friend o' mine. He also quit last week. We're both refugees from the company now." He finally snapped to the message of two imminent births. "Are they the reason I had to be here? The two preggoes?"

"Hey, it was your dream; I have no idea. Let's just get them over there."

Meanwhile, Holly had employed another old talent of his, picking locks, and managed to open the gates. Andi and Freddie saw the pick-up rolling toward them at ambulance speed as yet another storm front closed in from the North Atlantic and began to rain on yet another parade.

Both mothers were still ambulatory and able to move in their odd, painful gaits out of the plane and into the back of the Dodge Ram, girding themselves for another rough ride. Hilde and Jacq were already in the bed, and reluctantly they yielded it to the parents and the doctor. The two baking buddies exchanged *what-the-fuck?* glances as they dismounted by vaulting over the side panels, which they could do only because Freddie had insisted that Holly remove the camper top. (Freddie had also insisted that he didn't know *why* he was insisting on that. Freddie was operating, for the first time in his life, on pure intuition, and it frightened him, but he had learned a little something in Hezekiah Hamilton's office about overcoming one's fears.)

The truck, with well over a half-ton of human cargo in the bed, wound around the monument on the immense circular drive back toward the gates. When the truck reached the exit, a Ford Aerostar taxivan nearly broadsided it while trying to brake in time to turn into the park. The van missed the truck by a few feet, but not the deep drainage ditch in front of the fence, where grille met grass with a metallic *fwmpff*.

Still no sign of an ambulance. Andi tried to reach 911 on her cellular phone; alas, the little Nokia was on the kitchen counter in Wilf's apartment, where she had left it, and not in her purse.

The cabbie howled in his seat, pinned between the seat and the steering wheel. There was no airbag on this model. As the rain intensified, the lone passenger propped the sliding door open and tumbled out of the rear compartment, landing on his back in the deep, wet grass. He scampered to the aid of his

driver; Holly and Freddie scampered out of the cab of the pick-up to see what they could do. The five passengers were left in the bed, soaked to the skin even in their rain gear, too bewildered to be frustrated, too focused on contractions and dilations to be angry.

Freddie was certain that he recognized the man who had sprung so gracefully from the van. "Mr. Adamante???"

"Call me *Wilf*. And see if you can slide that seat back while I hold the lever."

Before Freddie was able to push the seat back, and 250 pounds of Russian-Jewish immigrant cabbie with it, they had more company in the persons of Terrell Daniel and Professor Paige Travertino. That brought the number of the party to the magic number 17, babies not included.

Paige was herself, but she was weak from all the cosmic activity that had passed through her head and hobbled by bursitis in both hips and both shoulders. "Here!" she shouted above the rainsplashes as she staggered from Terrell's Plymouth. "It has to happen here! Do not try to get to the hospital; it will diminish the Magic! Terrell, could you drive over to the monument and pitch the tent, please?"

Nancy Glancy was so beside herself, she was practically Siamese twins. "I'm not gonna deliver two babies in a fucking *tent!*"

Carolyn let out a yelp and a yowl. "I think it's time," she observed through clenched teeth. Lashondra had a contraction immediately afterward, as if in sympathy. Kenny was dutifully timing Lashondra's contractions to take the onus off Nancy; they were already ten minutes apart.

Still no ambulance.

Holly would have jumped back into the cab of the truck and headed for the hospital at Warp Nine, but something in the

back of his mind (and a confirmational nod from Freddie) said that Paige was holding all the trumps here—a woman whom he had only seen in newspaper and magazine photos when she spoke or wrote in defense of metaphysics as science, reputed to be as gifted as the legendary Hank Truber but in different ways. (Holly had only a vague idea who Wilf Adamante was, having heard Freddie's story about the weird night in New London.) But Holly, motioning for Wilf and his driver to hop into the bed, cautiously lifted himself back into the driver's seat and followed Terrell back toward the hill where powered flight first left the world of dreams and became part of reality.

Nancy continued to scream and curse, unresigned to the situation, unaccustomed as she was to delivering anywhere other than in a hospital's friendly confines. She slapped and banged the rear window of the cab of Holly's pick-up. "The hospital, you idiot! Turn around! Get to the fucking hospital!"

Carolyn knew that they'd never make it to any hospital in time for her delivery. "Dr. Glancy, I'm gonna get into that tent, I'm gonna squat, and I'm gonna push like a motherfucker. You just get in position to catch what comes out and clean it up for me—got it?"

Terrell had already practiced pitching the tent, at Paige's insistence. He had it up and ready on the west side of the hill, where it was protected from the Atlantic rain and wind, in ten minutes. It was a tent large enough to sleep six adults, bought for family camping trips when Andi was about eight.

"Hey, having babies in a tent in the rain!" Wilf remarked excitedly to his driver, who was just recovering his breath and clutching his bruised ribs. "This is just like at Woodstock, Vanya!"

"I don' know from Woodstock," Vanya replied. "My children maybe know someting of dis; me, no."

Everybody gathered by the tent, including Vanya, who had nothing better to do while waiting for a wrecker to winch his cab out of the ditch. Wilf communicated to him that a pair of potential 21st-century *Meshiachim* were about to be born; Vanya was skeptical but intrigued.

"How did you get here so fast?" Cindy Lou asked Wilf as they reunited at the base of the hill.

"He's not really here. This is an astral projection," Andi answered for him.

"I decided to work on overcoming some fears. I flew. Nonstop from Newark to Norfolk."

"You realize," Cindy simmered, "I'm gonna *have* to kill you now. We came down on a puddle-jumper, and you, Mr. Fear O' Flying, flew *commercial*?"

"Yup. My first time in first-class. Makes it rather pleasant, with all those free drinks thrown in. I sobered up on the cab ride from Norfolk."

"He dies," Andi declared.

"By tickling," Cindy specified.

Twenty merciless fingers pounced Wilf to the ground and made him thrash in the mud in an agony of embarrassment. Cindy Lou had never known a man as ticklish as her spiritual guide and sexual hobby-horse Wilfredo Adamante. Holly, witnessing the tickle-torture, began to laugh even louder than the victim, who had not laughed so loud since his college/LSD days. Freddie, Jacq, and Hilde just smirked and chuckled at the exhibition.

Inside the tent, Carolyn was as good as her word. She removed her sweatpants and assumed the birthing squat, working with gravity instead of against it. This first birth would not guarantee a quick delivery, but Carolyn's hips had

broadened enough to improve her chances of a smooth, uncomplicated birth. On top of everything, she had the will. Lashondra had heard of her ancestors in the Florida sugar cane fields giving birth in this way, but had never known anyone in her lifetime who had birthed in any position other than supine and under anesthesia. She decided that she would also squat when the time came.

Meanwhile, Nancy was pulling all kinds of goodies out of her medical bag: towels, blankets, sponges, sterilizing foam, rubber gloves, forceps, umbilical snippers...

Chub was agog. "How'd ya ever fit that much shit in your bag?"

"D'ya ever look inside Carolyn's purse?" Nancy replied. "A woman has ways of packing that most men will never grasp." She lay on a blanket on the ground between Carolyn's legs. "Chub, Kenny, each of you grab one o' her arms and hold her up. She's gonna squeeze out this puppy any minute."

They looked for all the world like an avant garde barbershop quartet: one squatting mom howling in countertenor, a tenor on the ground with her hands up by mom's crotch, a bass and baritone contrapuntally shouting encouragement close by either side. The performance climaxed with a scream as the final push brought a three-kilo, blue and red blob into Nancy Glancy's latex clutch.

Blood was wiped, nasal plugs removed, the cord cut, skin color restored (a very pleasant shade of mocha), and the birth of a potential savior announced to the world beneath the unfriendly skies of Kill Devil Hills, North Carolina.

"Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls," Chub proclaimed, "we have a new champion of our hearts: Horace Olin DeWitt Martell!"

Chub and Carolyn would change the first name two days later, on hearing that the child's biological father had decided to remain in Zaire, effectively abandoning his responsibilities in

the States. They kept the *DeWitt*, since they cast no blame in Lester's direction. In place of *Horace* they substituted *Matthew*, after Carolyn's late father who had saved for years to send her to the best cosmetology school in Connecticut.

Immediately after the announcement, the rear guard of the squall line passed over, and the rain slackened gradually to a halt. Two at a time, the entourage ducked into the tent to see the mother and child, as Nancy focused her attention on Lashondra. Marilyn and Pete went in first, then Andi and Cindy, Terrell and Vanya, Paige and Wilf, Freddie and Holly, Hilde and Jacq. Carolyn had never imagined that so many complete strangers would be present at her birthing experience. She welcomed them all, groggy as she was from her efforts, and considered them all godparents to her son.

Paige and Wilf brought the most interesting request to the new mother, who at that point just wanted to hold and possibly nurse her baby—if her blood-sugar tested low enough—and then just go to sleep. Paige spoke first:

"We hope you'll take care of this child as if he were the most valuable possession on the planet. It's not enough that he was born here. He has to be educated well enough to put him in the right position to help millions of otherwise hopeless people in the next century."

"And I'd like to be in charge of his education," Wilf added. "Not that I have all the answers, but I know a lot of people who do, when you add up all their knowledge and wisdom. Always remember that he's destined to save the nation from—"

"Oh, fuck that noise!" Carolyn groaned. "None o' that matters right now. Of course I'm gonna care for him like he's the most valuable thing in the world. But I'll do it because *he's mine*."

Ninety minutes later, the barbershop quartet got together to sing again, with Lashondra as the descant voice this time, and their song ended with the emergence of a girl, weighing nearly 4.5 kilos, whose skin settled into a deeper brown than little

Horace's once she got accustomed to breathing air. Lashondra bestowed upon her the name she had decided on years before she had even met Kenny:

"Mondette Turner-Farrish."

"Mondette?" Nancy asked, in order to confirm that she heard what she thought she heard.

"M-o-n-d-e-t-t-e. It's French. It means 'little world'."

"That's beautiful," the doctor declared, calm for the first time in 20 hours.

The infants were born on the same day, in a storm, at the foot of the hill where the ingenuity of the Wrights met the Magic of the Outer Banks. Wilf Adamante revealed to his old and new friends his plans to found a new community to be built over the next three to five years on Roanoke Island. They were all to be invited to live there and help build it, as long as they would contribute to making it as self-sufficient as possible.

"It's arable land, not beachfront, but about a mile from the shore. We'll grow high-protein crops, like soybeans and chickpeas. We'll spend no more than five hours a day in the fields, devoting as much time as we can to continuing education and creative pursuits. We will not exploit our fellow creatures, and we will give back to Nature as much as we take. We will be free with our bodies, but not so free that we breed like rodents, because that devalues children; children are the most important thing there is, but let's emphasize quality over quantity. We will educate our children toward our utopian vision, the wisdom of the Buddha, the way of the Bodhisattva, teaching them to dare to dream the impossible dream. We will not force orthodoxy on anyone, since that always backfires. We will accept any new residents whom our land can support and who can offer useful skills in return. We will be culturally and occupationally diverse. But mostly, we will teach happiness—true, lasting happiness—the happiness that comes of being a whole, well-rounded, generous human being."

"Sounds great," Chub noted. "Sounds too good to be true."

"I'm sure it is," Wilf noted back. "Who's gonna join me?"

Cindy Lou did not hesitate two seconds: "I'm in. But no booze allowed, even for the enlightened class."

"Fine," Wilf assured her. "Booze will be banned, along with tobacco products—except what we can grow ourselves."

Chub didn't particularly want to quit smoking, but with a child, he allowed that he could use all the help he could get in quitting. If Carolyn agreed, the Olin-Martell contingent would re-settle with him. Marilyn remarked that the offer beat the hell out of running a doughnut shop. Kenny added that it beat the hell out of any future in Paterson, New Jersey, and that he'd be more likely to get his shit together on Roanoke. Freddie had no life to return to. Holly dittoed that. Hilde and Jacq said they would consider joining as soon as they could give up smoking and sell their bake shop. Nancy impolitely declined the offer. Andi was silent, deep in internal dialog. All eyes turned her way.

"Y'know," she finally stammered, "I-I-I'd love to. But-but...but I think the real world needs me. I have a calling. As shitty as teaching in public schools can get sometimes, it's just something I have to do. Maybe I could just spend summers with you?" Her eyes were wet, her heart wrenched with doubt. More than anything in the world at that moment, she wanted to spend her entire life with Wilf and Cindy Lou. But her practical side was suddenly, firmly in charge, having achieved the Zen ideal of overcoming desire. In future years, she would divide her time, like Persephone in reverse, between the idyllic summer fields of Roanoke Island and the post-industrial Land of the Dead.

By five in the morning, which had become four in morning as the clocks of the Eastern Time Zone had regressed an hour, Andi had fallen asleep on a seat in the cabin of the plane. She dreamed about running the perimeter of a pond in a park near

her New Jersey home, and her path was suddenly obstructed by the one person who, though dead, was expected to put in an appearance at the birth site, since he was an unofficial sponsor of the event.

"Good choice o' words," said Heinrich Truber's troublesome spirit. "'The real world needs me.' I like that. That's the way of the Bodhisattva, y'know. Now if only you knew which world was real."

"And just what do you mean by that?"

"I think it was Carl Jung who popularized the notion that each of us is two people. He didn't know just how right he was. In your case, one of you lives permanently in Daylight Savings Time, the other in Standard Time. They're in two different, parallel worlds just an hour and a dream apart. When you wake up in Standard Time, none of what you've just been through will have happened. Well, not to *you*, but to your *Doppelgänger* in Eastern Daylight, it'll still be real."

"Are you pullin' my leg?"

Hank laughed with a mixture of sweetness and scorn, as much sweetness as he'd shown anyone in years, since death had finally allowed him to relax a little. Andi begged him to stop the laughter. "Yes!" he cried. "I'm pullin' your leg! Interestin' idea, though isn't it? Think ya may've read it in one o' Adamante's stories, the one about Ben Franklin and his evil twin."

"Well, darlin', I promise I won't bug ya any more, but do find some way to continue my remembrance. I never asked the world for much, but I want my name to go on some way. Got no heirs, y'know. Promise me you'll do that?—and promise me you'll spread a little Eastern Daylight in Paterson?"

"Okay." Well, she was dreaming; what else would she say?

"Oh, damn, I almost forgot. Do what ya can to grab that Spanish boy. He's the one for you. He ain't perfect, but you 'n'

him should make a good pair. You might also tell him that he doesn't have that disease he thinks he has. He cured himself!"

"*Disease?*"

Hank vanished, and Andi awakened to skies no longer dark or threatening; to a nation that was now living an hour ahead of time and would take some time to readjust; to a life that had changed beyond restoration; to a world still waiting for the Eastern Daylight that would clarify, simplify, and beautify the experience known as Life, the Daylight which the two children born that day were destined to provide to an America that had lapsed into darkness.

The starboard windows of the plane faced eastward. Through the windows a slice of sun could be seen peeking around the monument. She imagined a round, plywood sign, the color of the rising sun, nailed to a pine tree, pointing the way to utopia: *Welcome to Truberville.*