



## Introduction

I began this work as a platform into which I could dump and explore ideas. I expected to then part it out into multiple other writings. But I found it to be more fun than I expected, and I hope you will too.

As the name would imply, it was my intent to be brutally blunt, and include thoughts I might otherwise not dare to print. So join me as we attempt to fearlessly face humanity and global trends, and have a little fun as we seek optimal outcomes.

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## Where Are We Going?

The hawk soared gracefully above the prairie. The pattern appeared random, but Lane knew nature better than that. It scarcely moved its wings in the gentle breeze. With incredible efficiency it continually scanned the earth, and had all but disappeared into the distance when Lane saw a second hawk searching the same area. It was then that he knew there was a problem.

Hawks and rodents ebb and flow in roughly sinusoidal cycles. When the hawk population increases, rodents decrease, which in turn reduces the hawk population – allowing the rodent population to rebound.

Some species follow a different pattern. Arctic lemmings increase until their numbers consume their forage faster than it can recover. At that point they all begin to starve, and the population suddenly drops to near extinction. This allows the environment to rebound, and the lemmings again begin to multiply.

Although hunter-gatherer humans lived within nature in more gentle cycles, modern humans have joined the lemmings in their cataclysmic pattern. The inter-dependencies in our modern world and the rapidly approaching limitations of global carrying capacity do not bode well for the future of humanity.

Lane lived alone, and feared no questions. Early on he had decided that he would rather be a miserable realist, than a happy ignoramus. Ironically, his low expectations of humanity minimized disappointments, and freed him to be pleasantly surprised when people did something worthwhile.

He found little solace in relegating environmental concerns to some future generation that might be better equipped than his own – assuming that humanity would someday even care. Beyond all this, what would make people care in the first place? Why would a human care about others once their own immediate needs were met? He sometimes wondered if there was any actual line that must be crossed to go between a Mother Teresa and an Adolph Hitler. “Ethics” appeared to be relative only to the task or preferences at hand.

Without boundaries, might it be more humane to euthanize billions of people in order to bring the global population down to a manageable level. This would make it possible to feed everyone. Populations could then be more humanely controlled by sterilization at birth (perhaps some categories of people would become more sterile than others).

While in control, why not trim humanity down to where nature could recover? Why should the human race be considered more important than any other animal species?

This whole scenario presented yet another opportunity: Since we have the gene pool of the entire human race at our disposal, we could craft the ultimate human (or whatever) race.

And what about God? Apparently humans could neither prove nor disprove his existence. If he *did* exist, why didn’t he just say so, instead of making people wonder? He then recalled having heard an answer to this one when he was eavesdropping upon a conversation between a Christian and an atheist.

These two had agreed that there was not enough evidence to force someone to believe one way or the other. But the Christian got the atheist to agree that love could not exist if you didn’t have a choice to love or not love. He then proposed that the ambiguity concerning the existence of God that allowed people to choose, was actually evidence of a God who made it possible to be loved.

Even so, humanity as he knew it was in a terminal condition. If humans continued to exist at all, some things about their behavior would have to change. An increasingly globally connected world was setting the stage for a globally connected failure.

Obviously survival of the fittest (or best prepared) would come into play at some point. It was also clear that some regions would self-destruct before others. Then there was warfare and violence to consider – a far less predictable commodity. There would be no clear answers to this problem, but obviously, individual armed resistance would be futile against well-armed groups. In spite of all this, he did not consider himself a prepper.

Lane was grim as he went over the figures. The family farm of five generations had finally experienced a year in which the expenses exceeded the profits. True, it had been an exceptionally dry year, but even in more average years the profits had been slowly dwindling. Now reduced to just eighty acres, it had become more of a hobby than a money maker, and this year his hobby failed to support itself.

Many of his small farm neighbors and even a few larger concerns had simply abandoned their claims in the face of mortgages and tax bills. In fact, the increasing depth of the water table made it unlikely that the abandoned land adjacent to his property would ever be farmed again. Many of these parcels were being sold for the water rights alone, so that these rights could be used on other parcels.

At ten miles from the nearest town, there was no prospect of real estate development. This town of Stag had originally existed to support farming in the area, but as it grew, the variety of businesses reached a critical level where businesses began to support each other. Agriculture was still important, but with the consolidation of family farms into corporations – and with the failure of even some of these, agribusiness had distilled down to fewer and larger operations.

There were a few small farms close in to town where their owners supported themselves with local jobs. These were primarily residential properties that enjoyed the tax advantage of still being technically agricultural. These farms supplied local restaurants and the significant farmers market culture.

The dry fall winds continued to move dust consisting of once-rich soil and the chemicals it now contained. Lane felt like his very soul now consisted of dust and left over chemicals, and that the wind would soon move him as well.

Because of his thriving internet business, Lane was the only one of his siblings who could afford to inherit the dwindling returns of the farm. Since by this time both his parents were gone, and his siblings had chosen urban careers, there were few emotions at stake in the remains of the original homestead. For now, Lane could cover the costs and chose to do so.

For lack of water in the area, large corporations had no interest in further development – environmental politics had seen to that. Their political shenanigans had placed the abundant fresh water in regional rivers off limits. Apparently their speech writers had calculated that the sea level might drop part of a millimeter without them. Much of the surrounding land was therefore doomed to return to the desert from which it had been carved – albeit with the water table far beyond reach of any plant life for centuries to come.

Zeroing in on the water problem Lane noted that now at least thirty percent of his operating cost was in pumping water. In the early days the water table had been close enough to the surface for hand pumps and windmills to provide an adequate supply.

He needed “tractor therapy.” With no pressing excuse for it at the moment, he set the blade behind his tractor at an angle, so he could clear weeds from the sides of his long driveway. He would also restore the surface of his driveway to a slight convex, in anticipation of a rain squall forecast for the next afternoon. He needed time to think.

He had met his wife in the Bay Area while earning degrees in business and computer science, and she had initially been charmed by the prospect of rural “down to earth” living. But the charm faded quickly. Somehow it hadn't sunk into this social butterfly that rural living meant a degree of isolation. That one didn't last long – fortunately not long enough to bring children into the world.

Now alone and glad of it, he lived between the virtual world of his online business and entertainment, and the real world of his farm and well equipped shop. Farm shops typically included welders and a few machines for forming metals into custom parts. When farm equipment needed repairs or modifications, crops could not wait for mail order response. As an incorrigible innovator at heart, Lane had added such toys as a 3D printer and a computer controlled milling machine

## Escape

Lane came upon the accident the next day while in his pickup, returning from a distant town. The windowless van was on its side, and four panic-stricken girls were milling around. They had over-driven a T intersection on the flat, featureless terrain.

In a desperate bid to escape a sex trafficking operation, these girls had stolen a van and made an ill planned bid for freedom. They had been kidnapped and sold, and the van had been their hope of escape. They knew pursuit would be close behind – an hour at the very most.

As a chorus of simultaneous stories poured forth from the girls, Lane held up his hand in a request for silence.

"I don't know how much of all this is true, but climb in. One of you ride up front with me to explain what is going on. The rest of you get in back. Do not peek out, or you'll get us all killed if these people are as bad as you claim. You in the front will sit on the floor if we see another vehicle within a half mile of us."

Once underway Lane asked: "So where are you trying to go?"

"I don't know. Someplace where we can hide. These people will probably just kill us if they catch us this time."

"Oh great! So in other words I just signed my death warrant by picking you girls up?"

"You might have."

"Look, the town of Stag is just twelve miles up the road. I'll take you there and drop you off."

"That won't do us any good. Some people know us there, and some of the police are involved."

"Then what the hell was your plan?"

"I don't know," she sobbed. "We just had to try *something*."

"If they can't find you at the van, are they likely to check the nearest farms?"

"They'd have to."

"One of those would be me, so obviously I can't take you there. What exactly *do* you expect me to do?"

"I'm so sorry," said Cheryl, as she put her hands over her face and began to withdraw into quiet sobs.

"I have an idea – not a good one or even a pleasant one, but you girls are going to have to do exactly as I say. Do you think you can handle that?"

"We'll do whatever you say."

When Lane pulled into his driveway he pulled up next to a shed. "Stay in the truck," he ordered. Almost immediately he was back with a large folded tarp, which he unceremoniously dumped on top of the girls in the back. "Don't let this get away from you. We've got another quarter mile to go." He then quickly drove to a point 100 feet in from the fences on the northwest corner of his property, where he deposited his passengers.

"Get under this tarp and don't move if you see anything coming up the driveway. Sorry this tarp is only a two-star."

"Two star?" queried one of the girls.

"As in a hotel, dummy," replied another.

"I have to pee."

"Then pee!" said Lane, as he turned on his heel and quickly drove to the house.

Lane ran inside, tossed a few junk food items, bottled water, and a roll of paper towels into a couple of trash bags added a couple of old blankets, and trotted to his tractor. He rumbled quickly out to where he had left the girls. Ignoring them, he adjusted the blade to a steeper angle, and began to grade a circle around them almost two hundred feet in diameter – enclosing a little over one half acre. During his third pass, he saw a dark vehicle approaching swiftly in the distance. By this time he had gouged a circle about a foot and a half deep on the inside, that left a berm about a foot high on the outside.

He then paused at the point nearest the house, to summons the girls and set the trash bags in the groove. "Between this berm and the groove you have about two and a half feet of earth to hide behind. Get down

and don't let so much as a hair appear above the berm until I either return or you hear gunshots – in which case you're on your own.”

“This is miserable!” whined one of the girls.

“Would you rather join me as I greet the guys in the car slowing down to enter my driveway?”

Lane met them in front of the house as they pulled along-side his parked pickup and got out of their car. “What are you doing out there?” asked the driver of the car without introduction.

“Digging an irrigation pond. What are *you* doing *here*?”

“Somebody stole our van,” said the passenger. “We found it wrecked and abandoned two miles from here.”

“Sorry, I can't help you with that one. Any other questions?”

“Do you *usually* haul lipstick in your pickup bed?” asked the driver.

“No, it must be the strange weather. Look, if we're through here you guys need to leave – I've got work to do before the rain comes. Sorry I can't help you.”

“I believe you can,” said the passenger, whose hand was suddenly holding a gun. “Hand your keys to my friend. He is going to search everything. It would be much easier to just kill you now in this godforsaken place, but I'm going to give you one chance to survive: Are you sure you have nothing to hide? If my friend finds you are lying, you will never lie again – got it?”

“Get on with your damn search and beat it! I've work to do and you're burning my daylight.” A chill gust of wind swept a thin column of dust through the trio, and the driver turned and walked towards the house.

The more intense winds and sudden downpour came as the remaining shed was being searched. Although Lane thought of the lightly clothed girls lying in a growing puddle of muddy water just 400 yards away, he didn't dare favor their direction with so much as a furtive glance.

As he was handed his keys he was told that they might return at any time. The car's tires spun deep irregular grooves in the mud of his freshly graded driveway as it churned its way out to the highway.

Lane turned on lights only in the laundry room near the back door, in the bathroom, and in the kitchen, and then slightly elevated the thermostat setting. Still drenched to the skin, he donned a poncho, attached a scoop bucket to the front of his tractor, and drove it to his “pond” and its miserable occupants.

He instructed the girls to go to his house, clean up, dry out, and launder their clothes. They must enter only by the back door, enter no rooms other than the kitchen, living room and bathroom, and do not turn any lights on or off. He would stay away from the house for at least two hours to assure their privacy.

They must also post a continuous watch on the driveway, and to immediately flee into the field behind the house if any vehicle approached. If they didn't do this, they would be captured, and he would be killed. As for his own strategy, he resolved that if a vehicle approached he would simply drive through a fence and off into the surrounding fallow landscape where no street vehicle could pursue.

By now the squall had reduced to a drizzle, and soon a mist gave way to a starry sky. Creating a strategy even as he worked, he dug through layers of ancient sand, silt and occasional clay, to create a circular depression that would eventually become fifteen feet deep in the center of his pond to be. This pit would also become about twenty feet in diameter at the bottom, and have sloping sides. He deposited the excavated earth in an elongated pile, obscuring the pond area from the road to the south.

Lane was not immune to sensuality, and he struggled to avoid thinking about the girls currently drying their clothes in his house. A trip to the house might be believable if he “just needed a beer or a cup of coffee.” Thinking about not thinking about them wasn't working, so he disciplined his mind to focus upon practical creativity.

He didn't need or want a pond, so all he was doing for himself at the moment was creating a mess that he would eventually have to clean up. But were there any other possible options? If he *did* have a pond, maybe some low level of wind or solar power could continually bring water up from the water table so it would

take far less energy to irrigate during times of heavy need. But no: He would lose too much water from surface evaporation to make that practical, and the water table was too deep and continuing to drop.

Water table: How about this one? If he dug this project deep enough, perhaps he could line it with a membrane and create his *own* water table much closer to the surface. He could create a cone-shaped subterranean pond with a well in the center and plant things in the soil above it. That way any water that was not picked up by the roots could be recycled using far less energy.

He knew there were laws forbidding rainwater catchment. The theory was that such a practice violated water rights by not allowing the rain to a given piece of property to sink down into the water table. Since only about three percent of rain water actually made it to the water table anyway, it was obvious that politicians were either ignorant, or had some ulterior objective in mind. Nobody complained about rain landing in ponds though, so he decided to call the project a “garden pond” to obscure his intentions.

Three and a half hours later he parked the tractor near the garage, loaded some camp equipment into his pickup, and drove out to the pit to set up a tent and camp. A post hole digger created the best he would offer in terms of a toilet.

Upon returning to his house he found the girls sprawled and asleep on his living room rug and furniture, dry and comfortable, oblivious to any approaching dangers. After raiding the kitchen for anything edible and nonperishable, the various closets and cupboards for bedding, and whatever was left of his ex wife's clothing that may have been of interest and a supply of water, he conducted them to their new quarters. He gave them strict instructions to remain there for a day or two without showing their faces above the ground – yeah, right.

Before relaxing, Lane carefully cleaned up every detail of evidence he could find relating to the girls' visit. By about 3 am, after a final mopping and vacuuming, Lane was fast asleep.

### *Relief*

Lane did not often ask for help, but in this case he knew he was out of his league. Rising at around 7:30 he drove immediately to Stag without taking time to fix breakfast – there wasn't much left in his kitchen anyway. His priority in life at the moment was to unload his guests on someone who was not as helpless as himself.

An internet search on sex trade during breakfast provided a shocking education, but was zero help concerning his immediate situation. Normally the police would be the most direct route to catastrophic action on something like this, but he recalled one of the girls mentioning some level of police involvement in the very situation these girls were trying to escape.

A tornado of action, decisions – and yes, emotions – had suddenly crashed into his comfortable existence. He had been moved by the terror and helplessness of these desperate young ladies. He was forced to admit to himself that he had become emotionally involved in the situation by this shock-wave of calamity. He would look to the church first. These girls needed compassion – anything but heartless institutional treatment.

Lane sometimes attended a large church in town – more out of tradition than actual interest in spiritual matters. They had this adult singles group that seemed to collect the aging nerds, broken women, and lonely people who weren't really looking for relationships – but just didn't want to be alone all the time. Some were professionals in various fields like himself. His social needs were light, but when he felt the need for a little friendship and company he preferred this group of single orphans to drinking his way from bar to bar. He felt uneasy when he was not in total control of his faculties.

There were also the lecherous guys who viewed the group as a potential meat market. A certain instinct of protectiveness was a part of Lane's make up, and he had been known to soundly confronted such individuals – threatened them even. And it wasn't just guys. Wanda was always style conscious, immaculately primped, and tactfully overexposed. Occasionally Lane felt particularly targeted by this flirt. She reminded him way too much of his ex wife – why did he seem to attract these shallow women?

Within this group he had met an attractive woman named Joan. She was an interior decorator who also found time for pro-life and other crusades. He felt safe around Joan. Her preoccupation with social issues instead of relational concerns defined her as a woman of purpose rather than as an emotional threat. He was hopeful that the church would be willing to contact Joan and others in the adult group to see if anyone knew how to address his current disaster. The church immediately called Joan, and sent out a group email to members of the singles group in a call for help.

When Joan promptly met him for coffee, she added significantly to the education he had begun to acquire over breakfast, and confirmed the urgency of immediate action. She also shared a level of uneasiness concerning police and civic involvement. Primal feelings of anger, protectiveness and purpose were beginning to stir within Lane's masculine psyche. Soon the church and Joan began to contact people in a nearby city, and arranged for protection in a safe house somewhere in the outskirts of Fresno. Lane had no interest in knowing exactly where, but while this was going on he rented a windowless minivan so Joan could provide transportation. Later that very morning, Lane led Joan in the van out to his place to rescue the girls.

When they arrived at the farm there were only three girls present. The fourth had panicked and fled to the highway in hopes of hitchhiking. The remaining girls were convinced that she intended to betray them in hopes of preserving her own life, and they were terrified. When the van pulled out of the driveway Lane drove the tractor out to the camp in the pit, to remove all evidence that the girls had been there – meanwhile he kept a wary lookout for approaching vehicles.

Shortly after moving most of the camping equipment to the surface, he saw them coming. Two vehicles approached his driveway at high speed. He immediately threw his camping equipment back into the pit, climbed aboard his tractor, and quickly buried it all in the pretense of shaping the bottom of his “pond.”

One of the vehicles went immediately to his house, and the one attempting to approach him over the rough ground got stuck. The driver continued on foot. Lane pretended to ignore him as he continued his excavation, and proceeded to load another bucket-full to deposit on the external pile. When a warning shot ricocheted off the bucket he could no longer pretend to ignore the man.

“What the hell do you think you're doing?” asked Lane as he recognized the man on foot from the day before.

“A rumor has surfaced that you were trying to move some young girls. I should have shot you yesterday.”

“Do I look like I'm moving girls? I'll be easy to find if you need me. Can't you see I'm busy?” Even as he spoke, Lane began to wonder where this “rumor” had come from, and how these guys had learned about it so quickly. As far as he knew, no one besides church staff and the singles group could have known what was going on.

As the man surveyed the work in progress, there was little he could say. He then proceeded to examine the nearby fence line and a distance beyond it, but neither the fence nor the earth beyond it had been disturbed. When he returned to his car he soon despaired of moving it without help, and proceeded on foot to assist the others in the search. At that point Lane simply drove through the fence out into the adjoining abandoned farm land and continued driving in places no street vehicle could follow. He hadn't gone far when he encountered a shallow wash that provided a gently curving boundary between the abandoned fields on either side. The coarse sand and gravel bottom offered yet another barrier to street vehicles.

Observing his farm from a distance he saw his unwanted guests finally pull out, and he promptly returned to his farm through the opening he had torn in the fence. The interior of his house had been ransacked in search of clues, but it looked more like capricious vandalism.

After a few minutes of taking pictures and jotting down notes concerning the damage, he left for Stag to fill out a police report. That was when he saw a large bird alight next to something colorful beside the entrance to his driveway. It was the girl who had fled to betray the others – with her throat slit.

Lane would never be the same.

## Accusation

The murder was so fresh that Lane witnessed the last vestige of life leaving her body, as she subtly relaxed for the very last time in her short life. The amount of life that had left her body through her wound made it clear that she was far beyond hope. Obviously she had remained in their custody while they were searching his property, and had been murdered upon their departure when they had found no evidence.

Even as Lane dialed 911 he saw flashing lights approaching rapidly from Stag. It would have taken at least twenty minutes for a call to have been made, the mobilization of emergency vehicles, and the travel time to where they were now. At the very least, someone had either witnessed the murder and called in immediately – or worse yet, called in before the murder had taken place!

Immediately after his own 911 call, as the sheriff pulled up and the ambulance was closing quickly from a mile behind, Lane called Joan to apprise her of the situation, express his concern that they would consider him a suspect, and to please follow up if she did not hear from him again within the hour. As an after thought, he added “Tell the newspaper and our friends at the church what is currently going on. I want as many curious people as possible to be getting in on the facts, before anybody official has a chance to obscure them.”

The sheriff and a deputy were the first on the scene, and scarcely appearing to notice the body, the sheriff immediately handcuffed Lane on suspicion of murder. The paramedics pronounced the girl dead on the scene – with the time of death ten to twenty minutes prior.

On the way into town the sheriff plied Lane with questions – none of which he was obliged to answer, since he had already been read his rights. Nonetheless Lane chose to toy with him anyway, in hopes of learning all he could about what was *really* going on. Beyond that – handcuffs notwithstanding – he had gotten a hold of his cell phone and was recording in video mode. The video part would be useless of course, but the audio was recording nicely.

“What's this I hear about you harboring a group girls who had stolen and wrecked a van?,” asked the sheriff. “Grand theft auto is a serious crime.”

“I only saw one body,” replied Lane. “How many did *you* see – and this van thing?”

“I'm not at liberty to say.”

“Who called in the 911 before the girl was even murdered?” asked Lane, hoping for a response made careless by anger or worry.

“We *could* explain that you were beat up while trying to escape,” replied the sheriff coldly.

“I think that was a news crew that just passed us going the other way,” said Lane. “You might find yourself with a few more questions to answer than I will.”

During this exchange the deputy in the passenger seat listened in quiet contemplation. Lane had the sense that he was learning more than he wanted to, and was forming opinions that may or may not suit the official position.

Less than twenty minutes after Lane had been booked and settled into the county jail, he had a visitor. A lawyer contacted by Joan had quietly followed behind the process to convincingly reveal the absurdity of the charges and to have him immediately released on personal recognizance.

Meanwhile, Joan waited in the lobby with people of the press and a couple of friends from the single adult group of their church. She had already briefed them on how Lane had rescued three victims of sex trade whom he “spotted hiding in a nearby field,” and arranged for their delivery to freedom and safety. The details of how all this was achieved were carefully obscured. In any case, he was greeted in the lobby as a hero. The possibility of a jury conviction on a trumped up murder charge was now too remote to waste the DA's time.

Lane opted to postpone filing the police report relating to the vandalism of his home; he wanted nothing more to do with officialdom that day. However, during a relaxed meal at a restaurant with his friends from

the lobby and a couple people from the press, he shared a few more details. He was obviously targeted for harassment and elimination, and that clearly the murder in his driveway was an escalation of that program.

More privately, to Joan and a couple of his more trusted friends, he shared his puzzlement on how both the police and the sex traffickers were on to what he was doing so quickly. If they had waited until after lunch to move the girls, they might have *all* been killed.

As far as the police report concerning the damage in his home went, why *not* make it public before informing the police? The experience of the day made him more leery of the police than even of the news media. At dinner Lane shared the images of the vandalism in his home with his friends, and he emailed them to himself so he could print them out on a computer in preparation for the police report the following day. He also emailed himself the recording of his conversation with the sheriff, but kept it a secret – for now.

“I’m afraid to go home this evening,” said Lane, “not to mention that I don’t have a vehicle in town.”

“You could stay with me,” blurted Joan – immediately embarrassed by her response.

Lane laughed – and then apologized. “I’m sorry Joan. After your help today there is no one I am prouder to have on my side, but you caught my macho self image totally off guard. I indeed feel safer with you around.”

It was a Friday night, and after an exhausting couple of days Lane had no intention of risking a night alone at his remote home. Joan shared a house with a paralegal and a school teacher, and offered him a couch for the night. Rather than allow the press to imagine him spending the night with three ladies, he tentatively accepted a couch from a friend named Allen – who also offered him a ride home when he got off work in mid-afternoon the next day. In the end he opted to rent a motel for the night, but accepted the offer of the ride home. He had had enough human interaction for one day.

## A New Direction

A rented computer at the motel enabled him to print out the pictures he had taken of the vandalism at his home. He made the police report his first order of business for the next day and included the details of the invasion at gunpoint on his property and a verbatim quote of all that was said (some of which he had secretly recorded on his phone). Other than to say that he was experimenting with a pond idea, he excluded all reference to burying his camp equipment and any clue that he knew anything about a stolen van. He went on to describe his discovery of the body, and provided a convincing case for the murderers being the dangerous visitors who were angry over the fact that the girl had led them to the wrong farm. He also included all the details he could remember describing the persons and vehicles involved. Unfortunately he could not offer them a license plate number. All of these details he had shared with the gentlemen of the press the day before.

He immediately purchased a copy the report he had signed. “This will take a couple of hours to process, so come back this afternoon for your official copy.”

“Fine, said Lane, but I would like a copy of what I have filled out and signed in the meantime.”

“That is not how we do things.”

Whereupon Lane pulled out his phone and photographed the documents before they could come up with an excuse to stop him. He would leave nothing to chance or official editing.

The Saturday farmers market was in full swing, and for the first time in quite awhile he had the time to enjoy it. People seemed to return to towns like this after they had explored the world a little, and Lane was likely to encounter old friends whom he had known since childhood.

He had a kitchen to restock and arranged with a friend at the farmer's market to stash his purchases until he and Allen could pick them up later. As he leisurely strolled the aisles, noting prices and chatting with the vendors, he evaluated the various forms of produce in terms of what might be suitable for production in his

garden pond. He would later do online research concerning these and other crop candidates for things like water usage, root depth, productivity, and market potential.

Reluctantly, he forced his mind to contemplate his need for personal security. Lunch with Joan and her housemates suggested an answer. They had a couple of homeless friends who had been through various programs, and were struggling to remain drug free. They were finding it extremely difficult to maintain while living in an environment of constant drug availability.

Would Lane be willing to allow them to camp on his property in exchange for providing security and helping out on the farm? Their food stamps would be adequate to cover their food costs.

Homelessness was a huge unknown to Lane, but his very life had suddenly become a huge unknown. Something was coming alive in him and he was invigorated by the real world encounters. The computer games and other entertainment he had been relying on for adventure had suddenly faded in importance as he was encountering more worthwhile engagements. Idle boredom and pointless pursuits were being replaced by meaningful challenges.

"I'll be waiting for my ride home at 2:00pm at the library. Have your friends meet me there an hour ahead of time and be ready to travel. Still, I will make no promises until I've had a chance to talk with them."

Before going to the library Lane purchased a heavy chain and padlock, for securing the entrance to his driveway.

When the homeless candidates arrived they agreed to sign a statement that they were there entirely at their own risk, and would not hold Lane liable for *anything*. Furthermore, they could be evicted without notice or cause at any time. For their part, they were free to leave at will, and would owe Lane nothing that was not already his.

"We don't have a tent," said one of them. "Will there be any kind of shelter?"

"I think we can dig up some camping equipment," said Lane, with a trace of a smile.

Upon reaching the farm Lane conducted his guests to the garden pond where he had hastily buried his camping equipment. By very delicately alternating between removing layers of earth with the tractor and probing into the earth with rods, they got within shovel range of the equipment.

The new camp would be just inside (north) of the growing bank of earth Lane had begun to excavate from the growing pond. "Cut a semicircle a few feet across into the dirt pile to back your camp fire. This will help reflect the heat and guide the smoke upwards. I'll be back in two or three hours with something to eat."

The garden pond would eventually be lined with six mil black plastic, overlain by a tough polypropylene landscape fabric, and then coated with an asphalt emulsion by a broad putty knife.

On his way out to the pond he picked up some camp chairs, solar lighting, and a supply of firewood – none of which had he offered to his previous guests. Leaving them with hand tools to finish the job, Lane stretched his chain across the entrance to his driveway between existing posts where there had once been a gate.

The kitchen had sustained little damage, and he soon had a pot of stew simmering while he continued to bring order to the rest of his household. He then hauled the stew – along with a few ribs to barbecue – out to the pond.

He finally had time to hear their stories.

"So you guys are homeless because of substance abuse?"

"Not at all," said Paco. I was dumped on the street when I got out of prison, and James here couldn't find work after getting his associates degree in engineering."

"That's something people don't understand about homeless," said James. "We became abusers *because* we were homeless – not homeless because we were abusers. Try facing a life where you are unlikely to ever live indoors again. Now of course there are a few among us who *did* lose their footing because of substance abuse, but that's not the way it usually works.

"Where is it legal for you guys to sleep?"

"It isn't," said James.

“Come on now,” said Lane. “If you can't sleep, you obviously can't live, and as I understand it, our nation's founding documents guarantee people the right to be alive.”

“What constitution?” asked Paco. “The constitution only benefits those with the power to enforce it – or in this case the power to ignore it.”

“But it's the *federal* law,” protested Lane. “If what you say is true, then the cities who deny others the right to sleep at all are the *real* criminals.”

“You're beginning to get the picture,” said Paco.

It was a pleasant evening under the stars, before a cheery fire occasionally sending up stars of its own. It turned out that Paco had extensive farm experience, and James had experienced a series of *almost* successes in various entrepreneurial forays.

The monthly singles adult social event was calculated “blah” as far as Lane was concerned. It was contrived to draw normally isolated people out of their shells and into interactions with others. Wanda was in classic form as she trolled for admirers.

They had all been given numbers, and were expected in turn to name something they would like to see changed in the world around them. A few brief comments from others would be allowed after each complaint. When Lane's number came up, he chose not to participate and was let off after a brief protest from the hostess. But after the others were through and a few had left for refreshments, the hostess made another appeal.

“We all understand that you have experienced a very traumatic event recently. Would you care to share a little about that?”

“Only if I can share more than one complaint and touch on more than one subject,” said Lane.

“Granted.”

“First of all, there is this sex trade business that seems to involve more locals than anyone might expect – some of them even go to church. Secondly, one of our very number here – at least one who is on our email list – is involved with these people. Thirdly, there appears to be some connection between these sex traffickers and the sheriff's department. So we have legitimate demonstrable reasons to believe that the government we seem to instinctively distrust is at least complacent about – if not complicit in – this very hideous crime. And then there is this homeless situation. Did you know that our city does not allow homeless people the right to be alive?”

The response to Lane's assertions was a flurry of questions and disbelief, whereupon Lane dismissed himself with the announcement that he needed some coffee. He would be back in a few minutes to defend the claims he had made – if anyone was still interested.

By the time he returned the group had changed a bit. Those who had been a little too annoyed for their comfort had moved on to more frivolous environments, while a couple of faces that had left earlier had returned. Some of them appeared to be fuming. Soon Lane was managing the objections to his statements with efficiency and irrefutable logic.

“Do I have to tell you what the inside of a county jail cell looks like to get you to believe me?” Some who had hoped that they could refute his statements left to find more comfortable conversations, and the group distilled down to those most willing face reality.

After having dealt with the objections, Lane brought a shift into the conversation. “As a group of single independent adults, we – perhaps more than any other demographic – have the power to create change. We don't require anyone's permission about what to think, how to use our time, finances, and our living spaces. Thomas Jefferson was one such as we, and contributed tremendously to shaping our nation.

“Any of you who are willing to become active in creating change – whatever the arena – would be welcome to come out to my place after church next Sunday for more discussion and brainstorming. This is not a church function, so don't do any group mailings, but feel free to invite anyone you believe may be interested in actually taking action.

“I’ll provide a supply of ribs and all the water you can drink. Bring whatever else you would like to add. If anyone’s willing to coordinate the remaining food part of it, I’d be grateful. We’ll be meeting outside, so if you want to sit down, dress warm and bring your own chairs.

“I’ll expect everyone to share a brief introduction to an area you are concerned about – along with what you personally plan to begin doing about it. We can all think of a million things for *other* people to do, but what do *you* plan to do?”

### *Creating a Culture*

Lane had the remains of a large front lawn sprinkled by a few random trees, to which he gave its first intentional watering in some months. On Saturday he removed a circle of sod and dug out a fire pit. He also spread water over the driving and parking areas to control the dust.

Lane knew most of the people who showed up, even though a fourth of them had not attended the single adult group. Still Lane was surprised to see Wanda arrive – this time in less formal albeit more seductive attire. The afternoon proceeded at a leisurely pace, allowing plenty of time for socialization and for people to get acquainted in a congenial informal atmosphere. Others had stepped up to coordinate the potluck fare – in addition to Lane’s promise of ribs and water.

At one point Wanda came along side Lane to remark on how efficiently he had dealt with the “runaways” problem. When she followed this up with a question about how Lane knew they had so little time to deal with it, Lane’s guard went up and he immediately went into a deceptive diagnostic mode.

“That sheriff is pretty shrewd,” said Lane. “He had someone call me from an unofficial telephone to warn me that I had better hurry.”

After a couple pointless comments intended to cover the fact that she had little interest in further conversation, Wanda was soon socializing elsewhere. As the priorities of food and getting acquainted began to yield to conversations concerning more serious topics, the group began to congeal around the fire.

Lane stepped forward. “I hope you’ve been having as a pleasant a time as I have. Last week I invited you to think of local or global problems that particularly concerned you. I would like each of you to introduce yourselves, and very briefly name your arena of concern, and the next step you personally plan to take to address it. Who would like to be first?”

After a significant period of silence, Lane opted to demonstrate it himself. “My name is Lane and I’m concerned about water conservation and energy. I have excavated a half-acre cone-shaped garden area that I will line with a waterproof membrane, back fill with a layer of sand, and then garden soil. This will confine a recyclable water table within fifteen feet of the surface. An efficient solar pump will serve the garden from the shallow well in the center.”

“Hi, I’m James, I’ve had a financial catastrophe that has jeopardized my very survival. So I and am concerned about global famine. I am optimizing a high-density garden design to go with the water and energy conservation project that Lane has described – along with a balanced diet that can be replicated locally.”

“I am Paco, and am grateful to be off the streets. I have extensive farming experience, and will be supporting the efforts of Lane and James. I also plan to explore additional ways to get homeless people earning positions of mutual benefit with property owners – like James and I have.”

Once this pattern of brevity and planned action was set, others began to share. A couple concerned about population increases resolved to promote pregnancy prevention, rather than having to kill unborn children. Two adventurous young men concerned about the explosion of drug traffic resolved to set up surveillance situations and develop a library of videos and photos of drug users, their contacts, and hopefully increasingly important players – an extremely dangerous hobby. Others were concerned about the lack of a global ethic, and some, like James, spoke of various means of surviving the increasingly volatile political and economic environment.

There was also a group of four or five who were involved in the more mystical aspects of Christianity. They had experienced divine revelations and witnessed supernatural healings and other miracles. They were

active in encouragement and in looking for ways to support the efforts of others. Their basic view was that “If you don't touch a heart, your work is only temporary.”

As the presentations tapered off and yielded to rounds of nibbling leftovers and refreshments, numerous intense debates and conversations sprung up among the guests. Although at least half of those who showed up offered nothing to share, the afternoon and evening still demonstrated the potential of what a group of engaged and passionate minds could achieve.

Eventually a few people began to leave, and Lane again took the floor. “I've been enjoying a fun and productive time today. Since it's apparent that many important conversations have only begun, you are all invited to return on future Sunday afternoons to resume these discussions. Please continue to enjoy the fire as long as you would like, and forgive me if I quietly disappear at some point. You have given me a lot to think about, and I will look forward to seeing some of you next week.”

Two days later the sheriff parked his car in front of his home for his noon meal – as was his habit on Tuesdays. Ten minutes after he had entered his house a hooded individual strolled into plain view of a conspicuous video camera. With incredible calm and efficiency a sniper rifle was unwrapped, supported on the roof of a parked car, and a single shot was fired. The rifle was then re-wrapped, and the shooter left the field of view of the camera – never once having faced it.

Fired from a full fifteen hundred feet, the armor-piercing round entered the driver side window of the parked sheriff's car at face level, passed through the passenger side window, and embedded itself in the porch beyond. An assassination would have been easy for such talent, so this was clearly no more than a chilling warning.

The next day, when the news had alerted the gossip of Stag, Lane gave Joan a call. “It's Wanda,” he said. “The mole is Wanda.”

The terrified sheriff became even more committed to carefully serving those who controlled drugs and other rackets in the area. The intrepid pair who had begun some surveillance experiments with hidden remote cameras, began to suspect that a who's who in local criminals could be garnered from noticing those who would occasionally meet with the sheriff on a brief and informal basis. One particular deputy was also noting such contacts.

It was interesting that the sheriff would instantly redirect the conversation when any mention was made of Lane or his rumored Sunday meetings. Not so for the deputy. Out of professional curiosity and then genuine interest, he began attending these meetings when off duty. This made Wanda uneasy. On the other hand, this handsome young bachelor of aloof yet courteous manners soon developed a fan club he knew nothing about – being too modest to take the occasional flutter of giggles personally.

James had designed a bolt-together low profile domed frame almost thirty feet in diameter out of pieces of electrical conduit. He and Paco set it up on posts next to their camp. They covered the top and sides with tarps, and buried the bottom edges of the side tarps about six inches into the earth. Lane then inverted a junk grain bin to use as a hood for a central fire pit. This was all achieved in time for the meeting on the following weekend, and would provide a comfortable enclosure for Sunday meetings. This also gave James and Paco a place to cook and live when not in their shelters.

A format emerged where the afternoons began with updates highlighting progress made and problems encountered on the various projects. Sometimes new issues were raised while others became bogged down by impossible obstacles, delays, and waning interest. The environment encouraged people to dream without reference to mainstream limitations, and they were free to picture life without debt-driven dependencies and outside controls.

As the meetings progressed, the number and complexity of the problems raised would have been depressing, had they not been presented with hopeful avenues of resolution. Although some of these actions

were not small enough to be managed by individuals and small groups, they still provided direction and windows of hope for broader solutions.

This broad candid view of what was really going on set the group on a course of inventing community models. These could serve societies of a dozen or two, and then be developed in scale as desired.

Not all were on board with this adventure, and many who were annoyed by this confrontation with reality returned to less controversial dates in video games and bars. These were replaced by others who were more responsive to the primal cry for meaning in life.

Lane and a few others chose to go beyond mere survival. They understood the desperate motivation of their homeless friends who faced total destitution, and they were certainly supportive. But Lane and others in this group went on to scale high tech conveniences down to products that could be produced locally in simple shops from commonly available materials. This type of distributed economy could go a long ways towards preventing homelessness in the first place.

### *Initial Actions*

A form of outreach began with a farmer's market presence by James and Paco. The back seat of an aging Crown Vic was removed and opened to the trunk, providing a roomy conveyance for their wares. Eventually a presence at a flea market was added, where others in the group began to share their thoughts and projects with the public as well.

One afternoon James and Paco returned home followed by a carload of passengers and all their remaining earthly possessions. These had been caught between the city crackdown on homeless camps, and increasing pressure from drug cartels that were beginning to force homeless people into gang affiliations "for their safety."

In addition to this, the middle aged couple among them had recently retired, and had experienced interminable delays in getting access to Social Security – although they were both qualified and had applied for it over six months before. They and others were increasingly aware that they may *never* receive a penny of the countless thousands they had been forced to pay into their Social Security retirement accounts. There had also been three weeks of delay in their food stamps. With no guarantee of resolution in sight, their very survival was desperately precarious.

Lane did not appreciate this intrusion for which he had not been consulted – until they explained that these newcomers were not planning to camp on Lane's property for more than a couple of nights. They wanted to develop a camp of their own on the adjoining abandoned farmland.

In discussions that evening it was decided that their vehicle access from the highway would originate at a border between two fields a half mile away. This would terminate just out of sight over the bank of the sandy wash that Lane had discovered when avoiding the criminals a few weeks before. There they leveled a small parking area down far enough that parked vehicles would not be visible from the flat areas above. The final hundred and fifty yards to the camp would cross the wash, which would serve as a barrier to street vehicles. This would be a security measure against gangs and governments. To minimize implicating Lane's farm, the camp would be at least a quarter of a mile away from his nearest fence.

The desperation and sincerity of this group was evident within a day or two when they began to hand dig the first of their garden ponds at their new camp site. The experience and research of James and Paco enabled immediate action, and the garden pond based upon their design was used. One difference in this design was that the lining would stop about a foot below the surface, but spread out level for about an additional foot. This would enable excess water to escape if rains or flooding temporarily overflowed the ponds.

They would get seedlings started immediately in a relatively shallow version, and by the time these would be ready for transplanting they would have several larger areas prepared. For water they would surreptitiously "gather" about fifty gallons at a time from a canal about four miles away. They would pour

this water into a drum in the parking area, that was connected by a quarter mile of buried plastic tubing to a tank at the camp.

This community generally flowed in a libertarian mode, with an informal popular vote ruling significant decisions, with an agreed-upon “shot caller” officiating. The major exception to this was with regard to drugs: Since they were refugees from a drug infested environment, they immediately agreed that any instance of drug possession or use would result in instant expulsion. The perpetrator and whatever he possessed would be removed to the highway, and he would have to walk or hitchhike back to town. Not even food or water would be provided.

This law was tested a couple of weeks later when the population had grown to about fifteen. The individual was caught red-handed and told to leave, but refused. Beyond that, a group dinner was about to be served, and he thoroughly intended to join them. As the current leader stood firmly in the way, and several of the community stood behind the offender, the confrontation intensified.

The handful of gravel that struck the back of the offender had been thrown with impressive force. As the offender wheeled around, he saw several people poised with rocks or other heavy objects. When he turned in fury to again face the leader, he found him armed with a significant piece of firewood. He was then tackled from behind and held firmly as his pockets were emptied, and his belongings ransacked for any trace of drugs or weapons. He and his remaining belongings, were then moved to the road. Enforcement had found a voice, and future village candidates would be made aware of it.

Soon more were wanting to join them, so they began to plan for future villages by excavating starter-level food ponds at potential future camps spaced a mile or so apart. Even unplanted, those in which lining had been installed would accumulate concealed sources of emergency water from the infrequent rains. At the very least, these disturbances would begin to clutter satellite images with odd patches of green – due to the captured rain water. This would make them more likely to be ignored when they were later planted with crops.

Even before being lined and back-filled, the excavated pits and the piles of earth removed provided ideal places to hide small encampments of squatters, and some were being dug (usually at night) for just this purpose.

As the need for freedom from drug traffic, politics, and a crumbling mainstream economy were intensifying, strategies for security and survival were increasingly needed. As a result, these “mysterious” green patches began appearing on unattended private property, backyards, and public lands.

When the satellite images began to reveal these on otherwise barren land, drug enforcement agencies thought they knew exactly what was going on. Expecting to find crops of pot, opium poppies, or other contraband, an officer was dispatched to investigate.

The lieutenant was puzzled as he examined the small green patch of land before him. It covered a little more than a thousand square feet, was roughly rectangular, and it was in the middle of dried up unused farmland. The weeds, and the seeds that had apparently sprouted from some previous crop seemed to be thriving in the middle of a desert.

The small amounts of excess soil excavated from these patches was often dumped in circles and shapes that could obscure low profile camps and campfires – and indeed, there was often evidence of camping associated with them.

“Strange but not illegal” he reported, “– other than potential trespassing.” This was one of several such harmless patches he had examined that day – in addition to a couple of empty pits. If it had occurred to him to dig down a foot or two along an edge, he might have encountered the lining responsible for retaining the water upon which the vegetation thrived.

The experiences of these villagers added a valuable dimension to the Sunday meetings. Even as funds were only partially available for new Social Security claims, there was a growing percentage of people who could no longer afford to buy homes, or even pay rent.

As the Sunday group listened to stories of respectable hardworking people becoming homeless, they became aware of their own vulnerability. This awakened a motivation to develop off grid technologies that were as comfortable and economical as possible.

The internet placed a world of scientific knowledge and practical technologies at their fingertips, and they began to compile libraries of build-it-yourself instructions and useful gadgets. These could make life comfortable at the lowest possible cost. They also experimented with “starter packages” for individuals or groups that were being forced into homelessness. They attempted to sell these at flea markets, but the demand was low – at first.

### *A little justice*

One Sunday afternoon several months after the meetings had begun, Joan was at a coastal town setting up an imported fabric outlet for a client, and Lane began to realize how much he missed her. They enjoyed each others company, and as platonic friends they were able to communicate freely (on most subjects). Yet here was this clear thinking activist friend who seemed to take every opportunity to be by his side. How dense had he been?

The guests were just arriving when his reverie was interrupted. “We need to talk – privately.” It was the deputy.

“I haven’t been officially instructed to tell you this, but I’m very concerned for your life. You are about to be summonsed to testify against the gentlemen you met on the day you rescued the girls, and on the day following when you were accused of murder.”

“People get summonsed all the time. What’s the problem?”

“The good news is that the sheriff himself was incarcerated this morning and you may have a hand in convicting him as well. The bad news is that there are powerful players who are already aware you will be summonsed, and have no intention of letting you live long enough to testify. One of them has provided details of your lifestyle and schedule, so your security precautions will mean nothing.”

“Who would know these things?”

“If it’s any consolation, she was also rounded up this morning.”

“I... I’m a little confused.”

“You and I met when when you were being framed and hauled to the county jail – remember?”

“I’ve tried to forget, but haven’t so far. For a rookie you seem to have a lot of clout.”

“I was only posing as a rookie, but in fact have been serving undercover for internal affairs. I had been assigned to investigate the sheriff. How much of the conversation in the car can you remember from that day?”

“Probably all of it, but better still, I recorded it on my cell phone.”

“Excellent! The summons will arrive here within a day or two, and the initial hearing is scheduled for a week from this Wednesday. Here’s my card. Don’t call anyone official besides me. Please call me the day before the trial so we can finalize the actual time”

“Would you like my number – in case anything else comes up?”

The deputy smiled. “I already have it, and I’ll call you if there are any changes in schedule.”

“How much time do I have?”

“None, and I sincerely recommend that you leave today before most of your guests do. Good luck.”

The deputy then slipped out and left in his personal car. But when he stopped about fifty feet before the end of the driveway, Lane realized that he was standing guard.

A wave of fear momentarily paralyzed Lane, and it surprised him. Yes, he had experienced a healthy level of fear during the rescue of the girls, but not like this. He then considered the fact that he was now doing something of major humanitarian importance, and that there was a great deal at stake. But no, there was still more. There was something very important that he wanted to achieve, and it could wait no longer.

He immediately took James and Paco aside and explained the situation. Secrecy would be critical. He would be leaving in a few minutes, but hopefully be back within two weeks. “Watch for the summons letter,

and call me when it comes. I will ask you to open it and read the details. Otherwise, stay away from the house, so no one mistakes you for me. Run things as normally as possible – to include these Sunday afternoon meetings. Tell people I've gone hunting. See you later."

Less than twenty minutes later Lane was on his way. The deputy pulled out behind him and followed him from a distance of about a half mile, but pulled up close when a car approached from behind at a speed that would pass them both. The car passed without incident. The deputy then took a position in front for about ten miles, but finally pulled over to return to town. What a friend! thought Lane. It was mid afternoon when Lane arrived at the coastal town, and he was extremely relieved to see Joan's car still parked at the fabric store.

"Lane! What are you doing here? Great to see you, but isn't this Sunday afternoon?"

After explaining the situation of his premature exit that afternoon, Lane became awkward and unsure of himself. Joan had never seen him like this before, and began to get concerned as Lane struggled for words. What sort of disaster was he about to reveal?

"We've always gotten along pretty well – don't you think?"

"I've thoroughly enjoyed our friendship so far. Are you OK?"

"I guess I'm worried that we might lose that if I asked you a question that disturbed you."

Joan was beginning to get it, and took a deep breath as she wondered if this was really happening. "We're friends," said Joan, "very good friends, and I can't imagine us being anything less."

"Will you marry me?"

"Of course!" said Joan, and promptly threw her arms around his neck.

The reception could wait, so they conscripted the owner of the boutique to be the witness at a civil wedding two days later. She who had actually witnessed the awkward proposal and the joy that followed was overwhelmed enough to provide the requisite tears.

Joan was on hand for the next week's Sunday afternoon meeting, but Lane still had a few more days of exile. The only clue as to what had happened was a lovely emerald ring on the third finger of Joan's left hand, which Lane had purchased at a coastal boutique in time for the ceremony. When someone noticed it and its position, Joan explained simply that it had come from a boutique at the coast. As Joan struggled to contain her secret, she excused herself early and left for the coast to attend to some "urgent business."

Lane, as a witness at the trial, was being led to the front row. When he turned to see the witness to be seated beside him, she immediately broke into a beautiful smile and embraced him with a loving enthusiasm that embarrassed him. It was Cheryl – one of the girls he had rescued.

As the trial progressed, a woman dressed in an orange jump suit was brought to the witness stand. Her long hair was slightly unkempt. Cheryl sucked a quick breath when she recognized her. When Lane recognized the witness he had to stifle a laugh. As Wanda's stern eyes scanned the audience from the witness stand, and briefly made direct contact with Lane's, he gave her a sly flirty wink.

The flash of fury in her eyes reassured Lane that he had just contributed to justice that day. People usually tell the truth when they are either drunk or furious.

Joan and Lane had fun the following week when they announced their new life together. They began with a fake argument that horrified their friends, which then morphed into an apology, followed by a proposal and an embrace. Joan had even spoofed her roommates into bringing a cake for a wedding reception for a to-be-revealed newlywed couple. The deputy was on hand and given the honorary status of best man – since it was he who had sent Lane to the coast in the first place.

## The Rising Storm

Eventually, political opinions and other forms of entertainment began to displace solution-oriented presentations at the Sunday afternoon gatherings, and Lane finally addressed the subject:

“We are meeting needs that remain important with or without local or global politics. When the need is water, food, or a place to sleep, it doesn't matter who says you can't drink, eat, or sleep. We are looking for peaceful ways of bypassing obstructions to these necessities. “Some politicians depend upon welfare votes for their careers. This benevolence-coated corruption discourages individual productivity and perpetuates dependencies.

“In the resulting economy, nothing produces wealth like dealing drugs. This diverts millions in funds provide by SSI, welfare, food stamps, etc., away from meeting the needs of the desperately poor, and into the hands of drug dealers.

### *Thresholds of anarchy*

Political polarization had increased to the point where more and more people and groups were simply ignoring state and federal laws. Such civil disobedience was often overlooked on issues of lesser impact, but in more extreme cases there were highly publicized arrests and seizures of property.

Compliance was more easily managed at the individual and corporate levels. It had been a long time since Lane had carried more than a few dollars in cash. The convenience of chips in debit cards had replaced the time and mental effort required to count change – along with petty theft on the part of cashiers. Cash was still convenient for low-level vending machines, and was still a mainstay for many homeless who would occasionally panhandle. But now government payouts were being credited to card I.D.s.

This made it convenient for government to track individuals. If there was an arrest warrant for instance, the very next use (or attempted use) of the person's card would instantly tell law enforcement where the suspect was. Since the spending habits of citizens were increasingly visible to the eyes that knew all, significant drug purchases had more difficulty remaining secret. Beyond that, the government could push a button – so to speak – and all transactions involving a specified person would grind to a halt. Normally, this would instantly bring anyone they wanted into submissive visibility. Even a business could be brought into instant submission through the remote blocking of its point of sale terminals.

Lane was temporarily paralyzed with confusion and dismay when the grocery outlet refused his card. This resulted from an extreme judicial overreach, in which he was accused of involvement in a situation he had known nothing about.

A SWAT team en route to subdue a radical group camping on BLM land had been ambushed, and eliminated. The attack had taken place on a section of road climbing through a steep canyon, and began with a blocked road. It was followed by a rain of boulders from above that pummeled the vehicles, forced a couple of them off the road, and inflicted casualties upon those remaining. The survivors were quickly eliminated by snipers positioned across the canyon. The attack had been so sudden and well planned that the perpetrators managed to disappear before a response could be raised.

A “how-to” printout for some of the technologies found among the debris of the soon-obliterated encampment had been traced to Lane's group – such was their justification for implicating him in the debacle. It soon became obvious that the real issue they had was that he and his friends were advocating freedom from government involvement, and helping people to prosper without it.

He was immediately released under careful scrutiny, and would have to report weekly for additional “counseling.” Furthermore, his card was flagged so it would not work anywhere more than twenty miles from Stag.

Lane resolved to become as guilty of these charges as possible – while making it a little less obvious. He would continue to work on technologies, but be careful to arrange for their initial application in distant locations. His goal would be to produce an educational resource that would empower people to phase out of

dependence upon distant and government controlled resources. In a word, to help people become as locally sustainable as possible.

The first phase would be to collect and refine technologies of independence into clear and user friendly forms. He would then clothe them as solutions to environmental problems that would obviate the need for massive mining and refining operations. Inasmuch as these technologies were perceived as low tech, their proliferation would be comforting to the state-of-the-art global politicians.

The final product would be “build-your-own-civilization” manuals. Naturally the photos and videos were carefully edited to obscure the identities of those involved. A final stroke of anonymity was achieved by conning an enviro-politician into offering this collection of eco-friendly technologies on his website. From there it could be downloaded globally. With this endorsement and distribution by a prominent globalist, Lane would no longer be accused of distributing subversive technologies.

### *The challenge*

The future according to Lane would instead be billed as a world of opportunities. Let the world and its unbounded worries provide the pressure, while his path to a different future provided the relief.

He must begin with a realistic picture of human nature: The human psyche is more motivated by fear of loss than by hope of gain – herein lies the reason for the success of a credit-based economy.

We are easily enticed to purchase houses, cars and interesting toys, and the lending institutions make this very easy to do. However, in order to *keep* them we must work. Thus we become so driven to be productive that we endure miserable careers in menial work, under bosses we may or may not despise. We indeed become slaves, and as such are driven to higher levels of productivity and servitude than we would otherwise choose, if we were merely trying to survive.

Worse still is that a significant slice of our productivity goes to the lending institutions. These provide no product or service of value to society, other than to provide the whip that drives us to enough productivity to pay them off. If this productivity were applied to things of actual value, work efforts would produce far greater rewards for those who actually earned them. The total cost of homes, for instance, would be a fraction of what lending institutions actually “appropriate.”

Beneath all that was evident at the local levels, Lane knew enough about global affairs and economics to see that all these institutions were somehow interconnected at the top.

Thus the ultimate economic war boils down to enslaving human productivity at the global level, versus empowering people to control their own destinies.

Escaping the credit juggernaut may be out of the question for most Americans, but welfare dependency – another form of slavery – awaits those who are unable to contribute. The question now facing Lane was how to empower people to escape both credit and welfare dependencies.

## Review

So what had Lane learned so far? The initial residents on his property had little but the clothes on their backs, plus no more than they could conveniently carry at a moment's notice. Needless to say, James and Paco were already free from the credit machine, and as such, they were prime candidates for pioneering this sustainable future.

These had approached *him*, requesting an opportunity to work in exchange for the most basic necessities of life, and they had done very well indeed in fulfilling their end of the bargain. He had then seen this concept blossom into a tiny community growing near his property, and now enjoyed a synergistic relationship with them as well. All this had happened almost automatically, by simply ignoring the laws that had held them in misery and danger on the relatively peaceful streets of Stag.

At another level, when he had assisted some young ladies in a desperate situation, he had in turn received help from a community of Christians who stood beside him against dangerous criminals and corrupt public officials. All this had forced him to seriously rethink his arrogant sense of not needing anybody.

Lane had also begun to discern a principle in these situations that arose above the dictates of political expedience. The sub-code structures in which those on his property and the squatters on the adjoining land were prospering were illegal. And yet, everyone involved was benefiting from this civil disobedience; These people had clean safe lifestyles, and Stag benefited from fewer people living on their streets. The best that he could articulate this ethic at the time was to view it as “benevolent anarchy.”

In principle, we should get along with government as best we can, while understanding that governments themselves will forever be slaves of reality. Therefore both governments and individuals must join forces in optimizing reality.

Beyond the struggle for local autonomy, sustainability would be a key to solving many of the worlds greatest problems. The current level of motorized transportation is particularly terminal. The USA, with less than 5% of the world's population, uses over 20% of the world's oil, and 70% of *that* goes to transportation. We can minimize the *need* for transportation by reducing the need for materials from distant places. Fossil fuels come in massive quantities, generally from great distances. Add to that the pollution and energy involved in mining, refining and transporting all this, and you have a feedback loop that generates its own need for yet more fuel.

Also consider that over half the environment in our cities is obliterated by streets, parking lots, and other needs of the transportation infrastructure. This waste of city area in turn makes motorized transportation more necessary – another feedback loop of waste.

There would be better uses for the spaces saved than to fill them in with buildings. If high density gardens and parks featuring edible plants filled in this space, transportation needs for moving food would also be reduced. In addition to the obvious benefits, food production within them would give villages a more open and healthy feel. Yet another benefit would be the availability of flexible amounts of low level employment for those in need. Welfare becomes workfare for able bodied people who are truly in need. And the benefit of this work would apply directly to food and shelter, rather than insurance, taxes, political campaigns, code enforcement, interest paid to billionaires, prisons, and salaries of people who like to control the public.

The on-site production of electrical energy would further relieve waste. The amount of metal in a wire required to carry power squares with the distance it travels (doubling the distance would require four times the metal). Beyond all this, countless square miles of right-of-way are consumed between the towers of our high voltage power grids. So whether by solar electric or by mechanical means, producing power as close as practical to where it is needed reduces the complexity, vulnerability and material demands of extensive power grids. From an economic standpoint, the purchase of locally sustainable power equipment could free people from grid expenses for years to come.

All considered, each of these features contain the collateral benefit of reduced dependence upon the world's deteriorating economics and politics.

### *Lane's World*

What would it take for such a society to exist, and how could the current world get there? If local sustainability could be attained at the homeless level, then perhaps it could be continuously improved to become an alternative to an otherwise terminal civilization. As the product of freedom and quality of life continues to deteriorate in the existing systems, we would have a graph line of increasing freedom and quality of life to intersect the descending trends of the current system.

### *A civic oriented direction*

When they asked the city for permission to build an experimental encampment, the city would not yield an inch of their long-obsolete version of the American dream.

Homeless people had no right to exist. Never in so many words, but the city deemed it illegal for them to sleep on public property. Furthermore, it was illegal to sleep for more than three nights (if they had permission) on private property – a tad shy of the average life expectancy for a homeless person. The constitution be damned, and there was nothing they could do about it. Obviously no amount law enforcement could control the hundreds of daily violations. So in the absence of actions, they were trying to restrain the tide with a push broom.

This opposition to housing homeless people in economical sub-code dwellings began to dampen hopes of achieving anything at all.

Lane however, was not yet through trying. The plan would begin by addressing the most urgent needs on an individual basis. Sleeping alone on the streets poses a lethal danger. At the very least, homeless people are routinely robbed of whatever can be removed from an exhausted and sleeping person. Next to a safe and theft-resistant place to sleep and store belongings, the availability of sanitation would be a priority. For the present, food seemed to be available through food stamps and various ministries, but it would be foolish to ignore the food issue, since it has wiped out countless thousands of people in recent history (1.2 million in Ethiopia alone in the early eighties).

So they were faced with three categories of problems that must be simultaneously solved before any progress could be made: Shelter, sanitation, and code enforcement.

Although coordinating human and technical solutions with civic ordinances seemed unachievable, they began to consider ways to bypass as many objections as possible. Electrical power below 48 volts is considered “safe low voltage,” and is thus below the radar of safety regulations. By storing potable water on site (carried there by carts or vehicles), there would be no municipal plumbing concerns. Temporary or portable structures that could be moved without property damage would bypass building permits and environmental-impact issues. Membrane covered structures of less than 800 square feet are considered tents, and thus also bypass permits and regulations. As for sanitation, access to a place where sealed self-contained flush toilets could be emptied might at least provide a temporary solution.

At this point they would go ahead and build demonstration hardware in backyards, because there would be no restrictions until they were actually occupied. It would then become a game of pushing the limits through short-term and covert occupancies – benevolent anarchy at its finest. Moral justification might be balanced by considering that the city would benefit from each homeless person that could stay safely out of sight, jail, and hospitals. Relieving law enforcement needs, cleanliness and minimizing complaints would make their improvements low priority targets. Indeed, the benefits of their disobedience would eventually become evident. At the very least, the portable nature of the hardware involved could move such operations to less visible locations.

Without achievable pathways to survival, homeless problems are merely transferred to taxpayers -- through care facilities, recovery programs, and low cost housing projects. Until the city can come up with a better one, they need a system in which homeless people could be provided for by their own efforts.

An essential minimum, would be a sturdy tarp of at least six by ten feet. This would provide isolation from the ground. It would also protect belongings, that were stored in the fold as the other end of the tarp covered the sleeper.

As James was puzzling over the shelter problem, he began to experiment with simple sticks that he had notched on each end. The rules were simple: Each end of each stick rested either near the middle of another stick or on the ground.

He then cut an armload of twigs from a fallen branch to see if this structure could be achieved without a sawmill. He discovered that if either end of almost any stick came undone, the whole structure would collapse. So it was necessary to tie each of the connections with either twine or wire.

To make it difficult to destroy or haul away, it could be wired into a chain link fence on one side, or even to a barbed wire fence in multiple places.

Any type of covering – from foliage or tarp – could provide at least some visual and physical protection.



Such shelters could simply be abandoned when asked to move on, and perhaps revisited two or three shelters later – if they had not yet been removed. In either case, a surrounding environment of exceptional cleanliness would be essential for civic tolerance.

Sanitation was likely to be an issue with the city until everybody had a properly plumbed flush toilet. For street dwellers, anything better than crapping in the landscape would be welcomed. Therefore, concealment both visually and through the control of odors would be essential.

A concealed six to eight inch diameter hole in the earth about two feet deep would have to suffice for the immediate needs.

With a few leaves and a cup of dirt tossed in after each use, there would be almost no odor. The final few inches of each hole would be filled in with earth as the next hole was being prepared to grace the ecology with nutrients.

The “lid” of this seat-less toilet would usually be a 12” landscape paver, or a piece of concrete sidewalk. The hole could be dug by lifting out handfuls of earth loosened by a screwdriver, but James had a better idea.

He took about two and a half feet of top rail tubing and cut one end at an angle. He then hack-sawed a lengthwise slit in the angled end so the tubing could be spread out to form a shovel.

The other end was flattened and bent at a right angle to form a surface that could be pushed or hammered into the soil.

This compact shovel would be a versatile tool for the new civilization that was beginning on the street.

New horizons of economy and ingenuity began to arise within camps that blossomed on private and non-profit properties. A variety of bolt-together structures began to appear, along with frameworks of heavy welded wire. Small efficient wood stoves that consumed their own smoke met heating, cooking, and other thermal processing needs – such as blacksmithing, ceramics, and powering Stirling engines.

Community designs that shared sanitation and cooking left more room for community gardens. These gardens saved a large percentage of water through buried membranes that served as artificial water tables. Some of these were further enhanced by tiles on the surface that reduced evaporation from the soil. These technologies made it possible to haul the needed water in hand carts, far from the nearest road.



## Freedom Under Fire

Three years had passed since Lane had been propelled into activism by rescuing victims of the sex trade, and then become involved with homeless issues. He and Joan had considered having children, but they both had reservations about bringing children into an overpopulated and increasingly chaotic world.

The area the city eventually approved for regulated homeless camps had been saving the city on multiple fronts, and the nonprofit organizations involved in serving these camps drew freely upon the ongoing technical developments at the Lane farm. The Sunday afternoon sessions there, although still a stimulating time of discussing important issues, had morphed into a pleasant time of after church fellowship. Still, new ideas would frequently arise, and stimulating philosophical discussions were a regular fare. A gradual turnover of new faces and departing old ones continued to refresh the activist gene pool.

Paco had moved on to establishing his own well appointed homeless camp in an innocuous location a mile east of Stag. As replacements, James had taken a few students under his wing who were eager to learn important trades of their future world. One of these was an intelligent young lady who had been kidnapped into the sex trade through a foster home scam but managed to pull off a daring escape – with a little help from a baffled bachelor. She and James soon had a *thing* going, and James could easily identify with Cheryl in referring to Joan and Lane as mom and dad.

James and the students had put together a small off-grid conference center against the easternmost boundary on Lane's property. The basics of sanitation, sleeping, and a centralized dining and meeting facility could serve up to twenty people – depending upon the options available. This campus included a meandering quarter-acre tilapia pond. This pond recycled and refreshed the nutrients of a verdant acre of sub-irrigated park. Even a portion of a septic system entered this loop to form a closed recycling system. Under the management of James and Cheryl, this conference facility was already producing an income from small groups desiring a weekend or more of stress free isolated living. Some of these retreats included seminars and workshops on appropriate technologies.

The entire situation on the Lane farm seemed to improve in comfort and security – even as multiple forms of change and stress were wreaking havoc on the mainstream economy.

### *Ecology preserves*

Even as empowerment and prosperity were beginning to bloom among some of the homeless, centralized governments were pulling the world in a different direction.

In addition to national parks and countless state owned reservations of land, by far the most massive removal of land from private ownership had been the “Wildlands.” Driven by international treaties, these had forbidden the development and maintenance of land along countless water courses – in order to allow them to return to their more natural states. This removal of the nation's most fertile landscape from human populations had exacerbated the misery of overpopulation, and had reduced the amount of food available. The food supply – such as it was – was increasingly provided by massive farms, and rationed by interstate agencies to densely populated areas. This resulted in a growing dependency upon the government for provision.

Life was not all that miserable for people in these high density areas. Creative forms of entertainment and fantasy had replaced meaningful existence and ambition. Much of this could be enjoyed through internet games and limitless movies of any imaginable genera. Beyond this there were endless private and public events involving sports, carnivals, and all forms of sensual fulfillment. Yet under this veneer of prosperity, there were a few who could not be controlled by the threat of reductions in food allowances and access to entertainment. By this time not many people would even know *how* to grow food if the opportunity became available – but there were in fact a few.

Within these vast tracts of land that had been withdrawn from private ownership, roads had been sealed off and bridges had been removed. Maps had then been redrawn to deny that such roads and bridges had ever existed. In some cases masses of boulders had been accumulated to replace natural barriers that had

been blasted through to facilitate the previous roadways. On a more positive note, countless obstructions were also added to check the erosion in wadis resulting from the irresponsibility of mankind.

Foot traffic was generally allowed into these areas, but camping was not. Fires for any reason were strictly forbidden. Rumors abounded of people who had ventured in with intentions of camping, who simply disappeared. Nature became mysterious and dangerous as an abundance of natural predators arose to balance the proliferation of wildlife. Beyond this, nobody had instructed these predators to remain within *their* preserves.

For whatever the impact upon humanity, millions of square miles of underlying aquifers began a multi-century climb towards natural productivity.

### *Disturbing Candor*

Lane was puzzled by what he read of the world's situation. He was well aware of the routine lies and whimsical promises of politicians, but every month brought new and disturbing reports. The news accounts seemed plausible at the times of their printing, but within days – as more information emerged – they were exposed as clearly out of sync with what had actually happened.

There were many radical and frightening stories on the internet about FEMA and martial law, and it was easy to dismiss them categorically as rabid paranoia – However: There were also credible testimonies by this time from the histories of past hurricanes and other disasters. Many of these eyewitness accounts told of crushing control, the suspension of all constitutional rights, mass confinements, and the shutdown of all local communication. As Lane sorted through a dozen or so of these accounts, he was appalled at their severity, and yet was compelled to recognize their similarities – albeit from widely scattered times and disasters.

All-in-all, an intelligent mind could extrapolate these trends to provided a window into the future of what life would be like, as extreme federal control was imposed upon more and more regions of the nation. The worst mistake claimed by many, was allowing themselves to be evacuated to FEMA sponsored shelters. One meal a day was the norm, along with the confiscation of all cell phones – and certainly any firearms or other weapons. Evacuation orders were often served at around 3:00 am, and if the doors were not answered within a brief time of increasing demand, they were simply forced. Those who chose to remain in the few “voluntary” evacuation zones were subject to martial law, forbidden to enter or leave such zones, and required to stay indoors after dark.

The behavior of the public under these circumstances was likewise disturbing. When people were finally granted a small amount of food after standing in lines for an hour or so, the wise ones quietly concealed it. Those who opted to consume it immediately, were often swarmed and deprived of their dignity as well as the sustenance. Such were the actual eyewitness accounts. [Author: Such testimonies from past disastrous events concerning FEMA and public behavior are real in America, and available – look them up for yourself.]

Internet and cell phone services were also lacking in most of these crippled infrastructures. People who were expecting to learn about wild edibles, etc. from the internet after the disaster struck, were now helpless. On the other hand those who had previously downloaded or printed out files on these subjects, had the tools they needed to escape and survive.

Even in the absence of disaster, the US constitution was being routinely sacrificed for the sake of international relationships. Individual rights and voices of justice were being ignored as the governments sold out their constituents for the sake of “global peace.” This had all begun innocently enough decades before when an international treaty dictated the treatment of migratory birds. But now, phrases like “for the benefit of humanity” and “global unity,” provided sanctimonious coatings for more flagrant injustices on the domestic front. Lane was unable to make rational sense of media interpretations of the events they chose to print. They seemed to focus upon quoting or misquoting vitriolic exchanges of highly polarized

opinions, rather than verifiable facts. Rationality no longer mattered to a society shredded by hatred and fear.

### *Lane takes a walk*

Lane was beginning to understand why he felt so compelled to create a path that led away from the mainstream, but this in itself opened a universe of new questions. He needed a walk. He had no fear of darkness in the countryside where he had grown up, but as a courtesy to his guests he began to stroll into the gathering night in a direction away from the nearby campers. A quick glance at the sunset and a familiar fence line, set his course into a north-by-north-easterly direction. Soon it would be dark enough to spot his friend Polaris (the North Star), whom he could rely on to keep him from wandering aimlessly.

After he had walked for almost an hour, haunting music began to tease the twilight's magic. From somewhere in the distance brief familiar strains of long forgotten melodies came and went, as the capricious currents of the fading breeze would grant them permission. Although barely discernible they somehow evoked childhood memories. Ah yes, Sunday school: He and other formally dressed children were matching wits with pedantic adults who were trying to keep order long enough to work through their prepared lessons.

But from whence this music? They were miles from town and it was clearly not originating from anywhere near his property. The phantom sounds soon dissolved into a few individual phrases, and then into nothing. Lane had to ask himself if he was sure he had heard anything at all, and he consciously noted that yes, he definitely had. This improbable mystery would remain unsolved, for now.

As a part of his research, Lane had reread accounts previously assumed to have little relevance to his life. Even so, he sifted through Biblical records to find any clues that might relate to the current world situation.

If God had assigned dominion over the earth to Adam, he was somehow given the power to subdue all that was in it. As Adam communed with God he could freely draw upon all the wisdom, power and intellect that he would need for this task.

But a true relationship requires voluntary love – and by this, also the ability to not love. This ability was provided in the form of a single taboo in the garden of Eden.

Curiously, the word “subdue” was included in Adam's commission. This would imply that something in creation was not entirely cooperative and needed subduing – and indeed, this proved to be true. A certain creature – devoid of spiritual power or authority at the time– confronted Eve, questioned God's motives and enticed her with a greater level of status. “Become like God,” it said. Eve wanted to believe it, and therefore chose to.

Now Adam had a problem: Eve was the most beautiful thing on the planet to him, and was his only source of earthly companionship. To obey God would be to lose Eve, but to obey Eve, would be to abdicate his position of authority to this creature whom Eve had chosen to obey. In extreme agony to be sure, Adam chose to stick with Eve – commendable perhaps, in a tragic yet romantic sense. Thus began the new world order: Satan – now in the vacated seat of authority, then Eve who had obeyed him, and finally Adam who had obeyed Eve. God was not amused.

This scene contained additional insights: It spoke of two methods by which better judgment might be bypassed. In Eve's case, she wanted to believe something, and therefore chose to. To choose to believe the testimony of this strange creature over the words of its Creator was not a rational thing to do. But the story demonstrates that belief can be a choice – as opposed to an analysis of data. In *this* choice, Eve preferred the illusion of greater status over obedience to her Creator.

Adam's choice was more straight forward: In his mind it was either God or Eve; He had not deceived himself by choosing to believe anything different. One might speculate that if Adam had made the right choice, the God who later provided redemption might have found a way to restore Eve to Adam as well, but that speculation was not included in this story.

As Lane pondered the existence of God he considered the fact that matter and energy can't appear out of nothing at all.

For all the millenniums of philosophical squirming, it has proven impossible to convince a human of the existence or lack of existence of God – with or without rationality. Even Eve had demonstrated how preference can override rationality and allow us to believe whatever we want to.

#### *A political lesson*

As Lane struggled to comprehend the commonalities of history's most successful civilizations, he found that Christianity had been claimed by some of history's best and worst governments. Most of this was resolved quickly when it became evident that the evil done under that banner was not related to the teachings of Jesus.

Still, there were some glaring ironies. In the book of Acts for instance, Christians were practicing what may have been the purest form of communism the world has ever seen. On the other hand, communism according to Marx was notoriously genocidal, devoid of conscience, and history's greatest economic failure.

On a more mystical note, the Bible contained predictions concerning a future time. One prophecy saw an army of 200 million coming from the East, with a national flag of red and yellow. This prophecy was written on an island off the west coast of Turkey at a time when the population of the entire world was just under 200 million. It was therefore chilling in 1960s' when Mao Tse Tung boasted that he could field an army of – you've got it – 200 million.

In the light of other fulfilled prophecies of remarkable detail, the yet future one that disturbed Lane the most related to the four horsemen of the apocalypse. This one detailed a far too logical sequence of events.

The *first horse* would bring the entire world under the control of a single government. Lane could clearly see how the push for the centralization of power and commerce were doing exactly that. *Horse two* described the outbreak and civil war from within this government. This would result in widespread bloodshed and terror as feudal gangs and fragments of disintegrating armies would fight for control over their respective territories.

The resulting chaos and competition for controlling sources of food etc. would result in the *third horse*: widespread famine. Recent history contained numerous tragic examples of deadly famines resulting from civil wars.

Finally, for *horse four*, the cumulative chaos upon an overpopulated and interdependent world embroiled in violence and famine would lead to unchecked infestations of deadly diseases. This depopulation of scorched and infested areas would also give rise to marauding packs of predatory animals. The death toll attributed to the combination of these four disasters was given as one fourth of the world's population.

This sequence had been described over two thousand years ago, long before it would be possible on a global scale. Digging a little deeper Lane discovered that six hundred years before this prophecy, the final global empire of humankind (the first horse) had been described as an unstable mixture of rigid iron and soft clay (Dan. 2, Rev. 9:16, 16:12,).

So why did the Bible bother to record all these prophecies in the first place? What was the point in warning us if there is nothing we could do about it?

#### *A paranormal lesson*

Lane's personal definition of "paranormal" included anything that defied known natural laws – to include absurd mathematical improbabilities. UFO's? In spite of millions of credible sightings there were no repeating patterns. There was no way to predict – or even correlate their occurrences – with any other phenomenon. Data on everything in true science can be analyzed by mathematical laws, but these were a mathematical improbability. In any case, the supernatural realm was becoming an increasingly serious contender with science for explaining reality.

Lane's thinking continued to tumble into related questions: How could one determine if these things were good or evil – and for that matter, do good and evil even exist?

For the first part he considered the results. Severe psychological disorders often accompanied close encounters with UFOs, and sometimes they included perverse and excruciating physical examinations. None of these encounters had provided anything of value to society. The attempts at getting a scientific handle on these things had wasted decades of time, millions of dollars, and potentially brilliant careers on SETI – the search for extraterrestrial intelligence.

As for the concept of good and evil, Lane considered law two (of thermal dynamics.) This law notes that things deteriorate from ordered states into randomness, and that concentrations of energy dissipate into their surrounding environments. A building for instance, has value because of a well organized set of materials precisely cut and assembled. Upon destruction (its random state) it becomes a useless pile of trash.

So even without moral absolutes one might infer an ethical compass given by nature in this second law. In other words, that which builds and produces order is “good,” and that which randomizes is “evil.”

### *Ecology*

Some naysayers of concerns about diminishing natural resources were saying that it really doesn't matter, since we are capable of creating new resources. They liked to cite things like the replacement of whale oil with petroleum products, and ersatz motor fuels from coal and corn.

If mankind is so brilliant, why don't they fix things for the millions of people who remain on the verge of starvation – and for that matter, why haven't these highly motivated starving people fixed the problems for themselves? The unspoken part of the above perspective is that the benefits of mankind's ability to adapt will only be enjoyed by those who have both the ability and resources to do so – and to hell with the rest of the world.

### *Decision*

Part of Lane wanted to give up, and relegate his efforts to that of an interesting hobby. Lane needed to either find a position of moral motivation, or view his life as no more significant than a spec of sawdust passing through a flame in a brief twinkle of energy. He knew he did not create himself, and whether or not he actually had any true purpose in life would hinge upon the existence of a Creator – or the lack thereof. He would need to deal with all this at some point, but in the meantime he decided that he would live as if he were already connected to something absolute who smiled at his good intentions – just in case.

As a result of this decision, he resolved to proceed as if the universe in general – and life in particular – held some underlying purpose. As challenging as this all seemed, a favorable future for the world would depend upon a culture that valued both survival and the desire to help others. In view of the endless cycles of history's failures and the daunting challenges ahead, it seemed unlikely that both survival and altruism could ever coexist without supernatural intervention.

An hour had passed as these and countless other thoughts had tumbled through his mind while he was stumbling through the surreal beauty of the night in the long-fallow land. He was guided in part by a canopy of familiar stars. During this time the air had become dead still, and he found himself walking softly out of reverence for the quiet that surrounded him.

Curiously, he began to notice small scattered patches of plants among the parched leftovers of previous crops. These appeared to be poorly tended gardens of randomly rounded shapes – a few of which were nearly fifty feet across. These contained combinations of wild edibles and patches of domesticated plants intermingled in whimsical patterns – even artistic perhaps. From anywhere but up close, they would appear perfectly natural – except for one feature: They were alive.

Lane soon recognized the trick – he had invented it in fact. There *had* to be patches of buried membrane beneath these gardens that had trapped remnants of the sparse rainfall in the area, and also helped to maintain whatever other moisture may have been added. These were food gardens, but for whom and from where? There was no evidence of motor vehicle traffic, and the lightly used foot paths seemed to meander in totally random directions. And then, he heard a few barely audible syllables of voice!

While straining his ears to identify their direction, he jumped as his senses were jangled by a raucous ringtone selected to be heard above a crowded room.

"Where *are* you?" asked Joan.

"I have no idea," said Lane, but I'm about an hour from home."

"I think I can sympathize with your previous wife, but you're not going to get rid of *me* that easily."

"Uh...uh... sorry, I think. No – I mean yes, I'm very sorry. I had a lot on my mind, and I just started walking, and uh, I'm sorry that I didn't think to call. Maybe I'll... *run* home."

"Take your time honey, I'm OK – really. I was only joking."

It was Lane's turn: "You mean I *can* get rid of you that easily?"

"No, I was just – you brat. I was just getting worried about you, I didn't know if you'd been arrested, hurt, or what. But now I'm just glad you're OK. By the way, you have a very paranoid visitor waiting to see you."

"Who?"

"He's is so paranoid that he doesn't even want his name mentioned over the phone for fear of monitoring. Take your time, he'll be waiting outside."

The visitor, young for his occupational achievements, had poured himself into a career he had believed in. Only recently had he begun to slow down enough to consider the broader pieces of life. His visits to the Lane farm had opened his eyes to deeper subtleties of American culture – as it had for all, including Lane himself. As an occupational expedient it had been much easier for him to simply catalog people by profile and stereotypes, than to spend time actually getting to know them. But lately, the morality aspects of his dream job had begun to crumble as his advancements drew him ever closer to its underlying core.

After hanging up, Lane waited in the stillness for a couple of minutes in an attempt to reacquire the voices he had heard just before the phone call. Nothing. Whoever it was almost certainly had heard his ringtone. What a strange night!

## Hero On The Run

After taking a general direction from the stars, Lane walked briskly through the night, adjusting his course as he encountered the lanes between former crops, and previous subtle variations in terrain that he had crossed on his way out. Finally he zeroed in on the yard light from his farm. After climbing through his own fence, a figure materialized, silhouetted against the illuminated yard.

“Deputy! What are *you* doing here?”

“Please don't call me that.”

“Got a real name?”

“That would be worse.”

“Dep' then?”

“For now I guess.”

“What is going on?”

“I'm hunted. My interest in your activities here was more than professional. I had been suspecting that a day would come when I would need a place to hide, and that day – night – has arrived.”

“I would think that being a deputy sheriff would make you safe from the law.”

“The law is now what I fear – and so would you if you knew what I know. In my role in internal affairs, I was part of a federal level organization. Many of the sheriff departments are going federal, and being controlled by regulations that don't even answer to their states of residence. This is not widely known, nor it is intended to be. The fact is, we are becoming a local police force on behalf of the federal government.”

“What did you do?”

“It's about what I'm not going to do. A requirement came down about a year ago for officers above a certain rank to make a life-and-death commitment to honor and serve a cause greater than even our federal government. This involves a ceremony extracting an oath in which you must swear allegiance to this cause – so much for the American flag. It is punctuated by the installation of a microchip ID, and the penalty for violating this oath is supposedly death.

“This commitment is now being required of officers at *my* level. I would simply resign, except for the fact I know of at least two who did resign and soon died of “natural causes.” The problem is, I know exactly how these so-called natural causes are caused. For my part, I saw this day coming a few months ago, but it still came as a shock – and earlier than I expected. Meanwhile, I consolidated much of my net worth into some very helpful assets in a storage facility under an assumed name. The rent has been paid in advance for almost a year.

“In a nutshell I'm scheduled to be inducted tomorrow, so I *walked* here from Stag with my backpack. I left my car in the driveway, the doors locked, and the TV on. Hopefully it will take them a day or two to figure it out.”

“I almost got killed the last time I helped people escape,” said Lane. “Do you have your own plan, or do I need to come up with one?”

“Do you know of any off-grid community that I might be able to visit for a night or two until I can come up with something better?”

“Obviously I can't have you for a neighbor,” said Lane, “The law seems to come running to me for anything they suspect these days. But I almost met some people tonight, who might be very hard to find. I owe you Dep, and I wish I could do more for you.”

After checking in with Joan, and explaining the situation, lane dumped a few nonperishable food items into a plastic bag, washed out an empty plastic gallon container and filled it with water. He then carried the items out to the fence where Dep was waiting.

Lane explained where he had been that evening, and Dep agreed that trying to locate these people would likely be his best option. At the very least, there was food growing out there, but there may or may not be any water.

“Keep Polaris about fifteen degrees to your left,” said Lane.

“Who's Polaris?”

Lane groaned. “You civilized people are so helpless.” Lane introduced him to the basics of being outdoors once in awhile, and pointed out a few of the more prominent constellations – particularly Ursa minor, the one containing Polaris. Dep thanked him and trudged off into the darkness.

Dep was a mixture of feelings as the light of Lane's farm faded into the distance behind him. Although he had begun preparations for this a few months in advance, it still seemed unreal. In a single day everything in his life had been replaced by a whole new existence. It was as if he had just been born into a world that he knew nothing about, and now he was wandering off into the darkness to who knows where. His own emotions surprised him. Rather than grieving the loss of everything, he found himself excited by the adventure before him. There had been times in the past when he had even found himself jealous of some of Lane's homeless friends. These had no vehicle or insurance worries, and no taxes, utilities, rent or mortgages to worry about. His professional physical shape gave him confidence to face his new life ahead, and strangely, he didn't even feel insecure. A little hunger and discomfort would soon fix that.

Lane felt refreshed and cleansed by his journey into the night. In a life driven by expectations of others and the need to be productive, and in recent years, subject to countless interruptions from many directions, it had been refreshing to take a break from all this and just wander. In addition to resolutions to some of his most disturbing thoughts, he had returned with an answer for a desperate friend at a very critical time of need. It was as if he had been guided by a huge and gentle hand.

### *In Search of Eden*

After an hour of hiking across abandoned fields, Dep spotted a small light ahead and to the left of his path. As he came within about a hundred and fifty yards of it, it began to move.

“Hello?” he shouted. But the light continued to move in silence. Physical shape notwithstanding, he had not carried a heavy back pack this far since his military days, and the burden was wearing on him. He tried to hurry, but the light seemed to match his speed. Strangely, it continued to change course – always adjusting in a manner that kept him gradually turning to his left. After about forty five minutes of this hurried pace he was breathing heavily, and was forced to slow down. The playful light, now at a distance of about two hundred yards, also slowed down – and then finally it stopped.

As he warily approached it, he found a single solar light planted in an endless field of stubble, with nothing and no one nearby. The thin moon was about to set, and having no idea where he was, or in what direction he was traveling, he found himself stifling panic – an extremely rare sensation for him. As he began to regain control, he suddenly remembered the stars. As he looked ahead, he saw none of the patterns Lane had pointed out to him earlier. In his fatigue he briefly wondered if somebody had rearranged the sky for his benefit, or if this was all a sick nightmare. Gathering composure, he slowly rotated his vision, and finally spotted Polaris almost directly behind him. The light had led him in a huge circle back in the direction he had come from, and miles off course. He felt like a fool – yet another novel sensation. Lost, baffled, and exhausted, he removed his back pack, sat down, and leaned back against it. He resolved to do nothing but sleep until sunrise.

He didn't see the dark figure quietly arise from the stubble less than a hundred feet away, and was startled when he spoke. “If you're through chasing my light around I'd like to take it now. Is there a street number or something I could help you with?” he added in perverse humor.

Dep could not help but chuckle, feeling stupid and exhausted notwithstanding. This sadistic bastard *had* to be ex military. But Dep did have a pressing question at the moment: “Got any toilet paper on you?”

“Be sure the finger you use is on your *left* hand,” was his only response.

“Thanks. Who are you? I had become so confused I took you for a Ghost”

"I might have been called worse. I take it you're in need of a place to hide?" he asked, ignoring Dep's second question as well. "I can't help you without permission from my friends, but I'll need to know a little more about you before I bother to ask."

"Call me 'Dep.' So you've been leading me on this merry chase to keep me from finding your friends? Do you know Lane? I think everybody around here knows Lane. He thought somebody out here would be able to help me."

"Was he the guy with the ringtone?"

"Might be, because it wasn't me."

"Who's chasing you?"

"Nobody at this very moment, but the federal government and those who own it *will* be within a couple of days."

"What did you do?"

"Let's just say I'm a refugee of government control – a fugitive slave, so to speak"

"What happens if they catch you?"

"I die, if I'm lucky," said Dep.

"Are you willing to work?"

"You think chasing a firefly around while carrying this backpack wasn't work? I'll do whatever it takes."

"Ghost" looked at the impressive mass of the backpack and nodded approvingly. "See that light in the distance?" he asked, pointing towards the southeast. "That's Lane's farm – less than two miles from here. I think you'll be welcome there."

"Lane sent me to you. The league of my pursuit seems to make me a pariah of sorts."

"You come with a very impressive resume. Hang around here until an hour or two after sunrise, and if it's OK with the others, I'll send somebody out here for you."

"What happens if they don't approve?"

"It would dawn on you eventually. In that case, I would recommend that you learn how to lie about who's after you to whomever else you meet." With that, he retrieved his light, extinguished it, and after briefly consulting the stars he vanished into the night.

Dep spread out a small camouflaged tarp tied to the outside of his backpack, and was almost immediately asleep. The sun arose an hour before Dep awakened – initially disoriented by where he was and what he was doing there. Yet another confusing thing was the smell of coffee.

As the cobwebs began to clear, Ghost was handing him a cup of black coffee, and a large home-baked granola bar enriched with seeds and nuts."

"How did you know I don't use cream or sugar?"

"Too bad if you did," said Ghost. "Oracle says you're OK, so come along. You ready for a day's work?"

"I guess so. When's breakfast?, "

"You're eating it."

"Who's Oracle, and how would *he* know if I was OK?"

"Ever hear of Spiritual gifts – in the Christian context?"

"You mean like mind readers, fortune tellers, and other spooky things?"

"Category paranormal, but that's as far as the similarities would go. Oracle is gifted, and he often receives information directly from the Spirit of God – without the need of rational data. We've come to trust his judgment."

"Is he always right?"

"Almost. We are all still humans and are capable of failures, so in most cases he'll check with the rest of us to see what we're getting."

"So what are *you* getting?"

"I'm here aren't I."

"So you come and go like a ghost, and now I find out that you're all Christian mystics – you sure you guys are OK?"

“So follow or don't – nobody's twisting your arm.” At that, Dep shouldered his backpack and began to follow Ghost across the sandy fields back towards where Lane's ringtone had upset things the night before. After about an hour's trek, Dep began to notice occasional mounds of earth containing a couple of cubic yards or more.

“What are these doing here”? asked Dep.

“These correspond to hollows dug out for concealed sleeping and camping spaces. The earth is carried some distance from the excavations themselves, to make the hollows less noticeable. Another reason is that should this area ever return to agriculture, the hollows and mounds would still exist as slight variations in the terrain –leaving subtleties in the landscape within which one might hide if necessary.”

After awhile Dep could see a few people in the distance milling around a low shade of some kind; There appeared to be young, old, male and female. Before reaching that point they encountered an elongated pit about 5' deep, by around 20' at its widest point. The corresponding pile of dirt was forming into a low berm surrounding it, but spaced about 5' from its edges. The two men digging the pit were using 5 gallon buckets to carry the earth out of the hole.

“Grab one of the spare buckets and give them a hand. The skinny guy in the camo will show you what to do. See you in a few hours when you break for lunch.”

Just like that: This important young officer of status and income, was suddenly at the bidding of total strangers, being ordered to help dig a huge hole with a small shovel and a 5 gallon bucket.

Later, as Dep and the others approached the camp, Ghost asked “Camo:” “So how'd he work out?”

“He's earned himself a meal or few. He's a little clumsy with a shovel but he's getting the hang of it.”

As Dep approached the shade he was surprised to find that it was a low profile dome consisting of rough natural sticks. These formed an interlocking mesh with a diameter of about thirty feet, this was covered with a camouflage netting. The structure was placed over a leveled recess in the earth about 3' deep; the resulting berm added a couple more feet to its perimeter height. It was furnished in places by plywood surfaces on wooden palates, plus a few planks supported about a foot off the ground. The seating was mainly on tarps and blankets, although there were also a few collapsible camp chairs.

“When do I meet Oracle,” asked Dep when he encountered Ghost?

“You've been working with him.”

“You mean Camo?”

“No, the other one.”

“I'd have expected Oracle to have some special status.”

“He does – as do we all in our respective gifts.”

When the food was served Dep noticed the pause before anybody partook. A young lady briefly hummed a note, and the enclosure was instantly flowing in a beautiful a cappella hymn. The congenial conversations that followed with the simple meal gave a comfortable family feel to a seemingly impoverished setting.

Eventually the scattered conversations of the 20 or so people thinned down to a flow where only one person was speaking at a time, with the rest respectfully listening. Finally, Dep himself was introduced, and offered the floor.

“So Mr. Dep, how did you wind up here? We aren't slaves to clocks, so you can take your time.”

“I was chasing a firefly around last night, and it finally invited me home.” The poetic simplicity of this summary brought approving smiles from his hosts – most of whom had already been told the story. Part of it may have been fatigue, but Dep was already beginning to feel liberated from bondage to rigid rules of communication and behavior.

“Feel free to share how you wound up chasing a firefly – but if not, we understand.”

“I have loved America, and even did a tour of highly specialized combat on her behalf, but I began to question her international intentions. Upon returning to civilian life, I felt that at least I could be of use on the domestic front.

“I really thought a career in law enforcement would be a logical way to continue serving my country. But as I advanced rapidly in this setting I fell into a category of service that appeared to use America rather than to serve her. And then when I was being called upon to swear allegiance to something that seemed to be manipulating America it all became clear, and I fled. That was only yesterday as a matter of fact, but it seems like weeks ago.”

“In your training, what did they teach you about dealing with cults and religions?”

“The objective of the indoctrination they gave us on religions was to teach us to not believe any of them. In the case of Islam, about all they had to do was have us study various passages of the Koran.”

“What did you learn about that one?”

“Islam is not a religion. It's a cult of thugs with a primitive deity strapped on so it can reproduce.”

“Isn't that a little harsh?”

“The Koran advocates any fantasy a man might desire – including child molestation, rape, polygamy, murder, plunder, and the complete subjugation of women. It also advocates the death or enslavement of anyone who disagrees. It openly advocates the destruction and takeover of any government besides its own. And, if you should be fortunate enough to die while propagating this crap, you are effectively granted an eternity of sexual pleasure.”

Furthermore, it instructs adherents to freely lie if it would help their cause. This has a lot to do with why any Mohammedan you meet will claim that it is a peaceful religion. Admittedly in the first part of his book – which was dictated before he had any power – he does spout some peaceful things. But in the latter part, as his brutality and terrorism developed, he freely advocated his anything-goes doctrines.

The contradictions in this book were so obvious to even Mohammad that he provided instructions for dealing with them: He simply declared (in the very book itself) that in the case of contradictions, that which was written later would supersede that which was written earlier. There is no place in a civilized society for these brutally uncivilized dogmas.”

“So what did they teach you about Christians?”

“Generally they are harmless, hypocrites, but some of them can become fanatical, and will not waver even when facing death. But the fact that they won't fight back makes them an otherwise easy group to manage. They also taught us that the Bible is full of contradictions, and that the scriptures we have today are very different from the originals. The miracles, of course, didn't happen. What do you people make of all that?”

“You need to decide between believing what you see, versus what you have been taught. The Christians you interacted with at the Lane farm: Were they harmless hypocrites, or purposeful activists?”

“Good point.”

“As with Islam, the purest essence of Christianity would be revealed by the words of its founder. It would not have served their purpose to have you read the words of Jesus, so they conveyed their views by other means.

“In all fairness there is also a major difference between the Old and New Testaments of the Bible. Some deal with this by simply claiming that differences in the Old Testament are simply superseded by the New Testament – similar to Mohammad's method of dealing with his own contradictions. More observant readers find the Old Testament essential to an understanding of the New. Some scholars claim that there are over three hundred references to Jesus in the Old Testament, that were fulfilled in the New. I never checked this out personally, but I know I've seen a lot of them.

“If you don't mind my asking, do you have any religious views of your own?”

“Why should I? They're irrational,” said Dep,

“The existence of *the universe* is irrational,” said Camo, “You can't make anything out of absolutely nothing. so how do you get a Big Bang event out of that?”

“Obviously there was enough mass out there to coalesce into the Big Bang singularity before it ever happened,” said Dep.

“OK then, let's go with the fact that everything tends to deteriorate and cool down. After an eternity past, there would be nothing left to coalesce into *anything*.”

“Stephen Hawking – I don't expect you've ever heard of him – came up with a mathematical formula by which a matter and antimatter particle pair can spontaneously appear out of nothing,” replied Dep.

“If you had read a little more of your dear Dr. Hawking, you would have found that a gravitational field is a required part of that formula – meaning preexisting matter of course. In addition to that, some movement would be required, which doesn't happen at absolute zero. Theories and tooth fairies – cmon Dep, your blind faith is impressive. Science does not even come close to having a rational explanation for the origin of the universe. Ironically, the only rational explanation is an irrational one – God Almighty. Furthermore, you have no shred of evidence that God does *not* exist. Nonetheless, you have a God given choice to believe whatever you wish.”

Rather than leaving Dep in the awkward position of having to respond, Camo arose to serve refills of tea to Dep and the others.

“This is obviously a temporary camp,” said Dep. “What are you folks doing out here, and why am I digging a hole?”

“We are restoring the land to fruitfulness. It has been exploited for over a century, pumped dry, poisoned with chemicals, and now dumped like a used up whore. We are bringing it love and restoration, and in return, it feeds us and frees us from slavery to the destructive forces of mankind. We are here to care for garden Earth.

“The hole will be lined with a waterproof membrane to capture whatever rain may fall, and whatever water we may haul in to add to it. This may look like we're interrupting mother nature, but we are in fact applying band aids. The water table will require centuries to recover from what mankind has done to it, whereas these patches will once again make water available to surface growth. The bottom few feet will be filled with coarse sand,– along with hollow discarded forms of ceramic and plastic. These will provide a reservoir, with a plastic pipe at the center rising to within a few inches of the surface. The upper three feet will be filled with enriched soil. The captive water tables allow a little moisture to stay within reach of the planted regions. These subterranean ponds also provide us with emergency water supplies.”

“So you have this plastic pipe coming up from the bottom to give access to the accumulated water, but it stops a few inches below the surface of the garden. How do you find it when you return a week or a month later to water your garden?”

“At the very least we know it will be as close as possible to the geometric center of the garden, so a little digging will eventually find it – but we do have a better way. We use a metal detector that can sense the metal cap covering the top of the pipe.”

“No offense, but that strikes me as a little techy for your lifestyle,” said Dep.

“It would surprise you, but engineers and technicians among us have provided some very sophisticated gadgets. It is no secret to the government or anybody else that Lane and others provide ongoing research into technologies that assist our lifestyle. Once developed, the instructions are made available to the rest of us through the internet, hard copy and flash drives, so we can replicate them in the field. The fact is, that we have a broad repertoire of sophisticated techniques and gadgets available to us.

“Our lifestyle and needs appear simple and frugal, but we are in fact quite comfortable and secure. We have a sustainable supply of food and water, plus various categories of shelter technology that will survive most catastrophes and economic conditions. We are mobile when we want to be, and can flow in and out of suburban communities at will, while scarcely being noticed.

“By the way, if you happen to have a gun stashed anywhere among your stuff, you need to bury it – along with any ammunition or keys. Otherwise, if we get stopped and searched, you will put us all in danger.”

“Where will you – uh..we – go from here?” asked Dep.

“We have other places – some with weatherproof shelters – and we also have friends with whom we meet and exchange resources. Some in the community near Lane's farm are involved.”

Dep suddenly recognized a young lady named Dawn among the people. “Didn't I used to see you at Lane's place?”

“I didn't see you either,” she replied with a knowing smile, “but it's nice to finally meet you.” Dep found this atmosphere of discretion very reassuring.

In the unhurried environment, a couple of people returned to work, but most settled down for naps, or quiet individual conversations. After an hour or two the women and children returned to selectively weeding the garden plots and watering portions of them from water drawn by portable hand pumps from their respective wells. The men and a couple of the more robust women returned to the burden of primary excavations when the heat of the day began to wane. In any case, all were productive and fulfilled in meaningful tasks.

The evening gathering took place in a smaller leveled depression not too far from the dome. Having no dome or covering, this one enjoyed a magnificent canopy of stars. The warmth of a small campfire in the middle was reflected back from the surrounding earth, providing a very secure and cozy feel. When Dep asked why the dome was not used this time, it was explained that the light from the campfire would reflect off of the structure, exposing their location for miles around. Dep also learned that they enjoyed vented fires in cases where their domes were covered with opaque materials.

During and after the meal there were occasional songs that seemed to arise from the very earth itself. Somebody would hum a few notes at a scarcely noticeable level, and scattered soft voices would begin to blend in. A few people shared simple lessons that had entered their hearts as they had read their Bibles recently, and some shared comments and concerns about other matters. Some related scenes from their life experiences. Dep noticed that Oracle contributed nothing, but remained quiet and contemplative as the harmony flowed around him.

As the evening meal wound down the scene morphed into a period of quiet relaxation and a few quiet conversations, a few individuals and couples began to disappear into the night to their respective hollows. Eventually, Dep, Dawn, and a couple of others bedded down near the fire.

Dep was feeling washed and refreshed by the beautiful harmony of it all. In fleeing from the system, he had expected to be living like a hunted animal in a world where every person was a potential enemy, and every animal a potential source of food. Rationally, he should be experiencing culture shock while among this group but what he had found was very nonthreatening and positive, in many respects. So he made a conscious choice to do his best to anticipate and blend with whatever was going on. He had a whole new game to learn, but as a slave of rationality, he could not really *feel* what these people had. These people seemed to have a connection of some kind, so the best he could do would be to observe and attempt to emulate their attitudes and actions as well as he could.

He had scarcely gotten to sleep when he felt someone kicking at the soles of his feet. “We've got to leave now.” It was Camo.

“Why? What's going on?,” asked Dep.

“They're going to be searching this area tomorrow,”

“How do you know?”

“We just do.”

“Oh – yeah, I forgot that you people do this.”

Camo handed him a short-handled shovel and a short pry-bar used in digging, and a short-handled five pound sledge hammer. “Add these to your pack. We all carry our shares of the camp when we travel. Dep's ninety five pounds of backpack had just gained a dozen more.

“Dawn, take Dep to the rock band – we'll make contact later. Take extra water, and a roll of foil.”

Within five minutes Dawn, with her thirty five pounds of backpack in place, was waiting for Dep as he finished tying his boots, folding his tarp, and shouldering his obese backpack. Whereupon she nodded towards Dep, and without a word turned her back, and stepped out of the depression. They started off at a

pace only a little slower than his pursuit of the firefly the night before. It was still a challenge for Dep to maintain with his burden, but of course machismo forbade him to complain or lag behind.

They traveled in a straight line in a northeasterly direction, through both fallow and planted farmland. They had covered at least a dozen miles before the first signs of dawn began to reveal the foothills a few more miles away. When they ducked down before crossing another roadway while waiting for a period when there were no cars in sight, Dep finally asked where they were headed.

"Up there," said Dawn, gesturing towards the hills ahead, "at least for this morning."

"What are we going to do about breakfast?"

"We can go a few days without food; Would you rather have breakfast, or stay alive? There's a break in the traffic now – go!"

After crossing a final road, they began a gentle ascent across a quarter of a mile of pasture, where they encountered a barbed wire fence, separating the pasture from native growth.

"This is where the government property begins," said Dawn.

"You mean public land?"

"That's what the government likes to call it."

"Won't we get in trouble?"

"Not if we don't get caught."

The terrain was suddenly much steeper. Although the pace was slower, Dawn maintained a steady rhythmic stride, while noticing that Dep was constantly speeding up, slowing down and breathing heavily. Soon she paused to give him a brief rest. "You don't get outdoors much do you," she asserted. To which Dep, leaning over while supporting his upper body with his hands on his knees, merely grunted, rather than acknowledge his humiliation.

"Look: I noticed that you are still taking strides of the same length that you were while we were on the flat. This is why you are continually speeding up and then pausing to adapt to my current pace. The trick is to simply take smaller steps of a consistent rhythm while going up hill. It's kind of like shifting into low gear. This way you can keep a steady pace without beating yourself up. You go ahead and lead for awhile – at a pace you can handle. Head for the middle of that ridge, just above that intermittent layer of rock," she said pointing up the hill. "Go!"

Even as they continued, Dep noticed that she didn't always follow the same path he did, but this time he made it a point to see what she was doing and learn something. Soon he too was paying close attention to the subtle game trails made by the local animals. These paths efficiently navigated through the vegetation without meandering up and down the slope. The sun was just beginning to illuminate the far side of the valley, as they were working their way through a gap in the 50 foot strata of rock that Dawn had pointed out earlier. After ascending another hundred yards, they drew to halt.

"Now what?" asked Dep.

"You don't see it?"

"See what?"

"Good. That means we're well hidden. Right there," she pointed to a thick portion of the brush nestled into the canyon separating them from the next ridge. From where they were standing, a game trail made a direct fairly level path to a small structure of twigs, similar to the dome he had seen covering the depression the day before. As they approached Dawn pitched a few pebbles into the lattice and explained: "Sometimes these are occupied."

"That's not a very polite way of saying 'hello'," remarked Dep.

"More polite than crawling in face-to-face with a coyote or a rattlesnake," replied Dawn.

Before entering, Dawn unrolled several strips of aluminum foil and laid them shiny-side-down on the lattice. After covering them with a camouflage tarp tied to the lattice, she looked at Dep to receive his obvious question – but instead:

"Infrared signature," he said. "Only about five percent of the heat our bodies give off will pass beyond the reflective surface."

“Very good,” she said. “I forgot that day before yesterday you were on *their* side.”

Sitting a little ways inside the opening, they had a clear view of the valley below, and of the place where they had been – now about ten miles away.

“OK,” said Dep finally, “why are we here?”

“Because they're looking for you today.”

“You have no way of knowing that unless there's a known traitor in your midst.”

“God is not a traitor,” said Dawn. “He shows us things, remember? He let us know that there would be an immediate, and very intense search for you.”

“Impossible. It would take them at least a couple of days to figure out what had happened, and another day to organize a search.

Dawn just shrugged. “You'll see.”

## A New Commission

Lane was awakened by the sound of a helicopter flying low overhead. Even as he and Joan hurried into their clothes, it was landing on the other side of the nearby encampment. There was an immediate pounding on the door, and as he opened it, he could see two government vehicles in the distance parked on the road near each end of his property – in addition to the one in his driveway.

“Give us the keys to any doors you don't want kicked in,” said a heavily armed officer. “You two sit here while your place is being searched.” Lane knew it would be useless to ask why. If anything, any conversation could only endanger Dep – the presumed reason for this unconstitutional intrusion. The fewer words the better. Criminals were apparently wearing uniforms these days.

“Got any weapons or ammunition we should know about?”

“None that you should know about.”

“If that's your final answer, be advised that you will be confiscated along with them if we find any without your help – now again: Do you have any weapons we should know about?”

“The weapon you have no business knowing about is in the back of the bottom drawer of the dresser – along with one and one half boxes of ammo.”

“Thank you.”

“Piss off.”

Lane chose to risk not mentioning the scoped high-powered hunting rifle he had hidden above a beam in his barn – just in case this very thing should happen. Besides, it was still registered to his cousin, and he “had no idea it was there.” The invasion and search of his house lasted for about twenty minutes, and concluded with an individual carrying around a piece of equipment that could scan for thermal images. Aside from locating the possum living under his house, the scan came up negative.

The sudden surrounding and searching of his property and systematic confrontation of every person on or near it was completed in a little over an hour. The cars left, and the black helicopter wound up and arose from the nearby land. To Lane's dismay however, the machine did not simply fly off into the distance. Instead, it rose to about fifteen hundred feet and began a systematic scan pattern over the surrounding countryside. To Lane's mind, Dep didn't stand a chance.

Even from almost fifteen miles away, the object stood out by its motion as well as its contrast with the straw-colored landscape. A tiny black wasp was clearly scanning the square miles beneath it for prey. Now and then it would drop briefly to the ground for a more detailed examination. Had the lost art of tracking even been considered, its potential was quickly erased by the disturbance of sand beneath it. As Dep and Dawn watched, it eventually settled into the location that they and the others had abandoned a few hours before. It remained there for about fifteen minutes, before continuing its search.

“I'm impressed,” said Dep. “So what is this mystic thing, and how do I get some?”

“It's incidental to being alive,” said Dawn.

“Oh; you mean I'm not alive?”

“Not entirely.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You're not born again.”

“Who the hell are you to judge?”

“OK,” said Dawn “then tell me what 'born again' means.”

“It's personal.”

“Any meal is personal to the one receiving it, but the menu generally isn't. Don't ask me why I can see through you until you can handle the answer.”

The scanning continued for hours, but after about five hundred square miles had been covered, the tiny black predator disappeared into the distance. During this period of watching, as they took turns with Dep's

binoculars, Dep noticed dozens of additional pale green spots scattered across the fallow land. There were also subtle irregularities that Dep assumed were hollows where one to a dozen people might sleep out of sight from anyone more than a couple of hundred feet away. For the larger excavations, the displaced earth was distributed among numerous smaller piles at varying distances from the hide. “You folks have been busy,” noted Dep.

“We began about two and a half years ago,” said Dawn, “and we eventually got the hang of it.”

At this point Dawn and Dep added a couple of hours of nap to their interrupted sleep of the night before.

Earlier that day, when the sun was almost alive, a weary band of refugees quietly took shelter in subtle structures on the fringes of a homeless camp a mile east of Stag. “Welcome,” said Paco. “We’ll get your supply of water refilled and you can join us for breakfast in about 30 minutes.”

“Thank you,” said Oracle.

Immediately after breakfast most of the visitors retired to their shelters. “We’re a little short on sleep,” explained Oracle. “If possible, I would also like to arrange for some transportation – just for myself – sometime this afternoon. We have a new recruit who will need a little help.”

“Anyone I know,” asked Paco?

“Not anymore. On another note,” continued Oracle, “stand by for a greater influx of homeless. Most of these will not be experienced in street living, and will be in the throws of shock from having their incomes suddenly disappear. My people can work with some of your friends in developing more oasis areas a little closer to the foothills – we have a lot to prepare. There have been international pressures building for many years, and the first seal is about to be opened to allow them to have their way.”

Paco was contemplative. He and other believers among them had been experiencing a sense of urgency and foreboding for the past couple of months, and now it was all beginning to make sense.

Shortly after breakfast a hard looking middle aged man quietly slipped into camp. He would have scarcely been noticed, except that his clothing and camping equipment were new. Paco had an uneasy feeling about this hombre, and commented to Oracle. As they took turns surreptitiously observing him, he seemed to be systematically examining the entire camp. Clearly, he was looking for someone.

After a few hours nap, Oracle was given a ride and dropped off along the highway. He then began his trek across the pasture on his way to rendezvous with Dep and Dawn.

An hour earlier, Dep had been ravenously hungry when they awoke from their nap. He carried a stash of MREs (compact Meals Ready to Eat), but he had been so thoroughly outclassed in stamina, calm, and outdoor knowledge by this young woman that he resolved to not even *ask* about food again – at least not directly. “Tell me about this rock band we’re going to meet. Are we going to sneak back into civilization sometime soon?”

“You’ll find out – maybe.”

“What’s with the ‘maybe’?”

“You’ll have a decision to make – probably by tonight, so it will be up to you.”

“Whatever it is, ‘yes,’” said Dep

“Not so fast; this decision could cost you everything – including your life.”

“I don’t *have* anything, so what could possibly be more important to me than my life?”

“How about a purpose for *being* alive, or for that matter a purpose for dying. How about the awesome privilege of walking with the Creator of the Universe, now and for eternity?”

Dep at least had to wonder if her believing all this stuff had something to do with her calm and matter of fact response to disastrous situations. In any case, her heart was clearly somewhere else. “Can you prove any of this?” he asked.

“Where would you be right now if God had not told us to invite you to visit? Where would you be right now if God hadn’t told us to leave last night?”

“Likely dead or in jail – so I grant you that there’s some evidence, but still no proof.”

“Do you even have any evidence that God was *not* involved?”

“Not really, but I'm sure I could come up with something. Beyond that, I wonder if God even exists at all.”

“Let's start with a hypothetical: If God exists, and wants a relationship with you that would cost you everything else in life, would you be willing to serve Him?”

“That's a toughie. But I guess if He could absolutely prove Himself to me, I would have no other choice.”

“But you *do* have a choice; love cannot exist without a choice. The fact that you can't prove or disprove God leaves you with the option to believe either way. That's where faith comes in.”

“But I don't *like* faith. I like provable facts.”

“You *have* no provable facts either way, and you don't have to like faith. God has set the terms and they involve faith, so take it or leave it.”

“So that's it? That's all there is to Christianity?” asked Dep.

“No, that's only the attitude. We haven't even gotten to the Jesus part yet.” At this point, Dawn stepped out of the shelter for a brief walk – mainly to leave Dep alone with his thoughts, but she also had some praying to do.

As Dep considered his path in life it occurred to him that he had indeed been on a quest to serve something greater than himself. He had joined the military to serve America, but eventually encountered disillusionment. He then entered law enforcement to fight for justice – but again, found his master fraught with corruption. Not only was this system corrupt, but it turned out to be manipulated by the same dark forces that had been eroding America. Could he dare to fall in love with an ideal again? Wouldn't the sterility of cynicism be preferable to repeated bouts of disillusionment? And yet: If there *was* an absolute God, only He would have the power to bestow true purpose on any person or thing. If such existed, and was willing to connect, there could be no higher calling in all of creation. To Dep's heart, a life – or death – with meaning, would have greater value than a successful pointless life.

When Dawn returned, Dep had made a little progress. “OK: I've decided that *if* God exists, I would serve Him.”

“Did you tell Him?”

“I'd feel foolish talking to someone I don't even know exists.”

“Maybe you're afraid He might answer – knowing that if He does, your internal life could change as radically as your physical life has.”

“Where does Jesus fit in to all of this?”

“Ever need forgiveness?”

“Of course – we all do.”

“So why *do* we forgive?”

“Maybe because the person is more important to us than the damage they've done?”

“Exactly! We accept the damage done by others because we want to continue the relationship with them. Jesus was accepting *our* damage when He was crucified, so we can have a relationship with God.

“You need to do something about your backpack,” said Dawn, abruptly changing the subject. “It's far too heavy. Depending upon what you decide, the hike could become far more demanding.”

But Dep was not quite through. “What's the next step?”

“Talk to God.”

“But how?”

“Just talk – but you better mean it.”

“I'll think about it,” said Dep, “Now what am I supposed to do about my backpack?”

“Sort through it and bury what you won't need.”

“Any suggestions?”

“If you plan to hang out with us, you'll have to ditch your guns.”

“What makes you think I have any guns? – never mind.”

“You’ve seen what we do for shelters, and how we blend in with natural materials as much as possible, so you can do without a tent. Besides, a tent is a dead give-away.”

“Do I have to bury my MREs?”

“You’ve got MREs? Why didn’t you say so? I’m famished!”

Just maybe, thought Dep, Dawn was a woman after all.

At Dawn’s suggestion he carried his backpack over the ridge and into the canyon beyond. He began to explore a little before selecting a place to dig in a slightly level space among dense foliage. After digging down about two and a half feet, he wrapped his disassembled sniper rifle, a handgun, and ammunition in a plastic poncho, along with the metal poles and stakes from his tent. He also left the heavy combat boots he’d been wearing, along with a few other items, and put on his pair of work shoes. He would keep the lightweight tent fabric itself, since it could be blended with natural materials to waterproof a concealed shelter. He also kept his solid ten inches of razor-sharp blade. He did not consider this as much a weapon as a tool.

As he worked, he thought, and while filling in the hole and spreading leaves on it, it dawned on him that his thoughts had become a conversation. It wasn’t words per se from the other end. But, as he admitted to God that he needed forgiveness, he began to *feel* the forgiveness, and then began to express gratitude to God for it.

This was all so simple and rational, but even so, faith was involved. Where did this faith come from? He realized that he had been seeing it in action in Oracle and others – even Dawn. So it wasn’t a totally blind faith; it was a matter of surrendering the belief that human intellect could solve everything. If anything, *that* had been more akin to a blind faith. What it boiled down to was a choice, devoid of significant rational bias, and he had chosen.

His backpack and steps were lighter as he returned to the shelter – Dawn could sense that her prayers had been answered. She was also wise enough to not ask him any questions; he would share when he was ready, and beyond that, he had not yet grasped what had happened well enough to articulate his feelings. How do you describe the feelings of an idealistic warrior who has finally found a leader he can trust? For the first time in a number of years he was not within reach of a gun that he could deploy within seconds – and yet, he felt quite secure.

They were joined a few minutes later by Oracle, and enjoyed another snack, this time from a stash of food Oracle had brought with him. After a relaxed time of sharing what had transpired since they had begun their evacuation of the camp the night before, and learning the welfare of the other campers, Oracle zeroed in on their immediate future.

It began with a tour of a mile or two up the canyon they were in, during which Oracle began to point out dozens of subtle terraces they had formed from rocks and twigs. The effect was reminiscent of the garden patches down on the abandoned farmland, but on a minuscule scale – also, there were not always underlying plastic membranes when bedrock was available. Even so, the repeated impediments to the downhill flow of water through the mulch-enriched terraces caused the plants to flourish. Another difference was that there were only a few recognizable vegetables or other familiar plants in these wild seemingly abandoned garden patches. A significant portion of these plantings were wild edibles, but there were also fruit trees in the bottoms of canyons where water was more likely to pass. During this tour Oracle made it a point to thoroughly instruct Dep on the nurture and needs of caring for these plants, how they were best stored, prepared and cooked, and even techniques for developing additional terraces and enriching their planting environment.

Dep found himself fascinated by all of this, and eagerly consumed this new category of survival knowledge – so much so that he never saw it coming. When Oracle described the location of a spring a couple of miles away where he could refill his water supply, things suddenly became clear. How could he have not realized that he was being instructed on how to live off these gardens, and to expand and nurture them. He would be staying here for awhile. As they leisurely worked their way back to the shelter he was

informed that two or three canyons on either side of the one they were in had similar plantings and should be checked occasionally.

“Concerning additional shelters,” said Oracle, when they were comfortably seated under the shade of the existing shelter, “we have some pressing needs – one of which is yours. I met a gentleman this morning who was doing a poor job of trying to look homeless, while claiming to be an old friend of yours.” Dep felt a chill. “For the present, no group would be safe with your presence. For your safety, and for ours, you must hide well – so welcome to your new home. You are certainly free to leave and flee on your own if you choose, but I would like to know right now so I can determine my priorities one way or another.”

“About an hour ago,” said Dep, “I connected to someone very big, and I’d like the opportunity to get to know him better.”

“Good,” said Oracle. “I happen to have a copy of the owner’s manual with me.” He rummaged briefly in his knapsack and retrieved a book in a weatherproof enclosure and handed it to Dep. “This collection of ancient writings was compiled over a period of at least fifteen hundred years. Its authors included tribal leaders, kings, farmers, warriors, prophets, scholars, prime ministers, and at least one world ruler. Some of the writings recorded oral traditions from yet earlier centuries, and some were based upon documents of still earlier origin. Beyond that, it contains prophecies that have been taking place in recent years (you’ll recognize these in recent news events), along with clues about what is soon to take place.

Oracle also provide him with a pamphlet to provide him with an overview of the Bible and Christianity in general.

“I also have another category of tools for you,” continued Oracle, as he produced a four pound hammer, a small assortment of hardened chisels, and a few solar-charged lights. “Find a crack in the band of rock below us that is wide enough for you to squeeze into by at least two or three feet. You’ll find this mix of limestone and sandstone substantial, but it yields easily to a chisel. This rock band is exposed intermittently for about twelve miles, until it is disturbed by a volcanic intrusion on one end, and buried by geological forces on the other.”

Did Dep just hear him say “rock band?” He glanced over at Dawn, and she was stifling a giggle.

“You need to carve yourself an apartment,” continued Oracle. “Begin by carving a series of footholds that will allow you to climb upwards into the crack a dozen feet or so, widening a passage into the crack as necessary as you enter and climb. Then develop a small entryway and sleeping platform into one side of the crack. From there you can sculpt the apartment of your dreams. Be sure to include adequate space for the storage of food for yourself and others. There will be those periods when the harvest will be minimal.”

“So what happens if I get stuck in one of those cracks and I’m all alone?”

“You die, so don’t do it. During all this, it goes without saying that under no circumstances may you allow even a twinkle of one of these solar lights to be visible outside this, or any other enclosure.”

“Obviously,” said Dep.

“Once you are comfortable,” said Oracle, “We need to develop significant capacity for additional people. So you’ll need to find other locations along this dozen miles of rock, and develop them to the entryway stage so that others can continue to expand them as needed.”

“Wouldn’t it be easier to just build shelters like this one out of branches?”

“Sooner or later this area will all be swept by fires that a crippled mainstream will not have the resources to control. Those who hope to live off the land without making provisions such as these are going to be very disappointed when that happens.”

“Is he going to be needing some help?” asked Dawn, trying to sound nonchalant.

“Our ride back to Paco-land will be arriving soon. It would help if you could wait beside the road so they don’t miss us. Meanwhile I have a few more words for Dep.”

After they exited the shelter, Dawn offered Dep a firm handshake. “It’s been fun getting to know you,” she said.

“When will I get to see you again?” asked Dep.

“Perhaps.” said Dawn, as she bowed slightly and began her journey back to the ridge. She didn't dare look back for fear her tears would be noticed.

Dep was surprised at his feeling of loss but he was becoming accustomed to answers that bypassed the actual questions – while providing deeper levels of understanding.

Once Dawn was on her way, Oracle addressed Dep at a more personal level. “Talk to God constantly. The deeper you go, the more you'll know – and besides, there will rarely be anyone else you can talk to for awhile. When you have a clear sense of what you are to do or say, which may seem counter-intuitive at times, go with it. It may happen on little things at first that may seem trivial, but this sort of thing will help you learn to recognize the voice upon which your very life will sometimes depend.

“I can see some things about your future, but only you will truly know your calling. If you begin receiving prophetic insights, don't worry about whether or not anyone ever notices. People sometimes get caught up in labels – a pointless mistake. The main thing is to follow wherever God leads you, and to use whatever gifts God gives you for the moment. There are *some* gifts God has used me in only once or twice in my life – it's entirely up to Him. So just be available to God every moment. The point of all this is that our gifts do not define us, but our relationships with God do.

“Do be alert for rattlesnakes, and the occasional predator who might view you as a potential snack. The times to be most concerned are early morning and a little while before and after sunset. Be alert and carry a tool of some kind for protection.”

“I have just the tool,” said Dep.

As Oracle began his own walk to the ridge he did not look back either. This was not because of tears, but because his eyes were focused upon something a little farther into the future. As he contemplated the limited effectiveness of the preparations he and his friends were making, it was revealed to him that he was not alone in his efforts. He was being shown a parade of locations across the nation where groups such as his were hard at work in their respective environments. Some were making subtle alterations in cities, suburbs, slums, and in otherwise unusable terrain. He then began to see into other countries and a variety of beautiful people making preparations appropriate to their respective locations and cultures. He was still smiling when he refocused and found himself facing Dawn as he approached the road and his ride back to camp.

### *Dep at Rock Band*

Dep immediately began to make alterations within natural cracks in the rock strata and sometimes, farther up in other outcroppings. These subtle alterations created hidden footholds and enlarged routes to sleeping platforms carved into the rocks. In some cases these nooks became entryways that expanded into larger living areas.

Dep was deep in thought as he studied an outcropping of rock on a ridge between a couple of upper canyons. Here he carved a niche that required some strength and agility to access. Since he had modified nothing outside the access crack, it would remain hidden. This he expanded into a small living space, and sequestered an emergency supply of water and dried staples, along with a blanket, his binoculars and a few well worn tools. A deep horizontal crack provided an outside view,. By widening the crack upwards as it continued into the small room, it became a small picture window overlooking the operations below. With no external evidence of the room behind it, the watcher would remain concealed. Since there would be room for no more than two or three people, he felt no reason to share the existence of this hideaway with anyone.

The habitability Dep had developed in the lower rock formations made the area a comfortable place for others who would further replicate the subtle stands of wild edibles and domestic food plants in nearby canyons

The commanding view, the verdant beauty of the canyon terraces and shade from the summer heat made it a popular place for people to contribute meaningfully to coordinating nature and humanity.

Soon an informal staff of semi permanent refugees began to occupy and expand the habitations begun by Dep. The inaccessibility by motor vehicle added much to its isolation and protection.

Dep was voracious in his studies of the Bible, and enjoyed company that could explain more of it to him. In the informal conversations following community meals he learned more about the nature and operation of supernatural gifts, along with rich lessons and mysteries of ancient history. When he asked if anyone there ever went to church, it was explained as they gathered to share the things they were each learning, they *were* church. In addition to Biblical insights there would sometimes be poetry or music, and an occasional revelation or miracle that could not have arisen from available information or resources. Dep envied these gifts and wondered if he would ever experience them for himself.

Sometimes there would be stories and updates on others they knew. Lane, for instance, had published a book of plans for dozens of useful and essential technologies, and released it to the public domain. In addition to available hard copy, he posted it on the internet in a format compatible with common printers. Dawn traveled a lot, carrying messages between various groups and camps. Oracle was receiving and sharing increasingly urgent and disturbing revelations about covert global agendas, along with prudent precautions and preparations that would minimize their damage.

At Rock Band, there was something wholesome about a culture disconnected from the sensational bombardment of news and entertainment media, yet focused upon harmony with the environment and benefit towards others. The flow of visitors brought frequent updates on global news, new appropriate technologies, and a rich mixture of talents and experiences. This flow traveled both directions, as some who had served there would return to service and adventures in the mainstream environment, and other fugitives of stress or various dangers would come to replace them.

## Out of The Garden

It was late morning and Dep was feeling anxious, but having no idea why. This was not rational. He had a lot of work to do that day but couldn't concentrate on anything, so he began to stroll up the hillside in hopes of clearing his thoughts. He soon realized he was heading for the hideaway he had carved into the rock a couple of months before. Lunch would soon be served and he would be missed, but something was going on in his head that he couldn't figure out and he knew that he could not afford to be among them.

Far below a crowded SUV was unloading its passengers and their minimalist luggage, along with their contributions for the midday meal. Dawn appeared agitated – almost in a state of panic – as she burst from the vehicle and immediately charged up the hill without speaking to or waiting for anyone. People were beginning to assemble in the camouflaged shelter on a terrace beneath a cluster of oak trees. She shrugged off her backpack and in lieu of a greeting asked: “Where’s Dep?”

“Dunno.” was the most common answer, but finally:

“I saw him wandering up the next ridge about a half hour ago.”

“Thanks.” Leaving her backpack she immediately began intermittently hiking and jogging in pursuit – praying for direction as she went.

As Dep contemplated the view, his eye caught a glimpse of movement far below on the ridge. The individual would briefly appear in gaps in the vegetation as she wandered back and forth during her climb, in apparent search of something. She? Dep picked up the binoculars to better identify the approaching figure.

“Dawn!” his heart shouted through the crack. He immediately exited his loft and hurried down the half-mile of slope to intercept her. She was too exhausted to immediately speak from the intensity of her climb, and as he extended his arms to help she threw her arms around his neck and clung for support.

“Sorry,” she said shyly after she had caught a few breaths and realized what she had just done, “but I’m so glad you’re safe.” As her arms slipped slowly from around his neck a baffled Dep reluctantly released his own gentle embrace. They sat down on a slab of rock and said nothing for the next few minutes as she continued to catch up with her breathing.

“You’re going to have to leave,” she finally said.

“What’s going on?”

“While we were fleeing that first night after you had joined us down on the flat, the rest of the camp was evacuating to Paco land. An individual posing as a homeless person and claiming to be a friend of yours showed up there late in the next morning and was asking about you. We all knew he was a phony both by the Spirit, his mannerisms – plus his brand new and expensive equipment. His ruse was a joke on several counts. We couldn’t tell who he was talking about at first, because he didn’t even know your name.

“He spent the day, left the next morning, and after a series of additional visits people began to let down their guards and talk to him. Through his snooping he picked up the scent of this place and finally managed to finagle a visit.”

Dep froze. “When is he coming?”

“He’s here *now*. He came with a carload of us just fifteen minutes ago; Thank God you weren’t at the central.”

“This is a beautiful place,” said Dep ruefully, as he began to face the reality of having to leave. “When you’ve caught your breath enough for a little more climbing I’d like to show you something.”

As they approached the access crack Dep offered to help her up to the loft, but she promptly clambered up to it by herself with ease.

“What a view!” she said. “Sometimes I wish *I* had a place like this”

“You do now. No one besides you and I even knows it’s here.”

“I have a couple of questions before I leave.”

“Such as?”

“Where am I going – any suggestions?”

“You might be able to get lost in a large homeless camp about twenty miles north of here.

Otherwise, Oracle keeps in touch with a group of Christians developing gardens on abandoned land about fifty miles to the west. Still, I really have no way of knowing where God may lead you.”

“That’s the problem,” said Dep, “I don’t have any of those gifts you people have.”

“This place is perfect,” said Dawn, appearing to have abruptly changed the subject, “how did you even think to build. this?”

“I just felt I should.”

“How did you know that it was important for you to come up here this morning, instead of showing up at the central?”

“I just knew I was supposed to.”

“Don’t you see how irrational you’ve been in all this?”

“You mean...” Dep was beginning to see where this was leading, and Dawn then hammered it home:

“You have all the spiritual gifts you need for the moment, Dep, and as you continue to walk with God you can trust Him to provide whatever else you may need. This is all any of us can hope for.

“What was your other question?” asked Dawn.

“How do I get you out of my mind?”

This caught Dawn off guard – and yet: “I...I hope you don’t.”

“Do you think of me?”

“More than I want to.”

“Then please...can I just hold you for a moment before I leave?”

Nothing was said as they held each other, and yet so much was communicated. Dawn sobbed softly at first, and then began to relax. The mutual unwillingness to let go became an unspoken exchange of promises, that continued to grow as the minutes past. Dep’s work-hardened body made Dawn think of a living Greek sculpture. Dep wondered how Dawn’s athletic body could be so strong and yet so wonderfully gentle and beautiful to hold. And so the communication continued for several silent minutes. Finally, as if by mutual agreement, the conversation was over and they slowly released each other in peace.

“Follow me at a distance so I can make sure the way is clear on the way to your quarters, and then I’ll see you safely to the road. I’ll move anything you leave behind up to *our* loft when it is safe to do so.” They parted near the road after a light kiss, with the peace of knowing that whether in life or death, they would someday embrace again.

“Dep who?” was Dawn’s response to the inevitable inquiries.

The pursuit had been relentless. The search had begun at dawn on the day after Dep’s initial disappearance. Within a couple of hours, ground teams had invaded and searched all farm houses, outbuildings, and homeless camps within miles of Lane’s farm. This had been coordinated by a systematic search by helicopter equipped with infrared cameras and sensitive radio snooping equipment. Over five hundred square miles had been scoured either by foot, air, or both. The last signal from his cell phone had been logged in a region frequented by a religious cult – Christians it seemed, who had developed semi-autonomous gardens in unused crop land. Satellite images revealed that some of this land had been occupied the day before, but this population seemed to have evaporated during the night.

Although people in the agency who initiated the search had long given up, the computer programs they had enlisted to aid them had continued the pursuit on their own – briefly updating their masters when anything new turned up.

These programs had prioritized the search probabilities down to first homeless, then Christian, and then sustainable technologies. Lesser search keys, besides his physical description included veteran, armed and extremely dangerous, highly intelligent, and resourceful.

They concluded that he must have a spy of some kind within their organization that would warn him when they were about to close in – they were, of course, clueless about spiritual gifts. Considerable computer resources were employed to locate this supposed intelligence leak, but to no avail. Meanwhile the Holy Spirit of the God whom they knew nothing about continued to watch over Dep.

All this effort would seem absurd if the objective were to merely track down and punish an errant agent, but it was known that he carried a flash drive bearing information that must never become public.

Specialists from the agency also posed as Christians, and infiltrated homeless camps within a thirty mile radius that paralleled the search criterion created for Dep. At one of these they had learned of one fitting his description who was active in the nearby foothills.

Upon leaving Rock Band, Dep opted to head for the large homeless camp to the north. Countless thoughts tumbled through his mind as he continued walking into the night, and he found himself invigorated by the adventure before him. As he contemplated the awesomeness of walking with his Creator, his heart and steps were strengthened and he found himself worshiping God. To his surprise, he found himself expressing his appreciation in occasional snippets of poetry – what a joke; a poetic warrior? What would Dawn think? And what would she be doing this morning? Would he ever see her again? What would his pursuers try next; would they ever find him again? He touched his shirt pocket to confirm that he still carried the carefully sealed flash drive that they were so desperate to recover. By sunup he was within about five miles of his objective. Taking cover in dense bushes bordering an orchard, he slept for a couple of hours before proceeding.

He soon overtook a tired over-burdened couple with a ten year old child. When he noticed that the man was struggling with a heavy knapsack in addition to a loaded backpack, Dep's offer of help was gratefully accepted.

"Where are you headed?"

"Don't really know," replied Dep, "but I understand there's a homeless camp up ahead somewhere. I'd be happy to share your burden in exchange for a little guidance – company, for that matter."

"We have a few friends in the camp. What kind of work do you do?"

"Anything I can find. I'd be honored to do my share of whatever, if your friends would have me."

"We'll see. Until then I'm Bradly – and thanks for your help."

"I'm uh...forgive me, but I'm in need of a new name at the moment – don't worry, I haven't hurt anybody or stolen anything. Let's call it a jaywalking ticket for now."

"Well, to us you're an angel," said his wife.

"I'll take it" said Dep – "Angel...uh Michael."

"How about 'Mic'," suggested the wife, "I haven't had the privilege of naming a child since our son was born."

As Mic awakened the next morning the stars on the eastern horizon of the crystal sky were just beginning to fade. He quietly loaded a bundle of sticks into the small stove he had sculpted into the earth the afternoon before. He then ignited the kindling charge and started the draft – all this while only halfway leaving his bedroll. By the light of a lamp on his forehead, he then began to pen the words pouring from his heart as he had awakened in worship in the sprawling homeless camp.

I choose to arise and no power in hell  
can or will stop me or silence my bell  
The Spirit within me raised Christ from the dead  
and has power to lift me from apathy's bed  
When I contemplate that glorious day

When Jesus burst forth, death had nothing to say  
No power of darkness could stand in His way  
He arose through a barrier ripping chains with both hands  
That divided the universe from God's glorious plans  
The fabric of time and the spiritual realm  
were torn as the Master returned to the Helm  
Those imprisoned by death and mankind's futile ways  
now came pouring on through as those nights turned to days  
No longer enslaved by futility and strife  
I am now free to leave pointless death to new life  
I am free; I am free; I am **free**!!!

Mic's activity and fire soon gathered a few campers who joined him to enjoy the heat in the chilly dawn. One of them quietly placed a pot of water on the feature provided, and assured all that the sock containing the coffee grounds he had placed in the pot had been thoroughly scrubbed the day before. They all waited respectfully while Dep finished writing the poem.

As they continued to wait for the coffee to mature the poem was shared, and a candid respectful discussion of spiritual matters ensued.

The skills and tools he had gained in appropriate technologies soon made him a valuable asset, and these techniques gradually spread throughout the camp. They also provided a venue in which his newfound intimacy with God was well received.

Between this relocation and name change, he hoped that all traces and rumors of his whereabouts would soon fade from all but corporate computers.

### *Intervention*

The hunter who had pursued Dep to rock band slouched in disgusted anger as he was being debriefed. "He *was there*! He had been seen by several of them that very morning, and was expected to show up for lunch at any moment. I think that a young lady named Dawn had something to do with it."

Thirty miles from where the meeting was taking place, Dep froze. He immediately began pouring forth prayer for Dawn – having no understanding of why. He didn't even know the words but was muttering something out of the intensity of his spirit.

The hunter continued. "She bolted from the van the instant it stopped and charged up the hill well ahead of us all. I suspect she went to warn him. But how could she possibly know? She seemed to be mocking me – 'Dep who?' was all she would answer."

"We need another strategy," said the captain. "We need to make him come to *us*. Do you think you could find this 'Dawn person' again?"

"It would do no good; she's obviously on to me."

"It might get her attention if you told her you overheard that his friend Lane was to be assassinated. Then tell her you'll provide more details if you hear anything else. I *know* this Deputy, and he'll show up if he feels he has any hope of protecting his friend. If that doesn't work, we'll have to use the girl.

"What if he doesn't believe we will harm her?"

"That is why we will have to kill Lane – whether the deputy shows up or not, he will at least know we are serious. We *will* catch this guy."

One Monday evening a couple of weeks later as Mic and others were huddled around a concealed fire ( Mic had taught them about the shallow excavations and other technologies he had experienced

among the Jesus nomads), Bradley asked Mic if he knew of a young woman named Dawn. Seizing his emotions before they could flagrantly betray him, he casually asked: "Dawn who?"

"One of our number makes weekend visits to Stag, to visit his daughter, and stays at Paco camp while he's there. When this Dawn woman found out where he was from, she was desperate to get word to someone new in this camp that there was a plot to kill his friend Lane."

In an act of supreme discipline, Mic quietly responded: "Keep me posted. Lane was the one who invented some of the technologies I've been sharing."

A week later Bradley chased down Mic as he was explaining the construction of a bolt-together dome frame to a small group of campers. "I've more info on the plot against Mr. Lane: Supposedly, the hit is to take place next Saturday as he arrives at his regular time for the Saturday farmer's market. I'm sure somebody will warn him by then."

"I'm sure somebody will," said Mic.

That evening Mic took Bradley aside and explained that he would be gone for a few days. "I'll be traveling light and leaving most of my stuff here – if that's OK. If a young lady should show up looking for somebody like me, please take care of her, and let her use my shelter if necessary – or anything else of mine."

"I'm beginning to get the picture Mr. whoever-you-are, It's been a pleasure to have you around, and we'll do whatever we can – with the utmost discretion."

Dawn was very agitated as she wandered around Rock Band. She had been taking every available ride back and forth between there and Paco camp, in frantic hopes of learning anything she could about Dep. As she entered the loft for the second time in as many days she was startled. "Dep!"

When she saw the pistol on his hip and the case with the disassembled rifle she screamed "NO!! Can't you see that this whole thing is a trap?"

"Hello, by-the-way," said Dep. "I was hoping for a hug, but at the moment I have been compelled to uh... 'dig up my past.'"

How could he be so cold? wondered Dawn, Who is this person?

"I am so sorry," said Dep, "I should not have let you love me – nor allowed myself to love you. I'm a warrior, honey, and I'm really not good enough for anybody – let alone someone as precious as you. Trap or no, if I do not at least try I could never live with myself."

"But you could get killed!"

"Hopefully not, but that's what warriors do sometimes. If I survive, immediately run north, and inquire about Bradley."

"Please don't," she pleaded, standing squarely in his way.

Without a word or another direct glance, a firm hand coldly pushed her aside and he lowered his light assembled pack by rope and followed it to the ground. He proceeded resolutely to the southeast to follow the foothills to a point east and slightly south of Stag – the direction from which he would approach the town. He didn't dare look back. Get it together and do your job, he told himself.

Friday afternoon a homeless man with an obvious limp passed westward along the southern edge of Stag. From a nearby dumpster behind an office supply store he emptied the contents of a large trash bag and replaced them with his disassembled rifle, a blanket, and a few other items. His pistol was tucked well out of sight beneath his heavy jacket. His full beard was unkempt and pushed sideways in the opposite direction of the leg he pretended to favor. He wore no dark glasses, but his filthy ball cap rode low over his eyes. He had purchased a small slug of whiskey, and enjoyed a few swallows before "spilling" it on his jacket. He had made himself as disgusting as he could allow himself to be. He commandeered a shopping cart to which he added an additional random trash bag – selected for the light weight of its contents.

As he gradually limped towards the empty parking lot in which the farmer's market would flourish the next morning he began to study the surroundings. There was only one entrance and two exits to this parking lot. The other two had been blocked off by movable obstructions. It would be extremely difficult to exit quickly by vehicle, especially if there were other cars waiting to exit. It would take a fool to try, and these people were not fools. The most likely option would be a sniper on a rooftop or balcony.

There were a few high rises to the south – a parking structure, a hospital, and a three story apartment complex. Across the street to the east there was an event center with four levels of rooms, topped by a glass-encased complex of lounge, exercise facilities, and conference rooms. The parking lot serviced a largely abandoned strip mall, with the farmer's market providing its last hope of prosperity.

Dep shoved his shopping cart into a hedge opposite the entrance to the parking lot on the west side. This was the best he could do. It gave him a view of the available multi-story buildings. It also afforded a view of the rooftops of the single story structures comprising the deteriorating mall. Dep spent the next hour and a half pushed partially back into the hedge, exploring and mentally cataloging the visible balconies and rooftops, in terms of their potential as sniper nests. He then wandered off in search of a place to spend the night.

Returning to the hedge first thing in the morning, he assembled his rifle and added the flash suppressor. He covered it with a trash bag and began to scan the view with his binoculars, frequently glancing at cars as they entered the parking lot and passed before him.

As the market hour approached he noted that two or three balconies in the event center were occupied by people enjoying coffee and snacks. Suddenly he recognized Lane's pickup entering the lot, and desperately re-scanned the event center. A sliding glass door was partially open on a fourth level apartment balcony. A shot fired from deep within the apartment would not be seen or located from the outside.

Dep was astonished as the woman on the balcony stood up: "How did *she* get out of jail?" he muttered, "That's Wanda!"

He didn't have time to rest and precisely aim his rifle, so he instantly dropped to a sitting position, steadied his weapon on his knee, and fired into the broad sliding glass door – just as Wanda was about to enter. As she jumped back, Dep fired two rounds into the massive glass panels in the lounge immediately above the apartments. The clatter and visual effect of the cascading glass descending into the balcony made a terrifying display that Wanda may or may not have survived. In any case, her suite would immediately be entered and all evidence – including her sniper equipment – would be impounded. Profound legal complications would be unavoidable.

Dep immediately broke down and stowed his weapon, and placed it under the bag of trash in the shopping cart. Abandoning the cart, he raced to the three story apartment building to the south and promptly kicked in the door of Wanda's second floor apartment, closing what was left of it and bracing it with a chair-back under the doorknob. Then on to her computer. He promptly download the contents of his treasured flash drive onto her computer, posted it on her facebook account, and emailed it as an attachment after grouping and mailing it to her entire email address book. Wanda honey, you should have stayed in jail!

To a pounding on the door, he responded with: "I forgot my key!" He quickly retrieved his flash drive, exited to the balcony and dropped to the ground.

Now that the contents of the flash drive had been irretrievably splattered across the cyberspace, the drive itself and the security concerns motivating his pursuit became pointless. Aside from a seething hatred of Dep himself, there remained no official reason for pursuit to continue. Even so, the momentum of the monumental effort would have him shot on sight if he was ever seen again.

Returning to the farmer's market and its audience gawking at the event center, he quickly located an astonished Lane and cautioned him to keep a low profile until some of the confusion settled down. "Stay among friends." Lane should be safe now.

As a homeless man limped his way through the crowd he tossed the flash drive onto the passenger side floor of a parked police car, and then proceed to retrieve his trash topped shopping cart. Limping south through the town, he followed a seasonal stream bed dotted with small camps towards the foothills to the east. Soon the cart and his limp were abandoned as he restructured his backpack for the journey ahead of him. He circled the rock band area by a half mile, and shortly after sunset he settled in for the night into a position where he would be able to view his loft and a couple of the ridges and canyons.

After a period of cautious watching he quietly stowed his pack and eased himself into the loft for a parting moment of reverie – it was just something he had to do. Chiseled in small neat letters on the wall opposite the window he discovered the words “I LOVE YOU”, and it was signed “Sue.” Dep was briefly puzzled, but then he smiled, and in slightly larger letters inscribed the word “Too!” beneath the script. And then, it was with deep agony, that he made himself cleanse the wall of Dawn’s final message to him. Enough! He rubbed the surfaces of the hammer, chisels and any items that might carry fingerprints with sand, and then slipped out of the loft.

He shouldered his load and set off into on a journey to nowhere in particular; no friends, no roots, no destination, no purpose, and if he should ever encounter a connection to the chaos he had left behind, he would likely lose his life as well. Who was he? He had found purpose, friends, his Creator, and even love. And yet: In just fifteen minutes of mayhem this warrior-beast had arisen within him, saved a life (and possibly taken one), and unleashed the darkest secrets of an international police organization that the world in general had no idea even existed. He soon settled in for the night on a comfortable patch of sand beneath a dry seasonal waterfall. He had a decision to make and had no reason to continue on until it was achieved.

As the eastern sky began to awaken with the approaching dawn, Dep dug deep into the dry sand and gravel. How deep? Just deep. He then removed the protective coverings from his rifle and pistol and tossed them into the hole – along with all ammunition holsters, related hardware, and all evidence that any of this had ever existed. Nature would soon begin to deteriorate this now unprotected hardware, and continue to bury all remaining traces. It was also fitting that his street name was now Michael – the warrior angel. Mic was still a warrior, but now serving a kingdom that was not of this world. He resolved at this point that this would be his final name – no matter what happened.

After a few miles of travel he realized that his feet had been carrying him towards the large camp to the north, and his last rational hope of ever hearing about Dawn again. In spite of his desire to protect himself from annoying emotions he was forced to realize that he *did* have friends; people who cared – and even loved him. But they were out of reach, would have no idea where he was, and would be in danger if they ever got in touch. But he had in fact left a trail of gratitude and protection among those he must now leave behind. So for the moment, he would travel north to a place where he was known only as Mic.

After a nap early the next morning he entered the camp and was approached by Bradly.

“Welcome back Mic. There’s a young lady named Sue here who claims to be a friend of yours.”

### *Sunset*

Mic and Sue found themselves surprisingly at peace in this homeless camp – despite the looming challenges before them. They had only their street names, and no trace of official identity. Most in the sprawling homeless camp had access to food stamps and some form of welfare, disability, or retirement, but these two had no official identification of any kind. Legal employment would raise official recognition and soon cost them their lives. They had only the God they served, each other, and the belongings they had carried with them. Mic also had the stash of cash he had carried with him when he fled the system a few months before. He could collect recyclables along with his camp-mates for a little while, but he would

eventually need to do more. Even so, compared to the chaotic sequence that had thrown them together, they were enjoying a period of relative stability.

Since their initial night and day of adventure together they had only seen each other for periods of a few hours at a time. These tantalizing moments had forged a bond of mutual purpose and attraction. But the respite of their current situation allowed them time to realize that they were in fact, almost total strangers.

As they were enjoying the surreal beauty of a pollution-enhanced sunset they began to contemplate its metaphysical symbology. Normally water vapor would fragment the sunlight into spectacular beauty during seasons when it was more available, but now during the cloudless hot days of summer the sun would set with little fanfare. But filth and pollution had stepped up to fill the gap, and by taking advantage of the sun's daily journey over the horizon, pollution had arisen to pose as beauty.

As the growing darkness consumed the brilliant angry sky, it morphed into deeper reds, struggling to compete with the filthy haze that had provided it with color a few minutes before. But even in victory, the haze itself was betrayed by its own weakness. It had depended upon the setting sun to put it on display, and it was now fading into the horizon as a filthy fringe of atmospheric mud. It was soon being penetrated by stars bearing energy of their own, that easily bypassed its shallow influence. Soon the full moon arose with stately beauty above the chaos that had briefly cluttered the horizon.

As Mic and Sue contemplated the growing intensity of the stars, she turned to Mic: "There are billions of us, and we will still be here long after the filth has settled."

"So what happens next?"

"I guess we will soon find out, but for now, just hold me."

