



The Day  
**THE WORLD**  
Went

**COMPLETELY MAD**  
**(Part II)**

**Book 2 of the Spook&Ghost Trilogy**

**Barry Rosenberg**

*For  
my girls  
Anusha, Eve, Fi, Jess, Jo & Wayan  
and  
my GALZ  
Gemma, Amanda, Lola & Ziggy  
without whom  
life wouldn't be  
nearly so joyful.*

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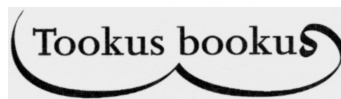
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## **PRE-WORD**

### **Cleveland, Ohio. 1962**

When Harris Meade's wife left him, he seriously contemplated suicide. Instead he went to Greenland.

Harris, a short, slim man in his late twenties, was a lot of things, some not to his own liking, and, as his marriage of three years began to falter, hardly any of them positive to his wife.

Harris's wife Sheila, who previous to their meeting had experienced any number of males who were no more than grabbing, oversexed, aging adolescents, had fallen for Harris because of his gentleness. He definitely was that, as a person, a husband, a lover. In time, she began to realize his gentleness had a backspin to it: he was dull as tofu.

He would come home from his job as a systems analyst, have dinner, which his wife would cook, or more often, remove from the freezer, thaw out and pop in the oven. Harris ate everything on his plate and never complained. Then he would either sit in the living room, always in the same chair, and read till bedtime – Harris enjoyed reading about things no one else seemed to care about – or spend hours at the wheel of a backyard pottery shed, even though his finished pots were, frankly, pretty ordinary.

On weekends he would go for long walks. Early on, Sheila would go with. But, as with everything Harris did, the walks never went anywhere. A couple hours out, a

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couple hours back, always the same route. She stopped accompanying him shortly after the first year of marriage.

She complained they never did anything, never went to interesting places. Sheila wanted to go to parties, to fancy restaurants and fashionable clubs; she wanted to go dancing. Harris never argued; he simply – and gently – begged off, then went to his favorite chair to read or to the shed and his mediocre pots.

He began to suggest she go instead with Aaron, a co-worker of his, whom he occasionally brought home for dinner. Aaron was single, talked a lot, laughed a lot, joked. Harris didn't understand jokes, and though a pleasant fellow, rarely laughed. Aaron liked parties and restaurants and clubs. He loved to dance.

Harris had suspected Aaron might be gay. He only discovered Aaron wasn't gay when he learned he and Sheila were having an affair. Everybody seemed to know they were having an affair except Harris. Well, maybe he knew as well, but denied it. Lord knows, she was leaving signs all over the place. Finally:

“Harris, Aaron and I are having an affair,” she announced one day during the third year of their marriage. “Surely, *surely*, you must have noticed!”

He absorbed the news in silence. Then: “Am I that terrible a husband?”

“Not terrible, no. Only dull. Harris, you are dull at every aspect of life. You are dull, dull, *dull*. Before we met I complained long and loud about men's high levels of testosterone. Your levels, on the other hand, are so low I wonder whether you have any at all.”

And she left him to go live with Aaron.

And Harris thought seriously about killing himself.

\*

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### **Thule, Greenland, 1962**

He didn't go to Greenland immediately. Rather he took a job with the contracting company for the Ballistic Missile Early Warning System, located in New Jersey. The job title was personnel services coordinator.

Greenland actually wasn't his first choice of locales. Antarctica was. But no jobs were available there. Nor were there any jobs open in Greenland for systems analysts. He had no idea what, exactly, a personnel services coordinator did, but he wanted desperately to get as far away from his wife and Aaron, and from people who might ask him embarrassing questions about why she had left him.

In his tiny New Jersey office he read up on the Ballistic Missile Early Warning System, and about Thule Air Base, which is where BMEWS was situated in Greenland. Eight thousand men resided on base. No women. Perfect.

BMEWS, he learned, was the first line of radar defense in the West. Three radar stations – Alaska, Greenland and the north of England – were hooked into the North American Air Defense Command (NORAD), the Strategic Air Command (SAC) and the Pentagon. The system worked thusly:

Unidentified objects are tracked by radar over the North Pole. The data is sent to a computer, which confirms their authenticity as missiles (and not 'space junk' – broken-up satellite, comet, airliner, etc.) and plots time and destination of impact in America. NORAD, SAC and the Pentagon go on green alert. The US President is called. Allied missile centers are notified.

The missiles come on. Yellow alert. All SAC jets are scrambled. Underground missile silos are activated. Nuclear subs are readied. The Russian premier is contacted. He confirms or denies.



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The missiles keep coming. They reach a certain pre-set distance from projected impact. Red alert. Western ICBMs are launched. Nuclear war.

None of this had anything to do with defense. There was no defense. Merely a pre-strike retaliatory offense. Neither side cared to be caught with its trousers down.

Harris was with the BMEWS home office in New Jersey a few months, learning the ins and outs of his job and the environment he soon would be headed for. He learned that nothing grows in Thule (pronounced 'Toolie'.) No trees, no flowers, not a blade of grass. It sits on the very edge of the polar icecap, on the northwest coast of the world's largest (and most frozen) island.

Three months a year Thule sees no sunlight. Three months a year Thule has no darkness. The other six months range in various proportions of day to night as the planet chugs along on its lopsided axis around the sun.

Freak windstorms abound, called 'phases'. They come on suddenly and can bear velocities of more than a hundred miles an hour. And while not much snow falls in this part of the arctic, phases whip previously fallen snow in off the icecap to such an extent that, were you unfortunate enough to be caught out in a 'phase three', you would not see your hand before you – literally – and the most minute patch of exposed skin (or your eyeballs) would experience the sensory equivalent of a thousand wasp stings per moment. Charming place, no?

The actual BMEWS technical station was composed, above ground, of four stationary parabolic tracking radars, each roughly one and a half times the size of a football field, facing northerly in a semi-circle, and a single twelve story high 'golf ball', the interior of which resided "the most sophisticated movable detection radar in the world". Underground, beehives of technical activity were connected by a miniature railway.

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The flight to Thule from nearby Fort Dix took place in June aboard a C-130 – the air force’s infamous ‘flying coffin’. The huge craft was so noisy it was impossible to even hear what the man sitting next to him was saying. Which was fine with Harris, who wasn’t one for small talk.

Upon landing in this strange, barren place (had he been told this was another planet he would not have been surprised in the least), Harris and a dozen fellow civilians were given arctic clothing and survival gear, then assigned temporary quarters in a dormitory. The time was 10pm and the sun still shone brightly. Dead tired, he crawled into a sleeping bag on a lumpy cot and was asleep in moments. After what felt like hardly more than an hour, he was shaken awake.

“Meade, wake up, man. You’re late for work your first day on the job!”

His legs entangled in his bag, Harris in his scramble to become vertical literally fell out of bed. Rising up from the floor, he noted the sun streaming in the window. The clock read 11.15.

Frantically, he began gathering together his clothing, slipping on garments. Then he heard the laughter. Looking around, he saw a dozen men clustered nearby, huge grins on their faces. Harris was totally confused.

“Relax, pal,” one of the men told him. “It’s 11.15 *pee-em*. That’s what’s called the midnight sun out there. Welcome to the top of the world. Now get yourself some sleep. Busy day tomorrow.”

This stunt, it was explained, was a practical joke played on every newcomer their first day in the Greenland summer.

Harris didn’t get the joke.

During his orientation tour the following day, Harris made two curious discoveries. The detection radar, “operable twenty-four hours a day, every day of the year, scanning the skies so the Free World may sleep in peace”,

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had not been functioning for some months. Reason? The BMEWS contracting company (which also recorded Elvis Presley) and the sub-contractor that designed and built the main gear (they also made many of the tires Americans drove on) were locked in litigation as to who was at fault over the gear's failure nine and a half years shy of its ten year warranty.

Second point of interest was the tracking radar's having spotted three unidentified (= Russian) missiles headed for Salt Lake City just the day before. Two months prior, five missiles had appeared destined to level Las Vegas. And six weeks before that...

These spottings, which the computer clearly had identified as genuine articles, in every case (and apparently there had been several over the few years of BMEWS' existence) would mysteriously disappear from the screens minutes, sometimes moments, prior to the red alert point. (The story going around had it that the Soviets vehemently denied having any part in these foul-ups – though they were laughing their heads off over them – and the CIA was unable to prove otherwise.) The BMEWS brass, as well as those right up to the White House, were growing very, very edgy.

But Harris had nothing to do with all this. The responsibility of the personnel services coordinator was to make sure the thousand horny civilian employees of BMEWS did not grow bored. So he put out a weekly newsletter. He oversaw the airings of a makeshift radio station that carried security warnings every 15 minutes ("Can You Be Absolutely Sure The Man Next To You Is Not One Of...Them?"). As director of the BMEWS Recreation Association (BRA) he staged events varied and sundry. Who possibly could grow bored in such a delightful environment with exhilarating activities like Wednesday night bingo and weekly dominoes and checkers tournaments?

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Greenland then was owned by Denmark, and the arrangement whereby the US leased land for the base stipulated that a small percentage of BMEWS personnel be Danish. Except the Americans didn't trust the Danes (or anyone else). So the jobs allocated these men were strictly bottom of the barrel, cooks and cleanup, mainly. Which attracted a class of men societally a notch or two below your typical Copenhagen bank president. In fact, every single Dane working at BMEWS was gay. Which underlined the Americans' contention that Danes are not fit to be trusted.

Harris found the Danes to be sensitive, well read and affable, in stark contrast to the macho redneck Yanks, and in short order his few friends at Thule were Danish.

A number of the Danes had established contact with Eskimos from a village twenty miles off base. Once a cook named Lars arranged for Harris to take a brief but dazzling dogsled ride with two Eskimos named Narak and Ajadnazak. Another time Lars confided that the Eskimos had told him of a city of white people that existed under the ice and with whom they carried on trade. Eskimo lore abounded with colorful myths.

Harris lived in the special sector of the base set aside for BMEWS civilians. Facilities were relatively comfortable military dormitories which were shared two per apartment. Harris's roommate was also a Harris, Fred Harris, a serious sort (most engineers were, he found) who spent all his free time puttering with chemicals that constantly were filling their quarters with a foul-looking but odorless, and, he was assured, harmless yellow fog.

Even more than Harris, Fred was so lacking in sense of humor he was forever falling prey to practical jokes. Some of these gags (there being little else to do here) were quite elaborate.

Once he asked Harris to help drag into their apartment a huge crate, which he said contained a bearskin

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rug someone had sold him dirt-cheap. (There are no bears in Greenland.) In order to cure properly (he had been told), the skin needed to be turned in its hermetically sealed crate twice a day for two weeks.

In no time the box began to issue a scent that would stiff a bull rhino at a hundred paces. Harris was occasionally forced to vacate the premises as the smell grew more and more ferocious; Fred, undaunted, turned his stinky box twice a day while setting forth his yellow clouds. At the conclusion of the prescribed two weeks he opened the crate with the anticipation of a Dickensian orphan on Christmas morn. It was loaded with decomposed fish. And even then old humorless Fred had a time sorting out what had become of his treasured bearskin.

Occasionally the roommates could be found silently eating together in the civilians' mess hall. Once some of their fellow workers sat at the same table, a little apart from the two loners. One yelled down, "Hey, you know if the two of you got married, one of you would become Harris Harris!" The cluster of fellow workers guffawed heartily.

Fred gave Harris a puzzling look. "Why would we get married? We're both male."

Harris just shrugged. Like Fred, he had no idea why the comment was funny.

Another time Fred wondered whether Harris had cottoned on to what the men working for BMEWS had in common.

"We're all social misfits," he explained. "We're here mainly because we don't fit in down stateside. Oh, they'll all tell you they're here because the money's good, that with a seven day work week and no tax if you put in the full eighteen months, they'll leave here with a bundle. Thing is, most don't want to leave when their term is up. Sure, they'll take a vacation, either back home or to Denmark because the flights there are free, gamble away half their money and screw themselves blind, but nine

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times of ten they clamor to get back here. You know why? Because it's safe, it's comfortable, and they fit in.

"You remember that series of tests you took back in Jersey to see whether you're qualified to be here? The results are figured out like a bell curve. They lop off twenty-five percent on one side of the curve because scoring there means you're prone to some form of anti-social psychosis. But they also lop off twenty-five percent on the other side because that area indicates you're too normal. Meaning you fit in so well with family and society there's a strong possibility you'll get homesick and cut short your stay here."

"And the remaining fifty percent?"

"Social misfits," Fred replied. "Like us."

\*

Fred was most secretive about the work he was doing in their shared living quarters. He'd come back from the tech site every evening, have dinner in the mess hall or simply take a sandwich in his room, then get right into dabbling with his chemicals. Harris, growing ever more curious, finally came right out and asked.

"If you promise to not breathe a word, okay? What I'm hoping to do is replicate the atmosphere in Los Angeles." When Harris appeared completely bewildered, he added: "I am creating the exact smog LA has due to auto emissions, only making it safe. That's the tough part, making it a hundred percent safe. But I feel certain I'm on the right path. Got it?"

Harris never bothered to ask again.

\*

He'd been in Greenland a full year the night the knock came at the door. It was early summer, and he'd just

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returned following a scrabble tournament with some of the Danes. Fred was not in, which was a bit odd for Fred was always in the room, working on his chemicals.

The rapping at the door was thunderous. Harris opened it to two huge air police, an unusual sight as the 'apes' rarely came into the civilian sector.

"You Harris?" one of them growled. He replied he was. "You're to come with us," the AP declared in a voice that made Harris's skin crawl. "Bring your parka and mukluks, you're goin' on a little trip."

At once Harris got it. They were after *Fred* Harris, and were part of another prank.

"Listen, I think you want –"

"Orders say Harris. You just told us you're him, right? Okay, pal, shake a leg."

He supposed it was a matter of still grieving over his loss of Sheila. Too, his kinship with the Danes had left him few friends amongst his fellow Americans. Practical jokes were never played on Harris. He was, frankly, lonely and depressed, felt terribly unloved. Whatever these guys had cooked up for old Fred, it must be one hell of a gag, what with APs in on the action.

He didn't stop to think. Just grabbed his heavy arctic gear and made out the door. As they walked three abreast down the corridor he thought he heard footsteps far behind them, followed by the sound of a door opening and closing. He did not look around.

Outside, a four-wheel drive pickup sat with its motor idling. They climbed in and took off towards the tech site. Harris sat there between the stone-faced APs, beaming. Whatever it was, this deal, it now was his.

Halfway to the station they pulled off onto a narrow, winding dirt track. The ride was bone rattling, but he was enjoying himself too much to care. Twenty minutes later they stopped abruptly at the base of a small hill.

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“Okay, friend, this’s as far as we go,” the driver said. The other AP opened his door and slid out, signaling Harris to follow. Once he was on the ground the AP climbed back aboard.

“Just over the hill,” the driver motioned with a nod of the head as he began to pull away. “And good luck.”

“Yeah,” called his partner with a chortle. “Good luck is right.”

The pickup tore off leaving him alone, cold and baffled. Slowly he made his way up the hill. What he saw from the top made him break out in a rare boyish grin.

Squatting on the very edge of the icecap, two Eskimos of indiscernible age were drawing on tiny hand-rolled cigarettes. Nearby was a sled, and a little further on a team of huskies rested comfortably.

Both men rose as Harris raced down the hill.

“Narak! Ajadnazak!” he cried. “Boy, am I glad to see you guys. This whole thing is a bit of a foul-up. See, they came for Harris and, well, I’m Harris of course, but they meant Fred, to get him out of the room and here on the ice with you. Only I’m here instead. Get it?”

The Eskimo he knew as Narak beamed a broad, toothless grin in his wrinkled, red, leathery face.

“Me Ajadnazak,” he said.

“*Me* Narak!” smiled the other.

“Oh. Well, anyway, I’m here. I know it’s not right because for sure Fred could use the air. But I’m pretty glad too, y’know?”

Taking him by the elbow, Narak led him to the sled.

“You’re sure it’s okay now, fellas? I mean, I’d love a ride on such a beautiful night. Well, day-night, if you know what I mean. But maybe it isn’t fair –”

The Eskimo shifted some parcels and gently pushed him down. The other signaled the dogs, which, on their own, assembled into formation with a grand burst of canine commotion. Before he knew it skins were placed over his



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outstretched legs, Narak stood on the sled behind him, the dogs dug in and he felt the sled lurch forward.

As Ajadnazak trotted alongside they soon picked up speed. The dogs – eight of them – were fanned out before them, their individual leads converging into a single line of eight leather strands that ran back over Harris's shoulder into the hand of the driver. He cracked a whip over them and the dogs as one moved into higher gear. Soon they were gliding smoothly across the ice.

The midnight sun sat just above the southern horizon, casting long shadows to the left. The packed-down snow glittered and sparkled like an ocean of diamonds. The only sounds were the patter of thirty-two dog legs and two human ones and the scuffing of wooden sled runners on the hard white surface beneath him. The cold, clean air smacked his face and flew up his nose and tickled Harris gloriously.

He figured the ride would last ten or fifteen minutes, but to his satisfaction seemed to go on and on. The Eskimos would change places every now and then, one jumping off to run alongside while the other took a turn at driving.

When a dog had to poop, it would pull out of line, move to the outside of the team, squat on the run and return to its original place, miraculously without entangling lines.

The air grew colder and Harris pulled the skins to just under his eyes.

He reckoned it was a couple hours later when he spotted something on the horizon ahead. Everything is so white on the icecap it's impossible to judge distance, and what he assumed to be a few hundred yards off was really a few miles. At last they came to a village.

A dozen huts were carved mainly of ice and fortified with corrugated iron salvaged, no doubt, from the air base. Everyone, it seemed, was out to greet them, or perhaps it was just Harris as a white man was a rarity here.

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People came up to him, jabbering to one another as they peered into his face in wonder. Kids, too, a number of them. While their elders unloaded bundles from the sled and replaced them with others, the little ones took Harris by the sleeve and escorted him to the last, and largest, hut in the village.

Inside was a sight he never expected to see. Fruit and vegetables, fresh ones, piled high to the ceiling. He couldn't believe his eyes. Where had they come from? Surely they didn't grow here – nothing did.

Narak and Ajadnazak looked in and chuckled loudly at Harris's incredulity. Ajadnazak pointed to him, then motioned out across the icecap as if to say, Over there; far over there. Narak stepped in and piled Harris's cradled arms with figs, bananas, papayas. Next thing he knew he was back on the dogsled and they were off again, the village, and kindly villagers, fading behind.

Now, Harris had a pretty lousy sense of direction; nonetheless he swore they were heading east, away from the base.

"Narak, are we taking a shortcut or what?" he wondered of the Eskimo running alongside me. The man smiled broadly and shook his head.

"Me Ajadnazak," he said.

"*Me* Narak!" came a voice from behind.

At some point Harris fell asleep. He must have slept for a considerable time because when he woke the sun was much higher. He munched on some fruit for a while, then fell asleep again. He was brought to an abrupt awakening some time later by the absence of motion and total lack of sound. They had stopped; the Eskimos were several yards away, cutting up chunks of raw meat for their tired and ravenous dogs.

Harris threw off the skins and got up to stretch and void his bulging bladder. He'd moved a few paces off when

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both men called out. They were motioning in a direction different to the one he was taking.

“You. Go,” they said.

It struck him: from his brief training in arctic survival he recalled warnings about the dangers of invisible ice bridges and crevasses when walking on the icecap, especially in summer.

Harris hollered over his thanks and changed direction, stepping out with renewed confidence. Some minutes later, having yellowed the ice, he began returning to the sled.

“You. Go!” the Eskimos shouted, vigorously pointing beyond him.

“Aw, that’s alright. I really don’t need any more exercise. Besides, I’m not all that sure of myself out here.”

“*You! Go!!*” they hollered. Nonplussed, Harris stood solid. The two of them began advancing. Gone were their friendly smiles, their comradely manner. In their hands were knives, long, sharp and dripping blood.

“Listen, enough’s enough already!” Harris heard himself cry out. “I’m not Fred Harris, don’t you understand? I’m already late for work and when I get back –”

When the Eskimos had halved the distance between them, Harris took a step back, then another. With a sigh he turned and began walking slowly away. Five steps, ten, fifteen. He’d go a few more and –

Something was happening.

A long, ugly cracking sound. Then the ice began moving beneath him.

And he began sinking.

*Crevasse!*

Furiously, futilely, Harris tried to work his way free. Each step he took, however, more and more ice granulated around him and sucked him towards the center of a slowly forming pit.

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His legs were prisoners. He twisted around, waving his arms frantically, shouting for help. The Eskimos continued to walk easily towards him, once again smiling.

The lower half of Harris's body was now hidden beneath the snow. In a few moments his head dipped below the icecap's surface. The crevasse seemed to have stopped expanding outward; still, he continued to sink. Then he could feel his feet moving freely, then his lower legs, then his thighs, and then...

Harris looked up to see Narak and Ajadnazak standing on the rim. They were grinning. And waving.

"Good! Luck!" they called down.

The crevasse yawned and swallowed Harris like a shark gulping a minnow.

### **Kama, 1963**

Colors. Shapes and forms, yes, but mainly it was the colors. The grass so green and trees so brown and sky so blue. Even though it wasn't real sky, still the blue was beautiful. And hills and mountains – well, one mountain, actually – and lovely little houses. And people: people walking, jogging, riding bicycles, whizzing around in those funny little driverless cars that ran on free and inexhaustible electromagnetic energy: friendly people, old and young, warm, loving people, and they too were of many and beautiful colors.

Wonderland? Oz? Followed the rabbit down a hole or suffered a knock on the head and these were hallucinations? None of the above. Welcome to Kama.

The word itself is Sanskrit for love. But wait, that didn't come till later. The beginning of Kama's place on Earth took place ages and ages ago, well before the earliest days of recorded history. Picture:

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A giant meteor crashes through the atmosphere and carves a hole roughly twenty-six miles in diameter by half a mile deep in the Greenland icecap. Meteor strikes had happened before, they will happen again. What makes this one unique is the icecap. Heat and radiation from the sunken meteor prevent ice from re-forming except at the very top of the new concavity, at the original surface. Over the millennia as the heat diminishes, this new layer of ice expands until by 1963 it measures nearly a hundred feet thick. The world's largest ice bridge.

That's geography. Now the history.

During the late 1930s a group of eminent Jewish scientists and intellectuals, plus their families, make a bold and well-orchestrated escape from Germany to Denmark. Two years later, upon advance word that Hitler is about to go back on his promise to the Danes and invade, these people flee once more, this time by boat headed for Iceland. They never make it. Instead, one nautical catastrophe after another sweeps them far and wide of Iceland, out on the Arctic Sea and up the treacherous west coast of Greenland. When finally the boat comes to rest – virtually in splinters – there is not one amongst the survivors who does not hold that it is the hand of God that has directed them here.

The Jews were found by Eskimos, who cared for them and nursed them back to health. In time the Eskimos, who knew all about the underground ice cavity, led them there, and the refugees at last had a place to finish the work they'd begun in Denmark: development of the ultimate weapon that would defeat the Nazis.

Their mission was all but completed when news first of Germany's surrender, then of Nagasaki and Hiroshima, came over short-wave. The atomic destruction of those two cities stunned people who had thought themselves immune from shock. For they were well aware of man's capabilities in terms of inhumanity. What they

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had never dreamt was that technological aptitude one day would measure up.

First move was to dismantle their weaponry. Second was to vote – unanimously – to remain in their new sanctuary and to keep it secret from the topside world. Whereupon, once again, they turned to God for help.

– You delivered us here (they reasoned); you kept us alive. Why?

– To do my work, of course, God replied (through the interpretation of the sole rabbi in the group).

– But we thought that was to destroy Hitler.

– No, My children. I brought you here to be my new Noahs. For there will one day in the foreseeable future be rains: rains of a different kind than you know, terrible rains, far worse than any rains before. Rains that very well may destroy the world I have bestowed upon the human race. This place is your ark, a ship that shall go untouched by the terrible rains. Understand that I am giving you not just refuge. I am giving you a mission. You are to preserve existing life, yes, but more, you are to better it, give it a quality until now it has lacked. My children, I charge you with breeding Love.

– Love? *Oy vey*, whoever heard of such a thing! (the people moaned, their souls yet showing deep scars).

– Now look here. (God smiled beatifically.) (Or so the rabbi claimed He did.) I Love you. Isn't that a nice start? Just learn to Love yourselves. Then one another. And let it spread out from there. What can be simpler than that?

And so, Kama.

Just as the Israelis would learn to grow pineapples in the desert, just as people in northern Scotland would grow twenty kilo cabbages in the lifeless soil of Findhorn, Kamans, armed with brilliant minds, faith and a mission of Love, grew dates and avocados and papayas under the icecap in the dead permafrost of Greenland.

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Heat and energy presented no problem. They merely laser-bored a hole down through the innards of the planet and tapped the clean and endless thermal energy there.

Further use of lasers and the development of electromagnetic and anti-gravitational systems enabled them to move mountains. Create one, too.

Climate was equally simple. The mountaintop was cold, the shores of the artificial lake were tropically warm. Clouds would appear in the perfect 'sky' above, and it rained lightly every Tuesday and Thursday evening and occasionally Saturday mornings.

While Kama was being converted into an under-ice Eden, the rest of the world already had forgotten the lessons of war just past. In both East and West, writers, artists, scientists, thinkers, people with imagination and a true understanding of the human condition were crying out for humanity to be set free...and were being censored, ostracized, institutionalized for their unreasonable/counter-revolutionary/trouble-making views.

Often such people suddenly went missing. Or they were said to have had tragic accidents. Or simply died of natural causes. The fingers of accusation quickly were pointed this way and that by one element or another. But rarely was a finger pointed downward. For that, invariably, is where they went.

The Kamans had constructed tunnels through the earth to dozens of points on the topside world. Pneumatic tubes enabled them to travel to the opposite side of the planet at speeds faster than sound. Their own ingenuity, as well as rigorous training (plus, they claimed, the strength of Love), enabled them to spirit dissident after dissident into the secret tunnels and shuttle them back to Kama, often from under the very noses of captors or surveillance teams. By 1963 more than three thousand 'outlaws' and

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political/religious undesirables had been escorted to this magnificent pocket under the arctic ice.

(He was the first to come *over* the ice. And he did not have to be dropped in through a crevasse. That was Narak's and Ajadnazak's idea. Another practical joke.)

\*

When he opened his eyes, he found himself looking directly into another set of eyes, these almond-shaped, mascara-lined and warm.

The face containing those eyes pulled back revealing a room with pleasant pastel-shaded walls. The woman whose face had been so close to his was perhaps the most beautiful woman Harris had ever seen.

"So," he said, his voice hardly more than a croak. "Heaven?"

The woman smiled. "Actually," she replied in a deep, thickly-accented voice, "the other direction."

"This is hell?"

Now she let loose a delicious laugh. "Neither, dahlink. I shall explain all in good time. For the moment understand the package of your precious self has been delivered safely and soundly, if a little, shall we say, unconventionally."

A tall, elegant Russian (Harris reckoned around forty; he later learned she was nearly sixty), she introduced herself as Olga. "And you, of course, are –"

"Harris," he said quickly. "Just...Harris."

She shrugged. "If you wish. Here you can have any name you desire, do any work you want (or not work at all), be either sex. And if you're not happy with chosen name, work or sex" – she snapped her fingers loudly – "change it! Who cares?"

Harris tossed back the blankets and made to get out of bed. Except there was no bed. He was lying in mid-air,



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and though the air beneath him was solid enough to support his body, he now succeeded in forcing his hand through it. He looked up to Olga about to ask the obvious question, but she had turned around and was headed for the door, motioning for him to follow. Gingerly, he squirmed off the non-bed, carefully eying its non-existence, and began slipping into his clothing.

\*

During the following days Olga explained many things, not all to his understanding by any means. She was his guide, his teacher, and, yes, his Lover. And the Love they made was so different from what he had ever experienced before. It was like, well, like *Love!*

Olga revealed that prior to being rescued from a nasty situation in Moscow, she had been a KGB operative.

“East, West, goot guys, baht guys, everybotty fears, everybotty spies. Oh, poof!” She gracefully flicked an ash from the herbal cigarette in her jewel encrusted holder. “Kama only place where everybotty not *meshuga*.”

“But Olga,” he wondered (about to ask his ten thousandth question), “don’t people get homesick here?”

“Kama our home!” she insisted. Then she smiled. “But yes, of course, many times homesick. That is always why, when I am missing my beloved Russia, I come here.”

She meant the Red Square sector of Kama, where they now sat outside a café overlooking an exact replica of the Kremlin. Harris had already observed scores of such sectors here, designed to alleviate homesickness amongst the immigrants. (The reason Fred Harris was recruited, of course, was the non-toxic smog needed to authenticate ‘Hollywood and Vine’, the Los Angeles sector.)

“What I don’t understand,” he declared, “is why with the way the world is going – Berlin crisis two years ago, last year the Cuban missile crisis, civil wars ongoing

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in Vietnam and China – Kama doesn't use its technical superiority to force everyone to dismantle their bombs?"

"Ha!" Olga snorted. "You think you can force the baboon to eat with knives and forks? Or convince the barracuda to become vegetarian, like all of us here? Love is powerful, but is not magic." She reached across the table and gently stroked his cheek.

"Forget the outside, my dear. They are too far going. One day, *ka-boom!* All finish. Except Kama. Kama safe. No damages. Only Love."

For the next three weeks Olga and Harris were together constantly. They swam in the lake, tramped the bush, climbed Mount Amor, went on safari. They visited St. Mark's Square, the Louvre, the Taj Mahal. Made passionate Love at her place and his own new quarters. Harris felt as though a budding flower deep within him had replaced the dying wrinkled petals he had known so long.

Olga taught him how to live without money (there wasn't any in Kama). To expect nothing, to accept everything. To Love and be Loved in return. Yes, for three weeks life was a dream.

Then one day she took him to a modern building and ushered him into a large room filled with all kinds of fancy looking technical apparatus and shelves of books, books and more books.

"This is yours, my dear," she announced. "To work as you see fit. To create in the name of Love."

Harris felt himself blushing. He had not yet told her who he was, or rather, whom he was not. In the beginning he was afraid he'd get into trouble. Now he was merely ashamed.

Olga gave him a great bear hug, kisses on both cheeks.

"My dear, I must bid you good-by. In a short while I greet a new arrival. One of my own countrymen. It will be like old times strolling through Gorky Park." And, tossing

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her knee-length scarf over a shoulder, she swept majestically out the door.

Alone, Harris walked around the lab ogling instruments, computer screens, and panels of buttons like a small boy, afraid to touch anything. He thought: All this is mine – wow! He thought: What a lucky guy I am to be in such a special place as this. He thought: This is like a dream come true.

He thought: I'm so miserable I could cry.

For the reality was that in an assemblage of life's prize pupils from around the world, he knew himself to be a nobody from nowhere.

Harris spent the next few weeks reading his fascinating books: books on untold subjects, many – most, actually – of which he had never even known about before.

He was sitting there one morning totally absorbed in a book about exotic butterflies when suddenly he became aware of a presence in the room. He turned and saw a man. The man stood very erect. He was smaller than Harris and extremely thin, almost emaciated, with white hair cut close to the skin as possible. His face was pink and wrinkled, his ears stuck out. He had a scar on his left cheek and wore a monocle. He looked to be at least mid-eighties.

"Ach!" the old fellow now exclaimed in a raspy voice. "You are new boy. *Vunderbar!*"

The little man came over and, bowing slightly, offered a limp hand. "I am Herr Steinmann. I am scientist."

"Oh," Harris said. "Are you – are you one of the original scientists who came here from Denmark?"

Herr Steinmann looked embarrassed for a moment, quickly recovered his composure. "*Nein*, I am one of the *momzers* zose poor vonderful scientists were fleeing from. Actually, I come most rrecently from California. I explain. Twenty years ago I am Chermany's number vun fee-two scientist, *ja?* I am designing rrockets for der Fuehrer.

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“After der var der Rrussians kidnap me and I am building rockets for zem. Den der Americans kidnap me and I am building rrockets for *zem*. Alwaysss, you see, I am building rockets for somebody to blow up somebody else.

“Vun day a man I am meeting. He says vhy you alwaysss building rockets and blowing up people? I tell him vhy: I am only following orderss. He says how you like, Herr Steinmann, to come live in a place where you don’t follow orderss, where you don’t build rockets, a place where only dere is Luff. I say, *Ja, ja*. Next I know I am here, in Kama.

“Now Kama is verry beautiful, *nein*? Everybody has Luff, *ja*? Herr Steinmann is happy to be no longer blowing up people. But den –” the old man reduced his voice to a whisper “– I am becoming sooo bored. When I am building rockets and blowing people up I am not bored. So I have a big tink. And from mein big tink I infent mein game. In mein game I am again building rockets and blowing up people, but not for real.”

“Um, I don’t quite understand,” Harris said slowly.

Herr Steinmann looked at his watch. “Come, come. Soon a shuttle leafs from Moscow. Ve haf game, *ja*?”

Cheerfully, the little old man guided him out of the lab and along a corridor. They entered a room twice the size of Harris’s own and housing five times the equipment. He led him to a far corner cluttered with gadgets of every imaginable size and shape.

“Mein baby!” he grinned, running his hands fondly over what appeared to be an oversize pinball machine, only with heaps of buttons and dials. On the lower flat surface was a map of the USSR, while the larger facing panel bore an impression of North America upside down.

“You see, mein young frient, as you know, zere are many tunnels from Kama through the earth, *ja*? One of zese tunnels goes to Moscow so our scouts can bring back persecuted dissident writers, artists, scientists. Few years

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ago I place in der Moscow tunnel a special laser defice I make, *ja?* Now vhen der shuttle leaves Moscow to return here, a signal is sent up which rreplicates rockets to any tracking rradar. One rocket, two rockets, as many rockets you vant, I got. Vhen der shuttle comes home to Kama I qvick switch over to der laser device rright here in mein lab, vvhich continues der simulated rocket signals anvwhere on der map I vant. Understand?"

"Ye-e-es...that is, I think I do. But I didn't know there was a tracking radar in Kama."

"*Nein, nein* – not Kama. Mein game is to fool dose dumkopfs ofer at der radar base in Thule."

Harris could feel, practically hear, his eyes widen, his mouth fall open.

"Then it's YOU who's been tricking BMEWS with those missile scares!"

"You know of mein game already?" Herr Steinmann's eyebrows shot up.

Harris smacked his forehead, a rare display of emotion. "Sure, I've just come from Thule. Why, the whole system, NORAD, SAC, the Pentagon, they go bananas every time there's an unexplained missile attack."

Herr Steinmann became so ecstatic his monocle popped out. The little old man clapped his hands and danced a jig. "Ach, Verner, if you could only see me now!"

A light flashed on the pinball, somewhere in the vicinity of Moscow. Herr Steinmann seated himself on a soft leather chair before the console. In his hand was a remote.

Harris sat on a chair nearby and watched in fascination as four thin red lines began slowly to emerge from the Moscow embarkation point, heading back to the crease between horizontal and vertical boards there in the lab. Tracking the progress of the lines, it was easy to see that the shuttle would arrive at Kama in a fraction of the time it had taken Harris to dogsled over the icecap.

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He had several cups of tea, Herr Steinmann a similar number glasses of schnapps while they waited for the shuttle to arrive. Soon as it did, the old man punched a series of buttons on the remote and the red lines continued past Kama, up the vertical board towards North America. He then turned, a mischievous grin on his lined, pink face.

“Where to? I let you choose.”

‘You mean I get to pick the impact site? Golly!’ The game was becoming infectious. “I’d sure like to blow up Thule. That place is awful.”

“Thule? *Nein*, der game ends too qvickly.”

“Oh. Oh yes, I see. Well then, um, well, ah –”

“At vunce! Ve must set der program at vunce!”

“Okay, okay, hold your horses. It’s not easy to –. Wait. How close can you land those things?”

“Close? Dis iss Herr Steinmann you are talking! I can part your ggrandmama’s mustache at ten thousand kilometers!”

“Great! Let’s go for Disneyland!”

“Disneyland?” He tossed Harris a curious look.

“Sure! Who would suspect the Russians of wanting to nuke Disneyland?”

The little man’s eyes began to sparkle. “*Ja. Ja!*” He madly manipulated the control buttons on his remote.

“*Ja-ja-ja-ja: Disneyland!*” He stood up as tall as his tiny, frail body would allow and joyously clicked his heels together. “*Jawohl, mein Fuehrer*; next stop, Disneyland! Okay Mickey, you rrodent ffruitcake, ve blow your *tuches* to kingdom come! Hee hee hee hee!”

And so for a time they sat there, transfixed by the flow of those four red lines as they moved up the inverted map of North America towards LA. Of course, the ‘missiles’ never got to their destination. Somewhere over Montana, just outside the red alert line projected on the screen, Herr Steinmann punched a button and the lines vanished without a trace.

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The game was over. This brilliantly crafted practical joke had ended, and Harris couldn't help experiencing some regret. It had been so terribly exciting, especially with the picture in mind of all those generals scooting around like geese trying, once again, to sort out what was, or wasn't, happening.

He glanced over to Herr Steinmann. This little old man, this genius, was sitting comfortably in his soft leather chair. His chin rested on his chest, a peaceful smile etched on his thin lips. His tiny fingers remained clamped around the remote. His smooth pink features were highlighted by the glow coming off the upside-down map of North America. He was sound asleep.

\*

A week later Harris made a full confession. No one seemed overly surprised nor deeply disturbed that he was not Fred Harris. They assured him it was perfectly all right to remain in Kama.

He lay on the grass on the left bank of the Seine with a new friend, a beautiful olive-skinned, black-eyed Latina named Inez.

"Harrees," she now intoned, "there are no accidents in the universe, and certainly none here. Everytheeng that happens in Kama happens for a purpose. Haven't you understood thees yet?"

"Yes, but – I don't have any skills, you know? I'm a misfit, have never fit in anywhere. I was a systems analyst in Cleveland, but what could I possibly add to the perfect system you have here? I was a personnel services coordinator at BMEWS, but I really don't think Kama needs me to schedule weekly chess competitions. And as a husband –"

Inez giggled sweetly. "You weell find your true path here. Everyone does – een time." She reached over

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and pushed him playfully onto his back, then rolled on top, placed her lips on his.

“Meanwhile...”

# BOOK ONE

## GHOST

### **South Island of New Zealand, six/seven years from now**

Eighteen months before *The World Went Completely Mad* (Part II), two skinny, vertically in-line, heretofore insignificant islands in the South Pacific, till then primarily known for a beekeeper turned mountain climber (deceased), a terrific rugby team with a curious name, a short chubby filmmaker who made bad movies with exquisite battle scenes, and arguably the worst drivers in the Western world, was declared the center of the known universe.

This phenomenon didn't happen overnight. A change of venues from what was known as Silicon Valley, just south of San Francisco, to the second of the skinny heretofore insignificant islands in the South Pacific, had begun a few years prior supposedly in anticipation of imminent natural disaster. This involved much secret planning, plotting and the quiet purchase of more than ten thousand square miles of land. Further billions were spent



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on construction of offices, factories, housing and services. A number of tiny towns were built throughout the area (in California style, it should be noted), all with schools, hospitals, parks and recreation facilities. Then, and only then, began the relocating of an enormous amount of materials and thousands of people.

As all this was happening, the natives of these two skinny islands, who strangely referred to themselves by the name of the country's national bird, a flightless, half-blind, nocturnal and not at all attractive creature, began flocking into the area much like iron filings drawn to a powerful magnet (or, as the transplanted Silicon Valley people saw it, a rush of humanity not unlike that of the mid-1800s to the American state they themselves had just abandoned), their eyes gleaming and their battle cry *Jobs! Jobs! Jobs!*

And jobs there were for all, and at pay scales far above what they were accustomed.

The newcomers, plus their families, all sat a three month full-time retraining program, not just in their specific trades but as well in citizenry ideals such as civic responsibility (which included racial, sexual and age equality); care of environment; natural sustainable energy; personal health; organic gardening and food preparation, and meditation and yoga. Everyone had to learn a non-European language, Mandarin, Hindi and Arabic by far the most popular. Not only was the retraining entirely without cost, but all were paid a handsome stipend and housed for free until such time they began proper employment.

By agreement with the national government, citizens and long-term residents of the home country received job preference; however, the finest educators, medical personnel and physical activity trainers were brought in from overseas, as the notorious brain-drain the country had suffered over the past two generations had left these vocational areas somewhat bereft.

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In no time at all, the country, which the century previous had ranked fourth in global standard of living but had sunk to forty-fourth during the intervening years, was catapulted into the top half-dozen, some ratings listing it as first or second. This in an international climate where economies had plummeted in recent years.

The new goings-on did not receive one hundred percent approval, it must be said. Tiny cries of *governmental sell-out! leftist fascism! and elitist socialism!* were heard from locals, and angered jealousies emanated from abroad, mostly next-door Australia, abandoned America and the downtrodden European states. All these moans were easily placated: natives with jobs, overseas elements with generous foreign aid grants.

Oddly, the anticipated natural disaster which supposedly prompted the great shift southwest never eventuated. This was to have been a combination of disastrous earthquakes followed by giant tsunamis which would have wiped out the entire west coast of North America. Only after the move to New Zealand was completed did it leak out that, although natural cataclysm indeed was a significant worry, it wasn't the prime reason behind SilVal's abandoning California after all. (And as New Zealand is one of the most earthquake-prone countries on Earth, should it have been?)

The Day the World Went Completely Mad (Part I) occurred on November 7, 2016 – the surprise election of one large, loud, lying orange lout. The major wheels of the Valley had it pegged early on the man was a buffoon, but not only had they survived a buffoon president before, they had actually thrived during his eight years of power. It soon became evident, however, that buffoon Trump was a far different kettle than buffoon Bush. This man was over the top maniacal. Free of the constraints of knowledge and facts, he truly believed building a giant wall to keep out

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undesirables provided the solution to all America's problems.

The Valley bosses played along during Trump's first couple years in office, figuring the man's advisers would mellow him out and things inevitably would change. And change things did. They got worse.

America, long a land of hatred amongst the various racial, religious, ethnic, sexual and socio-economical divisions, became a free-for-all battlefield. Trump was psychopathically out of control, suing anyone who in any small way criticized him. The police were out of control, with a steep escalation of killings of blacks and other minorities. The man's policies were way out of control with more and more of the nation's lucrative assets turned over to his friends in Russia and China. His advisers came and went as the White House became a revolving door of top-level aides, a daily mass scrambling of dark suits. Freedom of the press was severely curtailed. Armed thugs roamed the streets free of restraint.

Soon, secret meetings began to take place in Silicon Valley. The result of these hush-hush assemblages was this: to survive (meaning make more money, gain more power), the giants of the hi-tech industry needed to leave the United States.

They certainly didn't want it to be known, even amongst their own employees, many of whom were ardent Trump supporters, the reason for moving home base to the Southern Hemisphere was their insane president. Fortunately at this time, further scientific data revealed the rapidly encroaching imminence of the entire West Coast going bye-bye. Whispers began, with instructions that the move was to be kept in strictest confidence. Which was like keeping secret a fart in a crowded elevator.

A totally different sort of cataclysm was to take place not long after the digital immigrants settled into their New Zealand home, however, and because these were the

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smartest people on planet earth, many wondered whether the big brains behind the exchange of hemispheres had also anticipated, but kept mum about, the events which were to petrify us all.

### **SPOOK**

You know I'm dead, right?

Oh, wait. Most likely you're among the legions, the multitudes, of folk who never got around to reading the first book, narrated by Ghost and, ahem, starring old Spook here. So I shall now provide y'all a brief ree-ca-pi-choo-lation of *The Amazing Adventures*.

Ghost and me met up in Nam. I was officially named Walter but Spook fit me better. Both me and Ghost were outcasts, couple a dudes considered mega-weird by our fellow grunts as we had these, eh, special powers. See, we couldn't be killed. Or wounded. Two things prevented this from happening. First, something totally unseen and unfelt always moved us out of harm's way. If shit was gonna come down *here*, somehow we'd find ourselves over *there*. Every time.

Other deal was this: danger coming toward us, no way we can be moved, suddenly we'd get hit with this pain. Ghost's was a horrible screeching siren in his head, mine was my gums. Like an electric shock going through them. Badder the danger, worsen the pain. But the message was always the same: *go!!*

After we got sent back Stateside, we got into scamming some. Nothing terrible, nobody ever got hurt bad. Mostly lessening the burden of a preponderance of assets from those could stand to lose a little. Made us some bread, had some fun, paid for our hedonistic lifestyle.

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Then we almost got our ass nabbed. Well, actually, was me almost did. A babe was involved. So we skedaddled in different directions, quick-like.

Maybe a year later I got in real trouble. A babe was involved. (See some kinda pattern here, maybe? Well, that was me in my early days. I did change. Swear.) Was Ghost saved my skin that time. After, we talked it over. We be bored, just floating around aimlessly, always eventually getting ourselves in the stew. So why not lets us do what we be good at, what the US Army trained us for.

We became assassins.

Oh, never for money, and we didn't once whack any good folks. Each hit was well researched and fastidiously planned out to be eye-ronic. And every single victim was some really rich, really bad dude. Offing him likely saved untold lives down the track.

Same time, we started a house buying and restoration business in San Francisco. Made us a fortune. Which was how we financed our other activity. But again, we just missed getting caught. Meaning, once more, time to scram-ola.

Me, I went off to Africa, where, solo now, I spent some years helping my brothers and sisters by taking out some truly terrible characters was hurting them bad. Same time, I began talking to folks about compassion and understanding the true meaning of life. Stuff I learned from studying the dharma, which is what the Buddha laid down way back. When I realized I was better at, and far more happy, talking the good than killing the bad, I had me a major change in direction.

I went to Australia and set up camp in an Aborigine community. Ghost later joined me there, but it wasn't really his deal. So off he went to New Zealand, where after some years floundering around, going crazy-like, I mean gen-you-inely bonkers, he pulled himself together and got involved in some un-beee-lievable happenings.

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Me, I was never to witness that stuff. Not in my human form, anyway. Big C got me at fifty. Now, don't y'all feel bad for my ass coz being dead no sad deal, babes. De-fi-nitely. See, what you may call the afterlife, we here think of your trip as the beforelife. Like, this be the *true* existence, what y'all experiencing now is sorta an extended summer holiday. (Or, for some, an extended prison term. Choice be yours, know what I mean?)

Me and Ghost still keep in touch. That's right. See, the old boy is the best friend I ever had, closer than a twin bro, and I gotta look after his scrawny white ass till time comes he join up with me again. I mean, he *always* getting hisself in some crazy shit.

Thing with Ghost, he got another magic trick beyond those warning screams in his head and being cosmically shoved outta the way of oncoming bad. Something which, when he first showed me, ooh momma, I all but jumped outta my black skin.

## **GHOST**

Oddest thing, it was Boris of all of us who most welcomed the move.

See, Shoshona kept after me to abandon the North Island for the South. At the time I was still dividing time between my house on the beach and the yoga center outside Auckland where Glenda lived.

The physical relationship between Glen and me had cooled off. We were still top-tier friends and would remain close for life, but for some reason the sex part dwindled down to once every moon phase, less – and I realized I really missed my beautiful old native timber home on that magnificent seven mile stretch of sand, so I would frequently flip-flop between the two.

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Our psychic answer-finding operation, S&G Information, which Glenda managed (all proceeds going to charity), was still going strong, but ninety percent of the communication between us could be done on Skype Hologram, so there was little need for me to be with the others. Manu's detective agency was keeping him busy, mostly dull insurance work, and I knew he was growing stiffly bored. Boris? He loved his reclusive cottage there in the bush backing onto the center, raising his monarch butterflies, collecting herbs and reading his massive library of books. So when Shoshona, mother of my recently revealed teenage daughter, moved to the South Island with the Silicon Valley mob she worked with (in some super-high capacity I never understood), and began pestering me to cross the Cook Strait and come live there, Boris was the last person I figured would be amenable to pulling up roots.

I had told Shoshona I would go only if my three closest friends were willing as well, figuring Glenda as a probable and Manu (and his lovely sometimes-ladyfriend Rosamund) possible. But surely Boris, the oldest of us fogeys (well, Glenda certainly wasn't exactly foley material though she had passed sixty not long back), most likely would opt to stay put. Always a strange, unpredictable cuss, Boris when I contacted him (or rather sent word to Glenda to have him get back to me as Boris appeared to have no means of contact with the outside world) (how then did the little guy know so much about what was going on out there?), he sounded like a kid with his first opportunity to see the circus.

"Absolutely!" he cried in that raspy voice of his. "Just give me a week to pack everything up. Oh, hell with that: I'll just give everything away and start a brand new collection of *tchotchkas*! I'll be ready to roll in a few days."

It actually took us some weeks to organize everything on our end. Meanwhile, Shoshona scored us a nice chunk of land with bush and rolling hills and snow-

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capped mountains in the background. She would arrange for the local council to build a yoga and meditation center on the property, as well as homes for each of us as caretakers. The land was not all that far from where she and our daughter Walli had a luxurious, newly-constructed palace amongst the Schmidts and Zuckerbergs and Musks and others of the highest rollers in their super-posh gated community.

\*

The first time I became invisible I near had a heart attack. I was eight years old, playing with a toy dump truck outside my parents' house in Pennsylvania, no one else around. I felt a tiny sting on the back of my neck, dead center. Figuring it was a bug, I reached back to smack it. When my hand returned forward, I had no hand. Nor arm. The other one was gone as well. As were my legs and feet. I could *feel* them, yeah, but *they weren't there*. I ran to the house howling. My mother came to the screen door.

“What? What?”

“Ma, my arms and legs – I can't see them!” I bawled.

“Maybe if you opened your eyes?” I looked down at myself. All my body parts were back.

“Retard,” she called me (her favorite word), shaking her head and moving off.

It happened a few more times, spontaneously, always following the same tiny sting back of the neck, and always when I was alone. Minutes later I'd be totally visible again.

In time I learned to control it. In the beginning, it took a lot of concentration, but after much practice I could will myself to do it whenever I wished, with this proviso: I only ‘lost myself’ when no people or cameras were observing me.



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Weird? Tell me about it. After my parents were killed in a car wreck and I was bounced from one foster home to the next, I began using this gift to make my living. I became a burglar. I did this for a few years in my late teens until during one such break-in I realized that whereas I could fool humans and cameras, guard dogs, uh, not so much. When this one time I barely escaped with my balls intact, soon after I swapped said career for one just the tiniest bit more dangerous.

I enlisted in the army.

## SPOOK

The way Ghost and I ‘talk’ is this: he asks me questions that can be answered yes or no. He’s holding a pendulum, this particular device a rather cheap crystal hanging on a piece of thread. I send out an impulse, a tiniest bit of energy, which makes the pendulum swing either in what Ghost had early-on established as his yes direction, or no direction. (His is a back and forth line for yes, side to side for no; each person has they own, although most folk have the same as old Ghost there.) I can also spell out words by process of elimination: ‘is the first letter in the alphabet between A and M? Yes? A and G?’ And so on.

This whole deal can be laborious for him. Me? What the hell, I got till the end of time and then some. This is how the S&G Information biz works. Somebody gets in touch, asks a question. Ghost – and only Ghost; I love his friends Glenda, Manu and Boris as much as he does (though I never met any of em personally), but I’m only permitted to communicate directly with Ghost. Why so? Well, that’s a story for another time.

First thing, I gotta decide is the situation in question something should be dealt with in this manner. I turn down

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at least half of what Ghost sends through, for a variety of reasons. (You gotta look at the long-range picture here, which I am in the best position to do, being that we here know everything that is and has been, and are pretty darn good at future shit as well.) I also decide how much S&G should charge for this service, and that I kinda have fun with. F'r instance, the very first case they had was a sweet eighty-four year old lady who'd lost her wedding ring. Through a bunch of his questions on that pendulum of his, I let Ghost know the ring was laying at the bottom of a freezer in the old lady's storage room. He thought I'd say, Aw, charge her twenty bucks, or something. Number I gave him was six hunnit and eighty bucks. Whaaa? he cries. Thinking that's an outrageous price to charge a sweet old lady. But see, that was how much her hubby paid for the ring sixty-five years ago, and when Glenda told her the fee (holding her breath as she also figured it outrageous), that old woman was pleased as punch over the 'coincidence'. Catch my drift?

The whole deal with the psychic service started off the first time Ghost ever used the pendulum to ask me to help with shit. This here teenage girl in Auckland goes missing, and searchers and cops can't find her. Ghost gets this idea to use the pendulum to ask me, dig? Took a while till he and Boris came up with the right questions, but finally I yes/no em to the right place. Actually, Manu, who was then a police detective none of the other cops paid much attention to, was the one found her. Manu became an instant hero (he never knew about me till much later), and the top cheese cop thought it'd be primo for police image to start a psychic department with Manu as its head.

I also have a connection with one other person, and that be my daughter Shoshona. Now, I never knew Sho was my girl until a few years before I died. When I found out, oh baby was I ever high! (Oddest thing is, day I die, Ghost near out of his head with grief, Shoshona, then just a

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teenager, visit him in the dark and make love to him. Goof never even knew it was her till years later. So he and *my* daughter produce *they own* daughter, which he never find out about till she, Walli, become a teenager herself. Man, you humans sure goes out of your way to complicate life, know what I'm saying?

Now, Sho and me don't use no pendulum, or ouija board, or tarot cards. Nothing like that. I just send her impressions now and then. Not for diddily shit (like she ask me, time and again, "Daddy, 'm I gonna be rich and famous?"), but stuff that's real important. When I was on my deathbed, I told her I gonna be doing this (also told her about Ghost being able to make his ass invisible). Still, took her quite a while before she could tell an idea was coming from *me*, mostly coz what I tell her sound so strange (or what you silly humans consider strange).

One other thing I tell my baby while I be laying there on my way here: Ghost not only my number one all-time bro, but he gone be important to the future of the human race. I seen this even before I leave my body and gain the total freedom we got here. "You gotta look after that boy," I says to her back then. "Won't be for a while coz he gotta go through some nasty shit on his own, but later on." "How I do that, Daddy?" she ask. "You'll see, honey. I'll be directing you from the other side. Just listen close when you get a notion that don't seem to come from yourself, and maybe sounds unusual. See, you and me and him are connected in the strongest way, and we all be working together come the most crucial time ever."

I say all this as I lay there hours from passing over the magic curtain, not having a clue what the hell it all meant. And now (sigh), planet Earth stands on the very precipice of this baaad stuff happening.

## *Completely Mad*

### **GLEND A**

I can't tell you when it was, or even why, Ghost and I stopped being lovers. Our sex life had started tailing off some months back, but that was to be expected, the torrid pace of our humpin and bumpin (as he calls it, among other things). Odd thing was, the less sex we had, the more I loved the guy. When we stopped altogether, no explanation forthcoming nor, it appeared, was one necessary, my feeling for him returned to what it had been our earliest days together. I felt I knew this human being better, and treasured him for what he was.

The stoppage of sex was a road sign: I needed change. We all did: Manu, Rosamund, even, I felt, Boris, and he looked to be planted forever in that Hobbit-like bush cottage of his. Ghost I figured not so much as he had the flexibility of running back to his beach house every couple weeks.

When he broke the news that Shoshona was begging him to move to the new South Island techno mecca, that we all would be invigorated living smack in the middle of the most exciting development of the ages (her words), I thought welll, and Manu thought welll, and Rosamund...

Curiously, it was Boris who jumped up (he actually did a little hop, skip and jump!) and cried, "Yes! Go south, not-so-young men! Uh, and women!!" and immediately asked could he sell his collectibles at the following weekend's yoga course. (He wound up giving most of the things away, supremely satisfied with the huge number of appreciative hugs and kisses he received from the ladies.)

I surprised myself that I didn't mind leaving the cottage Ghost designed and had built for me, leaving the center and the dear sweet tittering and cooing ladies who always seemed to be hanging around, more getting in the way than helping run the place. And truth be known, I

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didn't mind creating more space away from Josh, my lovely gay, semi-suicidal son in Auckland, and Rhonda, my hard-as-stone three-times married and divorced alcoholic daughter in Coromandel.

I took a leaf from Boris's book and gave away most everything that wouldn't fit into my SUV and took off without looking back, part of a wagon train of four vehicles cutting down the spine of the North Island, onto the ferry and over Cook Strait, and into the interior of the SI.

Ashamedly, I admit to having been one of the eighty percent of North Islanders who never had ventured to the South, which in a way was a good thing as the first viewing of this magical patch of heaven on Earth simply leaves you gasping for breath

Meeting Shoshona and Walli was extra special. Mother and daughter are absolutely gorgeous creatures. Fascinating watching Ghost around his only child; all the toughness he feels he needs to show much of the time just peeled away. He actually glowed.

Our new home was beautiful. I could easily have lived in the makeshift quarters set up for us, but construction had already begun on the new yoga/pilates center and our individual homes. Ghost got right in there and worked like a demon on his own place, and when it was completed before the rest of ours he tried to bully his way into helping with ours. We all gently told him thank you very much, but we wanted to do the organizing and overseeing by ourselves. Well, maybe Manu wasn't all that gentle. From a hundred yards off I could hear the two of them shouting at one another.

Boris just ignored Ghost the way one might a stray dog, and Rosamund in her typical soft-spoken but ever so determined manner let it be known she had so looked forward to putting on the hard hat and on her own checking every detail of the architect's drawings and pointing out how things might be improved upon. For example, she took

## *Completely Mad*

no nonsense from the foreman (who learned quickly not to patronize this woman with terms like dear and honey) and ordered him to place all doors and windows in a north-south line to exert the maximum *feng shui* influence.

It took a while for Ghost to get the message. Sulked a bit, walked around growling at everybody for a while. Fortunately (for all of us), the hospital called him in for his long-put-off hemorrhoid operation, and between the recovery pain and embarrassment over his vulnerability, he sort of disappeared for several weeks.

It was during this time something most extraordinary took place. Rosamund and I began spending time together. She stays mostly in the background, especially when with Manu, but the better I got to know, and understand, this tall, slim, gracefully elegant part-Maori, part-Scots, part-Swedish woman, the easier it was to sense her true core strength.

At first it was general girls stuff, feeling each other out as women do, gradually letting out a little more about ourselves, our likes and dislikes. Our hearts and souls.

She asked me to teach her yoga, and, my god, with that gorgeous flexible body of hers she was such a natural. We began practicing together every morning on my veranda. A month of this and I really began to observe a strange but glorious bloom of feeling for this person, and she me. One morning following a really wonderful session, as we sipped our tea, munched a biscuit, our eyes locked and stayed that way. I don't recall who made the first move, although I'm inclined to think it was spontaneous, there we were kissing. Deeply kissing. Then we rose together and moved to the bedroom on feet that needed no contact with the floor.

It was the very first time for me; Rosamund said she had tried it at uni, of course (*of course?*), but not since. So the almost fifty year old and the just-turned sixty year old

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were, like that, lovers. No humpin and bumpin, us, just slow and gentle and so, so fine.

“Does this make us lesbians?” I asked our second or third time.

She let out a squeal. “My dear, you know all those letters used to describe folks with unconventional sexualities? Well, L is the very first of those letters. Meaning we’re so passé, the rest of the alphabet is looking at us like we’re old hetero fogeys from the past century. I suppose we are what we are at the moment we are. Wait, I think I’ve twisted that around some.” She suddenly sat up, peered down at me, my head still resting on the pillow. “That’s what we are!”

“What?”

“Twisted sisters!”

It was the beginning of the third week of our – what would you call it? friendship? relationship? – when I had a fright that illustrated my insecurity in this new adventure. We had been spending time in one another’s home, sleeping over more and more. We were at my place, early morning, had just finished yoga and making love, lying there together listening to the bellbirds outside. I heard the front door open and close. We’d none of us taken to locking our homes since moving in here, and now someone was in my house. We could hear footsteps, quiet but certainly not someone sneaking around. The person, surely male, was now in the kitchen. The sound of jug boiling, tinkle of porcelain.

I sat up quickly. “It’s got to be Ghost!” I whispered hoarsely. I made to dash out of bed, but Rosamund held me back. “Just relax. You’re a free woman, remember.”

We both sat up, our backs to the wall. She placed a pillow behind me, then one in back of herself. I was trembling like a frightened child.

More kitchen sounds, then footsteps coming our way. I held myself tight.

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“Good morning, campers. We’re offering a choice of organic ginger green and masala chai. Pure South Island manuka honey for those who require. Silver service, naturally.”

Ghost gingerly lay the tray holding a steaming teapot and two cups on saucers across our laps, looked at us with beaming smile. “I’m celebrating my first day – first hour, actually – of pain-free rectal existence, an event so significant I just had to share it with you lovely souls. Drink up while I go prepare some sourdough toast with home-made soy cream cheese and plum jam.” He turned and began walking to the door. “Oh, I feel like my bum has swallowed a rainbow!” He stopped short, twisted around, theatrically wide-eyed. Placed stiffened fingers over his lips. “No pun intended, truly.”

## **ROSAMUND**

I’m good at lying; lord knows I’ve done plenty of it.

Thing is, I can lie to men, no problem. Thankfully I look like I do, tall and slim, still good skin, cheekbones. Just like they like it. So my lies to men, when I need to resort to them, or even when I don’t but feel like it anyway, are heard with the eyes not the ears. Women? Unh-uh.

My big lie with Glenda is I fell in love the moment I first laid eyes on her. This was in a hospital room with Manu lying in bed wrapped in bandages and broken leg elevated at a thirty degree angle, the result of being attacked by a couple hired hard men. Glenda marched into that room breathing fire for the police commander, Ferguson, who was hoping to bluff his way out of any responsibility. Not a chance, as this beautiful woman with perfect bearing ripped into his lying hide while Ghost (and isn’t that a silly-arse name!) stood behind her, grinning.



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My somewhat smaller lie was not letting this feeling out until the right time, right place. Oh, and saying I hadn't been with another woman since university (a double fib since I never went to uni). Can two, or three, or four lies add up to a truth? Yeah they do where love is concerned.

Besides my appearance (losing its hold daily to the onslaught of years), my biggest plus in life is my patience. Once I lock onto something I want (need? no, want), it's like my breathing slows, heartbeat, pulse. I move into a zone of combat. I'm now a focused warrior. And I will get whatever it is. In time. And time is on my side, always.

With Glenda, I have to be mindful. If there is such a thing in life, she's the real deal. My love for her is very, very genuine. At the same time, she has a thing about honesty that I must be certain not to trip over. I've been letting out bits and pieces of my sordid story gradual-like. Don't want to blow her away, nice lady like she is, unaccustomed to the wickedness of the street. Same time, many of the uglier bits will remain locked away forever. So guide me, dear heart, as you know blamed well I can't trust my head.

The people around her, well, at first I reckoned whaaaat!? Ghost, who gets messages from a dead friend by way of a crystal pendulum; Boris, who has to be the strangest of sorts, though the more time I spend in his company the more I sense a very quiet, extremely on-to-it power. Love to read a printout of what's going on in that old boy's cranium.

Manu is, in the best sense, one hundred percent Kiwi bloke. That he's been totally accepted by the three others is remarkable. Have I underestimated the man all these years? Does he truly have something I've never seen, or taken for granted?

How we met: he arrested me in a raid on K Road a million years back. I offered him head to let me off.

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“You got no idea who you are, do you, babe?” he said, staring into my eyes. I was floored by the question.

“These other twats don’t measure up to your lovely ankle bone. Climb down off the rock, straighten out, be a person. Before it’s too late. Here’s my card ever you need help. Now get the hell outta here.”

A cop who turns down a blow job? Sheesh!

It was a year and a half later, eighteen months almost to the minute, his card appeared in my bag. It hadn’t been there before. I know because a couple times I went looking for it, turned the bag upside down, dumped everything on my bed, went through it all like a blackbird fossicking for a worm. Nothing. And there, the moment I need it most, it appears.

I was being stalked, hounded, abused, beaten senseless by a brute. Why not call the cops? Because he was a cop. When the bastard strangled me almost to death, I lay there under his hard bulky frame, smelling his shitty breath, and thought, Do it. For god’s sake, do it, get it over with, let me out of this rotten life.

You do know New Zealand has the highest incidence of domestic abuse and sexual violence in the developed world, right? Yep, sweet little ol New Zealand, home of fifty million sheep and all those cute little Hobbits. That was twenty years back; halfway through the third decade of the third millennium and we’re still number one.

I held that darn card in my hand for two, maybe three days. The only reason I finally rang was I had given up living. There was nothing whatsoever to lose.

We arranged a meet in a pub. Even in the dim light, even through my heavy makeup, he could see.

“Yeah, I know the guy,” he said. “It’s no consolation, but you’re not the first.” He looked in my eyes the longest while. “Make you a deal, okay?”

I thought, right: sex for life. Well, why not.

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“I get him off you, you clean up your life. Permanently. Off the game, off the dope. All dope, street and legal. Get yourself into some kind of, I don’t know, some kind of training program. Work with disadvantaged kids, old people, animals. Clean. Yourself. Up.”

I remember looking at him. Just sitting there looking. Guy was serious. Jesus, where did they find him?

Anyway, he did it. I don’t know how he did it, never said a word beyond, “It’s fixed.” My first thought: well, I fooled you, sucker. Hard babe, me. Few weeks went by, I felt human again, all set to go back to the only trade I knew...when something, a strong southwesterly maybe, something, swept me in a whole other direction. I’d never had any inkling before, no thought about it at all. Next thing I knew I was studying this new stuff called computer technology. And discovered I was a natural.

\*

So these four, and me, plus this remarkable Shoshona. (And convince me she’s not some top royal reincarnated from ancient Egypt or Phoenicia!) The way they attract money to themselves, and the way they just toss it away again, but not on crap, mostly to help others.

“Just numbers,” I remember Ghost saying once. “Keep the flow going through the horn of plenty. As the goodies pass through the small aperture and out the bell-shaped other end, just reach out time to time and pluck what you need, ignore the rest. Plug it up with greed, flow quits, eventually it all dries up.”

So when Glenda and I began thinking about doing a few weeks’ tour of the island, Ghost was right there, talking it up, giving us tips and pointers.

“The whales and dolphins at Kaikoura will knock you out. And the long winding drive up the approach to Banks Peninsula, then the view from the top down to

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Akaroa, is so amazing. Be sure to take the road along Lake Wakatipu from Queenstown to Glenorchy. But actually, my favorite place of all is the Catlins..."

Apparently a few years back he'd done an extended tour in an ancient van as part of some bizarre therapy number he was having in Auckland. We figured to take Glenda's SUV, camp out a lot.

"Good when you're kids," he said. "Mosquitoes and sandflies, leaking tents. Hey, terrific stories years later on for the grandkids. Two old hags like you, do it in a little more comfort. C'mon, see if this works."

He led us outside, past a copse of trees.

"Oh my god!" Glenda.

Sitting there like a golden chariot, a spanking new motorhome. Inside, fully equipped bathroom, kitchen, internet TV, queen-size bed. Everything glistening. He handed us the keys. We took it for a short run, agreed it was remarkably simple to maneuver.

Glenda, hugging him tightly: "Ghost, you darling man," she said. "You really shouldn't have."

"I didn't buy it for you, Toots. Merely rented it for a month. However, it's on lease-purchase, so if you want to hold onto it after..."

We indeed checked out Kaikoura and the whales and dolphins; somehow low-gear'd the beast up the skinny Banks Peninsula road with its untold switchbacks to the crest where, as he had said, the view down to Akaroa, the harbor and green rolling hills beyond was astounding.

It was a few weeks into the journey, when, following the drive from Queenstown to Glenorchy with its utterly devastating views alongside Lake Wakatipu, we began having trouble. One day as we camped out by the Rees and Dart, all the electricity in the town and, we learned, well beyond, went out. That lasted twenty-four hours before power was restored. Then the televisions wouldn't work. Next day the internet and smartphones.

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Following day our motor wouldn't start. The phones were again working so we called road service but were told that everybody seemed to be experiencing the same problem, they wouldn't be able to get to us for a day, day and a half at the earliest.

Then, as if by magic, following morning the motor turned over first try and purred as we began our trek back. We wondered was it us? Two silly females jinxing the entire area?

It was only when we returned home a few days later the news hit us full-on:

It had begun.

## SPOOK

Here's the short view of what happened that caused the world to go completely mad:

Nothing.

That's it – nothing happened. Things that *should've* happened, *had been* happening, just...stopped happening.

Oh, the sun kept on rising every morning, setting each evening; the birds still sang, the breeze blew through the trees as always. What stopped happening was a whole lot of bad shit that had been getting badder and badder. Give y'all a few examples:

Killer drones quit working. They simply refused to function. That was the first thing.

Bombs strapped to the chests of terrorists would not detonate.

North Korea's infamous nuclear rockets wouldn't leave the ground.

Coulda mixed yourself a big-ass milkshake with all the tabun, sarin, soman, cyclosarin, VX, anthrax and the

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rest of the shit used in biological warfare and got no more than a tummy ache, coz they all be rendered non-toxic.

Not only all this destruction stuff now useless, them satellites and related electronic apparatus used to spy on private citizens got shut down. Started up again next day, then ceased and desisted for absolute on day three.

Came a Monday, television broadcasts across the globe went kaput. Tuesday, the internet got hung out to dry. Wednesday, all stockmarkets blacked out. Thursday, every animal processing plant on the planet and all factories that normally emptied their toxic crap into rivers and the air outside lost total power. Friday, not a single automobile, regardless of whether petrol, electric or run on cat pee, would start. By that weekend, when everything began functioning again, the jitters were palpable.

Governments tried to keep it quiet, especially the no more spying on private folks thing. Fat chance of that.

All planes were grounded, even though they seemed to be running okay. Russia, China and America aimed their boldest weaponry at one another, figuring one of them *had* to be doing it. No big deal coz none of their weapons worked.

The Middle East went stone quiet coz not so much as a pop gun would fire.

One good thing happened: countries began talking to one another. Welllll, not talking, exactly. More screaming bloody murder at each other. The UN became a circus.

Nobody could figure where this stuff was coming from. Aliens from outer space grabbed the majority vote. But the biggest scopes couldn't see a damn thing out there.

Except for the weapons and drones and spy satellites and related toys, everything seemed to get back to operational for a time. Then, helter skelter, something would crap out again. And then start up again. The jitters became major league shakin and quakin.

Thing is, nobody died from all this. Some people got scuffed around in the panic, there was looting, that kind

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of shit. But nothing bad recorded. Hospitals continued to function perfectly. As did emergency vehicles, public buses and trains on the days cars and trucks copped it.

But mostly, the people, the *people*, they say, Hey, wait a minute. This ain't space ships with ray guns zapping us. Far as we can see, where's the enemy here? Where the bad dudes? Ain't none! Only, I couldn't access my Facebook page to tell people what I had for breakfast (Like! Like!). So what you do with the time you usually spend talking shit on yo gizmo? Uh, well, I played with my kids, took em for a walk in the park. Enjoy yourself? Well, a little weird at first, but, yeah, man, it be pretty cool!

Of course, the religious nuts got busy claiming the other guys' gods were behind it. Coincidentally (heh heh), the new-fangled electronic keypad-operated locks on all the churches and temples and mosques and devil worshipping halls quit working, so the nuts had no place to be nutsy at.

The scientific types came up with all kinds of brainy explanations, each one immediately rejected by kids in first grade, who were the quickest at pointing out the stupidities in the illogical logic.

So the big buzz is, Who behind this? Yeah, I know: eight million geeks and hackers crying, Was me! I done it sitting there in my mammy's basement while munching on processed junk that make my farts smell wicked. Uh, no.

Us folks, the living dead, of course *we* know the who and what and why, coz we know everything. And we be having ourself a ball watching the scrambling going on down your way. During those early days I hung out a lot with the likes of George Carlin and Robin Williams, and it a wonder our peals of laughter didn't drown out the fussin and cussin of y'all.

## GHOST

Silicon Valley South was going apeshit, internally as well as from the barrage of accusations coming from outside. Because both the innies and the outies were convinced that, since these were the smartest guys in the class, somebody here had to be responsible.

When the ladies returned, we gave them a chance to unwind their energy with tales good, bad and curious before we called a meeting of us. Or rather, responding to Shoshona calling it.

“It’s nobody we know,” she started off, as we sat on floor cushions in a circle of the new yoga hall. “I’m not saying we’re goody-goodies who wouldn’t do this stuff because we have finer ethics –” she paused to allow the derisive noises to expire “– but this is beyond what anybody here is capable of. As you probably realize, we keep close track of one another’s secret research.”

“Aw c’mon, doll. Call it like it is.” This from Manu. “Industrial espionage. Only you people don’t have to plant moles. Your magic eyes and ears are everywhere.”

“Were,” Boris corrected.

“Are, were. You know who I suspect, don’t ya?”

Me: “Don’t say it.” He said it anyway. “Your mate Bruce Montrose.”

“Baruch,” Rosamund corrected. She’d never met the man as Shoshona, Manu and I had back in the States, but had read all the reports I’d made to Commander Ferguson upon completion of my investigation a couple years back.

“Yeah, whatever,” Manu growled.

“He was at the very top of our list,” Shoshona replied. “Believe it, we’ve been watching him very closely since he set up shop here. He’s so involved in saving mankind with his Buddha machines he barely has time to sleep.”



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“How many has he actually produced to date?”  
Boris wondered.

“A few thousand. Of which he’s sold maybe half.”

“Oh, goody. Only eight billion to go and peace and love will rule the world.”

“Maybe, Manu,” Boris said, “somebody’s beat him to it. All this stuff that’s been happening is almost like a B-grade 1950s sci-fi movie where the peace loving aliens come here to keep us from killing off one another.”

“And the planet,” said Glenda.

“What about your buddy up in heaven?” Manu was still grumpy. I had a good idea why, and it had nothing to do with the current worldwide situation. “You talk to Walter the Spook yet about all this?”

I sat back on the cushion and sighed. “Talked and talked. Says it’s not coming from Mars, it’s not coming from New Zealand, or the States, or Russia, or China, or Kazakhstan. Not coming from some ten year old genius in Lithuania. But it definitely *is* coming from spaceship Earth, and I covered every country in the UN, fell asleep twice in the process, and he said no to all of them. He did say what’s going on is for the good, like Boris just noted, and not to be alarmed. But I get the supreme feeling he’s having a ball with all this.”

“As do I,” Shoshona laughed delightfully. She looked around at us all. “No, we don’t communicate through a pendulum. My Daddy sends me energy impulses time to time. They’re not always easy to understand, but this one reads like a headline: Don’t worry, be happy. He certainly is that regarding what’s going on. But while we are to worry not, I have been requested by the biggest of the biggest –”

“Google.”

“Facebook.”

“Apple.”

“Amazon.”

## *Completely Mad*

“Starbucks.”

We all turned and glared at Boris. “Well, we can easily get along without the rest of them, but no way can we survive as a race without decent coffee.”

“I have been requested,” Shoshona continued, “by the coalition of Valley South, Ltd, in conjunction with the government of New Zealand, to ask you sleuths to look into it.” She faced my way.

“Hey, don’t look at me. I haven’t done that stuff since back there in California. Don’t even know if I can now that my hemorrhoids are gone.”

“Do what? What’re your bloody hems got to do with anything?”

“Not bloody anymore. Been taken care of.”

“Oh look, ladies, the boys club is alive and well!” Glenda to Rosamund, who reached over and squeezed her hand. Lads will be lads.

“Manu,” Shoshona now said, her tone indicating a new seriousness to the discussion, “you’re the qualified detective here. Take on the case and you can name your price. Whatever you may need, highest quality, no holds barred. Even if you don’t get to the bottom here, do what you can, okay? The bigs are crapping themselves over this.”

The man took an exaggerated breath, poked his thumbs in the armholes of his waistcoat, peered around at the group. “Round up the posse, deputies, we’re about to ride hard into the night!”

## **MANU**

Hell did I agree to take this on? I can appeal to all my ancestors back to the first *waka*, I’m not gonna learn shit. Maybe those coalition buggers just want a fall guy. And what if, by some miracle, I stumble on the truth? What kind

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of super powers must these characters possess to be able to pull off a stunt like this? If I didn't care to have my picture in the paper over that lost kid rescue (in the end it did my career a heck of a lot of good, though, didn't it), this time I better wear a mask coz I really don't want these bastards, who or whatever they might be, to know of my existence, they'll shrink me down to the size of a weta. First move, I have to get my head straight. Good thing I'm not mad or jealous, anything like that. After all, she's free, half-white and wayyy over twenty-one. Plus she's gone this way before. Thing is, every time she does somebody gets hurt. I love her dearly, but in a brother-sisterly way I love Glen more. I realize she's a pretty strong woman, Glen, still, Rosie's past and all that. But I'm gonna keep out of it. Have so far and will continue to. This other thing: hoo! Hell do I even begin? Well, start with what you know. Fact: shit's happening. Fact: somebody, or some element, that's so smart the best techno brains in the world, these fellas right here, haven't clue one. They gotta be rich as all get-out to have equipment that can lights-out satellites without actually harming the product, disarm all weaponry right down to vest bombs those Middle East nutsacks wear. Plus turn off TV worldwide, the internet, cars won't start, Jeeesus. Them's the facts, ma'am. Now for the pseudo-'facts', by way of the late, great crim-turned-philosopher some call Walter, some call Spook: as in, nobody's doing it. At least, nobody we can name or even think of. Geez, thanks, pal. Maybe I oughta submit a bill for a week's time put in, expenses, and just go fishing. Wait, I hate fishing. Thing about this deal between em, I've never seen her look so happy. The babe's head over heels. They both are. It's actually beautiful to watch. Boy, didn't Shoshona look hot today. Oh my aching libido, that woman. Never met a babe before where I feel like a puppy lying on its back hoping for a belly rub. But what was that little thing went on between her and Ghost in the hall. She gives him this look,

## *Completely Mad*

no words, he says, “I haven’t done that stuff since back there in California.” What stuff? Hell’s he talking about? Sounded like a sex thing, but unh-uh, that wasn’t it. I was with him in California, I didn’t see anything like –. Wait. He flew up twice, first time on his own, right? And when he got back here to NZ somehow he’d worked out it was the Silicon Valley thugs behind killing the Chinese businessman in Auckland. And then we go up there together, confront this Montrose geek, turns out the Chinese guy actually died of a heart attack while the two gits working for Google were hassling him. And me, the great detective, only more like Clouseau than Poirot, I’m sitting there all Denny Dimwit, can’t find my pecker let alone glue all the pieces together. Damn, I’m so over my head here. Why the hell don’t I like fishing? Everybody likes fishing. I wonder would Rosie grant me one last shag. Old times sake and all.

## **BORIS**

Sure, I knew it was coming; it wasn’t *not* gonna come, way the world’s going. I just didn’t figure it would come this soon. Guess it was decided they wait any longer, poor old planet well might melt from the heat, drown from the rising waters, or just be zapped into extinction by bad vibes. How can people so smart be so ingloriously stupid?

Can’t they see? Really, people, it’s right there in front of you. The Aborigines knew about this stuff, the Druids, ancient Chinese, Hindu yogis, the Buddha: all kinds of people through the ages. If they could learn about the zillions of energy pathways criss-crossing the entire planet, do this with no more than placing an ear to the ground and listening to the songlines, or fashioning divining rods from two sticks, can’t these hi-tech geniuses work it out with all their gizmos and gadgets? I guess

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instead of songlines they're too busy listening in to phone conversations and reading emails. Yes, and selling insecure adult children dreck they surely don't need, don't even really want but can't possibly do without.

Yoga, meditation, organic vegan food, lots of aerobic exercise and positive thinking, all of which are sound and good. Then hocking your soul to repressive governments in order to remain atop the ever-diminishing razor-thin slice of humanity that owns and controls the ninety-nine and nine nine ad infinitum percent left behind.

'Do no evil' my scrawny old tuches. Do no sensible, maybe.

And look at me, sitting here on this beautiful hillside with an unmatched view of natural wonder. I am inside a postcard (remember postcards, my lovelies?) griping about the world the way it is and calmly awaiting those who hope to fix it. And most likely will fail.

# BOOK TWO

## SHOSHONA

Talk about a rock and a hard place. Few months back everything looked crystal clear and rosy. Great job, unbelievable money, handful of wonderful friends, couple good lovers on the string, Walli healthy and doing so well in school...then this crazy shit started and ripped away the blindfold, yanked out earplugs. True, they never should've been in place to begin with, but I seemed to be doing a

## *Completely Mad*

dance with that old devil named denial. As Walli more than once has reminded me, the hippies had a saying half a century back: reality is the ultimate bummer.

Really, I should be happy this crap they're calling *The World Gone Completely Mad* hit the fan. Prior to that, my star in the consortium was no better than stagnant, perhaps even slipping some. No, actually, slipping considerably. I wasn't about to lose my job, fantastic salary, palatial home. But with everything humming along smoothly, wasn't a whole lot for me to do. Attend meetings like a glorified personal assistant. Visit the big execs, schmooze with consortium royalty. But in truth I'd become the world's best paid soccer mom.

During this quiet time, I had become aware there was R&D going on that wasn't quite, shall we say, ethical? Some pretty scary stuff, actually. I learned this through people I know, had done favors for, who were in on these hush-hush projects. Some of these people thought the new stuff was 'neat', others were repulsed and beyond.

"Sho, you understand the mental meanderings of human beings." This was Baruch Montrose, whom I had grown to like considerably since we all moved down here. (And who was currently one of the lovers on my string.)

"Ideas that start out with all good intentions often wind up as apparatus used for repression. This stuff is a little different. It's starting out with repression as its prime function. It's the very opposite of the Buddha machine."

When Silicon Valley was still in California, Montrose had objected to the practical application of a number of the bright ideas. While he wasn't a whistleblower, never threatened to go public with what he knew, still he objected so strongly to Sil-Val's role in spying on private citizens that he was tarred with the troublemaker brush, labeled a loony and shown the door. None of which really bothered him, mainly because he'd met up with a wonderful Chinese businessman then

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working quietly for the consortium purchasing huge tracts of land here in New Zealand. Baruch told the businessman, Ling Bo-Ping, about his invention of the Buddha machine (not called such at the time), a device which when applied through pasted-on electrodes to a human's scalp could change the predominant waking state brain wave from beta – anxious, excitable, stressed, paranoiac; producing negative, even violent thoughts – to alpha – natural, understanding, compassionate, holistic; producing positive, loving thoughts.

The first time Ling experienced the machine, he stayed attached more than an hour, which Montrose feared might cause permanent damage as no one had ever been under for more than ten minutes. When finally he removed the electrodes, Ling looked at him with this remarkable beatific expression. "I am the Buddha!" he said softly. Meaning his mind had gone into its deepest, truest state: he'd become one with the Buddha.

Ling bought several hectares for Montrose smack in the middle of the consortium's massive South Island land grab, as well as handing him a wad of cash, as if to say: here, now go and make your machines – turn everybody on to her or his own highest self.

Trouble was, in a world inundated with vast spyware equipment and hedonistic gizmos and devices, Baruch's output, let alone sales, measured up to a few grains of gold powder stuck under the smallest toenail of the hi tech behemoth. That he was considered somewhat of a joke and didn't represent a threat to the big boys probably saved him from disappearing off the earth's surface.

Recently, Montrose had become aware through his own personal grapevine that extensive work was being done on a product pretty much the antithesis to his own.

"We have," he explained one time after we had concluded some delicious love-making, "literally trillions of working neurons in the brain, covering a multitude of

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functions. Every waking moment, perhaps a billion tiny pieces of visual and audio input are recorded in there without our having the slightest conscious knowledge. Even our dreams are filed away.”

“Meaning everything we see, hear, think and dream is stored in there: our own personal Cloud.”

“Back in California there was a group working on what they termed the somni-cinema effect: producing video direct from dreams. They developed software to the point they could actually do it, but since dreams are mostly a mish-mash of moments from your life’s experience combined with external junk, paranoia and just rubbish, the end results were pretty junky. They used all kinds of hallucinatory drugs to induce different dream states, hopeful of getting some cerebral art, but that too was garbage.

“If this exploratory work was done mainly in a positive vein – and I believe it was, people are always looking for different modes of entertainment – others heard of this and began to see other, not so positive applications.”

“Like, wait...like snooping on what people have seen and what they’re actually thinking.”

“Sure. It’s known that eyewitnesses are highly unreliable, mainly because we tend to mix what we’ve actually witnessed with our own interpretations. This technology would separate the two.”

“But that could be a good thing, don’t you think?”

“In the hands of people who’ve done extensive work with the Buddha machine, maybe.”

“But if I saw something I’m not supposed to see –”

“Or you’re thinking unkind thoughts about the government. Or even having the momentary crazy inner visions we all experience of, say, strangling your mother-in-law or blowing up the bank you feel just screwed you...”

I felt a sudden chill. Don’t have a mother-in-law, but sometimes when Walli gives me heavy single-



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daughter/single-mother back-talk, especially when both our PMTs are kicking in same time. “How soon –?”

“Now. It’s already been thoroughly tested in the lab and is considered ready for real-world use.”

“And you’re about to tell me they don’t need to glue electrodes to my head to do this.”

“Not when they have satellites that can do the peeking for them.”

So this had been my dilemma before the world went completely mad and the spy satellites all were corked up. Interesting how satellites that did ‘good’ deeds, weather, global warming watch, migration of birds, whales and animal herds, even your basic Google Earth, are still operating. The hackers who’re doing this are truly something else. Which brings up my current dilemma.

My star is again on the rise because everybody’s dashing around like headless chickens. When they exhausted all their traditional means of detection, to no justice, they escalated into frantic state, a millimeter short of panic, looked around and, golly, look who’s there: our own Shoshona! Who always seems able to sort things out, get things done.

Of course, it was desperation talking, a when-all-else-fails maneuver, but that’s been my strong point all along with these people. They’ve got their heads stuck so far into the stratosphere they sometimes need a sharp bod with her feet on the ground.

Now, I have this feeling, and I can’t yet tell whether it’s my own creation or has been impulsed into me by my dear dead Daddy: somehow Ghost and his lovely wee crowd will find out how to track down the critters doing this. Wherein cometh the dilemma: do I really want them to? If things revert back to, ahem, normal, I seriously doubt a lesson will have been learned, whereupon all the nasty stuff will be right back on the shelves. Oh, Sho: what to do?

## GHOST

I'm too old for this. Why can't I live in peace amongst the few people I love, tend my garden (getting better and better at it), long walks, camping in the bush a few days, drive to the coast, splash in the ocean. Like normal people who reach my age.

Yeah, right. Normal, that's me.

– I can do all this?

– *No.*

– You're such a putz.

– *No.*

– Should I then go forth and try to find whoever has done this foul deed?

– *Yes.*

– Will I be able to?

– *Yes.*

– With your help, of course.

– *No.*

– No!?! You mean you won't help me?

– *No.*

– Ah, hang on. You're tossing me that knuckleball once again. You saying I won't *need* you to help me?

– *Yes.*

– I'll be able to locate these dreaded dastardly demons all on my lonesome?

– *No.*

– Okay, let's see. I'll need the gang to help me.

– *No.*

– I hate you.

– *No.*

– You're right about that. Just sometimes. Like now. Um, I'll need help, but not yours, and not the gang's.

– *No.*

– If you were standing right here, I'd kick you.

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- *No.*
- Again, you're right. I'd grab you in a bear hug, lick your ear, whisper sweet nothings.
- *Yes.*
- And then kick you.
- *Yes.*
- Finally, we agree on something.
- *Yes.*
- So, I'll need somebody to work with.
- *Yes.*
- More than one somebody?
- *No.*
- Somebody I already know?
- *Yes.*
- If I run down the list will you tell me which one?
- *No.*
- Say goodnight, Gracie.
- *Yes.*

\*

Didn't even think about it a moment longer. What I did do was go on a little excursion around the SI. Considered renting the flash motorhome I'd booked for the ladies, but tossed that away, annoyed at myself I had even consider it.

Vehicles all around the place, I grabbed a four year old van, tossed a bunch of stuff in the back, started the motor, turned the motor off, got out and unloaded seventy-five percent of the stuff I'd tossed in. Just because I'm nearing seventy does not make me a needful pussy, hear that, Ghost?

I wound my way south by way of the west Coast, through Wanaka and Queenstown, which were making a comeback of sorts as tourist meccas now that people realized the world being completely mad did not include planes falling out of the sky. I stayed in neither place,

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rather took the Glenorchy road to the start of the Routeburn track. I didn't go all the way, maybe three-quarters, then turned around and headed back. The whole tramp took me a week, and by the last day some feeling had returned to my calves and thighs and no longer was I walking stiff-legged like the Frankenstein monster.

Continuing south, I thought about taking the ferry to Stewart Island, decided to bypass and go straight on to my original destination. There was still slight evidence remaining here and there of the South Island I had first encountered when my wonderful lady shrink Franni asked me – hell, *ordered* me under penalty of death or worse – to get my sorry ass on the road and don't come back until yatta yatta yatta.

The region known as the Catlins wasn't as pretty as much of the rest of the SI, and it had changed a bit, I noted as I passed through the countryside dotted with a handful of strung-out villages. But when finally I stopped and rented a cabin along the coast where I could spend a full day doing absolutely nothing, I was reminded that quality in this place had little to do with the landscape. The Catlins were its natives, the realest human beings still left on Earth. Was like they'd never even heard the world had gone completely mad. Or rather, had heard but couldn't care a tot less so long as the fishing was good and the shy yellow-eyed penguins could be spotted every afternoon.

I stayed a week, had daily tea and talk with my neighbors, got to know by name every dog and cat in the village, and not once did the silly subject even arise. Could this be the last place on the planet where not every soul had some sort of idiot device connecting her or him with inconsequential trivia?

And then back homeward. North along the east coast, stopping at Dunedin, Oamaru, Timaru, Ashburton and then inland to Mt Hutt. Finally I arrived back at the ranch. Nothing appeared to have changed. The consortium

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were still pulling their hair out, clopping around in their Nikes and Birkenstocks, Manu had pretty much settled in keeping his expense accountings in order but no further along in his investigations. The ladies were now living together, still in love but undergoing the daily dramas of coupledness. Shoshona was as beautiful as ever, and Walli had become more so. Was she really part of me? Really?

“Where’s Boris?” I wondered when except for him all were present and accounted for.

“He took off shortly after you left,” Glenda said. “Few weeks ago. Told not a soul his destination. And, as you might expect, not a word since.”

“I didn’t know he could drive.”

“Left on foot. Pack on back, walking stick and, would you believe, a huge smile draped across his face.”

“Smile. Huge. We’re talking Boris, right? Our Boris?”

“Never seen him so happy.”

## WALLI

School hols, they call it here. Meaning the periodic two week school shut-down to give teachers a chance to catch their breath, and parents the means to ignore their prodigies all day instead of just mornings, evenings and weekends. This break something very special was about to take place. I’m going to spend it with my father.

“You sure?” Shoshona looked surprised. “The whole two weeks just might be a little long. Will you be able to practice your running? You’ll be so bored over there. Text him and suggest a week. That goes all right, you both agree, you can extend it.”

Yes, Mommy dearest, it’s called control. Something you do well. Perhaps your standard state of confusion helps you along. Which has been intensifying over the past while,

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this world gone completely mad business. One can only hope you will discover who the real Shoshona is, and lock onto to her, allow the other to die off. Please.

“Oh man, I’d absolutely love it,” Ghost told her, sounding all giddy when she Skyped her hologram. “But I don’t have all that much experience entertaining fifteen year olds. Remember, there’s no McDonald’s or Kentucky Fried here.”

“As if you didn’t know I’m a devout vegan. And entertain me? See, that’s odd. Here I was hoping to gain some extracurricular credits during my break by assisting the elderly. I can read to you, we’ll play checkers, scrabble, do Sudoku together.”

“More I’m thinking tennis, one on one basketball, that sort of thing. I understand you’re hot stuff in the high hurdles, let’s see whether you can measure up in something longer, ten thousand meters, maybe.”

First couple days, as expected, were an awkward feeling out process. For example, he wasn’t prepared for my appetite. Nothing wrong with me, I’m a growing teenager, meaning I eat a lot. More than a lot. At home Mom is always on me about it. Pure jealousy. She starves herself to keep her ass and thighs down, sees me shoveling food in, it kills her. But Daddy was such a happy camper having me there I could’ve chewed on the furniture, he would’ve seen it as cute.

I wore loose-fitting clothes. Even my shorts were below the knees. I knew he and Mom had had it off a couple times before we moved down here, and I did look a lot like her. Not that I was afraid he would try something. (Turned out I almost had to wear a sign saying It’s Okay to Touch Me). I just didn’t want to make him uncomfortable; I was on a mission, and wanted nothing to detract from my reason for being here.

Mostly that first week we walked, cycled and talked. The more time we spent together, and we were

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together most every minute save for sleeping, for the first time I could see so much of me in him. We were now practically the same height so I could look directly into his eyes. And recognized my own eyes. Totally.

One morning I reached over and began slowly running my fingertips over his face. He reflexively jumped back, caught himself, let me do the scan. As I focused on his eyes, using my gift, I could see it all: the mischievous past, still-playful present, the fearful future. Most importantly, a good soul, my Daddy.

He cleared his throat, sign he'd had enough, was growing fidgety. "Um, you have a boyfriend?" New direction.

"Please. No time, no interest. No girlfriend, either, in case you were wondering. (He was.) And to answer the question you'd love to ask but are afraid, yes, I've had sex. It's nice but I'd rather ride horses. Gosh, look at you turning red."

"Enough!" he squawked. "I don't have a need to know, nor do I want to. Well, not really. Time for our daily checkers match?"

When I asked, he said absolutely no way would he tell me war stories. And when I pressed him about the stuff he and Granddad Walter had got into, the killings and all, initially he mumbled and fumbled, finally came out with "Some other time". I could see he wasn't all that proud of those days. But I pushed on, played teenage girl games that wouldn't work on anybody else. (Actually, they didn't work on him. He really wanted to share those amazing adventures with his one and only, and required no more than proper encouragement.)

I suppose it's not all that cool to laugh at stories of people being tortured and murdered, which he and Walter did quite a lot of during the time the Spook&Ghost logo became the world's hottest selling T-shirt. But these were really bad, hateful, evil people, and what my Daddy and

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Granddaddy did to them, or rather the ways they did it, were so bizarre in their absurdity he had me in hysterics. Best by far was the one about how they kidnapped the racist, pedophile televangelist.

“Was that when you threatened to string him up to the ancient, oak tree? The one with the gnarly branch you hung the noose from?”

“Wait. What?” He gawped at me. “Where did you – Ellie? Your grandmother told you about that?” She had been there, a participant.

“Hardly,” I scoffed. “She’s only interested in her toyboys and monthly botox sessions these days.”

He stared at me for several seconds. “Wal, you got something you want to tell me?”

I looked away, then back. “You have something you want to tell *me*? No, you don’t want to tell me. More, I want you to tell me.”

Dead quiet for over a minute.

“Please don’t be mad. You are mad. Look, I’m not poking fun of you, of the things you’re able to do which other people can’t. I don’t need you to tell me these things if you don’t want. What I do want, I guess you can call it need, is to tell you things about me nobody else knows, not even Mom.”

Long, long silence. Then, a slight nod of go-ahead.

“I know all about you and Granddad having special powers. I don’t know what yours are. Walter’s either. I’ve asked Sho untold times, but she’s afraid I’ll catch your weirdness, and she wants sooo much for me to be normal. All A’s, medals in track and full bragging rights at consortium parties.

“So if half my genes are yours, and another quarter Granddads, and you both could fly or catch bullets with your teeth, wouldn’t you expect me to possess an unusual trait or two?”



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Poor old Dad. He ran his hand slowly over his face, forehead to chin. “So...what? Can you tell me? Do you even want to tell me?”

“Yes. Yes I do. Just don’t, I don’t know, say I need to see a shrink.”

“Exorcist, I was thinking more. Shaman, maybe. Voodoo practitioner. All right, kiddo, spill.”

“I can’t read minds. Not exactly. But pretty near. I see auras, quite clearly. Through some old books I found, I’ve learned to interpret clarity and colors. Apparently it was a recognized science in Europe around the end of the nineteenth century. Even medical doctors practiced the art. Then the church stepped in.”

“Surprise, surprise,” he said softly.

“Auras tell me a lot about a person: mental state, emotions, physical health. Also, I see images of what’s on a person’s mind if they’re thinking strongly about something, especially when it’s accompanied by heavy passion. In the beginning, when I discovered I was the only kid could do this, I felt, I don’t know, gifted, a low-grade angel. Problem was I started being overwhelmed by people’s ugly thoughts and poor health, and had to create a filtering system to keep myself from getting sick.”

“But you can still do this.”

I nodded. “Most of the time I blank it out. I use it when I want to, or when the energy level coming at me is so powerful I can’t avoid it. In these cases I do a lot of protection work, surround myself with pure light to keep whatever is emanating from them out of my sphere.”

“You’re some amazing young person, you are.”

“I got that from my father. My looks, thank god, from my mother.”

\*

## *Completely Mad*

It happened two days before I was to go back home. He didn't have to say anything, I knew it was coming. Be still, my heart.

"There's only one person alive who's witnessed this, now that your grandfather is up with the fairies sending me cryptic messages through a pendulum. Shoshona knows I can do this coz Walter told her so from his deathbed, but she's never seen it done."

"So I'm going to be half the people in the world who's witnessed your act. Can you tell me who the -?"

"No. Now, I'm going to move across the room and strip down to my undies."

"Undies? You're afraid to be naked in front of your daughter?"

"I'm afraid of being laughed at." He peeled off garments one by one until he was wearing just his knickers. They were orange. Save for a bit of a gut, he was in damn fine condition, and I don't mean just for his years. And from the contours of his underpants I didn't think there'd be great guffaws if he dropped those too.

"Here's the really goofy part. It doesn't work if someone, or even a camera, is focused on me. Don't ask, I have no idea. So turn around, please."

I did so. I could hear my heart pounding. I waited. How long did this take? Would it even work? I began to imagine him sputtering that something went wrong, he didn't know what, some other time maybe. And what, exactly, was going to happen? Turn into a giraffe? Six foot speckled toad? Suspense was excruciating; I couldn't hold out any longer.

I turned around.

He wasn't there.

But his underpants were.

In mid-air.

Same contours.

He was inside them.

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Invisible.

*Shit!*

The orange underpants came towards me, slowly. I suppose he didn't want to freak me out any more than I was. They stopped a few feet in front of me.

"Reach out your hand." I jumped at the sound of his voice so near. I stuck out my hand, yanked it back reflexively, slowly extended it again, making sure I didn't make contact with his underpants. (Though I wanted to, so badly! I wanted to take him in my hand, in my –)

Invisible fingers slid their way across my palm to my wrist, dragged back and entwined with my own.

"Yep, it's me." My hand was lifted up, turned over and brought level with my chin. I felt his lips on the back of the hand. He gently let go, but my hand refused to return to its owner, hanging out there as on a glass shelf.

Still facing my way, the knickers began moving back across the room. "Okay, you'll have to turn around again." I did an about-face, thinking, What if I turned back real quick, caught him in the process? Would he be partly visible, and would he remain that way forever? *Idiot!*

Ghost was no longer a ghost. He was full-bodied, slipping into his sweatshirt and jeans. I stood there, not knowing what to do. He approached, stopped halfway. Put out his arms. I fell into them, hugged him hard.

"Hell of an act, Daddy. It's really worked up an appetite. Can we eat now?"

## GHOST

The world gone completely mad seemed here to stay. In the beginning, whoever was behind it wanted to let us know they had the power to, well, do whatever the hell they wanted. And the human race reacted accordingly. All eight billion of us went through your standard five-stage grieving

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process when there's great loss. So denial became anger became bargaining became depression became acceptance.

People now knew that on Tuesdays and Fridays their cars wouldn't start so they'd have to walk, cycle or take public transportation. Mondays and Thursdays the internet didn't work so they'd have to read or talk to one another other than via a gadget in their hand or wrist-imbedded. Social media were even more limited. The 'seven bigs' were allowed one day a week each, no two on the same day.

Technology involved in spying and projectile weaponry of every sort, plus drone bombs operated not at all (the drones worked, the bombs not). Violent domestic crime rates sagged. (Okay, the sale of knives skyrocketed in the early days, although surprisingly very few deaths occurred through knifings). When countries began resorting to chemical warfare as a means of settling disputes, said chemicals were neutralized immediately upon release.

Religion, of course, was given a prime boost from these events. When the electronic keypads were pried off and doors crowbarred open, churches and temples filled in a hurry. People began petitioning god for personal miracles: cure my cancer! they prayed; bring me a rich husband! heal my boils! *Bargaining*.

When none of these entreaties eventuated, the churches emptied in a hurry, god was accused of favoritism and given the finger; *depression* set in. But humans are made of sterner stuff and soon bounced back to their standard hands-in-the-pocket, nothing-I-can-do-about-it form, and *acceptance* was the mode.

Meanwhile, every military organization, police force, tri-initialed quasi-secret government appendage, plus geeks galore, attempted to suss out who, what, where and why with no success whatever. Manu himself tried several times to resign his commission from the consortium. Their

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response? Keep at it and let us know the moment you get anything, anything at all.

For whatever perverse reason, I delighted in all this mayhem. Wasn't this what Walter and I had set out to do way back with our ironic assassinations, the understanding implicit that our two-man vigilante act had no shot at accomplishing anything except maybe to do away with a few baddies and let us feel not quite so useless as other Nam vets? Here, some joker was doing it all. Even better, folks with smarts and a modicum of sensitivity were now getting together and talking about it. Not ranting, talking!

Our little group, which now met weekly at the center's hall, consisted of seven of us in Boris's absence: besides myself, Glenda, Rosamund and Manu, Shoshona had joined us, and she brought along Baruch and Walli. Discussions were lively, revealing and, I must say as a fella who normally disdains groupspeak sessions, rather illuminating.

We each had our agendas. Glenda spoke of the positive effect all this was having on the environment; Shoshona complained it was hurting Sil-Val's technological growth which, after all, was itself a boon to the environment, especially here, as coal mining had totally shut down and dairy and beef/mutton farming had been halved due to the consortium's retraining programs and job opportunities; Rosamund claimed that new methods of sustainable building construction had come about due to difficulties experienced in ground transport of non-recyclable materials; Manu believed what was going on had to be stopped because it represented lawbreaking at its worst element, and, after all, just who were these know-it-alls dictating how human beings ought to run their lives; to which Walli replied that was just it: human beings could no longer be trusted to run their lives, just look at the state of things prior to the day the world went completely mad.

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The only ones who just sat back and quietly took it all in were Montrose and myself. Baruch no doubt was devising new wrinkles to upgrade the effectiveness of his Buddha machine, and I was wondering how the hell I ever got here, here being New Zealand; sitting in a meditation hall with these lovely people, and reaching an age where my days as a productive member of society very likely were behind me.

Then one day two events took place that would make sense of the first two thoughts and throw the last in the rubbish bin.

\*

Shoshona called that morning and requested a favor. She'd been commissioned as an ambassador of sorts for the consortium. Her duties were to travel overseas for a month or two schmoozing with the consortium's parts manufacturers in Asia, stroking their egos, soothing their anxieties and letting them know the consortium is ever so close to working out the whole world gone completely mad thing, so have patience and business will be back to what it was, heck, even better than it was, before you know it.

"And?" I asked, hopeful of what might be coming.

"Would you be able to have Walli stay with you while I'm away? I've mentioned it to her and she all but did the four hundred meter high hurdles right in the living room. Obviously the two of you must have hit it off spectacularly when she was at your place."

"You reckon I can afford to feed our child on my fortnightly superannuation payments?"

"For a day or two, maybe. I'll load her up with giant bags of quinoa and kale."

I rejoiced that my daughter and I would be spending appreciable time together. That very afternoon, however, another most welcome face appeared at my door.

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“Jesus H, man, you look terrific!” I cried, hugging him tightly. I held him at arm’s length, bent low and had a closer scan. “I mean, no lie, you look ten years younger. Where you been, brother?”

“Aha, that’s what I’m here to see you about,” Boris replied. I led him into the kitchen, where we took time brewing up a cuppa, then moved to the veranda to sit and talk small for a while. Finally: “I want to take you on a little journey, have you experience the place I’ve just come back from.”

“Which is?”

“My homeland.”

“Israel?”

He made a sound, more through his nose than mouth. “Dear friend, I haven’t spent more than a few months total in that desert asylum. Back at the other center you kept probing, and to shut you up I told a wee fib. So no, not Israel.”

“Oh, hang on. Wherever it is, I can’t go. Not for maybe a month, maybe two. Walli is coming to stay with me while Shoshona prances around the world on behalf of the consortium.”

Boris raised his eyebrows to that. “Really?”

I told him in detail what had gone down with her during the school hols, our revelations to one another.

“That’s fascinating,” he said quietly, then drifted off into deep thought. “She’s sixteen?”

“Fifteen.”

“Ah.”

“What, ah?” I demanded.

“Youth. The essential generation. She’s got some of your gifts plus, I take it, a host of her own. Most of them undiscovered as of the moment.”

“Hell are you on about, man?”

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“What chance she might want to come with us? It’d have to be totally secret, I’m afraid. Can she keep mum when she needs to?”

“Boris, you’re beginning to scare me.”

“Shall we leave it up to her?”

“No, we shan’t leave it up to her. She’s fifteen, she’s got school, and Shoshona –”

“It would only be for, say, a week. Mainly, I very much want you to meet some dear friends. But her coming with would be...”

Boris, the *new* Boris, ten years younger and twice that perkier, brought the cup to his lips and sipped his coffee deep in thought.

\*

“Boris asked that? He’s such a lovely man. I’m touched he would think to ask me along.”

“Out of the question. You have school and –. What?”

“I must have come to the wrong address. I’m looking for the person who once stood invisible behind the great dictator in Africa while he was on nationwide TV and drove him insane with ear flicks and buttock pinches.”

“Yeah but –”

“Why in hell do people become so narrow, so rigid, when they get old?”

“Old?”

“That’s you, Pops. Not your years, your fears.”

Ooh, a kick to the groin, that. I stood up and walked around the house. Did a turn in every room.

“You’re right, absolutely. You know, most people, they have a child, especially the first-born, they fall in love with the *idea* of this child way before the birth. Cometh the event, their ego balloons. ‘From *my* seed (or egg) have you hatched!’ Time moves on, and they develop a new love, for



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the very being within this child. Then at some point, the heaviest emotion of all knocks them on their ass: responsibility for the safety and life of this tiny human soul.

“My situation was different. Since I never knew of your existence until the moment I met you, age thirteen, I had no time to prepare for what hit me. Normally, you raise a kid for fifteen years, you still have the sense of responsibility, but you’ve long ago lost the panic. Not me. Not ol’ Ghost. I’m just beginning to feel it. Especially since I have come to love you – *you*, babe – with total heart. And it’s a shit-kickin killer, this mantle of dread that something may happen to you. It hangs like an anchor from my psyche.”

She remained quiet while she digested this. Then, softly: “Question: do you trust me to look after myself?”

“Hmm, ye-e-es. Yes I do.”

“And do you trust Boris that he has the heart and strength to protect me, us, in all circumstances?”

“I do.”

“That leaves –”

“Aside from your Granddaddy, whom I loved more than a brother, you are the first person I would lay down my life for.”

“Great. Tell Boris we’re going. I’ll Skype Mom and say we’re off on a tramp, not to try and make contact. It won’t be the first time I’ve lied to her in order to get something I want.”

## BOOK THREE

### WALLI

Wow, was this ever weird. Boris refused to answer any questions, and did I ever have a bunch. I could hear myself chattering like a jaybird, telling myself to shut up before one, or the both, ordered me to.

Boris beamed as he led us on this crazy excursion. As Daddy had said, the man looked ten years younger than before he'd left on the earlier trip to his homeland. But just look at the old fellow: his bearing, the nimble movement as he plunked down his walking stick, took a few spry steps, plunked it down again. He had a wonderful rhythm, and Daddy and I, both in damn good shape, had more than a bit of difficulty keeping up.

What shut me up, though, was Daddy. No matter how much he tried to cover it up, his aura broadcast a felt need to overprotect his darling daughter. I realized there was nothing I could do to let him know how adept I was at taking care of myself, had been since I was old enough to take my first steps. With Shoshona for a mother, though she meant well, loved me, cared for me, I grew up playing second string to her own rising star. Well, Ghost would have to do what he had to do until such time he became comfortable within himself. What I could do, me, was keep sending him healing, relaxing light, surrounding him with it, directing the light to penetrate and permeate every cell of his brain and being. Around the middle of our third day out, the first sign appeared that it was working. Daddy began regaining his true Ghost self: confident, collected, playful.

“You have any idea –” I whispered at one point.

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“Not a clue, but if a yellow brick road suddenly appears, run for it.”

When Boris had told us we were going to his homeland, I naturally packed my passport.

“Oh no,” he said kindly. “You won’t need that.”

“I thought we were going overseas.”

“Over seas? No, not at all. Look, I know all this sounds so, so secretive. But please try to be patient. All, as they say, in good time.”

We tramped for three days following a four hour bus ride north from home. Boris knew where he was going. We stayed off the roads most of the time, even cutting through what I suspected was private property, scaling wire fences and mostly avoiding contact with people. As he had instructed, we’d brought food and water for the better part of a week.

Finally, day four, we reached Marlborough Sound, from where we headed west.

“Another day, we’ll be there,” Boris said. Wherever there was. “Of course, we might’ve avoided all this by driving straight here and leaving the car somewhere, but I thought it best to air out our minds before the adventure truly begins.”

“And show us how lousy shape we’re both in compared to you,” Daddy said with a face.

“That as well.”

Next day we came upon some unusual terrain. Hardly any grass or trees, and the ground was lighter colored than your standard earth.

“This area is largely limestone, formed by underground streams over hundreds, perhaps thousands of years. There are sinkholes around, so do be mindful where you step. I explored the area a couple months ago when I came through here, so if you follow me closely –”

“Boris, please. Where, exactly, are we going?”

## *Completely Mad*

“I thought I explained all that, my dear. To my homeland.”

“You come from Golden Bay?”

“No,” he laughed. “Actually, when I say homeland, I wasn’t born there. More, this is where my heart is.” End of discussion.

We camped that night along a large outcropping of limestone cliffs. Come dawn, we made ourselves breakfast, then sat and waited. A few times Boris glanced at his watch. Not nervous, exactly. More with low-key anticipation. Was someone coming to meet us? A UFO maybe?

At last, he stood, began cleaning up the area where we had been, excessively so, I thought, as though he wished to leave not a trace.

“Right,” he announced. “Just about time.”

He led us along wet and slippery rocky ground for several hundred meters. “Careful now. Sinkholes.” He paused and pointed a few meters to our left. At first I saw nothing, maybe an area the size of chair that appeared darker than the rest. “It’s covered over with some growth, but I doubt it would support our weight. The drop is a hundred feet or so.”

We skirted the area, and not long after we came to a series of cliffs. He turned and smiled. Softly: “Here.”

He moved some shrubbery aside, a fallen tree (later I realized it had been purposely placed). There I saw a narrow space, slightly more than a meter high and just wide enough for a crouching person to squeeze through. Boris told us to shimmy inside and wait. Not easy for Daddy and me, and I could hear Ghost’s knees crack as we contorted ourselves within. Boris simply bent low and backed in, making sure to replace shrubbery around the old tree trunk.

“Please put these on.” He handed Daddy and me headlamps on elastic bands like miners wore, strapped one onto his own forehead. “There’s no danger here, but it’s black-dark and I don’t want you to take a fall.”

## Barry Rosenberg

“Can’t say I don’t believe all this,” Ghost muttered. “Kinda figured you were part Hobbit.”

We walked quite a ways along a slightly down-sloping pathway framed by fascinating stalagmites and stalactites. “Spelunking,” Daddy snorted. “Jesus, Boris.”

“Patience, patience.”

Finally we came to a large opening, a space wide enough to park a car that led back as far as our lights would measure. An underground tunnel.

There was an approaching sound like a quiet whoosh, getting closer.

“*Bor-is!*”

“Just a few moments.”

And then came a light, growing ever larger. A vehicle? Awfully weird if it was. It approached slowly, finally came to a stop a few meters from where we stood. Sort of spherical, only with flat sides and a flat bottom. Size of a standard SUV except it had no visible doors or windows, no wheels of any sort. It stood, in fact, half a meter off the floor of the cave, unsupported.

A previously unseen door slid open. A person stepped out. A woman. She appeared not much older than me. When our headlamps focused on her, she had an exquisitely gorgeous face.

She spotted Boris and quickly gave him a great bear hug, peering over his shoulder at Daddy and me.

“The renowned Ghost, I presume,” she said, moving over and hugging him. Then she ran her eyes over me. “Oh, Walli,” she cried, wrapping strong arms around me. “You are far more beautiful than we had been told!” I had to finally pry myself free of her grasp. “And I, I am known as Pride. It’s only one of my names, but the one I like best. Please call me that, okay?”

She led us inside the vehicle before the obvious questions could spring forth, standing by the doorway as we paraded past her. Daddy was last, only because he was

## *Completely Mad*

so flummoxed by all this he had difficulty moving. I was as well, for sure, but my legs were accustomed to those high hurdles and seemed to move themselves without self-instruction.

There were four high chairs arranged in a circle. I was about to sit between the two males, but Pride took my hand and sat me close to her.

“We’re all here,” she said now, but not to any of us. “Okay. Okay. Sure. See you soon.” To us: “Comfortable? The journey will take about four hours. Mint tea in the thermos and home-baked in the tin. Take whatever. Has Boris filled you in what to expect?”

“Oh yeah, right,” Daddy mused. “Guy’s been a veritable blabbermouth of guidance and instruction.”

Pride squealed a giggle. “I’m going to like you.”

Movement. I hadn’t realized it, but we’d been moving without any sense of motion since we all got seated. The only way I could tell was the vehicle’s light casting off the walls around us.

“Boris, care to explain?”

“No, dear. I shall leave that to you.” Pride seemed pleased with that.

“We’re traveling along one of the planet’s many natural electro-magnetic energy lanes. Thus no external power source needed. We have constructed over many years’ time thirty-some of these energy corridors through the earth to various points on the surface. The station Boris brought you is the most recent, built mainly to escort citizens from the Sil-Val complex.”

“Wait. You’ve been kidnapping people from the consortium?”

Again she gave forth a joyful squeal. “Hardly kidnapping. So far these have been scientists and techies who had grown disgruntled with projects they considered against the grain of human reason. Not all that many so far. But I suspect there will be quite a few more in the future.”

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Ghost: "This is totally nuts."

"Yes, isn't it," she replied enthusiastically.

I wondered: "Are you part of a country? What I mean is, is this whole thing a single national effort, or maybe a group, like our own consortium, a bunch of different interests involved?"

Pride looked over to Boris. "Help!" she squeaked.

"Yes, I would venture we're a solo effort, but the country we operate from has no clue what we're doing, nor, with just scant exceptions, of our very existence."

"So you're kind of an underground operative."

Both Boris and Pride laughed. "Exactly!" she cried.

"Can I go home now?"

"Daddy! Where's that spirit of adventure?"

"Long gone. I just want to spend my remaining seasons pruning roses and playing darts with fellow pensioners down at the local."

"Like hell," Boris growled. "That's being dead. You've simply been asleep since you came back from California. You need to get out of bed and return to your true calling. And believe it, dear friend, when you see what we're about to see, the alarm clock will deafen your senses with its wake-up ring."

## GHOST

The journey through the earth was comfortable and pleasant except for all the unspoken bullshit. "C'mon, Boris, don't play this shitty game."

"Four hours, Ghost! Less, now we're on our way. Can't you just wait till we get there?"

"Why, this some sort of secret society indoctrination? We're going to meet the original Dalai Lama, who looks just like Sam Jaffe and has been pickled

## *Completely Mad*

in a large jar of mustard seed oil? I'm surprised you haven't blindfolded us so we can't reveal the route we're taking."

Boris sighed loudly.

"Okay, some guesses. I'm right, sigh once; wrong, twice. Ready? Playing centerfield and leading off for the Illuminati --"

"We're not the goddamn Illuminati!" he growled. "If they even existed."

"Growls don't count. Sighs. Ready? You bods are behind this world gone completely mad bit, agreed?"

"Not how we think of it."

"I'll take that as a single sigh. Next, and this is more a statement than a question: since I first met you I've wondered how in hell you knew so much about what was going on in the world when you had no TV, no computer, no phone, not even a radio, and for sure never read the papers." Boris, I noted, had looked away and was squirming slightly in his seat. "It hit me when Pride said a few things before, not to us and not into any sort of audio device, certainly not one I can detect, and then got some sort of message back that we couldn't hear. By the way, Ms. Pride, that person sitting next to you happens to be my fifteen year old daughter. Your hand slides another inch up her thigh you just might be shy a knuckle or two when we get to Valhalla."

"Daddy! It's my thigh and if I don't want her hand on it --!" But she did push the hand down to the knee.

I turned back to him. "You've got an implant, don't you, old friend. Some sort of device that, when ground control calls Major Boris, you can communicate with home base without any external gizmo. Where is it, in your head?" Boris remained mute, but after a few moments tapped an index finger behind his right earlobe.

"I suppose you've brought me along on this H.G. Wellsian excursion so your mob can investigate, or perhaps try to make use of, a certain peculiarity I possess, hm?"



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Makes sense. You can shut down half the world with your fancy super-hi tech, but you haven't figured out how to tiptoe naked through the tulips and have nobody see you. Look, I heartily approve of what your people are doing, but you know darn well I'm just a freak of nature and no amount of probes stuck into my silly-putty brain are gonna -. Wait." I sat up straight. "Whoaaa there, kimosabe. It ain't me you're after, is it? Is it? Louder, please, Boris, your sighs are losing volume."

"Ghost, I beg you."

"So do I, Daddy." My daughter was livid. "It's the teenager who's supposed to be all flighty and impatient, nattering away asking a thousand questions like I was doing when we first set out tramping. But I'm not doing it anymore, am I. That role seems to have been usurped by the senior citizen parent, the one who by rights ought to be calm, composed and take whatever comes equanimously. So...*please!*"

Alongside her, Pride commenced a slow, sarcastic clap of hands. Rebuked (but nonetheless satisfied), I joined in the silence that lasted the rest of the journey.

## BORIS

I felt awful.

I had instructions and the instructions were, as always, tell them as little as possible. There were no secrets, not at this point, but it's believed, or at least it's tradition, that the best manner of introducing a new visitor is for them to have their own subjective experience. Like someone who's never had any asking what chocolate tastes like. It doesn't taste *like* anything. It's chocolate. Unique.

Still, my love for the guy is so strong, and sharp as he is he'd begun poking gaping holes in my reticence with his acute observations, there I was tossing it around, shall I,

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shall I not, leaning towards my friendship with the man rather than stuffy tradition, when lovely young Walli set it out perfectly. And speaking of, I intend to have strong words with Pride when we arrive, perhaps even recommend to Council they send another escort when there's an attractive young female being transported. The woman, brilliant as she is, can be a total idiot. Ghost was ever so close to belting her, and I wasn't far behind.

We're around halfway, which is always when I begin to feel it in my heart: Home; dear sweet Home.

# BOOK FOUR

## GHOST

### **Kama**

Way back there was a British TV series called *The Prisoner*. Patrick McGoochan, who created, wrote and starred in the series (and had a nervous breakdown as result of it), played an MI6 op who got pissed off at his bosses and resigned from the service, only to be hit with some sort of knockout gas and kidnapped, waking up on this bizarre futuristic island where everything was perfect, but if you tried to escape this humongous white ball appeared, tracked you down and held you captive until you could be returned. Not that I thought our destination would be Big Brother malevolent. My dread was it'd be perfect. Me, I'm an imperfect guy with some quirky bonus material, and that's

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done me decent. Perfect, in women, in places, in life, gives me the willies. Show me perfect and I'll wrack my goddamn brain trying to track down the flaws.

\*

We left the shuttle at an underground station and boarded a similar podlike vehicle which Pride had ordered up on her implanted device shortly before we docked.

"Your own?" I asked as the strange looking thing pulled up. It was colored a ghastly chartreuse and beige with sequinny doodads that looked like shiny measles.

She shook her head. "Nobody owns anything here. Topside, what percentage of time do you reckon private vehicles actually are in use?" She looked around at us like a second grade teacher inquiring how many brush our teeth twice a day. "Average less than ten percent of the time. Ninety percent, the vehicles are parked somewhere. They clog your city streets, create the need for parking lots where open spaces with trees and ponds and walkways might far better serve your people."

Led by her, we situated ourselves comfortably in the vehicle. "For Walli," Pride noted, to which my daughter beamed. I gave Boris a look, but he simply rolled his eyes and faced elsewhere. We passed into a well-lit compartment which turned out to be an elevator; like the shuttle we'd just left, the lift transported us upward with no sense of movement. Suddenly we were there. Had seven dwarfs and a lovely damsel in white suddenly appeared it couldn't have been any more startling.

First sensation was the light. I had never experienced anything quite like this. Venice, I thought. That was the closest my mind could compare it to, the special light of sky leading all the way to the horizon. Could there truly be colors like these?

## *Completely Mad*

The aroma was the next thing that wrapped itself around my senses. A mixture of all good smells, not really sweet, certainly not overpowering: just...right. I sat there and giddily breathed it in.

Immediately, each seat of our vehicle began to change shape to form a contour around its host's body. As we had in the shuttle, the four of us sat not facing the same direction, rather forty-five degrees from those next to us. Pride issued a verbal order I couldn't make out, and the vehicle slowly began to pull away. Silently of course.

"Won't you be parking this thing when we get to wherever you're taking us?" I wondered, playing the dim, not-with-it tourist.

"Certainly not," she replied somewhat haughtily. "It will move on to the next person who needs it and has put in a call. It's been worked out so precisely how many vehicles are needed there's never any parking, never any waiting for one." Whereupon fifty thousand auto workers worldwide have just committed suicide.

As we picked up speed, all the basic elements of landscape beauty at once were evident: trees, flowers, parks, ponds, lakes, snowcapped mountains in the distance, even, some miles along, an ocean beach with waves. The architecture was stunning as well, not quite sci-fi futuristic, rather smooth classic lines which worked well with each micro-environment we passed through. What tickled as we drove along the countryside, past enormous fields of vegetables growing in raised beds and hydroponic glass houses, was the occasional replica of famous topside structures. There was the Sydney Opera House, further along the Taj Mahal, then the Blue Mosque of Istanbul. Odd thing was, each edifice appeared totally normal, as though they all belonged here.

We moved through towns that felt gentle, friendly. Towny. No supermarkets, fast food emporia, gas stations, ugly strip malls, real estate offices. No billboards. No

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traffic lights, no stop signs. Shit, no signs of any kind except a few here and there unobtrusively telling of future events. And beautiful murals everywhere.

The shops all seemed to sell home-made crafts. Hang on, I used the word sell. This was before we got the word: What happened, Walli wondered might she stop to browse.

“What currency do you have?” she wondered. “Can I wave my wri-phone here?”

“There’s no need,” Pride replied.

“Oh, well, I don’t want you to pay if I buy stuff.”

“What she means,” Boris explained, “we don’t use money.”

“Eh?”

“No currency, no ATMs, no credit cards, no banks. Walk in, take what you need, place your thumb on a small device you’ll see on your way out. Don’t worry about being billed; that’s not what it’s there for. Rather it’s to let you know whether you’re accumulating more of a certain item than you truly need which, while in itself isn’t against any sort of law, lets you become aware you might be growing a bit excessive.”

My daughter stopped dead, blinked once, twice. “Um, maybe later, okay? Nothing I really need anyway.”

Pride said that nobody here owns anything. Sounded like socialism, of which I’m not a big fan. Swell in theory; unfortunately, practice requires the human factor. Which made it a social form that could not possibly work. Still, what kind of socialism requires you to place your thumb on a thingamee so you’ll know whether you have more garden gnomes or xylophones than you need? And who’s to say how many is too many? And if you do have more than your fair share, so what? They’re not really yours because nobody owns anything, plus you can’t be fined because there’s no money here. So, what: public stonings for hoarders?

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What grabbed me the most as we soundlessly continued on, Walli too, were the people. They gave off an air of contentment, every single one we saw. Not my-guru-loves-me gushing goofiness: these folks appeared relaxed and loose being who and where they were. We saw lots of kids, all ages. Some in clusters. Not a mean, antagonistic, smart-assey vibe anywhere. Drugs? The nice-smelling air? Organic food?

At this stage I still had not a hint as to where on the earth's surface we were. Place looked like a giant happiness theme park, but what was the theme? Geography, though, fell a distant second to my curiosity concerning why everything felt so damn good here.

Okay, I reasoned, I had learned long ago that the world is far more than what we were taught in school; plus, a fella who is involuntarily moved out of the path of undetectable danger and can make himself instantly invisible through thought has an obligation to at least accept as plausible somebody else's impossible-but-real gig.

We passed an athletic field. People running, jumping, throwing things a long way. I peeked over at Walli. She all but leaped out of the vehicle, shucked off her outer garments and joined in. Boris and Pride watched her as well. With approval, I was happy to see.

Soon we came to what appeared to be a large parkland. But this, as it turned out, was just the topsoil. Beneath, as the vehicle headed down a winding drive and entered a cavernous area, stood a series of underground buildings, some sort of official compound, it appeared.

"Pretty nice workmanship," I noted, casually looking around.

"Well, yes," Pride agreed, "except workmanship is not quite the right definition. Everything you see here has been constructed by 3D printers."

"Intriguing. Must've taken ages."

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“Early developments, that’s true. But if all this was built today, what would you say, Boris? Two weeks total?”

“Less,” he replied. “Ten days tops, I should think.”

Are they putting me on? was my first thought. Yeah, right, a whole series of beautiful buildings done by a machine in ten days. Later, of course, I would learn a week would be more accurate.

\*

Inside, everything was well lit, yet none of the lighting seemed artificial. (Except it would have to be. Well, wouldn’t it?)

“I’d like you to meet some people,” Boris said. “They’ve heard a lot about the two of you, and would really like to say hello, share some tea or coffee and a bite to eat. After, we’ll take you to your quarters to freshen up, maybe have a nap before dinner. Okay?”

“I suppose,” Walli said softly. “But how, or why, have they heard about us. I mean, Daddy, sure. He’s quite special. I’m just a kid.”

“They’ve heard about you both through me. Ghost, yes, mostly. I’ve been telling them Ghost stories for some time. (I groaned at the pun.) But you, my dear, well, as your father guessed during the shuttle ride, we have a particular interest in you. You may be just a kid in your own mind, but my friends and I believe there’s a bit more to you than you might suspect. Please don’t be alarmed. It will all be in the finest of natures.”

Pride said good-bye. Her work was done. I had noted a major change in attitude since we got here. Gone like a mask was the pushy, assertive, smug woman in the shuttle. She now gave Walli and me hugs. I figured Walli would receive the bigger of the two of us, but no. Mine was strong, and it concluded with a passionate kiss and eye contact. I felt a stirring. It had been a while.

## *Completely Mad*

The three of us entered a low-slung building, moved along a carpeted corridor until we reached a tastefully appointed meeting hall. Nine older people, five of them women, rose from a conference table and greeted us with warm smiles and handclasps. They looked alert and healthy. I supposed they were officials of a sort. A woman said, "I'm Arlu. The current Council head of Kama."

"What's Kama?" Walli asked. Arlu appeared somewhat perplexed.

"Harris, you might at least have told them our name," she laughed.

"Harris? Who the hell's Harris?" I wondered, glaring at Boris.

"Please, Walli, Ghost," Arlu said. "Harris – all right, Boris as you know him – told us those are the names you prefer to be addressed by. Yes? Do please be seated. Mostly when we recruit someone from topside we explain a little more than what you obviously have been told. We don't wish to keep you too long as you've had quite a journey getting here and no doubt would like to bathe and relax, but permit me to provide the essentials.

"You are in Greenland. In a radiated cavity under the polar icecap. That's why the weather is what you'd expect in your spring. We've been in existence more than eighty years, pioneered by a large group of German Jewish scientists and their families who had escaped from Nazism and suffered untold hardships on the seas before arriving here. With the help of local Inuit, they made their way to this cavity, which had been formed in the mid-eighteen hundreds by a giant meteor.

"After settling in and constructing makeshift housing, these scientifically advanced minds set about designing weaponry that would defeat Hitler, but the war concluded before their efforts could be readied. Fortunately so. With the devastation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, our people were so horrified they voted unanimously to destroy



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all their weaponry and never again engage in the manufacture of aggressive armament.”

“Really? From developments of the recent past, I suspect you’ve kinda gone back on that ideal.”

“You mean what topsiders are calling the world gone completely mad,” Arlu chuckled. “I do so enjoy that turn of phrase. But, you see, we haven’t, Ghost. All we have done is neutralize the destructive energy of topside weaponry by applying the opposite energy to theirs. What we call the energy of Love.”

“You are speaking English, right?”

“Look at it this way. The planet is an active life form. There exist in this form untold natural energy sources and underground power rivers. This has been known for ages. The ancients discovered it, and used it. Hindu yogis, the Buddha, Druids, right up to Nikola Tesla and Einstein. We have done no more than apply modern technology to harness these known energies for peaceful purposes. You are familiar with the saying every action has an equal and opposite reaction?”

“Newton’s third,” Walli noted.

“Precisely. Every molecule, every atom, every subatomic particle radiates an energy. The particle has no idea whether the energy it gives off is destructive or loving. But humans do. We do. And since all energy has an equal and opposite energy – *equal and opposite* – it’s possible to use the destructive energy’s own opposite to render it useless.”

“You’re telling me it’s that simple?” I heard myself say, incredulously. “Just hold up a magic mirror and you can turn the bad guys’ nasties into zip?”

Another of the women there laughed delightfully. “What an extraordinary way of putting it. But simple? No. Which is why it has taken us so long to attempt a halt to the craziness out there. Einstein, who was one of the very few who understood the concept, acted out of haste due to his

## *Completely Mad*

passionate hatred of Hitler, and the results very nearly were catastrophic.”

“How so?” Walli wondered.

“You’ve heard of the so-called Philadelphia Experiment?”

“Vaguely. Something about a docked warship disappearing in a puff of smoke during the war.”

“Einstein believed he had harnessed anti-gravity as a destructive force. But when he attempted to transport it to Europe on a naval ship, the vessel literally disappeared from its base, simultaneously appeared for some minutes in port in Virginia, then disappeared from there only to reappear in Philadelphia with eighty percent of the crew having vanished. We can assume they were teleported to another dimension, but no one has ever figured out where. Also, most of the crew who remained aboard had lost control of their minds. It was a lesson our own scientists, who were but a step behind Einstein at the time, used as a wakeup call.”

One of the men spoke up: “We are dealing with forces well beyond humankind’s rather linear knowledge. Even now, having invoked our technology in hopes of showing the topside world there is a better, far more compassionate means of settling differences of attitude and opinion, we believe ourselves to be skating on thin ice.”

“Then why –?”

“He’s just told us why,” Walli said gently. When I appeared puzzled: “His final two words.”

“Thin...”

“Indeed,” Arju said. “While we are concerned for the welfare of all beings, we have argued long and hard whether we have the moral right to determine how humans should or should not conduct their business. But we have lately become somewhat desperate due to extreme climate change.” She paused, allowing the silence in the room to underscore her words. “The icecap around us is melting at a

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far more rapid rate than we had originally anticipated, and all of our advanced technology is useless in preventing it. Thus we are hopeful our desire to preserve our precious homeland will provide an alternate path for those bent on destruction.”

“But —”

“Hope is not a highly thought of scientific tool.”

\*

“So, Harris-Boris.”

I had showered, taken a power nap, and was now sitting with him on the veranda of my cottage. Walli was still resting in the cabin next door, no doubt agonizing over her inability to text friends.

“Ghost, stop. Don’t you have different names? For sure your passport doesn’t have you down as Ghost. I apologize for the few lies I may have told you over the past couple years, but understand that my primary allegiance is to Kama. Besides, look at the work I do. I’m a spy, for Pete’s sake!”

“I get that. But just who are you spying on?”

“My friend, there are hundreds of us topside, spread all over the place. Been so for a few decades. When your dear Mister Trump was elected, we shifted into higher gear. Around the same time we got advance word about the consortium forming, and their considering a move to New Zealand. So I was sent there. That I happened to wind up at the yoga center was simply a delightful coincidence. It just seemed a good place to be anonymous.”

“So, what, you have a mole at Google?”

“More than there. Look, Arju wasn’t kidding about our being desperate. Twenty percent of the icecap has disappeared since the turn of the century. What was initially a steady rate of decline has accelerated at a frightening rate. We would’ve loved to come out from

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underground and combine forces with the consortium and others. Together, we could possibly – probably, in my mind – turn this dreadful climate thing around. But no way, not now, maybe never. It was bad enough under Bush, no better under Obama, but the advent of Trump has shown topside in a scary array of its most horrific colors. The man himself was bad enough: a true monster. But worse was the groundswell around him.

“To us he represented the face of the foul decay of the human race, the painful, infected societal boil that needed to be brought to the surface that it might be exposed and thus dealt with. Except, wise as we believed ourselves to be, we had sadly misjudged the depth and strength of the rot. It was beyond our most jaundiced view of the ugly existing in the human condition. Indeed, it appeared there was no end to it, far too endemic for the energy of Love to combat.”

“So instead you took away their toys.”

“A desperate measure, but the only one feasible. You see, it used to be only governments could afford the really big guns. These days your local boys club can raise funds to buy the newest backpack-size rocket launcher by selling drugs or body parts or running a string of Ukrainian prostitutes or smuggling people without hope to what they believe to be safer ground. Businessmen in suits don’t even need to carry samples of their destructive wares anymore; they can display holograms of their choicest products in the deserts of Iraq or the darkest areas of Africa.”

“Or the hills of Wyoming.”

Across from where we sat, a meadow with cows grazing, a few sheep. For sure, none would ever see the inside of an abattoir. Beyond, I could see a miniature version of the Annapurnas, the white glistening in a makeshift setting sun. Such peace. Above us, such turmoil.

“If I may bring this a tad closer to home? Walli. What’s her involvement in all this?”

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A smile graced the old boy's face. "You know how nature works, right? Whenever there's an abundance of destructive insects or vermin, nature advances the number and strength of their predators. It's called the preservation of harmony. We began to notice a new breed of young persons a decade or so back. Not just Kama although mainly here. Smarter and stronger, sure; that was to be expected as the child invariably outdoes the parent in such matters. It's more than that with this latest lot. They're compassionate, concerned, motivated to do good. Not for prizes and medals, as has been the case for millennia. For the whole. And they can do amazing things. Ghost, these kids! Your own tricks would pale next to some of theirs.

"You remember that Israeli, Geller?" he went on. "Whether he was for real or a conning showman using sleight of hand is immaterial. What was far more important is this: Whenever Geller did his bit, whether live or on television, kids would try to emulate his shticks. Some of these kids were far superior to Geller himself. A handful of scientists had their curiosities piqued. They rounded up some thirty of these youngsters from around the world. Told their parents the kids were being offered free summer camp upstate New York, at one of the scientists' farms. There, they let the kids play for a couple weeks, get used to one another and the environment. When they felt the kids were secure and relaxed, they brought them one at a time into a nice-feeling study, sat them down and had a pro hypnotize each. Following the standard opening ice-breakers, they asked three questions: who are you, where are you from, and what are you doing here. Ghost, every single child said the same thing. They were sent here from an advanced race somewhere out there in the great void to eventually help steer the Earth away from self-destruction."

"And Walli is really an emissary from the dog star? Boris, for fuck's sake!"

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“Of course not. In truth, we never really bought the study those people did. Let’s just say it’s no more than a metaphor. These young ones now, I believe, are very high souls who’d long ago concluded their cycles here on Earth and perhaps were happily hanging out where your late friend Walter resides these days. But, as you may have noticed, it’s coming on to crunch time.”

“So, what, they’re here to rescue our sorry asses.”

He shrugged. “When was the last time you talked with your pal?”

“Not for a while. I felt he was messing with my head too darn much and put the pendulum away in a drawer somewhere.”

“Uh-huh.” He reached into a pocket, pulled out a closed hand, performed a little now-you-see-it and stuck out both fists. I blew out some air, stared at the floor, reached out and tapped his left. The opened hand revealed a pendulum not all that different from the one I had put to great use when we were running the S&G psychic detective operation. I stared at it the longest time, reached out, took it from him and stuffed it my pocket. Then I got off the chair and went to rouse Walli and grab us some dinner.

## **SPOOK**

Did the whole thing surprise y’all? Or are you one a these sharp readers can figure out whodunit before you’re halfway through a book. Myself, I figured Harris being Boris might be a little tricky. Even thought about sending out a signal what was coming before they boarded the shuttle, but maybe that woulda ruined it for y’all.

Now, I want you to know this Kama ain’t made up, unh-uh. It’s real, Jack, and it’s there in Greenland, only not exackly where me and Ghost be telling you it is. See, even though this story takes place *after* the world went

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completely mad (Part II), you're reading about it *before* the world goes completely mad (Part II), and the reason we're not giving the real location is the fear that suddenly there'd be a fleet of tourist snowmobiles descending on the place.

So what's gonna happen now? Well, as I told y'all, we the dearly departed know everything what happened in the past and everything what's happening in the present. The future? Not so much.

But if ol Spook here was a betting man, I'd lay some gelt on our heroes getting involved up to they eye teeth. Hear what I'm saying?

## WALLI

I love the place. And everybody I've met so far has been super. But the only people I've had anything to do with here, except for Pride, are olds. What I craved was to be amongst people my age.

Our third day here I was sitting by myself on the veranda. As I gazed out over the meadow, I spotted seven or eight kids my age just on the other side. I didn't know whether as a short-term visitor it'd be cool to walk on over and hang out with them, but I was so bored listening to doomsday rubbish that frankly I didn't give a damn.

I figured these kids, living in a twenty-six mile diameter cage, might be kind of small-town narrow. I'd had far too much of young people of that ilk. They judged me an alien species because either too tall, or too pretty, or too successful in academics and track, or because I was the daughter of this gorgeous, vivacious Mom whom other adults thought beamed sunlight out her shapely bottom.

Always it was the same pattern: I would try to fit in, realize I didn't fit in, shy away then get accused of being standoffish, of thinking I was better than they were. But

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this new place, this strange, beautiful place they called Kama...aw, I had to give it a try.

As I approached I figured they were probably stoned, sitting around smiling with unfocused eyes. I stood there not saying anything, and they sat there not saying anything, and I thought, yeah, well, I've been here before and began walking off. Then one of them, a girl whose name I learned was Raz, called out to me.

"You the new topsider?"

"Me? Yeah, I guess. I mean, I'm from, y'know, outside. Got here a few days back."

"Knuckin!" she said, and introduced me around. Then the questions began: What music did I like. Was I into films. The girls wanted to know about clothes and shoes. The guys were happy just looking me over. Normal teen stuff. What impressed most was they didn't bother about all the political crap going down. I kinda thought they'd be a bit snooty since their people were behind the world gone completely mad and all, but they didn't seem to care one way or the other. When I told them I'd been born and raised in California but had followed the consortium to New Zealand, they showed moderate interest. A number of them claimed to have an older brother or sister or somebody close living topside, mostly going to college there or working in hi-tech.

"Wait, you people can leave here? Go out to the real world?"

They laughed at that, and a few repeated 'real world' as though it was the funniest thing they'd ever heard. Immediately I felt embarrassed, but they were cool about it, not giving me a heap. One boy named Tarq (and was he ever hot!) said, "We go topside on assignment." When I looked puzzled: "We're infiltrators, Walli: spies, sent out to learn your deepest, darkest secrets." They all laughed at that, as did I.

"Is it something you look forward to?"



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A few of them made faces. Only a couple said yeah, maybe.

“You know about our head lice, right?” a pretty girl wondered.

“Your what!?”

“The sensors in our heads.” She rolled back an earlobe to reveal a tiny scar, same as Boris had. “It does all the things your external gadgets do, plus let’s us know when mom wants us home for dinner.” A few giggled. “That’s what we were doing when you walked over here – tuned in together to a new movie with that hunk Ryan Dowling.” Their reactions to this last comment were split perfectly along boy-girl lines. “Hunk of what?” one young guy muttered.

“Head lice, huh,” I said. “I like that.”

“You’ll get yours soon, I guess,” another boy said. “Plus training how to control it, pick up stuff when you want, channel selection, but also – and this is the main thing – how to keep stuff out when you don’t want. It’ll feel strange at first, like your head’s being invaded, but you’ll learn to deal with it. We’ve had ours since we were three, so take it for granted.”

“You come to Kama alone?” Raz wondered.

“With my Dad. Supposedly we’re only staying a week, then going back.”

“That’s new. Never heard of short-term visitors before.” She looked around, received confirmation from the others. “I thought most of you go to Mexico or Bali for vacation.”

I shrugged. “I honestly have no idea why we were brought here.”

“Usually,” a boy named Pem said, “topsidars are recruited for their skills. Scientific or entertainment, mostly. The first to produce more techie trash we don’t need, the second to keep us juvies from growing bored and creating mayhem in the streets.”

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“What’s to do here?” I wondered.

“Same as topside, I suppose,” another girl replied. “Reading, music, art.” A boy added, “Surfing. Skiing. Climbing. Sitting around bullshitting. Sex.” A few titters.

“You’re not anxious to get out? Go someplace in the re– uh, topside?”

“I used to be,” Tarq (the hot one) replied. I liked when he looked at me, felt all juicy. “But, y’know, it’s just too weird out there. Why all the fuss, the hatred, wars over something as stupid as oil and religion?”

“I guess that’s because you’ve learned to do without them.”

“Oil, yeah. Early on we got clued in about existing natural energies. Religion? Dunno. Lots of people come from topside bring theirs with them, but it’s not the big deal your people make of it. Believe in what you want, or believe in nothing. Who cares? We’re instructed in things like acceptance, tolerance, compassion pretty early on.”

“I certainly get behind that. They really drill it into you?”

“We’re not brainwashed, if that’s what you mean. Just taught these things matter more than blind obedience to fairy tales and myths.”

He added: “We’re totally tuned in to what’s going on topside. It’s just, y’know, we find it hard to understand what your problem is. Look, we’re all different, we’re all the same.” Shrug. “What’s to fight about? Why all the hate? With us, I may have an argument with you, think you’re a dwort. A day or two later the feeling’s faded away, healed like a bruise or cut, and I remember who I am, and who you are, we make up, maybe have sex or just unify our minds, move on.” Tarq paused, looked out at the landscape. “I suppose we’re too insular here, all our basic needs met, to truly understand what it’s like out there.” He gave a Boris-like sigh. “Thing is, I get assigned, I go. Like your military service but without the nastiness. Otherwise, I

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really have no desire to leave Kama. Anyway, while you're here would you care to join us rebellious adolescents in our daily activities?"

And so, following morning, I went to school.

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I would like to say that school in Kama wasn't much different from what I had experienced in California and Sil-Val South, but in truth school here wasn't like anything I had known before. Fortunately, Tarq filled me in on what to expect before I set foot in there and made myself look like a bumbling doofus.

"Most education topside is the act of instilling information into kids," he said. I wondered whether he was conscious of my sidling up so close to him. "Most times, from what we are able to discern, this turns out to be misinformation entwined with myth and fact that isn't fact at all, layered onto your brain's outer surface like wallpaper. The idea is for you to memorize this old stuff and repeat it back in exams. Those with decent memory techniques are labeled 'smart'.

"Here we have no exams; none. We have no real need of them. There are two types of learning here. Passive takes in the building blocks of knowledge: mathematics, the sciences, languages. These basics are modularly implanted into our brains early: we're not even consciously aware of their presence until comes time to use them. And then, *voila!*, there they are – you know eight times seven equals fifty-six, water rises to its own level and how to say isn't it a lovely morning in Swahili.

"Active learning takes place at a much deeper level. A damp sponge absorbs far more water than a dry hard one. This entails concepts rather than facts. Idea here is to use one's personal intuitive process in order to arrive at individual responses to situations and conditions. In this

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manner ten people may come up with ten different solutions to a problem. Or even the means of defining the problem. Which one is correct? Maybe all of them, maybe some, maybe none. This doesn't really matter. What does matter is the process you have taken to get there.

“When we agree each of us involved in a specific problem has reached some sort of solution, we turn our head lice to the same frequency and compare, argue, hopefully work out alternative paths to an understanding. At the same time we realize that although one path appears the best for today, tomorrow another path may more workable. This enables us to be flexible and – here comes the core of our educational system – *creative*. This last word defines our very being in Kama. We are here to further our individual self and our group selves and the whole of Kaman self by constant innovation. Becoming set on one way, one answer, one process, to us is stagnation. Which we consider tantamount to death. Make sense?”

“Ye-e-es, I suppose. As you said, I'm used to more structure and guidance from the top. The schools I've attended have been pretty open and liberal-minded, but nothing like you've described. Just one thing, Tarq. (God, I love the sound of his name rolling off my tongue! I could say it over and over and over.) If you consider me a dry, hard sponge, how do I get to be damp and absorbent? (I wonder whether he has any clue I'm pretty darn wet now!)”

“Tell is over. Time for show.”

He led me to a semi-enclosed area where eight other students sat on yoga mats and cushions, talking softly. Some I knew from my meet with them the previous day. They greeted me kindly. A girl named Pon took over from Tarq. She was short and quite pretty though pudgy with natural silver-white hair that hung in a single braid down her left side past her waist.

“When we're seven or eight, each of us goes through extensive mindpower training. This may sound a

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bit heavy, but it's really quite pleasant. The entire training lasts a few months, and at least once a year we all go through a refresher. Then every morning when we meet we start off with a twenty minute silent meditation followed by one of the mind strengthening exercises. Have you done any meditation, Walli?

"Yes, actually for some years. But," I confessed, "not every day, I'm afraid."

"No problem, we're all pretty much the same." Giggles all around. "Your meditation, like each of ours, is personal and private. When we're all finished, we'll do a group imagery exercise." She handed me a small white box with a set of headphones attached. "We'll be tuning in to a common head lice channel so we can do the exercise together. We find this provides more power than if we do it individually. If you put on the headphones following the meditation, you can join in with us."

We all closed our eyes, took some deep breaths to clear out any early morning cobwebs. My meditation was simple and straightforward:

Focusing on a small invisible triangle extending out from my nostrils, I took a long, slow, deep breath, being aware of the cool air entering my nostrils. As the air was coming in, I silently recited a popular mantra, or series of four words that had no real English translation: *Om Mani Padme Hum*. On the connected exhale, I repeated the six syllables. Om Mani Padme Hum. And that was it: long, slow breath in, subvocalizing Om Mani Padme Hum. Long, slow breath out: Om Mani Padme Hum. Focusing on the inch and a half triangle extending from my nostrils. Sound like a piece of cake, does it? Yeah, sure. After the third breath-in, breath-out, already my mind was floating off in space. Am I really here, in a strange hole under the Greenland icecap? Maybe I'm dreaming all this. Oh shit. Focus, goofball! Om Mani Padme Hum...Om Mani Padme Hum. He must have a girlfriend, Tarq. He's so luscious!

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*Focus!* Om Mani Padme Hum... Could I live here like these kids? They seem really together. Breath in, breath out. I probably strike them as a retard. Me, the straight A student in two hemispheres. Like transferring to another school and being put back two grades. I could never catch up. Om Mani Padme Hum...

And then, as it almost always happens, I must have gone into a zone because twenty minutes were up when I would've sworn it was hardly ten. Pon motioned to the headphones and I slipped them over my ears. Soft, lovely music, Asian sounding. Then a gentle female voice.

“With your eyes closed, spend some moments focusing in on your kundalini system. Be aware of the presence of your *shushuma* in the form of a transparent tube the thickness of a common drinking straw from the crown of your head down through the rear of your skull, down through your neck and then running in a straight line about an inch in front of your spine through your chest area, midsection and abdominal region. Allow your focus to slowly work its way down the shushuma from top to bottom. Within the shushuma are your seven main energy centers, or chakras. Direct your consciousness to the base chakra in the lowest area of your abdomen. Good. Now visualize a tiny pinpoint of light within the very center of the base chakra. Using your mind's own power, direct this pinpoint of light to begin growing, slowly expanding outward from its pinpoint. Feel the warmth, the peace, the power of this light as it continues to expand, immediately absorbing and thoroughly dissolving all negative energy, any blockage, it comes in touch with. Allow the light to grow, to relax and purify this entire area. When it grows to the size of a soccer ball, the light will cease its growth. Now focus your full attention on this pure and perfect light. This is positive energy, the Universe's most natural resource. Take a deep breath and direct this new fresh air down your kundalini all the way to the ball of light that is

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now filling your base chakra area. Feel the difference in power and radiance between this area and the rest of your body. Wonderful. Now bring your attention up the shushuma to the second chakra, located in the very center of your abdominal cavity, and as you did with the lowest chakra, see here a second pinpoint of light and allow it to begin its expansion...”

In this manner, the voice guided us through the remaining five energy centers: an inch above the waistline; the heart area in the middle of the chest; throat; third eye, and finally the crown. With this last chakra cleansing, instead of ceasing its growth at the soccer ball stage, the voice had us observe and feel as the light continued to grow, downward into the head, throat and torso, mixing and mingling with the previous illuminated energy centers, as well slowly down the arms all the way to the hands and fingertips (I could feel my fingers tingling when the light entered and split into ten tiny rivulets of joy), as well down the legs, washing away any stiffness from all the sitting. Once the light had saturated the body from within, it moved through the skin and formed a protective bubble around me, growing larger, brighter, stronger. My light bubble made contact with those nearest me, and then those nearest them, until the entire area and all it contained was, in fact, light. We then were asked to fully sense the continuum of this Universal light, one light connecting all of us and unifying our individual strengths into a massive powerful, perfectly focused mind comprised of each and every one of us.

The pleasant voice went silent, replaced by the heavenly music I'd heard at the very beginning. Without being told, I slowly opened my eyes and noted the others were doing likewise, as though a magic string had been gently pulled bringing us back to a physical reality. I felt as though I were stoned, but not in any doper's sense. Rather I had assumed a new state of remarkable lucidity. I looked out to the distance, over the field of grass and trees to one

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single tree, an elm I think, perhaps half a kilometer off, and on that tree one single leaf, and it was so, so clear, its serrated edges perfectly formed, and I decided that was my leaf because it stood out from all the rest, from everything else in my vision.

And this was how these kids began each and every school day?

Wow.

## **GHOST**

At dinner with the Council people we learned eating animals was frowned upon, if not actually outlawed, but that controlled fisheries existed in every community. I had some delicious trout while Walli and Boris went strictly vegan, as always.

After Boris and I had finished our talk, we went over to the cottage Walli was in, but found it empty. I got worried for a minute, and needed Boris to place his hand on mine and look into my eyes to calm down. I'm so unaccustomed to having responsibility for someone, or believing I have responsibility for someone, which is closer to the truth, and I dislike what it does to my nerves.

"I was just with some kids my own age," she said when she showed up.

"Doing what?"

"Smoking crack, heavy sex, gunfights with rival gangs. You know, the usual."

I stuck out my tongue. "Some day you'll be a parent and you'll find out what it's like," I sneered.

"Please, god that I don't believe in, save me from that one."

The sunset cast magnificent colors on the distant mountain, and we sat on her veranda in stupefied silence until darkness descended and a sky filled with stars was



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overhead. If all this is fake, manufactured by a super-intelligent sector of humanity, they've done it to perfection. And, yeah, while I claim to distrust perfect things, it's like eating something sweet which isn't particularly good for me: in small doses it sure does soothe the troubled psyche.

I returned to my own quarters, sat there deep in thought, reluctant to get into that which I knew I had to get into. Slowly I labored off my chair, went to the desk, picked up the pendulum, sat back down, held the thread in position. I warmed up with a few innocuous questions I knew the answers to, watched as the crystal swung back and forth or side to side on its thread. Finally:

– You there, old son?

– *Yes.*

– All's well your way?

– *Yes.*

– I suppose I have you to blame for getting me into this.

– *Yes.*

– These people are genuine?

– *Yes.*

– No unseen agendas that might be detrimental to Walli's and my health and welfare?

– *Yes.* (Yes, no unseen agendas.)

– I should place full trust in them?

– *Yes.*

– You reckon these good people can hold back the flood of ugly on our poor woe-begotten planet?

The pendulum initially began a forward-to-back swing, then danced into a clockwise ellipse, the sign for I-don't-know.

– Gonna be a race right down to the wire, huh.

– *Yes.*

– Shit.

– *Yes.*

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I had so many damn questions. One would pop into my head and immediately three more would fight it for top billing. Most had nothing to do with what was going on with worlds gone completely mad and melting icecaps and the reason for Walli's and my being here. For example:

How did Kama go from an empty hole in the ground to this elegant, exquisite patch of paradise? After all, when the original people crawled off their shipwrecked vessel onto the icecap they had no more than the tattered clothes on their backs.

These animals I see across the way: unless they've figured out how to hatch mammals from eggs or seeds planted in the frozen ground, they gotta have cattle-car shuttles through the earth, right?

The materials with which their 3D printers build everything: For certain they didn't come from here in Greenland. Trade with Eskimos? Dog sleds and seal furs, yeah, but metals, precious and otherwise?

So they send spies topside. Got that. And no doubt they're brilliant forgers so passports and other documents present no problem. Plus they're undoubtedly amazing hackers, so they could've amassed a huge kitty of cribbed wealth. But that's only since modern electronic and digital communication came into being. What did they do for money before the internet, run pea-under-the-shell games on the streets of New York?

The only answer that made any sense, at least to me, was Israel. Jews started it off here, Jews started off there not many years later. Has Kama been working hand in hand with the Israelis since? Whose knowledge was it, really, that grew those pineapples in the desert? Boris said he's been there quite a few times, though he claims no more than a few months total. Is he the link between them? Ah,

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what does it matter? There are, after all, slightly more pressing issues than my curiosity.

I met with Arju, the head of Council, at least once daily over the next several days. I never brought up my silly questions, simply sat and listened. She struck me as a sincere and deep thinker. Then I realized there was something else about her.

A warm, lovely, graceful woman, she looked to be in her late fifties. Then I learned she was one of the first actually born in Kama, which made her...good lord, old enough to be my –. Cut it out, Ghost! As with so many native-borns who'd never spent time away, she was wonderfully preserved, possessing the glacial skin and firm musculature topside women half her age would die for.

“Since we have no state religion,” Arju was saying upon that occasion, and I was brought sharply back to the present, working not to dive into the pools of her eyes, “many topsiders no doubt would classify us as atheists, although that’s hardly an accurate assessment. If we have a common belief most likely it would be the interconnectedness of living things, which takes in *all* living things, not only the animal and vegetable kingdoms, and certainly not restricted to this world.”

This last time I met with her she told me: “We try extra hard not to be competitive here. We tell our kids, Do your best, win the race, tick off the box, then toss it behind you. Anybody who boasts, who struts, is sure to get mocked by peers. The football hero does not get the pretty girl in Kama unless he has other attributes such as humility and compassion. I won’t say there’s no us and them mentality here whatsoever; after all, we’re human beings, and as such acknowledge a basic design fault in our spiritual wiring. But it is something we work hard at instilling in the young.”

As with all our get-togethers, I sensed she was trying her best not to lecture, but occasionally her

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explanation of things couldn't help coming across as a sermon. I struggled to pay attention to what she was saying, and not on her increasingly fetching loveliness.

"Mind is the thread connecting all life in the universe," she told me over green tea and oat bran cookies. "Actually, the universe *is* Mind, like a gigantic tree, and we are all tiny, tiny splinters thereof, which makes each of us a microcosm of the Mind tree, possessed of all its knowledge, wisdom and experience. But how easily our egos cause us to forget this one basic fact of life."

"It's amazing," I said, brushing crumbs off my chin.

"What is?"

"I had a friend. The best friend I've ever known. The words you've just spoken might have come straight out of his mouth."

"Ah. That would be Spook, I presume."

I stared at her, too stunned to speak.

"You know, we used to rejoice in your antics back in, what shall I call it, your halcyon days."

I continued to gawp.

"Please don't be angry. We know a lot of things which are not known topside. We have to. For us, knowledge is survival. We snoop on topside much like your CIA and NSA, but with a somewhat more positive and loving motive.

"For a while, the two of you were our fondest source of entertainment. Far better than any series produced on your TV. On one of his excursions Harris – Boris – even brought back a sack of your T-shirts. I believe he still has his. When the two of you would pull off a caper, if I may put it that way, you would hear cheers resounding throughout Kama. Although I must say, that time where you just barely escaped with your life in Mexico..." She shook her head, made a face.

Still, I was unable to utter a sound.

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“Ghost, I’m shocking you, and this is exactly what I’m trying to do. Shock is one of our greatest weapons. This entire charade, which topsiders refer to as the world gone completely mad, has been perpetrated not for the purpose of control, to demonstrate we can shut you down at any time, but in the hope of shocking some sense into a foolish populace which had gone mad long before Kama grew fed up and pulled the plug.”

“And my part in all this?” I wondered, when finally I could speak.

She sat quietly, composing her words. “You have a great gift, and I’m not referring to your ability to become unseen. In fact, that’s looked upon here as one of your minor attributes. Mostly, you possess an acute ability to, the expression you topsiders use, think outside the box. Frequently, with you, these thoughts are mischievous, devilish. But even those are full of curiosity, imaginative, creeping into dusty corners which have largely been ignored by all who have swept before you.” She paused, placed a fingertip behind her earlobe, nodded. “Right. Thank you.” Back to me: “Now, sir, do you suppose your heart is able to stand an even greater shock?”

“Jesus, what next?”

She stood up. “Come, my friend.” I rose on less than sturdy legs, followed her out of the room. We walked along a corridor, turned a corner and continued until we came to a closed door at the very end. She took a deep breath, smiled at me, pressed her thumb to a small strip on the jamb. The door split in half, sliding into the wall on either side. We stepped into a cavernous, windowless room with banks of fancy gadgetry against three of the walls. A single high-backed chair sat facing the farthest wall, beneath a gigantic electronic map of the world.

“I shall leave you to it,” Arju said, stepping out again. Leave me to what? I was about to ask, but the half-doors slid back from the walls and welded solid once more.

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I was alone.

Or was I.

I had a weird feeling someone was sitting in the chair.

The urge to flee suddenly was overpowering.

I waited.

Nothing.

“Hello?” I called, my voice creaky. “Somebody in the chair?”

Nothing.

“If there’s somebody sitting in the chair, would you mind –”

The chair started to rotate, slowly, mechanically, around to the left, sporadically illuminated by the blinking colored lights of the map on the wall. Movement seemed to take forever, a degree at a time. Ten degrees...twenty... I debated whether to go right up to it, but I was frozen to the spot. The arc of its movement reached thirty, forty. Chills began crawling up my spine. At sixty degrees I could sense a form, a shadow, a figure. Seventy. Eighty. At ninety, facing directly the left wall, I shot my hand out to the door behind me for support and let out a primal yell that was heard throughout the galaxy.

“Well, ain’t you a sorry-ass sight for dead eyes,” came a voice from the chair.

Walter.

## BOOK FIVE

### SPOOK

What I wanted to do, I wanted to fall off that chair and roll around on the floor laughing my butt off. I guess I coulda done it, but it'd probably look weird coz I ain't got no body to do it with. But if I did do it, I mighta lost sight of the look on Ghost's face. Man, that was one classic expression, hoo! Glad the boy didn't have no seizure, dunno what I woulda done.

"C'mon, babe, don't tell me you never seen a talking Spook before, hee hee hee."

He stepped away from his wall, did a sort of drunken stagger over to where I was seated.

"You're a projection:" hardly more than a whisper. He looked all around, up to the ceiling, over at all that fancy electronic shit against the walls. "You're not real."

"Real as you, bro. I mean, I talking to you, ain't I?"

"Can I – can I touch you"

"Ooh-wee, I never knew you swung that way. No, you can't touch me, dummy. I ain't got nothing to touch. Okay, I'll stop messing with y'all. I'm a sorta projection, I suppose. A hologram, in truth, coz it too damn hard manifesting a body. Not that it can't be done. These people – what do they call theyselves, Kamans? Kamarians? Kamalotters? – they so advanced in their technology they make your fool consortium look like they just discovered fire. But it take a shitload of energy, and why bother, I just have to toss it away come time to go back. Want not, waste not, got me? Yeah, I'm real, Jack. And talk about eye-ronic: you got you a body but can make it unseeable; I don't got no body but y'all see me fine. Maybe all the shit

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happening topside, people have a heavy need for new entertainment. We can go on tour, babe, do our Spook&Ghost act again, only with a slightly new twist.”

Poor Ghost, he be totally dazzled. “Now look, my brother, whyn’t you just sit down on the floor in front of me. That’s it. Now clasp your hands together and stick em out before you.” When he did this, I closed my hands around his. He couldn’t feel me or nothing, but in a way I could feel him. Felt good, too.

“I’m afraid I can’t hang around here too long. Again, it’s an energy thing. So first thing I gotta say is how much I love you. For sure y’all know that, but it feel good to say it. Damn pendulum don’t give me the opportunity. Second thing is, whatever happens, whatever situation you get into, I’m with you all the way. Got you covered total. Walli too. Man, my grandbaby girl’s something, ain’t she. That’s coz she the product of Spook&Ghost, both. Just, y’know, give the girl some room to breathe, hear what I’m saying? Nothing bad gonna happen to her coz I’m using all my powers to make absolute certain of that. You as well. Three words to keep in mind: protection, guidance and healing. Every breath y’all take, every moment passes, every step: your bro got your backs.

“These Kama folk the real thing, man. Big brains, even bigger hearts, so much integrity you wouldn’t think the human race capable of such. They on the right track, but it gonna be a hell of a haul to get to where they want. If they fail, you can kiss sweet mother earth good-bye.”

“All right, I get that. And it’s obvious I’m being volunteered to do something. What, I have no idea. But Walli: Jesus, bro, she’s a child, you know?”

“Joan of Arc was younger.”

“Sure, and look how she wound up!”

“Old Joanie didn’t have no dead Spook looking after her, did she. Okay, I’m feeling the energy beginning to drain outta me, so it’s almost time to head off. I don’t



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reckon we'll meet again this way, but I'm not far off, wherever and whatever."

"Ah, man, how I miss you, fella. How I, aw geez, Walter..." Ghost bent his head forward until his brow touched my knees that weren't really knees. I placed my hand on back of his head. He began crying. Bawling like a baby. Then I did too. Not real tears, of course. Can't get no blood from a stone nor tears from a hologram, but I *felt* those tears. What went through both our minds was all the good times we had together. And for the first time I felt sad I hadda die.

For a few minutes we remained that way, no words, none needed. Just two loving souls.

And then I was gone.

## WALLI

Unlike many of my female friends and acquaintances from school, both in California and Sil-Val South, I have had relatively little experience in sex. I can only suppose this might have been a reverse rebellion against an overbearing mother and even more-so grandmother, whose tales of their teenage sexual escapades and conquests frankly bored me silly. So I had little to compare with that first night together with Tarq.

"Aren't you going to wear something?" I asked, looking him in the eye, then down at his delightful member.

"You want me to keep my undies on?" he replied, incredulous.

"For safe sex purposes." Still he appeared perplexed. "What other kind is there? Then he wondered: "Do you carry some sort of malady in there?"

"No! It's just I'm too young to become pregnant and have to experience abortion."

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“Ah. You’re so, you know, beautiful and have fit in so easily to our ways I’d forgotten you’re a topsider.”

“Oh, thanks for the compliment!”

“No-no, what I mean is, you people haven’t acquired the practice of mind control as a means of prevention. It’s not a put-down, honest. We learn this shortly before the onset of puberty. With us it’s automatic that before sex we create a mental filter. My sperm and your egg won’t be meeting tonight, this I can guarantee.”

“Really? Then dally no further, my prince!”

It was wonderful. Touching, kissing, licking, here, there, everywhere, all accompanied by tickles, giggles and loving whispers. When he inserted himself in me, it felt like just another step up the mountain. We remained that way for ages. I had ten thousand tiny climaxes before he announced, “I don’t think I can hold back any longer.” And we both exploded. Omigod, did we ever! My shrieks of passion must have reached the icy dome way overhead and reverberated back down then up again. I thought: these people do this on a regular basis? Who wouldn’t want to live here?

The following morning we were sitting on the veranda when Daddy came by. I felt myself tighten. But something was, I was about to say off with him, but I suspect ‘on’ might be more apt in describing his look and behavior. He glowed. Maybe he, too...

He gave me a great hug, then stepped over to where Tarq had stood up, his hand extended. But Ghost just smiled, lightly batted away the hand and reached in to give my lover a mighty cuddle of his own. My god, what’s come over the man!

Would we mind his sitting with us a few minutes, he wondered. After all I had explained to him about Daddy’s possessiveness, Tarq gave me a face which said, *This* is the guy you told me about?

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Small talk, chit-chat, some words about meetings we had scheduled later in the day. Then he was gone.

We sat stupefied for some time. Then, “He’s not at all what you –” “I swear he’s never been like –”

But Ghost’s odd behavior wasn’t what was foremost on my mind this morning. Our stay here was almost over. I did not want to leave. To go back to – what? Maybe I could run away. Hide. Miss the shuttle. Would they adopt me? Let me stay forever? The next bit of conversation put an end to this dream.

“I have a feeling you’ll be returning here,” Tarq said. “Maybe not for good, but for a longer period.”

“You don’t care that I’ll be leaving?”

“I don’t understand. What does my caring have to do with it.”

“Well, I thought we –” His expression cut me short.

“We had a wonderful coupling. You and I are good together, we have fun, speak from our souls. But there is work to be done. You understand? Extremely important work. They say you will be instrumental in this work. You and your father both. Way beyond what my imagination might tell me. And I honor you for this.”

“But y’gotta do what y’gotta do, eh. I thought young people here didn’t concern themselves with what’s happening topside and the climate change.”

“We don’t discuss it, sure. What can we do about it? But there are others here, far more insightful than we are. I have no idea what they’re planning, but I trust them. We all do. And whatever they decide for us, that’s what will be.”

I took in his lovely face. His strong neck, smooth shoulders. He had the body of a swimmer; no, a sprinter. Oh, why can’t I have you? Yes, right, that’s how we are in, yep, I’ll say it, or think it: the real world. We become one another’s possessions. We cling and grasp and let our hearts and genitals guide us, even with the understanding that it can’t last. We study Buddhism and agree that

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impermanence is a terrific thing but we can't help infusing impermanence with the hope that this time, this time...

For a few minutes I sat in silence, viewing myself as a comic strip character with a wisp of curlicue dark smoke rising up from my head reflecting ire and frustration. Usually I allow such negative passions to build, to linger, but this time the anger lifted quickly, and a sense of joy overcame me. Look where I am! I thought. Look who I'm with, what we shared. I leaned across and placed my hands around his face, stared into his lovely dark eyes. Then I reached in and kissed him lightly on the lips. Wow, look at me, I thought. Kicking and screaming, the big little girl grows into a woman. Hot damn.

## **BORIS**

*"Israel!"* I heard myself holler. Followed by involuntary laughter.

We were seated in a pleasant room in the Council chambers, smaller than the first time we three assembled here with the full Council. The standard tea and cookies had been served and the feeling was one of ultimate ease.

"Wherever do you get these ideas? Way back, you had me down as an assassin or gunrunner for the Mossad. Ghost, my very dear friend, I'm a stumblebum from Cleveland, a classic societal misfit who fell through a hole in the ice and landed here a million happy years ago. Yes, I've been to Israel. I've done a little business with them as I have with merchants of a dozen other countries. I did not give them nuclear secrets, nor have they ever supplied Kama with any of the materials you see around you."

"Okay, okay, get off your horse. You bring me to this place, I see magic with my own eyes, witness impossible things, and my very conventional mind can't help but reach out and try to find answers."

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I turned to Walli, seated alongside. “And you, young scholar? You haven’t had questions that can’t or won’t be answered?” Walli merely smiled, had the sense, or perhaps it was shyness, to hold her thoughts inside.

I continued on: “Think of the changes in your own world over the past eighty-some years. A mere generation back, whoever would have conceived that such necessities of life as the home telephone, the postal service, gas-belching vehicles and Kodak film would be phased out of existence. And that you could communicate instantly with anyone on the earth’s surface with a gizmo that fits in your hand or is hermetically sealed in your wrist. Well, this place had an advantage over topside from the very start. The people who first showed up here were cream of the genius crop. And following the first few years when their direction was misguided by hate and revenge, they haven’t had the disadvantage of wars, corporate greed, utterly stupid leaders and a general populace full of fear who can’t see further ahead than their next chemicalized meal and who’s going to win the Superbowl.

“Even topside has for years been aware that a living being can be reproduced from a cell in a test tube. That a 3D printer can make anything material, even if you don’t have those exact materials to start with. Some of our endeavors may be considered new, but truly, most are no more than re-establishments; after all, alchemy, with which we’ve attained a modicum of success, is a science that was practiced prior to the dark ages. We’ve just learned to do these things faster, easier, better.”

“So, what, Kamans sport higher IQs than us retards outside?”

“Ain’t whacha got, my dear Ghost, but whacha do with it. Didn’t Einstein claim contemporary humans use no more than ten percent of their brain’s potential? Well, maybe Kamans have doubled that; more, most likely. All it took was a bit of trial and error, finding workable systems

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and adopting them to the fullest to meet their needs. Necessity mothers us all, but topsiders' needs lean more towards seeking toys to amuse themselves. As you people say, it's not rocket science. No, it sure in hell isn't. Rocket science, things that explode and maim and kill, everything that utilizes and dissipates unsustainable energy, polluting air and water and soil in its wake, all are contrary to the very laws of nature. Which has made it possible for us to create the world gone completely mad situation that exists out there now. There's nothing wrong with the situation; in fact, it's very, very, right. What's created chaos is the removal of nasty toys that any reasonably intelligent society would've junked before they ever left the laboratory."

"So you never got help from topside?" Ghost said.

"From those we've recruited, of course. But they have simply slotted into what we already had going here. We did get some extraordinary help, especially early on, from sources beyond topside." I let that sink in. I had to hold back the smile created by the wheels which started spinning over that planted line.

"Boris, really? Daddy's told me about his extraordinary meeting with my grandfather. So you've got help from the no-longer living?"

"No, dear. Not that we haven't tried. The session with Walter was a one-off, more his undertaking than ours. When we learned this was even feasible we had considered further efforts, but were sternly warned off. Appears there are certain things in nature which, either for the moment or else forever, should not be messed with."

I figured that would end the conversation, but from their expressions I felt I had to go beyond.

"Way back, hundreds of thousands of years, civilization was far, far, more advanced than it is now, even here. A continent you probably think of as myth, Atlantis, possessed the greatest minds who have ever lived on our planet. Mankind has always been motivated to go further,

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achieve more, and Atlantis was no exception. Unlike us, the Atlanteans had no desire to shoot for the stars; they had their eyes on targets which enticed them even more, having discovered the presence of alternate universes, materially similar to our own but with differences, mainly in the beings living there. They were warned, both by their sages and messages from within our own universe, to stay clear. Whether it was for curiosity's sake or the seeking of power, they went ahead and developed a ruby laser device they believed could propel them through the boundaries of this universe and into the next."

"Bye-bye Atlantis."

"Indeed. During our brief contact with Walter, he let us know that communion between the now-living and former-living was once a rather common experience. But the emergence of religion, or rather of false prophets preaching religion, messed up everything. The living began to look upon the unliving as gods, to worship them, fashion idols of them."

"So the dead," Walli reckoned, "after trying to reason with us dummies, finally threw up their hands and went back to their nice quiet sensible existence, put up a wall and left us to fend for ourselves. And there the divide between us remains. Fair enough, too."

"Okay, the pre-history lesson is appreciated and all, but you have done everything conceivable to bamboozle us and not answer the primary question. You do remember the question, eh Boris?"

I turned to Walli. "My dear, I believe your sense of belief stretches considerably further than your father's."

"Aw, c'mon. I'm just a little slow sometimes. I do get there eventually. Mostly."

"As the product of Spook&Ghost, with a mother who carries the seed, if not entirely the tradition, of one of them, I would say I'm fairly well equipped to believe what I see, see what I believe. However, if you have any

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smelling salts, I shall carry them in my bag in case Daddy's consciousness craps out on him. What have you to tell us?"

"Not tell, show. Hang on a minute." I signaled for a go-ahead from Council, which had been closely monitoring our conversation from the very beginning.

The door to the room now opened and Arju entered. I noted that Ghost was more than pleased to see her. And on Arju's side, the look she presented him most definitely was accompanied by sparkling eyes.

She greeted both warmly, then approached Walli. "My dear," she said, clasping the teenager's shoulders, "we've been ignoring you, and I do apologize. We'd hoped you would integrate with those your own age, so we more or less left you to your own devices. I understand you've done considerably well in that regard. You're blushing. How delightful! We don't get much of that here.

"And my dear friend Ghost, I trust your recent experience has opened you up to accepting further new and unusual things."

"Oh god, this sounds like something even weirder is about to take place. All right, my fists are clenched and teeth are grit: shock away, lady."

"Daddy, I do believe your fear buds are showing."

"Nah, Babe. Only things I'm afraid of are great heights and strong women." He stage-shot Arju a glance.

"Welll, maybe not all strong women."

## **GHOST**

I expected another trek down the hall to the room of gadgets and bizarre. But Arju was full of surprises. We left the building, walked to the garage and picked up one of those cute little self-drive silent vehicles that zip around here. Arju gave unheard orders and we took off, up to ground level and away, taking the scenic route. We passed



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fields of growing black and red rice, oats, corn and several additional grains she named but that I'd never heard of. Obviously organic, nutritious and decidedly GM-free. And the fruit trees: acres and acres of everything imaginable. How is it possible to grow bananas in the arctic?

There weren't very many single houses, she said, as most people preferred to live in small communities in which individual living quarters were linked together. All dwellings had grass, flowers, or crops covering the roofs, as well as hydroponic glass buildings in a shared area.

When our vehicle would approach a curve in the road, I automatically held tight, anticipating the standard shifting of momentum, but that never came, regardless of speed. The other three, Walli included, seemed to expect this, making me the lone analogue amongst the digitals.

Lots of people rode bicycles and related concoctions. I must say that invention is of the essence here, whether for function or fashion, and I enjoyed watching Walli thrill to the show. The girl certainly loved it here; it would be a struggle for her to return home.

We went through small towns, and again it struck me how people-friendly they all were, devoid of any evidence of stop and yield instructions and other authoritative declarations of traffic and pedestrian control. Soft loudspeaker music I associated with long-ago Asian travels seemed to permeate the air wherever; certainly no programmed elevator rubbish or heart-stopping modern cacophonies in this place. The vehicle might slow, occasionally came to a stop whenever obviously necessary, then smoothly carry on, back into the countryside.

Arju said earlier that Kama's population had recently passed thirty thousand, and was now around two-thirds/one-third native-borns to expats. Longer term immigrants were having their own kids, and like first-generation immigrants in the West, the kids were pushed to work harder, achieve more. This, she said, would ease off

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when these kids had children of their own. Many newcomers initially had trouble with the two children per adult system, but eventually would come to understand that the geographical area was finite; no suburban developments would suddenly rise up beyond the great concavity's outer limits and no above ground buildings could by rule exceed three stories.

We came to the foothills of the faux Annapurnas, wound our way through and around the base of the main peak and pulled into an underground car park. Apparently, the synthetic mini-mountain range was hollowed out, and was home to Kama's primary scientific region.

A silent and swift elevator propelled us up what seemed a fair distance. "Mostly," Arju noted, "the research and development areas are deep underground, but the major reception station, where we're headed, is up here." I thought: reception? Of what, signals? Perhaps a giant electron telescope? Ah, no.

We entered a large area. There were maybe a score of beings present. Different types of beings. A few who were structured like us, but most were not. I let out the long breath I did not realize I'd been holding. Walli, meanwhile, grew twinkling eyes the size of Frisbees.

There were reptilian looking beings and simian looking beings and elephantine beings. There were tiny beings and very large beings and one that looked like a truncated boa constrictor with itty bitty arms and legs.

I was having an acid flashback.

Many turned to face us as we approached. Those with mouths smiled. Other made motions with a limb or appendage.

Yep, definitely an acid flashback. Just hang on and wait it out.

Nearby, I heard Walli shriek with exultance. She made a silent inquiry of Arju, who smiled and nodded slightly. My daughter began to walk over to where these,

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these, *things* were congregated. On impulse I made to pull her back, but Boris, who had been ever so quiet the whole way here, reached out a hand to check me. "It's fine," he said softly. "She's perfectly safe."

And apparently she was. A few of the beings stuck out a hand and touched hers. Others placed their front appendages together and bowed. The elephantine touched the end of its trunk softly to the top of her head. Another, more human looking than the others, placed its brow and flat nose delicately on hers, much in the manner of the Maori hongi greeting.

Absolutely an acid flashback.

We didn't stay long, although Walli would've remained there all day. Or forever. Back down the elevator to ground level and beyond. Far beyond. We were taken through several laboratories and workshops sporting gear I had never seen before, nor was I curious as to their function. I needed to get out of there. Walli, bored with what she called 'stuff', asked whether she might return to play with her new-found pals. Arju smiled and said something to the effect that they had work to do.

An hour later we were back at Council headquarters. We entered the room we had occupied just prior to the journey. I flopped down in my chair.

"I take it," I said, "all that was real. Not your version of Halloween, not an elaborate practical joke." I waited for a word of assent, but the three of them simply waited for me to continue. "Okay, how do they get here, and where do they park their spaceships?"

"No interstellar spaceships," Arju declared. "Basically, there are no such things. Never were."

"Meaning Roswell never happened."

"Only in the X Files," she laughed. "Our friends whom you met mind-project. Their ancestors had been visiting our world for several generations, in pretty much the same manner Walter appeared the other day: in essence

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but not material. That requires an enormous amount of energy, and to be honest, they were unsure whether it would be worth it.”

“You mean they would offer gifts and tell us they’ve come in peace and we’d respond by blowing them to kingdom come.”

“When our forebears discovered the cavity in the ice and adopted it as our home, these beings hoped we would be different. Early on, when we were intent on developing even more destructive weapons to defeat those already in use, the beings figured we were same as the topsiders. Then we changed. They noted this change, gave it a few years to determine whether we were sincere in our quest for a loving society. Obviously, we passed muster, and they approached and asked might they establish an energy station here so they could come full-bodied.”

“They live here then?”

She smiled. “They get as homesick as humans, so venture back and forth frequently. We asked whether they wanted to recreate some of the special places from their respective worlds so they wouldn’t miss their homelands, but we both knew there simply isn’t the space here.”

She pulled her chair close to mine, reached out and took my hand. “Dear soul, it is they, who project from many thousands of light years off, who have provided the missing elements of our scientific knowledge and understanding. They’re wonderful, patient teachers; they instruct, but don’t do for us. They teach us theory, then take us through the initial steps of practical application. After that they give us the time and space to work through the details ourselves.”

“What do they want from us? From you.”

“Guess,” Boris coaxed, addressing the class dunce.

“May I?” Walli broke in. “They want to save us from ourselves. What I wonder is, why do they even care.”

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“Ah.” The dunce removed his conical hat. “They care because of the interconnectedness of all living things.”

“Bingo,” said Boris, with a dash of sarcasm. “Give the man a cigar.”

“In the great chain of universal existence,” Arju intoned, “planet Earth is the single weakest link. This has been understood since humankind took a wrong turn around the time of the Industrial Revolution. But there was always the hope we would come around eventually.”

“Yeah, sure.”

“The best opportunity was directly following World War Two, when, tired of all the fighting and killing, we appeared to be coming to our senses. Then America and Russia began trying to outdo one another with their evil toys. A second, slighter opportunity came about when John Kennedy was elected president. They really had hope for him. But he listened to the wrong people, and then, well...”

“All downhill since,” I offered, still foggy-brained about what I’ve learned and experienced here. “So I have a brief conversation with a dead hologram and meet creatures from beyond the pale –”

“Don’t be such a speciesist, Daddy!”

“I love it!” cried Boris, clapping his hands. “Speciesist. Well done, Walli!”

“And, I gather, my lovely daughter and I somehow figure to be involved in repairing the link.”

“So it would appear. But please don’t ask: we haven’t the faintest notion at this time. Meanwhile, the three of you are scheduled to leave tomorrow.” At this, Walli issued a moan of disapproval. “But you shall return. That much is known.”

Arju leaned in ever closer, placed her hand lightly on my knee. “On this, your final evening here, it would be my pleasure to share with you some hours of joyful Love. Do you consent to this invitation?”

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“Beautiful lady, if they formed an alliance for the purpose, all the beings in that room high up in the hollow mountain could not possibly keep me away.”

# BOOK SIX

## SHOSHONA

### **The South Island of New Zealand**

I came home from the trip on behalf of the consortium confused, disoriented and totally frustrated. I had started out all pumped up: Hey, the big guys are sending *me* to hang out with other big guys...I'm a genuine player! No, actually I'm a genuine fool. The Chinese parts manufacturers, stuck in their own false glory, no longer were inscrutable nor indomitable, and the Indians, always greasy males, looked at me like I was an unsacred cow waiting to be carved into succulent cuts. Both countries blamed the consortium for a situation that was continuing to put a crimp in their ascent to further wealth. When I spoke to them of the potential benefits of this world gone completely mad business, an opportunity to use our scientific knowledge for the common good now that so many of the negative applications had been taken away, they looked at me like I was a deluded hippie chick. Then they looked at my thighs.

Meanwhile, Walli, who had got back shortly before I did, was over the moon about her trip. What the heck had happened on that tramp with Ghost and Boris? “Tell me!” I kept demanding. “You couldn't be this high spending a

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couple weeks getting blisters, scratches on your legs and sleeping rough along with a couple old geezers!”

“Ask me no questions, Mom,” she’d reply coyly, “and I’ll tell you no lies.” Bitch!

Her gleeful reticence combined with my utter frustration got me seriously depressed. I’ve known for some time I was missing something major in life by comfort feeding my ego, but the contrast between hers and my present personal assessments made for a gaping divide.

All right, so how do I extract myself from all the ugly of the big corporate game, what would I do with myself in its stead, and, biggest question, do I really and truly want to? Daddy Walter, help me! But the Spook was silent in my head these days. Was like he was telling me, You gots to do it on yo own, chile!

## GHOST

I’d put on weight. Didn’t even have to climb on the scale, just saw myself in the mirror. All right, start back at the gym, twenty minutes each on the exercycle, X-trainer, treadmill. Pump some iron. Sit in the sweat box. But what I really needed was a gym for the soul, let me process all that’d happened down that hole in the ice.

Third time I went gymming I ran into Shoshona. Jesus, she looked miserable. Fake smile, forced words. Too much gunk trying to hide tired lines around the eyes. I asked did she want to meet for coffee after. Brushed me off like I was hitting on her. (Was I? Probably.) Several minutes later our eyes met as I was passing by her treadmill. She gave a slight nod. I hoped she wouldn’t probe about our supposed tramp. As it turned out, she didn’t even mention it.

When we’d seated ourselves at a table away from people, she wasted no time.

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“Ghost, I have to talk. Wit’s end. Me, this is. Shoshona the brave, the stalwart, cheerleader supreme, trampoline to the stars. Tell you how serious this is: before I ran into you today I was considering calling Ellie.”

“Your totally insane momma? First you’d have to listen to an hour of raving about her latest Brazilian plastic surgeon. All right, give.”

“I want to quit and I’m too damn scared to do it.”

“Ah.”

“Yeah, ah. I feel like the ball in a Chinese ping pong tournament. I used to love what I was doing. My role. And after the world went completely mad the role became even more satisfying. Top dogs came to me for strokes. Everywhere I’d go in the consortium, it was ‘Shoshona – help us!!’ Sho the shrink, open twenty-four/seven, no appointment necessary. Thought about strapping a couch to my back, only for them to lie on, not me.”

“But the act grew tiresome.”

“Until this trip. I was so up for it, like I’d finally graduated suck-ass university, got my diploma in life. Before I left to go talk to the billionaire dudes whose Asian slaveshops used to make all the parts for our shit, they tell me, Be positive, Sho; be uplifting, let em know we will prevail! Only the people I met, god, they were so *ugly*, Ghost. Mean and ugly and awful.

“So there’s me trying to spread cheer, Eric Idle nailed to the cross whistling Always Look on the Bright Side of Life, all the while the bastards are looking daggers at me, like the whole thing’s a consortium conspiracy, and I’m the poster girl for deceit. A solid month of this! A month of being placed in a hole up to my pretty little neck, bits of food stuck to my face and starving soldier ants charging my way.

“Finally I get back here, take a dozen steaming hot baths to scrub the yuk off my soul, happy to be home, my own people, y’know? And I look at them with tired eyes –



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yeah, I clocked you searching the new lines around them – but at the same time new eyes. And it hits me, the true reason the head honchos here sent me out in the first place: to let the big money Asian dicks spew their venom on *me*, little ol Shoshona, gorgeous black babe, symbol of consortium arrogance, and take the heat off them! I know this, and I want to ram it down their throats, but my feeling is, I sing one note, my throat gets slit.”

“And your next move is?”

“I can’t see either move doing me good. Keep on working for them and rot what little is left of my spirit? Quit, give up all the precious earthlies I’ve become addicted to and do what: volunteer work at an old folks’ hospice? I just wish whoever’s behind all this would reveal themselves, tell us what the hell they want. But unless one of those comic book villains descends upon the earth, some eighty foot high Vlad the Impaler, screams that unless we cut out the seven deadlies and love one another within the next thirty minutes he’s going to eat us, one by one, no way I can see any change happening.”

I took a few moments to digest this. Then: “Why does it have to be a villain?”

She looked at me hard, staring with narrowed eyes. “Ghost, what do you know? Don’t lie to me, you tricky old devil, you know something.”

“No, I won’t lie. But I won’t tell you what I know, either. You wouldn’t believe. Hell, I just barely believe, and I’ve been right smack in the middle of it all. Difference is, I want to believe it, and in time I will, when finally it seeps into the cracks of my mottled old brain box.”

“You’re beginning to creep me,” she sing-sang.

“I’m convinced they – whoever they are behind this, I’m saying – are the good guys. Ghost the ultimate cynic has become the ultimate idealist-slash-realist. Not a hundred percent, but it’s growing on me.

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“I reckon this was the deal back when me and Walter went on that killing spree. We knew it wouldn’t do a damn bit of good in the long haul, still we had to do *something*, couldn’t just spend the rest of our lives sitting on the couch smoking dope and screaming at the TV. Thing is, maybe the odds on this thing motivating us to suddenly cry out Eureka! and turn into eight billion Mother Teresas aren’t any better than the Spook&Ghost bit –”

“– but it’s got a shot, is what you’re saying. Does it have a shot, Ghost? Does it really?”

I let it simmer maybe half a minute. Then I began nodding my head. In a whisper: “I believe it does.”

“Wow. Just...wow. So maybe that’s my future: designing world gone completely mad T-shirts.”

“T-shirts. You? Yeah, right: original off-the-shoulder embroidered silk with matching hand-tooled alligator mad bags and platforms with five-inch stiletto heels and sexy black criss-cross straps, maybe.”

“Already I envision top-end franchise outlets in fifty major cities. Move your aging ass aside, Prada.”

## **GLEND A**

They looked different. Boris we’d recognized the change when he came back from the first holiday, the long one. Had never seen such a spring in the old boy’s step. But after this shorter tramp Ghost, too, showed more life, and young Walli was absolutely radiant. Was I jealous? You bet. Though we were still good together, Rosamund and I had settled into routine, that killer of psyches, even joking that we’d become an old unmarried couple, misinterpreting one another’s comments, ‘well, dear, you said –’ ‘no, darling, *you* said –’ and crashing into one another in the kitchen when before we were a pair of Russian ballerinas.

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The eight of us still had periodic get-togethers, but agreed they had deteriorated into banal tea-and-scones affairs since no one dared budge from their original stands. Manu would start out with his standard rant about the world gone completely mad being a classic breakdown of law and order, to which Rosie would counter that, typical cop (“ex-cop!”) (“yeah, sort of like ex-Maori”), he preferred the good old days of shootings and bombings and governments listening in on civilians’ phone calls, and everybody else would stare at their laps or wonder whether that tiny black spot on the wall had actually moved or not. And as per usual, Baruch Montrose would say nothing, nor did Ghost. Now that Boris was with us again, his silence added to the significance as well.

It was Shoshona who finally broke the spell.

“Excuse me, good people,” she said, rising up gracefully from her plumped-up floor cushion. “As one who has earned a small fortune employing my skills as a triple-A grade bullshitter, I detect a definite stink of falsehood by omission permeating our little group.” Wow, talk about a Big Mac invading the annual vegan conference! Postures in the room suddenly grew erect. Was I being accused? Me?

“What?” cried Manu. “You think somebody here’s lying?”

“No. I think everybody is. Just some more than others. Shall we start off with you, Ghost?”

“Eh?”

“Sorry to disturb your senior citizen stupor. Now screw in your hearing aid and listen up. You hinted to me not long ago that you knew more about what’s going on than anybody is saying.”

“Ah, well, I was only implying, eh, you know —”

“And,” she went on, “for one of the rare times since we’ve known one another I believe you weren’t stringing me a line.”

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“Ghost, Ghost.” Boris leaned over and gently patted my red-faced former lover on the arm. The little man looked around, made eye contact with Walli, smiled and nodded. Curious eyes focused upon her beaming face.

“You want me –?” she said softly. “Oh, dear.” Taking time to compose her thoughts. “Um, first a confession. Boris, Daddy and I didn’t go on a two week tramp last month.” Waiting until eyebrows descended to normal position: “Mom, I am so sorry for deceiving you, but this was, this was, oh my god, it was the most amazing experience of my life, so please don’t be totally pissed.”

Ghost interrupted: “My doing, really. Don’t blame the kid, Sho.”

“Actually, I was prime instigator of her deception,” Boris amended. “But do give her the opportunity to say her piece. You’ll see, I’m sure, the wee fib pales when placed in context with what is to be revealed.”

Stunned silence. Eyebrows raised higher than ever.

“We went –.” she began. Stopped. Started over. “Boris took us –. It was the most –. I can’t believe –.”

“Boris,” Ghost finally said, “assigning Walli this monumental task borders on the criminal. You tell it, man. Slow and easy.” He peered around, for whatever reason settling his eyes on me. “Despite the appearance of stark madness on our parts, Boris’s, Walli’s and mine, what he’s about to tell you is atheist-honest truth. More than that, it’s absolutely magnificent. Go ahead, my friend.”

Which Boris did. In stunning, unrehearsed detail. It took him the better part of an hour, during which time there was not the creaking of a joint nor clearing of a throat nor, it seemed, a single exhale of breath. Even Manu, who normally couldn’t sit still for a minute, who even performed asanas with grunts and a sense of frantic desperation, sat frozen solid throughout. When he did stop speaking, Boris looked around at the dropped jaws of those five of us who previously had been kept out of the loop, as

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if awaiting accusatory cries of refutation and ridicule. Oddly, it was Manu who staunched the flow of muted incredulity.

“So,” said the normally skeptical detective, “when do the rest of us get to take the journey?”

### MANU

Had anybody else told the yarn, even Glenda whom I count as just slightly shy of sainthood, I would not have bought it. Cops are naturally suspicious, take nothing on face value, believe only what fits into the narrow channels of our jaded professional mindset. But Boris. Strange as the old dude might be, I'd pegged him for a totally straight shooter from the time he and Ghost clued me in on the whereabouts of that missing child near Auckland. That is to say, if he told you something, you could take it he's straight on. What he might do, often did, was hold back on you, or place subtle hints here and there so you'd have to trace the arrows yourself. But outright lie? No, never.

Besides, what he laid out for us was so incredible, so unbelievable, you couldn't help but buy into it.

But what caused me to buy it in bulk was this: as a kid, youngest of a brood of eleven, five of them outright thugs, one momma, god knows how many poppas, I had no place in our three bedroom, single bath board-and-batten to hide, to be by myself. So I found the perfect space elsewhere: inside my head.

I had make-believe mates, make-believe places to meet with them and special powers to take me there. One of these secret locations, frighteningly so now that real-life Kama had been revealed, was a mile-long alien space capsule embedded under the ice in Antarctica. That I would be taken there by a Maori warrior named Egon on a snow-white unicorn, I now realized, was no more than a

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smidgeon more improbable than a semi-spherical electromagnetic shuttle silently zipping through fifteen thousand kilometers of man-made tunnel. As Boris's tale unraveled, I was time-warped half a century back to the only moments I could recall where the me-child didn't live in fear and humiliation as the perennial bottom feeder in a series of *whanau*, school and street gang pecking orders.

It never once occurred to me that this magical Kama might be fictitious. What suddenly caused my throat to constrict was the paranoid qualm I was the only one of us who didn't really fit in here, that once again I stood awkwardly at the tail-end of the queue, dragged along as an afterthought like a friendly feral dog, and I would be excluded from the most remarkable experience ever to come my way. And then I heard Boris say:

"By the authority invested in me as ambassador of the great nation of Kama to the renegade branch of the sub-state of Sil-Val South, it gives me vast pleasure to invite the five of you esteemed citizens, Glenda, Rosamund, Shoshona, Manu and Baruch, who've not yet had the experience, to my beautiful homeland. Although the exact date for your visit has yet to be set, I promise it will take place within the month. I hardly need caution you concerning total silence beyond this room. If you have any commitments for the dates involved once firmed, you might drop hints about a late scheduled event, a private yoga retreat perhaps, that need take priority."

Oddly, what gave me the most joy here was not so much being included in the invite, but that he hadn't called my name last.

## **BARUCH**

I could barely contain myself. It was like everything I've long worked towards and had got myself in so much hot

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water over was finally being validated. To discover that an entire society – all right, a mere thirty thousand citizen society, still – was actually living the principles of the Buddha machine! Did this make my machine redundant, obsolete? Does it matter? Who needs a machine when they're naturally breathing, thinking, *being* on a twenty-four/seven basis everything said machine hoped to provide?

What kind of people were these, anyway? Boris never really went into detail about them, only what they had accomplished, were trying to achieve. Do they look different from us? Taller, prettier? Are they some kind of superbeings? Thirty thousand modern day Buddhas?

Poor Shoshana. I've really paid her so little attention lately. (Have I ever, really, been attentive to her, forever relegating her needs second to my work?) Of course, on her part, concern for her status with the consortium, and now being pulled two ways, should she continue with them or move apart from them, and then being deceived by Walli, she's seen me as no more than an occasional bed partner. (As beautiful and brilliant as she is, why she's chosen me for the role is curious.) We're simply conveniences for one another, and I don't believe anything beyond is a consideration I might warrant.

Anyway, here I am, a scientist about to make a whole new discovery about the world I live in. Isn't this what people like me live for, would die for? And me, a guy who has been accused of lacking emotions, just look at what's going on inside me now: I'm actually excited!

## ROSAMUND

I feel like I'm wearing a condom on my heart. Why, I wonder, am I not feeling what the others are about this Kama business and our going there? Look at Glenda. It's

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like she's been given top marks for all she ever believed in but had been forced to settle for the conventional and mundane. For the first time, she's become the aggressor in our physical relationship, a dynamo in bed! Am I such a control artist it's this that's causing me to feel flat: I'm losing her to a new happiness, that of a previously undocumented existence? I should be so pleased my beautiful lady has found pleasure, even if it's over a come-true fairy tale. Yet I feel nothing. We might be going to Lithuania, or some other tiny country where people are wiser, more free. Even *Manu* – *Manu*, for Pete's sake! – is thrilled with the prospect of taking a choo-choo ride through rock and stone. Dear god, I'm such a strange old thing. For chrissake, Rosamund, wake up!

## SHOSHONA

I'm jealous of my teenage daughter – is that it? *She* was invited there first; *she* was fawned over by the locals; *she* somehow is being marked for great things there (and for the rest of the world as well should their project succeed). Am I such a horror as a mother and human being that secretly (not so secretly!) I'm hoping Walli, and the whole Kama thing, fail? And is this common and normal for approaching middleage beauties who sense the advent of their own fall from grace? Ugly, ugly, *ugleeee!*

How can I not have learned from my own situation with Momma Ellie, who, were it allowed, might have taken sharp objects to scar my face when she realized her own was losing its luster. Cripes, I'm acting out a clichéd Shakespearean family drama! Blah!

No, I shall not give in to my terrible twisted ego. Just won't, that's all. I've too much invested in my spirit to become a cranky old witch. I have got to remain bold and strong, do what's in the highest element of right and proper.



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Perhaps I should spend some time with one of Baruch's magic helmets on my head. Ah, Baruch. Such a pure, lovely man. Even with his mind totally encased in the universe of algorithms and logarithms, he must know I'm just using him for sex, and even then I have to resort to all sorts of babe tricks to woo him into the sack.

So, changing Shoshona gon be easy, right?

Sheeut, changing Shoshona gon be a major bitch, is what.

Walter, my dear dead Daddy: where you be when I need you so!

## GHOST

When they got back a little more than a week later (no four-day tramp to the station, just a few hours' drive by van), the change in all of them was enormous. Well, of course. When we convened for our standard rave, it was anything but standard. They had not received the full tour, as we had; perhaps Arju had reckoned their meeting the ETs would blow too many brain cells. Pride had made a full-on play for Shoshona, to no avail. Maybe next trip we'll bring grandma Ellie along so the poor rejected shuttle driver (if one actually did drive that thing) could have a crack at three generations of that clan.

All five were totally stunned by the experience. Sho had to be restrained from running to the consortium and blabbing the whole bit in attempt to unite our geeks with their geeks and thus bring peace and harmony to the galaxy. What it would bring, instead, likely would be a straitjacket and enrollment in a top-end lunatic lodge.

Baruch, well, it appears we have lost the boy. Boris claimed he wants in, they want him in, and the only reason he came back at all was to train his Buddha machine

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apprentice to take over the operation, pick up a couple clean shirts and toothbrush and await the call from down the hole. It was nice to see him so strong about his decision to ditch topside; it was also nice to see Shoshona feeling good about the guy's choice to use his good brain and intentions elsewhere.

But it was Manu who had come up with the most comprehensive, and somewhat startling, impression.

"Mate, first two days I was afraid I'd get lockjaw, how in awe I was of the place, the people, all of it. Day three I sorta came down to earth. Well, under-earth. Maybe coz I got lucky the night before. This woman: I'll tell you. First glance, thought she was maybe twenty years younger than she turned out to be. I think most of them, the native-borns anyway, are that way. Guess it's the air."

I had a start at this news. For a moment I thought maybe Arju. Watched myself become jealous, angry, then guilty over the first two, all in about five seconds. But no.

"You met her. The babe who pilots that shuttle they got, although I never saw her lift a finger all the way there."

"Wait. Pride?" He nodded, smiling. "I thought –"

"Yeah, me too. Figured early twenties. Turns out she's damn near fifty. Well, forty-five-ish. Waltzes into my quarters that second night, strips, climbs into the sack, *va-voom!*" Shaking his head.

"Next morning I go outside, still high from the place, from her, but my feet finally make contact with the ground. I'm still feeling great about everything, right, but no longer is it some kind of mystical experience. Rather, Kama now reminds me of a few other places I've been: good feeling, relaxed, gorgeous fems, people into healthy stuff. Raglan, here in New Zealand. Over in Aus it's Byron Bay. States have a few of them, Austin, Sedona, Berkeley, Eugene. I still feel terrific, understand, but I'm no longer ga-ga, know what I mean?"

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“And the detective in me comes out of his fog, rises to the surface. And kneejerk-like, I begin detecting. Hang on, I think: they got no money here, no police at all. How can a place with a population of thirty thou have no cops, none? What happens if Black Bart brings disgrace to the pretty young school marm: they round up a posse, arm em with broomsticks, chase the blighter out of Dodge? I mean, they have young studs, they have pubs of a sort, Saturday night gotta be shit going down, I don’t care how mellow these people are.

“I meet up with this bloke. Big dude, from one of those countries used to be Yugoslavia before it got split up. Was a cop there when they’re all killing one another over that way. Family all murdered, everything he had gone. Considers topping himself, instead winds up in Kama. (And my detective radar wonders: they find a ton of people in this state of being – how do they know?) Anyway, guy hints he’s sort of head of security, although they don’t call it that. We have us a few local brews – damn good stuff, too – he opens up some. Tells me there’s a definite caste system, like, everybody’s equal only some a little more so, y’know? With few exceptions, the natives rank higher on the scale than immigrants. Did you know that except for our boy Boris and a handful of others, topsiders who migrate there don’t get the implant, what the kids call head lice? It’s a trust thing. Okay, fair enough, every place got us-and-them. Here, we Maori have our iwi, our tribe. You’re from another iwi, come pay a visit, we honor your *whakapapa* and all, but you’re still a brown-skin *pakeha*, an outsider.

“We have a few more beers,” Manu continues, “the fella’s tongue gets looser. It’s obvious he’s had nobody to talk to in an age, maybe since he got there. They’re not without problems, they just don’t discuss it with types like us. One of the problems is like that old saying from WWII: how ya gonna keep em down on the farm once they’ve seen

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Paree. The people they send topside to spy and shit, some of them catch too strong a dose of the good life, hard to bring em back down the hole in the ice. Now, this was a little fuzzy, coz either the dude had his fill of hops or he just don't know, but he hinted that when this happens, when some Kaman comes topside on assignment and gets turned by our wicked, wicked ways, they somehow toss him a life preserver, reel him in. But if that doesn't do it, and the guy's – and mostly the ones get trapped up here are male – they send a force out to track the guy down and, if possible, bring him back. But if not possible –”

“Aw man, don't tell me.”

“Preservation of the homeland, mate. These folks may appear la-di-da to you and me, but just remember what kind of tough birds pioneered that place. They aren't butt-ugly like the Israelis can be, but they're hatched from the very same stock. Ain't nuthin, *nuthin*, gonna deny em what they've worked so hard to create and preserve.”

“Yet they seemed so complacent about people like us going there for a visit. I asked one time weren't they afraid we might talk when we come back here. They laughed and said, Talk all you want, who's going to believe you? I thought: Doesn't make sense given the paranoia that exists topside since the world went completely mad. There are forces here would do anything to restore war, pestilence, chaos and mayhem to their previous ugly state.”

“Okay,” Manu replied, “one, whoever wants to get rid of the completely mad biz has to find them. You know they change the locations of their shuttle stations periodically? Boris said the place where we boarded and got off wouldn't be there in a very short time, that the tunnel entrance would be moved to a new spot. And two, if somehow one of the powers here does locate the exact position in Greenland – and you got an idea of the size of that place, right? – what're they gonna do, send in soldiers armed with icepicks? Bombs no longer work, remember.

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“Still, I get your point. They seem just a little too casual about stuff that by rights ought to be a deep, dark secret. But there’s one more problem this security fella let drop, and this has to be far more of a concern to the Council there.”

“You mean the melting icecap,” I said.

“Well, that too. But see, they’re convinced there’s a mole in their midst. And that somehow this mole is getting word out topside. Only they haven’t a clue who it might be, nor who it is they’re leaking shit to.”

\*

“Now look: I know it’s your way, maybe even your job, to poo-poo anything anybody says which puts Kama in a light other than perfect. But listen to what Manu here has to say about what his cop’s nose sniffed out down there, okay?”

Boris nodded solemnly, appearing just a tad uncomfortable. Manu laid out all that he had said to me, with the exception of the security guy’s telling him all this. No need to get the man in the shits. I girded myself for the old boy’s standard line of trashing any negatives about his adopted homeland. He sat there looking down at his tea, occasionally taking a sip.

“Not quite a hundred percent, but close,” he said finally. I looked over to Manu, his eyebrows raised, back at Boris. “We’re not the Trapp family, you realize. Never claimed we’re without blemish. We are human, are we not? We’ve made mistakes, we’ll go on making them. We do try to learn from them, but that’s not always the case. So far as the implants, I had to go almost forty years before they put one in me, and that came about only when I began going topside to do what I’ve had to do. But this caste thing just isn’t true.

“When topsiders make it to Kama with young kids, the kids get the implants – with consent of the parents, of

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course. It's not so much a matter of keeping expats out of the loop as retraining their mindsets, which past a certain age, usually the onset of adolescence, is darn near an impossibility. Early days, when the implants were perfected, they figured everybody should have one, but older immigrants began going crazy, unable to control the device and tolerate new voices in their heads. Thankfully, I went through extensive training before they implanted me, and even then, first few years, there were times..." He shook his head.

"And look," Boris went on, "this thing about a killer squad which hunts down recalcitrants: come on, guys. There have been three cases; three who actually died up here out of how many have been sent topside and wandered off-track. Two of those suicided before we could get to them. The third just went bad, really bad, and even then it was a matter of self-defense for our rescue squad. This, I believe, is a pretty darn good record.

"Now the mole." He smiled, looked over at Manu. "Don't know how you cottoned on to that as it's our biggest immediate problem and for security purposes we try our best to keep it under wraps. But then, it's who you are and what you've done most of your life; you're good at it." He paused to allow Manu a chance to reply, but the man remained silent.

"Seriously, we know there's a major effort afoot to track down the source of the world gone completely mad and eliminate it – and us along with it – at all costs. There have been efforts right along, certainly, but this one is huge. It involves a collaboration of elements which normally would have little to do with one another. These are very, very, powerful, extremely wealthy bodies, and they are most upset that their vast power and wealth have been severely curtailed."

"Weapons manufacturers?" I offered.

"Big oil?" Manu wondered

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“Asians?”

“The various mafias?”

Boris remained mute. Then he peered at us one at a time, long lingering looks. Leaning across the table:

“Organized religion.”

## SPOOK

With so much bewilderment concerning the subject these days – who’s hating/terrorizing/blowing up whom (or were before the world went completely mad) – I should like to provide herewith a crystal clear picture. So listen up, yo.

In the beginning (hardly the beginning; more like two minutes till midnight), this clever dude one day, maybe high on mushroom, concocts a myth about some kind of god which he lays out for his tribe. Ooh, they chorus, you be the man!

Not long after, another tribesman, most likely pissed the ladies paying him no attention, he creates a different myth. Some folk follow the first boy’s story, others this character, so now there’s a split in the tribe. Scenario don’t quit there. Come another myth-split, and another. The sundry sub-tribes, let’s bunch em all together and label them Religion J.

More and more divisions take place over the following few thousand years until a new myth hits the lottery. As their followers grow in numbers, they break away totally from J; thus is born Religion C.

C looks upon J with increasing contempt coz J’s myths don’t take into account C’s top myth-figure as son of the big bopper. This animosity peaks around seven hundred years ago when C priests in Spain incite believers to commit such acts of their self-professed charity as tossing J babies into cauldrons of boiling oil and tying the wrists and

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ankles of pregnant J women to four horses, then scattering the horses to different directions. Show them unbelievers!

Remaining Js are ordered to convert to C's myth or undergo further entertainments. Most do so. Except they don't *really* do so; see, they just pretend while continuing their own myth worship in secret. How cool is that?

Other Js skedaddle to North Africa and Turkey, where they're offered hospitality of sorts by a totally different bunch of myth-ers, Religion I, whose advanced culture is evident in their magnificent architecture and gorgeous pottery. An uneasy alliance between I and J lasts several centuries.

Meanwhile, C undergoes a major myth division. Factional wars are fought, accounting for heavy loss of lives. This goes on until just recently.

Come 1948 (by the C calendar, not J's; all religions got they own), J get they own nation, whereupon they immediately set about abusing those I's who long have resided upon this here land. Such enmity continues till today, growing worse and worse. And just in the past couple decades, the most violent factional divorce of all-time has occurred between differing myth-believing segments of I itself, the ramifications of which threatened to engulf the entire planet. (Until the world went completely mad, putting a halt to this kinda shit.)

Now that you are perfectly clear on the subject, I should like to add this footnote: not a single one of these myth-believers, nor Religions H, B and others big in the East, pays a tuppence in tax on billions of annual income nor a rupee in real estate taxes (rates) on the mega-billions worth of property they own. This bit of news leads me to the kicker of today's entire rave.

See, all this multi-religion nonsense is no more than smoke and mirrors, coz in truth they's only one single religion. And that's the religion of greed, power and control. Which is why, despite appearances of hatred towards



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one another and expending so much time and effort over the centuries kicking the tar outta each other, it really wasn't all that much a fuss to get together and go after the new enemy number one: whoever's behind the world gone completely mad, which has led to hundreds of millions of followers becoming ex-followers, instead giving their hearts and spending their shekels on things having to do with peace and love, religion's true dreaded enemy.

### **BORIS**

I certainly don't mind telling an inconsequential fib in order to achieve a higher purpose. The fib here was in setting up Manu, whom I love dearly. Manu is a person instilled with a grand sense of curiosity. He is also a pit bull when he undertakes a mission. Thing is, part of his makeup is the need for a mission to be of his own undertaking in order for the pit bull to be utmost effective. Thus his meeting with big Gus, formerly of Croatia, was not coincidental. Gus most likely did actually get tipsy – he often does – but nothing that came out of his mouth was by accident. Nor did he tell any lies. There is a mole in Kama, and he – she? – managed to get bits and pieces of data out before we became aware, began intercepting messages and converting them into hopefully believable misinformation. Also, sharp as we take ourselves to be, it was a while before we managed to pinpoint the recipients of said mole's transmissions. Once we ascertained reception was taking place in a certain area within the city of Rome, the identity of the enemy made so much sense. The smartest people – us – can be the most thick.

So far as a supposed caste system in Kama, I must say as one of the long-term outsiders, this accusation is somewhat justified. That's what makes this mole business

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so infuriating. You see, Council is pretty well convinced the perpetrator is native-born.

# BOOK SEVEN

## ARJU

### **Kama**

Have we bitten off more than we can swallow?

How long and arduously did we argue this one? Meetings, debates, more meetings, on and on and on. At first, the consensus said we should give a warning. And when that was sure to be ignored, offer a demonstration: See? We weren't fooling around, we can do this! Now do as we say, or...

Yeah, right.

Did the Americans go through this process before they dropped the big ones on Hiroshima and Nagasaki? Knowing them, Truman the way he was, surely not. And if they had, would the Japanese have listened?

Even when we went to the extraterrestrials, who had provided so much of the technology, we knew beforehand what their responses would be: we'll support you any way we can but it has to be your call.

So finally we put it to a vote. And what I dreaded most came about: the vote ended in a four-four tie and it was up to the president of Council to break it. "Yours is

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just one vote, Arju,” they all said. “No more weight than any of ours.” But it was, wasn’t it. It truly was.

Point is, almost two years since we did it, put a stop to their insanities, creating different insanities (but at least halting the mindless violence, if perhaps for no more than a brief moment in time), trying to let them know it was possible to exist without killing off one another and the planet as well...has it worked? Peace and love by mandate? How to judge?

And now this. Imagine getting the world’s top religious power-mongers to actually sit down with one another and *agree* on something, even if it’s to seek us out and – do what? We’ve taken away their nastiest playthings so on the off-chance they do locate our position, what then?

How innocent we were, we all were, when anticipating the various enemies of our plot for peace and what action they might take to reverse the world gone completely mad, and not once taking into account the cardinals and imams and their brethren of the cloth and robe. Yes, and how terribly naïve to think there could not possibly be objections so serious from within our own that attempts would be made to thwart what we hoped to achieve. I still cannot believe the culprit is one of our own, as our investigators have said. My prejudice, I am ashamed to admit, leads me to believe it must be an expat topsider, and I shall hold to this view until conclusive proven wrong.

Please, whoever you are, reveal yourself that we may sit down and ask what we have done wrong here that so offends you. Are you a believer in one or another of these religions, and if so, have we done anything, meaningfully or inadvertently, to deny you your belief? No, I simply can’t go down that road; it makes no sense whatever considering the lengths we have undertaken since the very beginning to provide an atmosphere of free thought. Are you then so warped that the very notion of

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enforcing love and peace amongst those so in need is an execration insofar as your soul's desire?

Ach, be silent, dear spirit. It's time to place our egos in storage and invite back those whose experience in such nefarious matters might lead to plausible resolve.

So, Arju old girl, who you gonna call?  
Why, Manu and Ghost, the Molebusters!  
(Did I really just think that? Dear me.)

## **GHOST**

It felt like coming home.

How extraordinary that returning to a place I had spent no more than ten days might produce that effect the moment I stepped off the shuttle. Like I belong here.

Manu? Ah well. Boris had led us to the relocated camouflaged station, twenty miles from the one we had used prior. So well camouflaged, I have to say, even he had trouble finding it, constantly asking for more explicit directions via his implant mechanism. When finally the shuttle arrived and the door slid open, two things happened: The driver/guide was a rather unwholesome-looking male, protruding teeth and slack jaw, excessive gut, prompting Manu's expectant face to sag, a kid deprived of an anticipated sweet. Also, Boris surprisingly bid us farewell and happy journey and such, claiming he had work topside to perform, and, depending on the length of our stay he might or might not catch up with us in Kama.

Manu, arms folded and mouth turned down, sat silent except for the occasional vocal grumbling. The driver, who introduced himself as Lawrence (for once, a common name for a Kaman – and the first native-born of either sex I had come across who didn't look like he'd just stepped out of a fashion magazine), then, perhaps judging

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Manu's reaction to him, said no more for the entire journey, whereupon I spent four hours in my own head wondering why I was here: did the Council wish me to play Watson as the world's greatest detective, armed with briar pipe and magnifying glass, sought to de-mole the hole?

### THE MOLE

So, they've brought in reinforcements to find their mole. Well, fellas, I'm hiding where you'd never expect to find me: right out in the open.

If only our geniuses would use some sense. Problem is they can't see beyond their short-sighted philosophy. As much as they use terms like love and peace, they fail to define them properly. Just what are they, love and peace? The hippies used the words to excess in the late '60s. But their love and peace were tissue-thin veneers atop middleclass convention, and most often meant free sex and drugs. Here, we've got eighty-five years' worth of a lifestyle and mentality based on genuine kindness and compassion, and we still haven't a proper definition of the words. (Buddhists have twenty-six hundred years of such foundation and have just as much hatred of others, including other Buddhists, as any.)

They're referring to me as a mole: someone who has infiltrated a system and is working on behalf of the enemy. Well, we have met the enemy and they is *us*! Our refusal to change and adapt. A lack of understanding that there exists a quiet groundswell of discontent within our own ranks. We are led by first generation Kamans who do not understand the need to bend, to truly grasp the sense of younger generations who no longer care to be like them. We respect them and honor them, of course we do. But we are not content to live in a twenty-six mile diameter hole in

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the ice, nor would we ever wish to live as the mind-washed topsiders do.

To create the world gone completely mad was a wondrous maneuver, but for a number of us it's only a first step. We must go beyond; love and peace necessitate expansion and change outside our tiny ice-covered cavity. We can't – and shouldn't even were we able – achieve this by force. Nor will we ever be able to convince the thick skulls topside to change their ways by crimping their violent nature because *that is their true nature!*

It is their nature to rob the Mother of every cubic meter of her precious living soil by gouging out huge tracts of minerals below then erecting on the surface monuments to satisfy their insatiable greed; to so diligently compete for power and status that seventy percent of the planet's population goes without minimum essentials while a miniscule fraction of one percent acquires more and more trinkets and baubles.

Love and peace? Instead of a way of life they have specific days where these cherished natural qualities are nominally celebrated. They buy, gaudily wrap and present to each other manufactured excrement on birthdays, Mother's Day, Father's Day, Valentine's Day, Christmas. Why not simply combine them all into one huge Conspicuous Consumption Day, pile pyramids of gaudy product on one another's doorsteps and be done with it!

They poison the water their children drink and the air they breathe, then poison their corpulent bodies with processed chemicalized pseudo-food; to call them animals for doing so would be an insult to every animal species that ever has existed. And we expect these people to change their thinking because we have cut off their main implements of ugly?

Our elders wholly lack imagination. With all their intelligence how could they not conceive that the prime forces behind the world's penchant for the polar opposites



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had to hold myself back from doing so. I want to quit the track team because my heart no longer is into it, but my coach called Mom and together they put a pincer move on me. So I force myself to train, to compete and feel like crap because my performance is so lackluster, even when I win.

Shoshona keeps after me to ‘come back down to earth’, which is a joke because she’s feeling pretty much the same, except she still has one foot in the consortium’s door. Apparently now that a good portion of their former business having to do with invading citizens’ privacy no longer is operable due to non-functioning satellites and other interceptor contrivances, Google finally got it together to get involved in more people-friendly areas such as health, education and identity protection. Same with Facebook and their aligned feeder outfits, all of which had their operations severely curtailed. Their stocks, which had pancaked immediately following the day the world went completely mad, are beginning to climb again, and Momma seems to have regained her sense of self-importance. Pity. I’d had visions, delusions I suppose they were really, of the two of us packing a few things, maybe linking up with Baruch and emigrating. Fat chance of that now.

With Daddy having gone back along with Manu to take care of this mole business, there was only one person I could really talk to about the way I was feeling.

“I’m going to tell you the one thing older people invariably tell the young, and the one thing above all else the young hate to hear,” Boris said gently after I had raved on about what was rattling around in my head.

“I know, I know: have patience,” I sighed, deflated. “Sure, patience might work – might – if I were positive about going back. Tell me for sure that next year, or when I finish high school, or when I turn a certain age, that it’s a sure thing and I could happily deal with it. But I’m so pessimistic it’ll ever happen. How do you handle it, Boris?”



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Come on, you spent years living at the center up north. How did you keep from going crazy?"

He thought about it. "Yes, you're right. After all those years I missed Kama terribly, especially in the beginning of my assignment topside. But I had advantages which you lack. I was in constant communication," pointing to his implant scar, "and I felt my mission was of importance. But the main thing, I suppose, is I had, still have, varied interests. I wish to know at least something about everything, from extraterrestrial life to monarch butterflies. It's said curiosity killed the cat, but it's kept this ancient moggy very much alive. I just want to know about things, have always been this way. It probably ruined my marriage, but being so uncomfortable around people as I was back then my penchant for gathering information, much of it, admittedly, of little consequence, inspired me. Then one day I stepped into a crevasse in the icecap and wound up the first person – the only person to date – to be inducted into the Kama experience by falling down a hole."

"You don't by any chance recall exactly where that crevasse is, do you?"

He laughed. "My dear, with the understanding that, future-wise, nothing in this universe is absolutely certain, those who claim to know more than we mere mortals have stated that not only will you be going back to Kama at some time, but that you will play a significant role in the community's well-being. In the meantime –"

"Yeah, yeah, I get it: Dear lord, please grant me patience –"

"But do it by eleven o'clock the latest."

"Amen to that."

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### MANU

My ex-cop's brain, too long in cold storage, instantly became activated. I'd neither heard nor could see a thing, yet dead asleep I knew somebody had come into the room. Whoever the sneak was made not a sound and it was too damn dark to see even a silhouette. No doubt the mole himself, here to take me out before I could reveal his identity. In Yank movies I'd have drawn the gun under my pillow in a single smooth move and blown the bastard into meatloaf. But I'd been a New Zealand cop, we didn't carry guns, and besides, guns no longer worked. (Wait – that was topside. Maybe here...)

The air around me suddenly became spiced with the aroma of cinnamon and cloves just before the assailant thrust himself on top of me, pinning me to the mattress. In one slick maneuver the attacker was under the blankets with me. Naked. A tongue darted into my ear and out again.

“Sorry I couldn't meet you at the starting gate, my Maori stallion. Had business elsewhere. Care to make up for the lost time?”

A muscular leg clamped over my abdomen, strong fingers locked around my rapidly ascending pisces. I considered my options. Despite years of tough NZ cop training I realized I was overpowered. Resignedly, I submitted to the perp's will.

\*

“The problem,” I announced the following morning, “is you people don't have locks on your doors. How am I supposed to maintain even a semblance of professional decorum when any horny babe can waltz right in and use her charms to disrupt my investigation. Which, I must say, is another problem. I'm brought in on a supposedly top

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secret mission, and every man and his dog knows full bloody well what I'm doing here."

"Ah yes, the notorious mole in the hole, secret agent of the combined forces of the Vatican, Mecca, Varanasi and Jerusalem, sending up smoke signals and semaphores to furnish the true believers our secret recipe for love and peace." Pride lifted the blanket, set her feet on the floor and gracefully left the bed, her perfect body the only spiritual totem I cared to worship at the moment.

"All right, all right," I growled. "Despite your cynicism, the Council believes it's real and they're obviously very upset by it. Whether it's because they think contact between this mole character and the religious bigs can really do Kama damage or they're just upset that one of their own has betrayed their trust doesn't matter. I haven't spent a whole lot of time here, but I gotta say I like what I see and feel. Good people, fine ideals, terrific way to live. What more can you ask of a society? Council wants the bloke found before shit hits the fan, they've asked me, well, me and Ghost, to stop him, and I'm gonna do my best. End of story."

Pride's response to my spiel was to stand there looking sexy as hell and giving with some slow sarcastic applause. "In peace or war, the FBI always gets their man. Well, good luck, Agent Manu. If I may make a suggestion, look closely at some of our young. They're the ones forever grumbling about how things are run here. And don't make the mistake of discounting any of them because they're only fifteen or sixteen. Our kids mature a lot earlier than topsiders, plus this generation is super smart. That's where I'd put my money. If we had money, that is."

She slipped into her clothes, bent down, gave me a kiss, then out the door. I turned onto my belly and pressed my face into her pillow, breathed deeply. The aroma of sex, of course, mingled with cinnamon and cloves.

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And for thousands of years the dummies always figured heaven was upward.

### **GHOST**

In a lot of ways, Arju reminded me of Glenda. I know it's pretty lousy to compare one person with another, but a couple times I actually caught myself about to call her Glen before I went whoops, not cool. Guess I must like strong, soft, good-looking older women now that I no longer feel it necessary to chase after young tail.

I was growing more comfortable around her smarts. And was she ever clued in. Maybe coz this was her turf and I'm just a rookie here, I had no problem her having to explain so much. For instance, when I wondered about the matter of health care it was like I'd pushed a button.

"We've long recognized that ninety percent of illness emanates from the mind," she told me while we were strolling through the gardens of the government complex one morning. "For sure we're not the first to come to this understanding. While someone considered emotionally disadvantaged in the West is shipped off to a mental ward and drugged to the max, in some Buddhist countries he'd simply be shorn of hair, fitted for a robe and placed in a monastery. He wouldn't be treated any differently from other monks, simply instructed to follow standard practice in the dharma. More times than not it worked. I use the past tense because, unfortunately, the shrink industry has got its teeth into those Asian countries hoping to pass for modern, which often means no therapy, just keep the patient sedated so he's not a menace to society."

"And those who go off the rails here?"

"Complete holistic mind, body and spirit healing. Which means working closely with the person in all aspects of life. Meditation, not medication, wherever possible. Plus

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we're all healers. Our education system is structured so every student receives several years' tuition as a healer regardless of their chosen curriculum."

"Okay, that's the head. What about the body? I realize you don't like to separate one from the other, still, you must have the standard topside maladies. Or does no one here get cancer or heart disease? Nobody is born deformed or with faulty organs or intellectually handicapped?"

"We have all of those and more. Mainly, we focus on those aspects of the body your physicians refuse to acknowledge, namely the chakra energy centers and the myriad meridians – energy pathways – throughout the body which emanate from them. Since we have established that much of bodily sickness is derived from a sick mind, we first work to straighten out a tangled mental state, at the same time concentrate on unclogging the energy centers and meridian routes through a variety of what you folks call alternative therapy, such as shiatsu and acupuncture. We don't totally discount allopathic medicine, we just apply pills and chemicals as a last resort."

"Okay, granted. And I do believe in what you're telling me, totally. But let's say one of your agents topside has been living the good life, incurring the joyous results of crap food, stress, industrial pollution, right, and one day is diagnosed with pretty advanced Big C."

"We bring her or him back immediately and perform operations, only very unorthodox ops according to topside surgery. See, when our pioneers came to their senses and stopped trying to out-Hitler Hitler, they turned their attention to questions that never before had been given full-on scrutiny. They came to realize that each person's state of being is a perfect closed system, that within each of us is the means to treat illness should it arise. Our scientists discovered that certain cells, mostly in the brain and spinal regions, when removed from their original positions and

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grafted onto the cancer cells, will vigorously attack those cells and eventually destroy them without harming a single cell that is not cancerous.”

“It’s that simple?”

She laughed in such a pleasant way as again bringing Glenda to mind. “Hardly simple,” she replied. “It took years of trial and error. We always figured the theory made sense –”

“Yeah, theories are like that.”

“Actually, this is what started us thinking about ways to stop the bad stuff going on topside, the killings, the bombings. Even the use of technology to spy on private citizens. Every closed energy system is complete within itself, meaning it has both positive and negative polarity. If you properly place one in context with the other, plus-X and minus-X equal zero.”

“And our geniuses can’t see it.”

“It’s a matter of funding, my dear Ghost. Even scientists with lateral thinking and the highest integrity need huge amounts of money for their R and D. Where does it come from? Certainly not from government, nor directly from taxes. Big pharmaceutical, oil and tobacco corporations control most all research, and they do so specifically to sell product. What use is it to them to fund research into bodies naturally fixing themselves or locating sustainable energy sources within our planet?”

“Whereas Kama solved the funding problem by not having funds.” I shook my head. “Babe, I don’t want to pry into all your secrets, but some day will you please sit down and explain that one by the numbers. Also, how you know so darn much about what’s going on topside without any personal contact besides a handful of spies?”

“How do you know we have no personal contact?”

She suddenly gasped, comically opened wide her eyes and placed a hand over her open mouth, as if accidentally letting something slip. The moment prolonged, and I

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realized something important was in the offing, like, I was about to be led another small step into the Book of Kama.

I swallowed my initial reflex, which was to blurt out, Tell me! Tell me! I'd been brought face to face with my long dead dearest friend, if only as a hologram. I'd been brought together with a room full of assorted alien species – *ETs!* – whose existence, I later learned, no more than a handful of native Kamans even know about. Okay, Ghost old man, put your brain in neutral and let's just wait and see where this one leads.

\*

“For some time,” she said as our shuttle was speeding through the never-ending tunnel toward its destination, “we have been in close contact with the leaders of a certain country.”

“Can I guess?”

“No. That is, you'd never get it, and besides, we'll be there soon enough and you'll get to meet the king.”

“King? Who in the world has a king these days?”

“They do. Actually, we became close allies when the present king's father was ruler. He was an amazing man who did brilliant things for his people. He abdicated suddenly in 2006, and his son, then mid-twenties, became the fifth monarch in the succession. And the son soon showed he was every bit as brilliant as his father. In some ways more so because he's democratized the country, brought it into the twenty-first century, albeit gradually. He had observed the experience of other developing nations when they permitted blanket tourism and a headlong race to modernity, and noted how this had severely diluted their cultures. The young king instead strongly suggested ways and means to prevent his nation from going that way.”

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“I thought you said he’d democratized the place. Doesn’t that mean he no longer could make laws or influence the political scene?”

“The call him the people’s king. Which truly he is. To the point where for years he would take off his kingly apparel and play soccer with kids on a public field. It’s far more than his position, or that the people have been brainwashed to worship their royalty. They love the man, have utmost respect for his person, so when he makes a suggestion they understand it has come from a lot of consideration and discussion with his advisors.”

“You’re saying he’s got a bit of influence there.”

“More than a bit, but he’s mindful not to try to sway the people to vote one way or another. Not that his country is immune from difficulties. But no other nation so strongly cares for its citizens. None. Some examples, okay? All education is free, and if your smarts exceed the level of their educational system you’ll be sent to a top foreign university, all expenses paid. Similarly, health care is free and if you become so ill their medical facilities aren’t equipped to heal you, they will send you – again, at government expense – to another country for treatment. More than a few have come to Kama for this purpose.”

“You’re not selling real estate in this place, are you? I mean, you’re making it sound like some kind of utopia. I thought Kama had that bit locked up.”

“Wait, there’s more. By constitution, sixty percent of the land there must remain forested. At present, I believe it’s slightly more than seventy. The land is rich in underground minerals, very much so, but the king has decreed that they are to remain untouched so future generations may benefit. This includes no drilling for oil and no fracking. Last heard, they were ninety-nine percent organic, and are striving to make that one hundred.

“Fast food chains are not permitted franchise there. No McDonald’s, no Kentucky Fried, no Pizza Hut. And



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believe me, they've tried! Plus there's not a traffic light in the country, nor an advertising billboard. And while we're at it, absolutely no sex discrimination in the workplace."

"Aren't they afraid to let foreigners in? We do have a history of crapping up every place we touch."

"Only a generation back did they open their doors to the outside world, but it costs two hundred and fifty dollars a day to get in, and they dissuade solo travelers. Still, it's being developed, a bit too quickly I'm afraid, although this is mostly confined to the capital city. And even there, the rules dictate that no building is to be more than four stories, and every new construction must conform to their particular architectural style."

"You're making it sound like a greenie wet dream."

She smiled. "You're not far off. They have beautiful, wonderful mountains, some of the highest peaks in the world. They're considered sacred so no climbing is permitted. Meaning they are as pure and pristine as they were hundreds of years ago."

"Do they at least have money?"

"They do. Except their currency's value outside the country is about the same as Monopoly money, so in a way they're not far off Kama's fiscal system. Have you yet figured out where we're going?"

"The lost continent of the Azores? Dark side of the moon?"

"Okay, here's a clue: they don't have a gross national product."

"Oh? And how can that be?"

"The former king did away with the label and instead instituted something they call gross national happiness."

"Aha. The light bulb finally illuminates over Ghost's head. We're going to –"

"– the Kingdom of the Thunder Dragon...the magic land of Bhutan."

## MANU

Getting nowhere, and not even fast. These kids are way smarter than me, and a little weird to boot. To begin with, I swear they knew I was coming here before I did. Sure, they talk to one another without the other being around or through any sort of visible device, but it's more than that, like they're psychic or something. I don't try to antagonize them, nor be pals with them. I just lay it on the line.

"You know somebody is talking to people topside who want to hurt Kama," I tell them. "How can you defend these moles, or whatever you wanna call them, by not being on the level with me? What, you practice some kind of Kaman omerta? See me as a sort of foreign agent brought in to bring one of you down? Well, I suppose that's exactly what I am. This dude is out to hurt his own people. You don't see this?"

Yeah, right, Manu: that bit of logic'll bring em round. They remind me a little of those kids in that old English sci-fi movie *Village of the Damned*, high foreheads and yellow eyes, all born the same day, got these magic powers to weakmind folk into doing what they want em to.

"Why do you think it's someone our age?" a pretty girl asked.

"Just figured I'll start with you kids. After all, you young ones here are brainy as hell, you've got your own agenda and being your age it's natural you'd be rebellious."

"So, what, it's a movement among us? We're out to overthrow the gov? Power to the people sort of thing?"

"That's what I'm trying to find out."

A few others around her laughed. "Oh man," a guy around sixteen said. "Y'know, you're just like them. Sure, we're leaking secrets to religious nuts topside so they can dogsled over the icecap and put us all on the rack."

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“Somebody seems to be,” I replied. “You don’t care enough to stop them? You just don’t give a shit? Got no sense of patriotic duty?”

“Pa-tri-o-tic duty,” a tall, extraordinarily handsome guy who’d been quiet till now, said softly with a sigh. “Look, Manu –” I started at that: I never told them my first name; he just knew it “– try to understand how we differ from topside. We have no sense of patriotism here. No flag. No national anthem. No special salutes or symbols or statues of dead heroes to mark who we are. We’re fond of our little enclave under the ice not because we believe Kama is extraordinary, rather because you lot are so insane.

“Our big thing here is freedom of thought, not just the talk but the walk. Except our generation’s thinking is changing and not everybody is cool with that. Meaning there are numerous things on which we disagree with our leaders and elders. We don’t need special haircuts or rings through our nipples or walk around with our shoelaces untied and pre-cut knee holes in our jeans to be rebellious. If somebody is, in fact, trying to work something out in secret with this new coalition of religious wackos topside – and we heard such rumors long before you got here – have you considered maybe they’re doing it for reasons other than harming Kama?”

I stared at him, then at each of the others. I didn’t bother with a cop stare because I knew it wouldn’t flush with these bright bunnies. Still, they all had this confident expression like they knew something, or thought they did.

“Yeah? Like what, smart guy?”

The handsome young guy, who said his name was Tarq, shrugged. “No idea. But somebody here being a mole, or a turncoat? Doesn’t make a bit of sense. So what else, you ask, might his agenda be? Hey, you’re the detective. Detect!”

Christ.

## **BORIS**

“Please,” she cried, ‘you’ve got to help me! Do something!”

Shoshona, this was. Pacing the floor, her face in anguish, but still one of the most beautiful women I have known. And for sure Kama doesn’t lack in this area.

“She doesn’t eat, she mopes around, doesn’t give a damn about school anymore. She used to be so passionate about track. Now it’s everything I can do to keep her on the team. Boris, you started all this.”

“So my fault, eh.”

She stopped, turned and faced me. “Oh no, dear Boris, no.” She approached where I was sitting on a beanbag chair, squatted down before me, laid her head in my lap. I felt a little movement in my trousers. Really? Goodness me, he’s not dead after all!

“What do you suggest?” I asked, knowing, of course, her response.

“Because I’ve been there, seen it, felt it, I know it’s not typical teenage girl blather. Sure, she pines for the boy, but only because he’s part of it, the place.” She looked me in the eye. “And I know she experienced something big there, something she won’t talk about. You know what I mean, don’t you.”

Ah, in my younger days...

“So you want me to contact them, see will they have her back.”

“Not permanently! Just, I don’t know, a month maybe? Her summer holidays are coming up. Hey, great idea! She can write an essay for English when she returns: ‘How I spent –’”

“Woman, not even in jest is that to be spoken of. All right, all right, I’ll send a message. Me, I don’t see why not, but as you know –”

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She reached out and placed her hands around my face, then leaned in and kissed me with her soft, soft lips on my own.

More stirring in the nether provinces.

### GHOST

It was the king and queen themselves who greeted us. (Of interest, the shuttle terminal was not camouflaged in some spider-web infested cave, but actually inside the Dechencholing Palace.)

Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, the *Druk Gyalpo*, or dragon king, was an extraordinarily handsome man, early forties, about my height, dark hair and bright eyes that reflected intelligence and self-confidence. He was wearing what I came to know as the traditional Bhutanese garment, a knee-length robe called a *gho*, tied at the waist with a belt known as a *ker*. Draped over his left shoulder was a *kabney*, a wide, long scarf (the color of which denoted status; only the king and head abbot wore yellow). Next to him, several inches shorter and ten years younger, her beauty somewhere between elegant and exquisite, the *Druk Gyaltshen* (dragon queen), Jetsun Pema, wore the customary women's garb, a long ankle-length dress called a *kira*, accompanied by a lighter outer jacket known as a *tego*, with an inner layer termed a *wonju*. Her woman's scarf was a *rachus*.

And thus ends today's fashion report from the tiny Dragon Kingdom of Bhutan.

What struck me right off with these two, even before I left the shuttle, was their quiet strength. No royal Ken and Barbie this pair. Their powerful presence had me slightly uncomfortable...until they caught sight of Arju disembarking just before me, whereupon smiles lit up their faces and made them decidedly human. For a moment they

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stood back, and it occurred they were treating her as a visiting head of state. Then the formality broke and both king and queen gave her hugs. (Me, I settled for a firm but somewhat held back handshake from his maj.)

It was only when we were being led along a long corridor to an elevator by a few assistants, Arju in the company of the royal couple, and me, the faux prince consort, a step or two behind, that the king turned and faced me, holding my eyes.

“When I was a mere lad, my father the king often would tell me bedtime stories. The ones I enjoyed most were about antiheroes. Some were real, some fictional. There was Ned Kelly and Guy Fawkes, The Man With No Name, played by Clint Eastwood. But by far my favorites were a pair of wonderful American scoundrels who became known as Spook&Ghost.” I gawped at him.

“Virtually every night I would hear tales of their valiant efforts at taking down the rich, the bad and the ugly. I was even given a Spook&Ghost T-shirt, the garment much too big for a boy, but which I insisted upon wearing to bed instead of some boring royal bedclothes.” He reached just past me. Handed a white silk scarf by one of his attendants, he draped it around my neck, then held me by my upper arms. Looking me square in the eye, his own glistening like a fanatical basketball fan running into Steph Curry at the dry cleaner’s: “I want you to know that our son is now the same age I was when my father told me those wonderful stories, and I have just begun telling them to him. So I must say that it is an honor to welcome you to *Druk Yul*, Mister Ghost, sir!”

“Um, I appreciate it, your majesty. Except, well, please don’t let on to your boy I am that man. It will totally disillusion him to see what happens to an antihero when he turns seventy.”

“What I neglected to inform you,” Arju laughed, “I’m here mainly as your escort. His majesty has been

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asking for you ever since your first days in Kama a month back.” I thought: Somebody there thought it was important enough to inform the king of Bhutan of my presence?

The king said, “I would have jumped on a shuttle to come meet you then but we had some visitors. Who was it again, my dear?”

“Prince William and Princess Kate, darling.”

“Ah yes, that’s right.” He shrugged. “Protocol, you know. Sometimes it can’t be avoided.”

To which I brilliantly replied: “Uh, uh, uh...”

## ROSAMUND

There wasn’t much to the get-together. Manu and Ghost were in Kama, Baruch and Walli soon would be heading there, he to remain, she on loan from us toppies. That left Glenda, Shoshona and Boris. Plus yours truly.

Following the standard tea and bickies routine, Boris cleared his throat, signaling he wished the floor.

“You dear friends will please excuse me if for once I sound a bit unsure of myself, but what’s going on at this time, both topside and downside, is ever so confusing. Manu is sleuthing and, according to him, getting nowhere. Ghost and Arju are currently in Bhutan.”

“What!” we all seemed to cry at once.

“Boris, what in heaven’s name are they doing there?” I wondered.

“Yeah, and just where the heck is it?” This from me, shamefully not terribly up on world geography.

“It’s a tiny landlocked country of great mountains, rushing rivers, magnificent pastoral scenery and a mere seven hundred thousand citizens snuggled between India and China. Ghost and Arju are there at the request of Bhutan’s king and queen.”

## *Completely Mad*

“Oh, good grief!” Shoshona wailed. “The world gets curiouser and curiouser.”

“Indeed. I had no idea of their journey until Arju contacted me from there. Apparently both are enjoying their visit enormously. Irrespective of this, what I have to tell you is that the Council of Kama wish to extend invitations to each and all of you, either to visit their happy home once more or, should you so desire, to emigrate there as permanent citizens.”

This announcement was greeted with dead silence. We all seemed to be holding our breath.

“I must say, to my knowledge this has never before happened, that an entire group would be extended residence, especially, if you don’t mind my saying, persons without the standard required skill sets for recruitment.”

“Meaning what?” Shoshona asked.

“Medical, scientific or technological expertise. Artistic backgrounds. Some quality they usually require to upgrade the level of their – our – society. As well, normally they make overtures solely to those who might be considered, let us say, in uncomfortable predicaments in their homelands and are hankering for a major change in climate. Obviously, they are genuinely fond of our little collection of scruffy souls.”

The breaths we were holding were released with a quiet whoosh.

“There’s no rush here. No deadline for a decision. You can grab the next shuttle or put off either a visit or moving in permanently till you feel it’s something you truly wish to do. And remember, please: I’m only the messenger. I know no more than what I’ve just told you.”

Glenda and I eyed one another. Hers were glowing. How could she be so sure? Me, oh gosh, I don’t know. A visit, no problem. Anything else would be like leaving earth to go live permanently on Mars, or a space station. It is wonderful there, isn’t it. On the other hand...



## GHOST

We traveled the country for a week. It was approaching winter, and in some places bitterly cold, colder than either of us could recall experiencing, but this did not worry us in the least. Magic was everywhere we went. And the people were so kind. Didn't they know the world had gone completely mad and we were living in calamitous times?

As the king himself explained: "Bombs can't explode? Rockets can't get off their launching pads? Bullets just fall out of guns? And you believe anyone here should be bothered by this? Ghost, do you know what our national sport is? No, of course you wouldn't. Well, it's the same as our most destructive weapon: archery! I kid you not. We shoot arrows with bows here, and mostly at bullseyes, not one another."

"But what if you're attacked by another country?" I wondered. "Lichtenstein, say, or Luxembourg."

"We'd simply invite them in to spend time with us. So long as they all paid the standard two hundred fifty dollars a day, of course."

Arju and I, along with guide and driver, took in the breathtaking area of Punakha, then we flew to the eastern part of the country, which might well have been a voyage in a time capsule to centuries past. Back to the capital city of Thimphu (a rather noisy, ugly town; perhaps they keep it that way to show they are, in fact, human, and not everything here is out of a fairytale) for a night. The next morning we took off by car once more, heading west through outrageous scenery to a hamlet by the delightful name of Haa.

Back in Thimphu, we were accommodated at the Dechencholing Palace which, like the 'dzongs' in every region, served as both religious and administrative centers.

## *Completely Mad*

“We have no separation of church and state here,” the king explained. We were having lunch with the royals along with a few of their top people. The head chef was an older woman who, we were told, had been one of the first females in the Bhutan police force, had, in fact, risen to the highest rank ever for a woman before she retired to become a full-time chef. After running her own restaurant for some years, she was stolen away by the king. Somehow, as people here, as in Kama, appeared to know more about me than did I myself, she knew I was vegetarian, and explained patiently the ingredients of each dish that was served. The king has insisted I sit by his immediate left side. Did I perceive a bit of jealousy from significant members of government that, at least for the next few hours, they’d been moved down the line?

“We’re a Buddhist country, and a particular strain of Buddhism at that,” King Jigme went on. “Ours was brought here by Tibetan king Songtsen Gampo in the seventh century, and later strengthened by the arrival of Guru Rimpoche, whom we consider the second Buddha. We weren’t actually a country until the seventeenth century when Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyei from Tibet consolidated power.

“You know, we got some bad press a decade back when we were forced to expel a large number of young Nepalese. They were actually born in this country, but wanted to keep the traditions of their Nepal backgrounds. We spent a great deal of time explaining that we had no problem with their worshipping as Hindus, but this is Bhutan and we have certain traditions they must follow and abide by. Finally I told them, Look, I am truly sorry, but unless you conform, you’ll have to leave the country. It was their choice to go, even though their parents and grandparents elected to remain here. Before ordering them out, I had long talks with top people in the Indian government. They are almost all Hindus, and we are very close with India.

## Barry Rosenberg

Our number one industry, in fact, is supplying India with hydro-electric energy, which we have in abundance.”

“How did the Indians react?”

“Kick em out!” he grinned.

“I remember reading that it was a religious thing.”

“Absolutely not. But you’ve seen our national dress, the gho and kera. By law, all who work in government must wear them in the Dzongs and during all administrative business. This, I must tell you, is definitely not a hardship. We *like* wearing our cultural costume. But the young Nepalese employed in admin positions refused as a show of their defiance. So” – he shrugged – “I had no option but to ask them to leave the country.”

“You may not know this, your majesty, but my dearest friend and partner in crime, whom you know as Spook, I won’t say he became a Buddhist, but his entire being after we got done popping off baddies was based on the Buddha’s teachings. I would like to believe some of that rubbed off on me. But now there’s this weird thing going on where the major religions apparently have combined to combat the world gone completely mad thing. They’re looking for the culprit behind the sudden drop in violence and thwarting of privacy invasion, and things are getting a little antsy for Arju and her friends in Kama.”

The handsome king looked away for some moments. His face when he turned back showed anguish.

“First, I can assure you that no Buddhists – and there are perhaps a billion of us of many different stripes worldwide – are part of this plot. And second, it bothers me no end that people who claim to be of god could possibly be opposed to cleansing the world of implements that destroy and kill. Who, if I may be so bold to ask, are the truly mad in this scenario! There are sound reasons why my forefathers kept us a closed nation until my late father made the first moves to slowly open our borders to the world.”

“How on earth did you and Kama become allies?”

## *Completely Mad*

He smiled grandly. “Arju’s predecessor as head of Council made a pilgrimage here when my father first ascended to the throne upon the untimely death of his own father. The man just appeared one day.”

“And said take me to your leader?”

“Precisely! Perhaps our people were too stunned to say no. The man told my father of Kama’s existence, and said his people had searched the world for some semblance of compassionate sanity.”

“And you had the only game in town.”

“He invited the king to accompany him to Kama –”

“And he went? I’ve done crazy stuff in my time, but getting in a vehicle that travels on electromagnetic waves close to the speed of sound through the core of the earth!”

“So you get some idea of where my father’s head was at.”

“And you’ve been allies every since.”

“We have been close. They’ve helped us with scientific and technological knowledge, and we have, so they tell us, been a spiritual beacon for their society.”

“Damn good trade-off.”

“Indeed. Now, to change the subject completely...”

\*

I walked onto the hardwood floor dressed in borrowed T-shirt, shorts and running shoes. He was already on the gym’s court, T-shirt and track pants, fancy New Balance shoes, shooting one-handers from a fair distance. Swish, swish, swish.

“I love the game,” he said when I situated myself beneath the basket. “Played in the States when I was going to prep school. Wasn’t all that bad. But now, you know, I’m over forty. I know that doesn’t sound old to you, but there’s not a lot of longevity in the Wangchuck line.”

## Barry Rosenberg

“So you have to take advantage of old guys like me whenever the opportunity presents?”

“When the opportunity comes along to be with *anyone* who knows the game, I drag him down here.”

A few more shots as I stood around doing some token stretches. Swish, swish, swish.

“I never played formally,” I told him. “Schoolyard stuff, yeah, a bit. Last I had a ball in my hands you weren’t born yet.”

“Yes, but look at the shape you’re in. And I’ve watched you move. You’re more agile and flexible than men half your age. Besides, all I’m proposing is an easy game of one-on-one. You won’t even work up a sweat.”

Five minutes later water was pouring off me. His maj was ahead, sixteen to two. There wasn’t a bead of sweat on him. He was having the time of his life. Finally I said enough.

“Aw, come on. Game’s twenty-one.”

“By twenty-one my knees will require a complete tendon replacement and I’ll be prime candidate for open heart surgery.”

He kept it up. Cajoling, pleading. He wasn’t rubbing it in. Rather I got the feeling he was just enjoying a break from the daily routine of kinging. Except it was at my expense he was enjoying it.

Holding onto the backboard standard, I bent over to catch a few breaths. Catching them was like trying to catch dreams in a bottle. When he refused to call it quits, it was my keen sense of self-preservation which prompted me to take action. “Uh, look, I do have a trick or two that might even the match up a bit.”

“Great!” He smiled broadly. “What have you got?”

“Let me go to the loo first, okay?”

In the changing room I stripped off T-shirt and shorts. Peeled off shoes and socks.

## *Completely Mad*

Back on the floor, he was about to take a jumper from around eighteen feet out. I quickly barefooted over, perfectly timed a jump of my own and stole the ball out of his hand.

“What? *Whaaat!*?”

I dribbled to the basket and laid it in.

“What in the world? Ghost??”

I tossed the ball at him. He wasn’t ready for it coming out of nowhere and it hit him in the chest. When it bounced away I retrieved it, went in for an easy bucket.

“Sixteen-four,” I called out.

“Where *are* you? I can’t believe this!”

I threw him a bounce pass. He fielded it cleanly, looked around in puzzlement, began to move slowly to the basket. I snuck round behind him, leaned in and sang at top voice: ‘*You ain’t nuthin but a hound dawg...*’ Startled, his maj, a known Elvis freak, lost the plot for a moment, whereupon I reached in, swatted the ball away and lit out after as it made for the corner. I caught up just shy of the sideline, turned and hail-mary’d a two hander, no thought of the ball going in, I just wanted him to see a basketball soaring twenty-four feet by itself, no shooter. Unbelievably, the damn thing went in. I was on a roll!

“Sixteen-five. No, wait, that’s a three pointer. Sixteen-seven.”

“Ghost, this isn’t quite fair, you know –”

I grabbed the ball under the hoop and flipped it in such a way that upon hitting the floor to his left it bounced crazily to his right, hit his knee and bounded away. We both scrambled after it but since I had a head start I got there before he did. Instead of dribbling, I simply zigzag-walked it in, moving the ball side to side across myself. Chasing the ball he made a stab for it, whereupon I took a sudden sideways move, hoping I wouldn’t bust an ankle, stopped a few feet away and banked it in off the boards.

## Barry Rosenberg

If I kept it up there was a chance I might have caught him. Except if I kept it up odds had it that I would've had a stroke right there on the court. Thankfully, it never got to that point. Completely out of breath, my legs jelly, I collapsed on the floor. "You win," I croaked with the last gram of energy in me.

"Who cares?" he cried. "Oh my word, this has been the most fun I've had, ever! You know, there were always rumors about you guys, you and Spook, the kinds of miracles you could perform. Now I know! My question is, are you hypnotizing me or are you really invisible?" He found out a few moments later when he tripped over my body and fell heavily to the floor. "I just got my answer," the king groaned, sprawled out a few feet from me. He began laughing hysterically and let out a whoop that resounded through the gym. Moments later one of the doors flung open and two faces appeared.

"Out!" he yelled. "Both of you, out!!" The faces quickly disappeared and the door closed.

When he had regained some semblance of composure, Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck sat up, reached out his hand. I extended my own and we did a palm slap, one palm belonging to a king, the other not even there.

"You realize, of course, I am the first monarch in world history ever to play basketball against an invisible man, and the rotten thing is I can't tell a soul for fear of being locked away for life!"

## BOOK SEVEN

### SPOOK

That boy does get himself in some crazy situations. On the other hand, give him credit for getting to where he's supposed to go. There are only two places on earth that have any semblance of sanity these days, and our Ghost is now involved with both.

That Kama and Bhutan should become allies is not unusual, nor is it coincidence. When energies become stronger, higher, they don't shoot up in straight, separate vertical lines. More they take the shape of a pyramid coz higher energy attracts like. It has consciousness; it is an integral part of the universal mind.

Y'see, what we're here to do, in these bodies, on this planet, in addition to preserving and hopefully upgrading the spiritual quality of the species – *all* the species – is to create. Don't matter none what you create, or how you create. Can be a painting or cultivating flowers or producing an event that gives folk a spiritual boost or even writing a silly-ass book like this here. At a certain point in the creative process, even if you ain't consciously aware of it, a creation occurs, a new thing, or maybe a new form of an existing thing. This creation then enters into the universal consciousness; it becomes part of the *om*.

Trouble is, humans have forgotten this. Long ago did y'all lose sight of what we're all here for, and it's getting worse and worse. So instead of creating new and good, y'all be destroying the existing good. Now you might say, Yo Spook, I ain't doing nothing of the sort! I'm just sitting here at my favorite upmarket café sipping my soy latte and playing with my latest i-thingie. No way I'm



## Barry Rosenberg

destroying anything. Well, y'know what they say: if y'all ain't part of the solution...

Now, it's a pretty common thing that when a shitstorm hits, there always be tiny holes in them big black clouds which let in light, and this light often so bright as to beam right into the soul. Folk what been sitting on the fence ever so long suddenly feel compelled to get they ass off that fence and begin to *create*. If you ask them what they gonna create, probably they couldn't tell you. Don't matter coz while their individual minds have been conditioned to be half asleep, their souls have woken up and dived into the river of universal Mind, the wonderful super-powerful energy that connects every living thing. Like an expert white water rafter, they begin to paddle that raging river, move in tune with it, flow, baby, *flow!*

That's when miracles happen. You start meeting other former fence-sitters, very often total strangers, who're doing stuff similar to what you've jumped into. That's the convergence, the attraction, of higher energy happening. Simply put, it's the law of the universe being enacted. This law so strong it supersedes crap like ego, jealousy, greed. (And it's *suuuch* a major buzz – hoo!)

## WALLI

I was so afraid he'd forgotten me. Well, not forgot who I was or anything. But there are so many hot young babes here and me, aw, I'm too tall and gawky and unsure of myself around these switched-on kids. I was more nervous than any time I could remember.

When I came upon them, he was faced the other way, talking to a very pretty girl. He noticed a few of them looking my way as I approached, twisted around, stared a moment, then turned back to the one he had been speaking to. My heart went flat. Then he quickly twisted back, did a

## *Completely Mad*

double take, and a great smile broke onto his handsome face. He excused himself, came over and stood directly before me. His eyes danced and my soul sang out. And when he reached out and grabbed me, pulled me close and hugged me with his strong arms, my tears just flowed.

I wondered how the girl felt he had been talking to. Did she feel like I would've in her place? Were they lovers? Did I care if he had others?

My mind was jabbering; fortunately I couldn't get any words out my mouth. He took my hand and began moving me away from the others. We headed towards a path through some bush and stepped through the trees. No words between us. Oh, please, I thought. Let this be real.

\*

He'd never told me where he lived. I had supposed with family, maybe other young people. No, he lived alone. A tiny one-room cabin alongside a stream, away from other buildings, other people. He had a lovely lady beagle called Nebbie, a female Persian cat named Minx. Single bed, neatly made; scuffed chest of drawers; an ancient desk with two computers; lots of other electronic equipment sitting on shelves to either side, a framed painting on the wall of a woman in profile dressed seventeenth or eighteenth century. A wooden deck had a small hand basin, one burner propane stove, folding table with two chairs, a hammock. The outdoor toilet stood alone twenty feet off.

He hadn't asked why I'd returned, how long I was staying, none of that chitchat stuff. Words were hardly necessary for the first hour, and then we sat on the grass just off the desk. He smoked a herbal cigarette which smelled like patchouli. I had refused his offer of one because I wanted to sit there and let the smoke coming off his waft into my senses.

## Barry Rosenberg

“You’re worried I may hurt you,” he said softly. I tried to say no, not at all, but with little success. “We do things differently from topside, as you know,” he went on. “What you call commitment we call strange.”

“I know, I know.” I covered my face with both hands. “Funny thing is, my Momma and Grandmother both have bounced on a thousand beds, no problem. Me, I’m too much a prude, I suppose.”

After a considerable silence, he said: “Some cultures topside claim the guest is god, which I kind of like. I don’t know what restrictions you have here, either from your people or ours, but if you wish to stay as my guest, I have no problem honoring your needs and wishes, no difficulty being with you alone. The oddest part is having to speak aloud our feelings and needs since we share no internal communication. That might be a bit awkward for a while, but what is life without new experiences.” He reached out and cupped my chin in his hands. “So here’s an official proclamation: you want, I shall be committed to you for however long you’re here as a visitor.”

I sighed. “Thank you,” I whispered.

“And if Manu wants you to spy on me, feel free to tell him everything. Ah, I see he’s already been on to you.”

“He has. I told him straight off the answer is no.”

And with that, we returned inside to the single bed.

## GHOST

“Sorry to be the bearer of what may be news you don’t like to hear.”

“Uh-huh.”

“She’s moved in with this guy.”

“Uh-huh.”

“He’s the one I suspect may be the mole.”

## *Completely Mad*

“If they get married will that make her Missus Mole?”

“I gather you don’t give a shit.”

I shrugged. “Ever have a teenage daughter?”

“You know I haven’t.”

“Fascinating experience. If there’s something you absolutely don’t want her to do, one way to make certain she’ll do it is tell her not to. Have you mentioned their shacking up together to Arju?”

“Thought I’d run it by you first. Besides, way things work here, most likely she knew before I did.”

“Myself, I can’t imagine that some kid, he’s what, eighteen –?”

“Seventeen.”

“– smart as he is would conspire to sell his people out to some of the heaviest hitters topside and be so arrogant about it that a couple of shleppers like us could figure him out when the rest of Kama hasn’t a clue.”

“Does seem strange, I’ll admit.”

“You remember how wrong we were about the Chinese guy was offed in Auckland?”

“How wrong *I* was. You figured it out. However the hell you did that.”

I looked at him. Had a flash-thought of telling him how I became invisible and crashed the top secret meet of all the consortium wheels in the old Silicon Valley, and what I learned eventually pointed me in the right direction. But nah, straight as he is, guy’s been incredible handling all the crazy stuff he’s been hit with past couple years. This bit of news might push him over the edge.

“Mate, believe it, you had as much to do with unraveling that mess as I did. But what I learned then about you, if I hadn’t realized it before, is you do jump to conclusions. Typical cop move, maybe, but you grab onto what appears the obvious solution and like a terrier with a rag doll don’t let go.”

## Barry Rosenberg

“Most times the obvious dude is the right dude.”

“Most times. Well, do whatcha gotta, my friend, I just don’t get the feeling about this kid. Smug, yeah. Traitor to his people?” Shook my head. “Reckon it goes deeper than that. A lot.”

“You think I’m falling for the first obvious character but he’s just the iceberg’s tip?” He suddenly grinned. “Hey, iceberg’s tip: fitting expression for a place like this, eh.”

“I have no idea what’s going on, right. But if this kid presented any danger, either to Kama or, far more importantly, to my kid, I would feel it in the goofy ways I feel things. So far, not a twinge.”

Which got me to thinking.

– You home, my man?

– *Yes.*

– Busy at the moment?

– *No.*

– You know what I’m after, yeah?

– *Yes.*

– Okay. First thing, and far more important than the second thing, is the kid in any danger?

– *No.*

– Absolutely no?

– *Yes.*

– Is this Tarq guy sincere about his feelings for her?

– *Yes.*

– Not playing her for reasons other than his heart?

– *Yes.* (He’s not)

– Do you like him?

– *Yes.*

– Cool. Then it’s fair to say he’s got nothing to do with this mole business?

– *No.*

– Wait. No?

– *Yes.*

## *Completely Mad*

- Then he's the mole!
- *No.*
- Oh boy, here we go. Walter, my brother, you know I'm a bit of a dunce.
- *No.*
- Well, I am, especially it comes to trying to figure out your cryptic messages. So he's not the mole.
- *Yes.* (He's not)
- But he knows who is?
- *No.*
- I hate you.
- *No.*
- All right, all right. So, he's not the mole, doesn't know who is, but he's got something to do with the one who is?
- *Yes.*
- Well, that clears that up.
- *No.*
- You got that right, pard.
- *Yes.*

## **THE MOLE**

All going well. The consolidated forces of big religion believe they are on track to discovering (and obliterating) whoever's behind the world gone completely mad because they blame the cessation of warfare and destruction for why hundreds of millions of dues-paying devotees have skedaddled from their membership rolls. Those who *are* behind the world gone completely mad believe they have a mole in their midst and are intercepting said mole's transmissions to the consolidated forces of big religion and substituting misinformation to confuse them as to who (and where) this heinous foe of god's chosen con artists might be. The imported Sherlock Holmes-Doctor Watson duo are

## Barry Rosenberg

scrutinizing footprints with their magnifying glasses, wondering why the prints are going in ever-diminishing circles until they climb right up the back of their own trousers.

And me, I'm having a blast creating all this fuss which, the universe willing, will draw back the curtain and expose to all the world the self-serving ugliness of topside's religion mafia, plus get the message across to our own leaders that, two-and-a-half decades into a new millennia, change is desperately needed in this community grown sleepy through contentment and arrogance.

As an unexpected bonus, I get to observe the beautiful budding romance of a couple of gorgeous kids. So, what's not to like about the exploits of a despicable, insufferable traitor? Holy Mole-y!

## GHOST

“Hit me with it again. What's the big worry about this mole person being in touch with the religiosos? Did he give them Kama's map coordinates? Reveal the mechanism of your anti-bad stuff setup or say how they can undo the undo?”

She rolled over and, face inches from mine, peered into my eyes. I was so enjoying our spoon position I regretted bringing the topic up. I only did so hoping to help poor Manu, who first spent a year and some in the pay of the consortium trying to unravel the great mystery of the world gone completely mad, and then when he was led into the core of it all had to resign from the consortium because no way would he bag Kama, now was crawling around blind in attempt to learn the identity of this elusive mole.

“The mole did not, up until the moment we caught on to his act, do any damage. It was only after we discovered what he was doing and began to amend his dispatches that some revealing stuff began to go out.”

## *Completely Mad*

“Okay, but what if –”

“– he had figured this whole thing out and made sure we were on to him before the juicy bits began to flow? Yes, my dear, we feel relatively certain this was precisely what he’s done. What’s so thoroughly annoying is why he is doing this, and how in heck did he come by the workings of our system in such detail. It is intricately complex, as you might imagine, and we have vetted and re-vetted everyone even remotely involved with the technology.”

We were silent for the longest time. Getting lost in the eyes of this beautiful woman, I felt myself being aroused again. Not to be. Rats.

“I can’t help but wonder is he doing this to get our attention. But if so, what does he want? And why go to such extremes? Why not shoot a flare into space over Council chambers or go up in a gyro and drop leaflets?”

“Is afraid of fire, gets airsick, doesn’t like to waste paper or litter the countryside? Or maybe, may-be, in answer to your first question, he’s tried all these things, and more, and you birds just aren’t paying attention. Hm? Governmental bodies have been known to be deaf to the needs of their constituents.”

“You know how difficult it is to –”

“Save it for your election platform. Or whatever you do to get in office. I should herewith like to make a suggestion.”

She snuggled closer, reached down and took hold of me. I felt my eyes cross.

“Cat got your tongue?”

“Not my tongue, no. Christ, don’t stop!”

“Try multi-tasking. Speak your piece, my lover, and I shall happily return to what I was doing.”

“Yes’m. It’s obvious he’s *awarrre* of everything you’re doing. Why not, *uhhh*, let the next transmission go through as sent. How much damage could it do? Let’s see what his *omigawwwwd* move will be then.”



## Barry Rosenberg

She paused her hand action to think it over.  
“*Multi-task!!!*”

### WALLI

We woke every morning well before sunrise. (Of course, it wasn't *real* sunrise, still, the change of colors from pre-dawn until the 'sun' appeared over the horizon was totally convincing and ever so beautiful.) We took yoga mats out to the garden and sat facing one another. As the young people did at school, we would meditate in silence for twenty minutes, finishing by chanting *om* in unison another few minutes. Then we would do some yoga. Initially Tarq was so much more flexible than I was, but within a couple weeks I felt myself catching up. We finished by doing a mindpower visualization together, using the small white speaker I had used before, this time having it play out loud.

The exercises were led by a woman's voice, soft and melodious, yet carrying much strength. When Tarq happened to mention the voice was that of his mother, and that it was she who recited all the recorded imagery journeys used by the students, I got an even more accurate sense why he was so strong and calm and self-assured without the need to be cocky and macho like so many of the up-themselves boys back at the consortium school.

I had two favorites of the twenty or so exercises that made up the mind training program. First was the chakra cleansing, which never failed to transport me to another dimension. Not far behind was the one Tarq referred to as 'size matters'. It began with the standard step-by-step relaxing of all the body parts, where you purposely tightened a specific area hard as you could, holding it for some moments, then completely releasing the joints and muscles of the area, taking a deep breath, letting it out and moving on to the next. The recorded voice led you slowly,

## *Completely Mad*

deliberately, from the toes up the legs, torso to the neck, then from the fingertips up the arms, then neck up the face and head until the entire body was covered. In just a couple minutes, you felt a completely different person.

The voice then counted us slowly from ten to one, letting us know that with each descending number we were going deeper and deeper, safely and comfortably to a stronger, healthier, higher place inside our minds. (Actually, these exercises reminded me of the sensations I had experienced using Baruch's Buddha machine.) When we got to number one, the voice informed us that we were standing before a closed door which led to our very own place of total power, where we would be protected and guided throughout. We were instructed to open the door and enter alone. Of interest, the first time I did the exercise I found that, without any forethought, Tarq was right there with me. When following the exercise I mentioned this, he smiled grandly and confided the same had happened to him, adding this had never occurred before. And when I described my power place, noting every tree and bush, the fine sand of the beach around the lake, the breeze rustling through the leaves, the birdsong, he threw his head back and laughed.

"You've just described to a T the power place I've had since I was a kid. I've never told anyone about it, and there's never been another soul with me: never. It seems we're even more in tune than I'd thought."

The voice suggested we move through the power place using our physical sense to explore, then went silent, the only sound being very soft music, the mood of which I can only describe as heavenly. (Tarq later explained it was an Indian morning raga.)

After some minutes the voice returned, telling us to find comfortable spots and lie down, whereupon the main part of the exercise began.

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Emphasizing over and over that we were fully protected every step and moment of the journey, the voice told us that we were shortly to commence, safely and comfortably, a gradual reduction in our respective sizes, becoming smaller and smaller, to the size of one of our fingers, to the size of a fingernail, and continuing to get smaller. When first informed of what was to transpire, I got a sudden, and unexpected, chill of fear, as in: will I be able to return to full size! But once the process began, I felt an unanticipated exhilaration. As I got tinier and tinier, I began to experience things which later I would learn existed on a microscopic level: first there were cells, then molecules, then atoms, then electrons and protons, and even smaller subatomic particles. And it wasn't only visual; there was actually sound emanating from these miniature forms of life, quite pleasant sounds which I couldn't describe to save my life.

Then the voice told us to slowly reverse the growth pattern, and guided us back through the atomic, molecular, cellular stages until once again I was big enough to experience the physical world I lived in. Back to fingertip size, then a full finger, larger and larger until I returned to my full and normal size. But the growth didn't quit there; I continued to grow larger. Fortunately, our power place was outdoors, although the voice informed us that since we had experienced the subatomic kingdom we now possessed the capacity to go through matter free from obstruction.

Larger and larger, growing not only upward and outward, but downward as well, into the ground. I could feel sensations of cold now as my being encompassed all the physical forms I came in contact with. The information was pervading my mind so quickly I no longer could analyze it, yet I knew such understanding was being processed, recorded, within me.

Bigger and bigger, my head and shoulders effortlessly breaking through the thick ice dome that served

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as Kama's roof; my feet and legs down through the freezing tundra, arms reaching out to the very limits of the Kaman community. And still I grew larger, taking into myself hundreds of miles each second, the planet around me seemingly shrinking and filling me as I grew larger, faster, accessing total information, knowledge, understanding and wisdom of all that I encompassed. This remarkable journey and its powerful yet gentle force continued until the entire planet was encased within me, an experience more thrilling than anything I had ever known.

Finally we were instructed to cease all growth, to focus within and take note of that which now existed therein. "All the love, joy and happiness in the world is now yours. At the same time you have the ability, and hopefully the desire, to use your newfound power to instill these positive feelings into those laden with negativity, sadness, hatred. As the entire world is within you, you can literally change the world, to cleanse it of hurtful energies. Remember that when you return to your normal size, you will retain this power, and you can convert vibrations from bad to good, not just within reach of your physical senses, but wherever it may exist on the planet."

With that, we began the process of returning to our usual physical sizes, again reducing our beings in a manner which seemed slow and gradual but which was speeding along at a supersonic rate, until once more we were lying on the grass in our place of power. Whereupon the voice – and I had to keep reminding myself it belonged to the woman who had brought my beloved into this world – began a slow count from one to ten, instructing us that we were returning to the surface, conscious, physical level, and at the count of ten we were to open our eyes and be who and where we were at the start of this amazing journey several minutes before.

"Everything you have experienced during this exercise, whether it sits in your conscious knowledge or

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not, is recorded in a readily accessible place within you. You may go back at any time to review or re-experienced the journey all or in part. All right, eight...nine...ten. Open your eyes, slowly sit up and spend some quiet moments sensing all that exists around you.

“Good. This is a perfect time to ask yourself the three prime questions of life. As you ask each question, don’t search for an answer, and keep in mind if one does arise it pertains only to this moment, and as you are constantly changing it may or may not apply to the next. The first question is: Who am I? Who. Am. I.”

A silence of several moments ensued until she asked: “Why am I here? Why. Am. I. Here.

“And lastly: “Where am I going? Where. Am. I. Going.

“Now have a wonderful, wonderful day.”

And we did.

## MANU

The mole’s transmissions emanated from different spots in the community. He moved around, used different equipment. I had no qualms that I was up against a foe far more intelligent than a dummy like me, and besides, this was his turf, and he would know every building and blade of grass. I certainly wasn’t gonna outsmart the dude. Really, I had to rely on his making some kind of mistake. If I was to discover his identity he would have to trip himself up, and somehow I couldn’t see him doing it.

Ghost’s idea of letting a transmission or two go through without alteration I thought was a good one. The first one came and went, beamed out to the Vatican, or someplace nearby in that corner of Rome, far as we could tell. There was some data pertaining to the instruments Kama was using to neutralize poison gas, which a number

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of countries began using immediately after their boom-boom weapons petered out. The smarties here caught on quick, and whether they had prepared for this from the get-go or they worked out a formula in a hurry I had no idea, but it took only a couple weeks before they cut off that lovely line of death-dealing as well. I guess knives, swords and clubs with huge nails poking out were beyond their scientific mojo, but from all reports the world had yet to revert to gladiator doubleheaders at the Roman coliseum. And so far as the bad guys using the mole's info to fix their crapped-out nerve gas, people I talked to here said yeah, it may be possible, but it'd take ten years of full-time effort to come up with an alternate method of delivery.

Now, the mole's usual dissemination of information was every ten days give or take a couple. When the formula for the poison gas fixit was made, and went through without any cuts, nearly three weeks went by before the next one. I'm tempted to say he was shaken some by the failure to change his script, but this guy was too sharp by miles to apply simple logic on his tactics.

Ghost and I had decided to tell nobody about what he and Arju had decided, and I mean nobody. So we were the three mute mice. Still, talking with the kids, hearing them say that their imbedded communications thingies were being tapped by the elders, I wondered can these jokers reverse the process and listen in to people's thoughts? (If so, I couldn't even imagine what they'd make of my inner babble.) I have no doubt that these Kamans' intentions are honorable, but hell, when technology is as far out as theirs, the temptation to use those gadgets must be awfully tempting.

The next transmission came from the head scientific facility itself, the one set into the mountain, ironically just a ways down the block of labs where the setup existed to intercept the guy. Normally he threw up a sort of umbrella of distorting signals to camouflage his exact site. What he

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didn't know – maybe – was that the techies had recently refined their tracking gear, so we got a pretty close hit. Apparently he broke into the lab, attached some sort of external drive to an existing apparatus not even intended for broadcasting, and fired away. This to me smacked of a game of cat and mouse, like, I'll show you people I'm always a step ahead of you. Ghost didn't think so.

“He's far too cool to become involved in puerile crap like that. He's on a mission, and he's serious about it. My question is, just what exactly is his damn mission?”

And then we caught a break. The next transmission was a brief one, incomplete it sounded like, as if he'd been interrupted in the process and had to shut down in a hurry. We vectored in the site where it had been made, and pinpointed it within a certain area. Unfortunately, this created a problem of sorts. There were very few dwellings in this area; one of these just happened to be where this kid Tarq was shacking up with Walli. For sure, Ghost wouldn't be very happy his daughter was caught up in this, but I felt certain we had nailed our guy.

## GHOST

“Guys, time for a talk.”

We were sitting on the grass just off the veranda. Walli, who looked radiant, had made us all cups of delicious herbal tea and some scones she had baked. She could do this? So much about my big little girl I didn't know.

“You want to know my intentions with your daughter?”

“Now look, mate,” Manu cut in, holding himself back for my benefit, “why don't you for once cut out the smug wisecracks which, more than anything, shows a bit of immaturity on your part. The two of us, me and Ghost, are visitors here, we're both senior citizens, and we really are

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fond of you folks and what you've done with this wonderful community. We've never talked down to you, any of you, and it would be appreciated if you might reciprocate. Deal?"

Tarq held up his hands, palms out, nodded a few times. Truce.

I said, "You know we're here trying to run down this mole guy and, more than anything, find out what his agenda is. A very large and significantly influential part of the world is seriously pissed off at you people, and would love nothing more than to find you and eradicate you from existence. The mole appears to be trying to help them do so, although my gut tells me there's a lot more to his actions than that."

"But why are you telling us, Daddy?"

I sighed. Looked over at Manu. Who looked up at the artificial sky.

"We picked up a transmission a couple days back. We believe it came from right here."

"*What!?*" both kids cried at once. I thought: man, if they're faking it, they're better than any Shakespearean actor I've ever seen.

"How the heck can that be?" Tarq cried, his normal baritone voice rising almost to soprano.

"That's because it was sent from here," Manu replied. "Well, around here." He waved his hand in an arc. "And this is the only building."

"Daddy, swear, it's not Tarq. I don't think we've been apart five minutes since I moved in here."

"The last broadcast was just five minutes long. A little less, actually."

"The only times we've been apart are when one or the other of us has been in the garden or staying late at school."

"Did it happen at night?" Tarq wondered.

"Late afternoon."



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The kids looked at one another. “That’s when we go off to watch the sunset,” she said. “Which we did two days back.”

Now the seniors looked at each other.

“What about the electronic stuff you have in there?”

“You mean can it send messages to Rome? I guess, although it’s not a heck of a lot more powerful than your typical smartphone.”

“You mind if we –?”

The four of us rose off the ground and traipsed inside. I was dead certain this kid wasn’t who we were looking for, and from his body language I reckon Manu had backed down several pegs from his initial conviction. Tarq powered up his gadgets and began to explain what everything was used for. He just as well have been speaking Urdu, and my listening mechanism shut down after thirty seconds. Then I happened to glance at Manu; I thought: what the f–.

The handsome Maori had stuck his face right into the apparatus. He seemed to be smelling it. Then he squatted down and began sniffing the chair.

“Jesus, mate.”

He stopped sniffing but remained in the squat, his eyes closed and head nodding slowly.

“Who else comes in here and could’ve used this stuff?” he asked quietly.

They both spoke at once: “Nobody comes here. I’ve made it known I don’t want any–” “Your mother visits once in a –”

The three of them seemed to come to a simultaneous understanding. Tarq’s mouth was agape, Walli held her hands to her face and Manu looked like his dog had been hit by a truck. Only Ghost the galumph was out of the loop. I decided to wait it out.

“May I ask your mother’s name?” Manu inquired.

“She uses a few different ones.”

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“Is one of them Pride?”

I swiveled my head around and stared at him.

“Yeah, mostly that’s what she likes to be known by. But really –”

Manu shook his head. He got up from his squat, knees cracking a mini-drumroll. He placed his hand on Tarq’s shoulder, nodded at Walli, blinked and stepped outside. I followed soundlessly and we stood together on the veranda, gazing out at the beauty of the land.

“Cinnamon and cloves,” he said, barely above a whisper.

## **PRIDE**

I screwed up.

Me, who’s so calculating, every move planned well in advance, work out each detail prior to the deed...and look. Go visit the kids, whom I love to pieces, they’re not there, oh right, late afternoon, must be out by the lake ogling the sunset, hey I’ll just jump on the boy’s powerbank, attach my signal blocker, begin sending out, not even halfway along, oh shit, here come the kids, holding hands and gazing into each other’s eyes, so I quick shut down.

I mean, I should’ve figure by this time the geeks would come up with some new deal can penetrate my blocker. So I send, and they grab it, home in on the general area. Well, yes, I should’ve anticipated, and would’ve anticipated, except there I was topside waiting forever for that darn Iranian physicist to make up his mind, should he come with me and leave behind his crabby wife and overfed kids, or stay and probably go to prison for ten years. So I was still topside when the geeks here came up with their new tracking contraption. Added to this my quandary over those last two transmissions not being

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fudged with – hell are they up to? – call it a matter of overconfidence mixed with weary mind, a deadly combination. Worst thing, of course, I’ve dropped the kids in the poo. Having suspected Tarq from the beginning, Manu must be in his glory.

Reckon it’s time to do a fade, old girl? Grab a shuttle and go topside for a while? They’ll figure out pretty quick the kids had nothing to do with it. (Imagine, Tarq the mole! Christ. Kid is so pure I have to wonder which of my sundry lovers could’ve been the father coz sure as gravity that Mister Clean gene didn’t come from Momma!)

Back to basics, I suppose I can do the deed from up there, half the deed anyway, the part that’s obvious but not the main thrust of this whole adventure I’m on. Or maybe the smartest thing is to just give it up completely. Truth, what’re the odds that what I’m trying to achieve can possibly penetrate the thick skulls of those running the show here?

Whoa, *whoaaaa* there, girl! First bit of adversity and you tuck tail and run? Some dedicated activist, you. All right, time to roll up the sleeves, or roll down the knickers, whichever serves the purpose, and design a new strategy.

## ARJU

*Pride?* True? I can’t believe it. Don’t want to believe it. I love that girl. Wait, is that it? I still see her as a *girl*? Still looks like one, that stuff the ETs give her, their elixir of life. Scares hell out of me. Seen too many sci-fi/horror movies where one morning the youth juice suddenly does a back flip and you wake up looking like Grandma Moses.

But *Pride!*? Aw.

They sounded pretty certain, both of them. Manu, okay, he’s a conclusion jumper. But Ghost too. What’d he say: seventy-five/twenty-five she’s the one. Especially

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when they checked the dates she's been here and not out fetching new recruits and saw that everything jives.

Worst thing, I can just imagine how she's feeling, what with the kids involved. Hell were you thinking, girl!

Okay, done is done. Next step. Keep it quiet. (Right, as if anything can be kept quiet here.) Well, don't make a fuss over it. And I must call her in, talk with her. Has this whole thing been an attempt to get our attention? *My* attention? And why am I feeling so guilty about this? Well, I can venture a pretty good guess: if she had to resort to actions that might hurt us, even if she had figured it really wouldn't hurt us, it must be something I simply haven't paid enough attention to. And if that be so, I can't be doing my job all that well, can I.

All right, next step. Let her know she's forgiven without actually coming out and saying that, which, knowing our Pride (you don't have to look far to know how she got that name) would just push her away. At least this entire mole episode is behind us. (Hopefully.) Ah, Pride, baby. Let's air this out, yes?

## GHOST

"Why is he here?"

"Why not?"

"You don't like me."

"Like you fine. Don't *trust* you."

"Because I put my hand on your daughter's thigh?"

"Because you used my best friend to try and get information."

"Maybe I used him because he's a good lover."

"Like maybe you're showing me crotch as a way of hinting what color knickers you'd like for Hanukah."

"*Dear god!!*" Arju said quietly, eying the corner where two walls met the ceiling. She looked fatigued,

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almost despondent. “Ghost is here because I asked him to be. I know him, and I trust him to be totally up front with me. I sense that whatever is going on here has at least something to do with me as head of Council. If I have been as old and crotchety in that role as I feel this morning, he will not hold back pointing such out, as I imagine few Kamans might.”

Silence. Not a sound. Outside the windows, manufactured breeze played backup band to leaves in their dance. No eyes within the comfortable room made contact as we sat in soft, ergonomically-sound chairs placed in a U, Arju in the middle. Pride reached out, picked up a raisin oat cookie from the low table equidistant to us all, looked at it as if for a sign, put it back on the plate. Continuing to focus on the table:

“I want us to open our doors to topside.”

“What?”

“*Whaaaat!*”

“I want us to declare who and where we are, and let the world know what we’ve done.”

“They’d bomb the hell out of us! Uh, you.”

She stared across at me. “With what? Rubber bands and paper clips? I want not only to let them in, slowly, verry slowly, but as well to let us out. I listen to the kids, you know. I actually *listen* to them.” She looked to Arju. “You,” she pointed, “you do not! You are old. I don’t mean in years. Heart and mind. You are old school, put the wagons in a circle, *keep* the wagons in a circle.

“The two of you recently visited Bhutan. Heard you loved it there. Everything about the place. How come you haven’t learned anything from the Bhutanese? Country was a closed shop until just half my lifetime ago. That recent. Then the king, the present guy’s dad, ordered the drawbridge lowered across the moat. Groups only, no solo stragglers, everybody charged a stiff daily fee to keep out riffraff. And it works. They’ve survived, and nicely so.

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Way I see it, there's very little difference between us. They set the template, and it's time to for us to follow their lead.

"Our kids," Pride continued, "the citizens of our tiny nation I *listen* to, want this. And like the topside slogan goes, they want it *now*. You do realize, don't you, there are presently as many of them as there are of us? The over-thirties? Somewhere I recall hearing we're a democracy. What a laugh! Democracy means will of the people. Instead we have will of the olds.

"Look, you know I was one of the first, and surely the loudest, to move we initiate the world going completely mad scheme. It's now been in place two years. I'm out there much of the time. I see, feel, what's happening there. Even if you haven't been outside Kama yourself – Bhutan doesn't count – the numbers, *their* numbers, show it: currently more than sixty percent of the total topside population approve what we've done."

"So, was this whole mole thing with the religions just a ruse to attract our – my – attention?"

"Yes and no. They're a means to the end. Yes, I want to take them down, show them for the power-hungry, self-aggrandizing miscreants they are. More, I want us to break free from our pleasant but semi-comatose hole in the ice. I want us to cast ourselves out of this little round underground Eden so our young people can stop feeling claustrophobic and grow!"

I thought: Wow! I can't believe anybody saw this coming. Was like lighting the wick to a powder keg. I had to stand up. Walk around the room. Poor lovely Arju was stunned even more than I was.

"This – to do this would mean the end of Kama."

"Wrong! It would be the second beginning. We'd have to be extremely mindful how we go about it, of course. Jesus," she looked up to the ceiling, "I can just imagine how many meetings of Council *that* would entail!" She sighed. "Once we came to an understanding there

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would be a plebiscite, or referendum, or whatever you wish to call it.”

“What about, you know, the ETs?”

“I’ve already discussed it with them.”

“Pride! You didn’t!”

“Whyever not? You keep them hidden away in their mountainside cave –”

“At their insistence!”

“– and what do you talk to them about besides pinching their technology?”

“They actually told you we should do what you’re suggesting?”

“Of course not. They listened. As they always do. And they issued their standard ‘it’s up to you people’ line. But for certain I would’ve been able to tell were they against it. Not the tiniest vibe in that direction.”

Arju looked at me. I shrugged, my eyebrows climbing to the hairline. “I’m over thirty, remember. Plus, I don’t live here.”

Pride: “Bullshit, man. Lately you’ve been here more than you’re not, and besides, you’re our head of Council’s poster boy. How’s what I’ve just laid out hit you?”

“Like getting blindsided by a blitzing linebacker.”

“Terrific. Now try answering the question.”

I squeezed my nose, looked down at my lap. “Head says uhn-uh. Too scary. No, wait. That’s not what my head says. That’s my gut talking. Head says I don’t want Kama to change. It’s the last perfect place on earth; how long will it stay that way you begin letting outsiders in?”

“And I don’t particularly care for your comparison to Bhutan. Their culture is held in place by a combination of strong faith and love for their king, two commodities Kama lacks. Even so, Bhutan is changing, slowly. They’ve got the beginnings of the problems every country has: provincial people moving to the city hopeful of getting work that isn’t there; bored kids doing drugs, not in great

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numbers, but enough; most restaurants now serving pedestrian Chinese and Indian food in place of traditional local cuisine because tourists are unfamiliar with delicious organic Bhutanese fare and want what's familiar; accommodation prices soaring in Thimphu, putting the squeeze on natives. Still, I'm betting they'll pull through because the people believe so strongly King Jigme Number Five will do the right thing for the country.

"So far as Kama moving in a similar direction of opening the gates," I went on, "keep in mind that if sixty percent of topsiders approve our taking away their pet means of violence and citizen spying, that leaves forty percent who'd just love to stick a knife in us for depriving them their decadent joys. You're going to invite these people into your precious home?"

"And even if you somehow deal with the threats of revenge, there would be untold hiccups and stumbling blocks. For instance, just how do you work tourism in a culture that doesn't use money, issue vouchers?"

"So you're obviously against it."

"Didn't say that. I simply believe the dynamics are insurmountable."

"Do you think I'm just offering this off the top of my head?"

"Knowing you just the little I do, I would venture you've worked it out to the finest detail. All that I've just spouted out is the first dumptruck of stuff unloaded from my head. I've now had a whole two and a half minutes to consider this."

"And?"

I turned my attention to Arju. Then to Pride. Back to Arju. Felt like Solomon, sword in one hand, baby both mothers claimed as their own in the other.

"I kinda like it."

"You what!?" Both of them.



I nodded. “Me who loathes change, abhors anything new, yet has lived seventy years with nothing but change and new, I do see this as potentially a second beginning. But man, you gotta smooth out every single wrinkle before there’s the tiniest peep. And I’ll tell you who’ll be the greatest desecrators of your lovely Kama: not religious thugs, or political thugs, or military thugs. It’ll be the corporate thugs elbowing and shin-kicking one another in their rush to be the first to have ETs do Coke and Nike ads.”

## BOOK EIGHT

### SPOOK

My brother was wrong. At least in the short term. What he can’t see that I can is the current trend towards amalgamation. Forces as different as oceans and mountains have begun to understand they can’t do it on they own. And by ‘it’ of course I mean maintain power and control. Them the biggies. Money, yeah, sure, but that’s just the by-product of incarcerating folk in they own minds. Control, baby! The universal mantra now is: if you can’t squash em or buy em, join up with em.

In two years of the world gone completely mad, the dudes who got they asses kicked have had time to lick they wounds, regroup and work at figuring out what the fuck’s going on. And when they got a handle on the ‘what’, they not only began work on undoing it, in earnest they started searching for the who and the where.

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From my comfy perch here in dead man's land, I like nothing better than my front-row seat watching y'all. Man, what a show! So what the Kama folk discovered, that the major religions joined hands in order to get back to killing one another (and ol' Buddha here was really sweating it that his gang would join in, but nah...or at least not yet), what they don't know is that others have secretly slinked in the back way to throw in with them god squads. Governments of China, Russia and India are all in there now along with the Catholics, Protestants, Muslims, Jews and Hindus. Y'all could sell tickets to one a they slugfests!

Now, here comes the funny part. Lately there be another element introduced into this crazy mix: those nice folk who bring you electric cars that drive all by themselves (which Kama has had for decades, and use no fuel at all) and hang out the banner reading Do No Evil! They ultra pissed at the world gone completely mad thing, as y'all can imagine, and since it first came down they been trying to figure out how to get rid of it. Never occurred to the techs that they not the only ones geek-savvy.

So one day they get a call. 'This here Cardinal Blipblop. We got our nerds working twenty-four/seven on this thing, so help us god! We close but no cigar. So we'd like to extend y'all membership to the biggest club of power hungry bastits ever, help us eliminate whoever keeping us from playing with our favorite fuck-em-up toys.' So the consortium is now in with the Catholics and commies and all the rest of them control cats.

And guess where they set up headquarters. Well, here's a hint. What's the smallest country in the world in surface area? (Seventeen square miles.) With the smallest resident population. (Less than a thou.) The only country in history that's never had a single birth. (None registered, anyway.) No natural resources, only business the sale of stamps, postcards and souvenirs, and they one of the wealthiest countries in the world.

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You got it, babe: the Vatican.

Now here's the thing. Ol dead Spook here is not gonna tell you all these dudes be bad, no sir. Fact, maybe ninety-nine and nine-tenths percent be righteous. This includes the head dude, who, by the way, got no clue what be going down in his town. Mainly, the force behind the RCs is a tiny group of ultra-conservatives, super shrewd fellas for sure. Same goes for the Muslims, Jews and Hindus. Maybe you can say the same for the consortium fellas. How many people working on spotting where the completely mad zappers be coming from just nice family-loving folks who enjoy the challenge of they work? Lots, that's how many.

So this is why my brother Ghost is wrong about who be the biggest threat to Kama. (By the way, none of those 'mole' transmissions this Pride babe sent out did the least bit of damage. If anything, it confounded the control guys, made em think whoever's behind the world gone completely mad was on to them, forced em to shut down their op for a while.) They got no idea whatsoever that Kama exists, or where it is, exactly. Figure it's an underground weapons installation somewhere in the arctic, and even with all the ice that's melted lately, it be a pretty darn big area up there top of the world.

Still, it's just a matter of time. Months, maybe. So stay tuned, y'all. Gonna be pretty exciting when the two universes collide.

## SHOSHONA

### Rome

And just what am I doing here? Well, Big Boss calls me in one morning, says, Sho, go home and pack, we're going to Rome. I'm going to turn that down, right? Then I learn I'm

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not to be included in any of the hush-hush discussions. And just where are these discussions taking place? In the *where*? Right, the Vatican. What I thought you said. Didn't know you were Catholic. Oh, you're not. Got it.

So I'm here for show. Sho the show playing the big show. Boss says I can't tell you, but it's a major deal. With cardinals and bishops? And just look at these dudes' outfits. Oh my god, they are so, *so*, gay!

So I roam around Rome. Shop my sweet ass off. Watch myself doing this and think: Sho, honey, you don't *feel* any of this. You don't feel *anything* anymore. You're going through the motions and not a damn thing is soaking in. A robot shopper. More shit to cram into my wardrobe. But hey, I've got a bi-i-ig job, making bi-i-ig money.

At least tell me what the hell's going on. I mean, the goddamn *Vatican*!?

Meantime my baby is down there up there, in love and loving it. Wants to stay forever. I am one jealous old witch. She sends through Boris: Momma, come! Baruch sends through Boris: Sho, come! And I keep putting it off, putting it off. One day I walk in to the Big Boss and say I want to quit. I'm bored witless, eating too much, busting my gut at the gym just to maintain. Drinking now too, not a lot but I never did that, never. Big Boss says, Sho, hang on, babe. Big things are brewing. You'll be part of it. A week later he takes me to Rome. Best hotel in Europe. And what's he do? Sets me loose on the street with unlimited credit while he goes off to meet with cardinals and bishops. Another old boys club.

If I don't do it now, I'm afraid I'll never do it.

I'm gonna do it.

I'm gonna.

I gotta.

## WALLI

### Kama

I've taken to piloting Tarq's soundless bike on my own. Thought I'd seen everything here then he asks have you seen this, have you been to that. Uhhh.

So every afternoon now following class, while he stays and talks to friends or plays chess, I grab the bike and tootle around. There are so many lovely villages and pocket parks, plus the old replicas of famous topside places, hardly used anymore to combat new recruits' homesickness, but I marvel at their construction. However did they do all this before they had 3D printers, those early settlers?

Then one day I find myself at the mountain. I wonder whether the ETs are still there, the ones I met my first time. I want to ask someone whether it's permitted, then I remember most people here have no clue of their existence.

I park the bike and find my way up the building constructed in the side of the mount to the floor where they were last time I was here. Nobody challenges me or even asks can they help. Busy people doing whatever it is they do and don't get paid for. (Still seems wee-ird.) Come to a door I'm sure leads to their conference room, or whatever they call it. I pause, nervous. Finally I knock. Nothing. Again. Same. I was about to turn away when, on instinct I suppose, I reach out and touch the panel on the jamb. I don't know why I did this, I'm sure my print isn't in their system, but suddenly the door splits in two and I'm in. Doesn't seem to be anybody around. But I'm curious – who wouldn't be – and begin to slowly wander through, calling out hello? hello? Dead silence. Yet I have the sense that –

Suddenly the silence is shattered – that's the best and only real word for it: shattered – by a clamor such as never before has assaulted my senses. It wasn't just a single

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loud noise, it was a cacophony of discordant blasts. There was a hundred decibel braying, like a huge animal being ravaged. An excruciating whinny. A foghorn warning of dire distress. A monstrous bird call. And what sounded like hysterical laughter. All these sounds, mind, at very top volume. My initial gut reaction was to turn and gallop. But I gave in to my second reaction: curiosity.

The combined eardrum shattering noises lasted no more than a few moments, though they seemed far longer. Moving ever so quietly myself, I came to an open doorway, hesitated for a few seconds, finally stretched my neck so that only my head extended into the opening. And I could not believe what I saw.

A gigantic room, along the walls of which banks of hi-tech gadgetry. No surprise there, of course. But no one was attending to the equipment. Instead, maybe ten, no twelve, of the ETs were standing in the middle of the open space, forming a motley semi-circle, their backs towards me. There was Ebb, the elephant-looking one. And Meer, large, a whale with tentacles. Next to him (her? it?) the tiniest of the lot, Losom, who looked almost human except a head large out of proportion, in total no more than eighteen inches high (it was said he was the most brilliant of the lot), sitting on the slight shoulder (only one) of Gupunu, the cobra with legs. And a perfectly formed Abraham Lincoln, which had to be the shapeshifter, Pheemoon. And so on. In the middle of the arc, sitting on a small bench, his face, as the others, turned away from me, yet I had seen enough of him at home to easily recognize the back of his head, the ears that stuck out: Baruch Montrose. Now, as odd as all this was (odd? really?), their presence here was in no way nearly so peculiar as what these beings were engaged in. What they were doing was steadfastly viewing, and I quickly gathered, participating in, a moving hologram in their midst. It was a hologram I recognized from my classmates topside, had seen it many

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times, had even engaged in its performance on more than a few occasions.

The ETs, and Baruch, were playing Grand Theft Auto 8. Good glory, I'd walked in on a galactic frat house!

Their concentration was so rapt that even with their supposed highly tuned senses they had no idea of my presence. Or they did know but I placed a far second to the wonders of GTA8 and they were ignoring me. Either way, I felt stupid standing there outside the large room looking in. I was about to walk away when there came another, though far lesser, explosion of sound. It dawned on me these outbursts were cheers. Then I caught a glimpse of the source of their joy. What the –? I couldn't believe –! Can these geniuses be that dense they can't –?

"That's so wrong!" I cried out, quickly slapping a hand over my mouth and thought about pulling back my head and darting out of there. Too late. In an instant all eyes (and there were some with more than two, especially Raonon, the shimmering half-humanoid/half-cyber, who sported five at the end of stalks) were turned towards me. For a moment there was dead silence, and then:

*"Walli!!!"* In chorus, this was.

The group broke formation and the beings moved towards me with open arms (those who had arms). Baruch practically pushed aside two or three in his rush to give me a giant hug. Together they formed a boisterous, happy circle around me, squealing and braying and reaching to touch me on my head, my shoulders, my arms.

"So good to see you again!" "Are you once more visiting?" "Please tell us you're here to stay!"

"Folks, give the girl a little room to breathe," cried Baruch at last over the din of greetings.

"But you said something is wrong," came a gravelly grunt that sounded as though coming through a trick microphone. (Later I learned it was.) "Whatever is wrong, my dear."

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“Your whole approach,” I heard myself say. “Eight is different from the others. You just can’t play it like –. Look, who’s got the remote?” It was Wayan, the most human looking of the group (though her eyes were set on either side of her tiny mouth – “So I can see what I’m saying,” she would joke when I got to know her better) who timidly held it up. I reached out and practically snatched it out of her three-fingered grip, walked over to the cusp of the hologram, began making adjustments.

“Now, when you maneuver the Administrator towards the Kremlin, like so...”

A few moments of silence were followed by *ahhhhh* as they began to regroup, this time around me instead of Baruch. I manipulated the scene as I seen it done topside, tilting it at a different angle...

“*Ooohhhh!!*”

...and thus spent the next couple hours, first controlling the game myself, then passing the remote around to give each ET the opportunity, gently instructing and making sure to strongly praise everyone’s effort as the story line unfolded. They all were quick learners, and the joy they expressed became instantly infectious.

When finally I left and returned to our cottage, I could hardly conceal my glee.

“Good lord,” Tarq cried. “Whatever have you been up to?”

I didn’t know whether he’d approve or not, whether the ETs might be off-limits to people like me. (Like me? What – newcomers? Temporary residents? What’s my status here anyway?) But he just threw his head back and roared. “That’s brilliant! The smartest dudes in the galaxy and here’s my darling conducting tutorials for them!”

“Are you going to tell the others?”

He stopped abruptly. “Oh right, I can’t. There are so few of us who even know of their existence, and as you are well aware, nothing is kept secret for long down here in the



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hole. Imagine if I told –.” He grinned. “Of course, they’d just think it was whacky, extraterrestrials hanging out in the mountain. Still, best keep it under wraps, don’t you think?”

“At least will you come with me when I go there?”

“You’re going back?”

“They insisted! They want me there on a daily basis. I told them I’d speak with you about it.”

“Babe, you do what you like. But just look at you: like you swallowed a sunbeam. At least now when I come home with boring accounts of a chess match or standard bull session, you can play the good wifey and pretend to listen for a few minutes, then jump in and tell me of the day’s session with the lads.”

“So you’ll come with me?”

“Nah. It wouldn’t be the same for you. This is your show and I’m not going to stick my nose in and spoil your fun. Enjoy!”

I didn’t go every day. Most days at first, then a trickle down to maybe once or twice a week. But the feeling of wonderful camaraderie never diminished a drop. I only wish I could tell somebody. Shoshona! The old girl would pee in her Pradas if she knew her darling daughter was hanging out with her former lover and a bunch of extraterrestrials – playing Grand Theft Auto!

## SHOSHONA

### Rome

I’d never seen him like this. Ever the stoic, nothing seemed to rattle him or give him more than momentary joy, always cool whether pressure or pleasure. Do a deal for ten billion, introduce the new self-piloting personal plane: no more emotion than having his morning latte and reading the news on his wri-pad. Okay, he’d been in the dumps like everyone

## *Completely Mad*

else when the world first went completely mad, but no real show of emotion. I didn't think he had any, tell the truth. (Nor did his wife, who left him with billions in her pocket, claiming the guy exhibited flatlined feelings even when he was coming.)

But since we got here he'd come back from the daily secret pow-wows they were having more juiced than the day before. He was mega-impressed these religious wheels were so geeked-up.

"Their techies are as good as ours," he said one evening in his suite. "Better, maybe. Can you believe that? And they don't even have to pay their people! Just pop one of those cookies on their tongue, or make sure they get called to prayer on time, or whatever it is the Jews and Hindus do, and they're satisfied. Maybe there is a god and these bishops and imams and rabbis have a direct line!"

Every day he'd make some comment that they were getting closer. To what? I'd ask. He'd just grin and stare off into space. Should I be worried? I wondered. Could they really track Kama's location, work out how to reverse the technology that's keeping the world from blowing itself to smithereens? Main thing, the few people I love the most being there now, will these religious nutworks be able to come up with some sort of zap machine, do real damage to the place?

Now tonight. He returns to the hotel from his day with the crazies totally over the moon. Major smile, rubbing his hands together as we make our way through the six course dinner his private chef has concocted. At least, he made his way through, with gusto. Me, I merely picked at the five star serving on my plate. He didn't even notice.

"So tell me," I said from behind my mask of happy-that-you're-happy.

"Oh Sho, wish I could. Love to share this with you. First of all, it's heavy on the tech side, you wouldn't get it. Plus, you know, I pledged secrecy to the top guys there."

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“Even to me?” I said, every so slyly.

He looked like he was making a decision. “No, I really can’t. This has been such a huge collaboration, elements never before getting together on a project, and if even a squeak got out before we launch it –.”

Launch. The word made my tummy flip. Launch what? Rockets? Even if they’ve discovered Kama’s location, nothing that explodes or has any energy at all would work, right? Right?

I leave the Big Boss and retire to my suite. The consortium had leased the entire penthouse floor, so I was just down the hall. I pace the floor. Butterflies are bashing themselves against the inner walls of my stomach. My hands feel ice cold. And then, of a moment, everything just...stops. Total silence, total peace. Like, like,

*Daddy!*

He’s here. Right here, in the room. I’m in his arms, gentle, sweet arms, and his hands are stroking me, sending me love, giving me strength and total focus. I sit down on the thickly carpeted floor. Waiting. No hurry now, time has stopped. Then

*Sho, my baby girl, you always smart as a whip, ten steps ahead of the pack, yeah? But along with your smarts, you were made beautiful, irresistible to men. You’ve used this power before, never has it failed you. Okay, you don’t like to use it, you know it’s false, makes you feel dirty. But this here be so important, baby girl. I know what them bastits gonna do, but no way I can warn our good friends less’n Ghost ask me, and no reason for him to do so. Which puts everything in your hands, my darling. Your body is like a vehicle here but it’s your heart and soul what guides and protects you. Do your best, child. And know yo Daddy Walter be right there along with you, don’t you worry none. You’ll do fine, jess fine. Love you, honeybunch.*

And he’s gone.

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I don't get up right away. Work my way into the lotus, consider meditating, but that's not necessary. It's like every wonderful thing that ever was, is now, ever will be, come slowly together and envelope me, a cocoon of goodness and light.

I don't want to move, to break this magical spell. And for the longest time I don't. Then of a moment, I rise off the floor, head into the bathroom and run a bath in that ostentatious giant tub with golden dragon-head taps. I lay there for I don't know how long. Then like I'm on automatic, I step out, towel myself dry, apply lotion, oils, some scent. Not too much. Just right. I get into something I'd bought that very day on a whim, figuring I would never use it. Sexy, ooh yeah. But not slutty. A touch of elegance. Looking in the mirror, I see me not so much seductive as in my mission uniform. Slip into matching shoes, one final spray of the world's most expensive perfume – eau de money. Consortium money. Ah, one more touch. Hunt around for them. There, bottom of the drawer. Take them out, two pairs, black and white nets. I consider. Sit on the edge of the king size bed, off with the shoes. Left leg slip on the black; right, the white. Pull them up tight, check myself one way in the mirror, then the other. Me, I like black. Wore them once to the office, thought his eyes would bulge out. Not the only thing bulging out either. Never wore them again. Red flag to the bull. I go with white. More subtle, plus it brings out more the bit of thigh comes time to show. So off with the black, on with the second white. Shoes back on, out the door, down the hall, not feeling the floor beneath me. Like, like, I'm being guided and, yes, protected. At the door I check myself. I've never been more perfect. All systems go.

I tap. Count to ten. Tap again. I can feel more than hear his movement across the floor.

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“Sho! I thought you had –.” He pulls the door wider, his mouth flopping open. Voice a whisper: “Oh my god, Sho. Oh sweet Jesus.”

I don’t say a word. Step in, smile, reach up, kiss him lightly. Continue into the heart of the matter.

## BORIS

### South Island of New Zealand

I listened to it for the third time. All the while, each run-through, making notes on my wri-pad, on which the entire hour and a half dialogue, complete with groans and moans, had already been transferred from Shoshona’s. In my most jaded moments, my most cynical takes of humankind, what she got out of the Big Boss catapulted to the top of the heap, leaving all else far behind. I don’t believe it, yet I do. Of course I do. I work to keep my head from exploding.

“You going to send it up to Arju?” she asked. (Funny how people say ‘up’ when they think north, not ‘down’ even though it’s below ground.) I sensed her impatience despite brave attempts at maintaining a calm air.

“I don’t think so.”

“*Bor-ris!*”

“What I mean, this is far too heavy to trust sending electronically. If they’re this advanced – and boy, did we ever sell them short on their tech skills – they very well may be listening in to our head to head transmits. What I think – d’you happen to know whether any of our people are coming back here soon?”

“Baruch is there forever, and I suspect Walli the same. Ghost and Manu both appear to be happy there, so why return.”

“Then this might well be the time for us to exit.”

“What about Glenda and Rosamund?”

## *Completely Mad*

“Ah. Good thought. I’ll run it past them. Now off you go and pack a bag. Keep it simple, okay?”

“Don’t you worry about me, luvvie. You’ve heard me rabbiting on about giving up this life for some good long time, but till now I’ve been afraid. What I needed was a really firm excuse, and oh my god, is this ever that. There’s actually a half-loaded backpack hidden behind a million dollars’ worth of fashion garbage in my main wardrobe. Two pairs of jeans, three tops, sweater, down jacket. Toss in a few bras, half dozen knickers, second pair of running shoes, I’m ready.”

The following morning the lovely Glenda and gorgeous Rosamund came round. I offered tea and my special raisin oat bran cookies, which they took, but no small talk. They sensed this was a major call to arms and wanted to get to it.

“Right then. Shoshona has been a magnificent spy. What she learned, and recorded in full, is the plan between the combined efforts of the consortium and the religious collective to do in Kama.”

“Everybody wants to do in Kama,” Rosie noted softly. “What makes this any different?”

“They’ve got the smarts, they have the finances. This is for real. They have no idea Kama exists as Kama, that thirty thousand people actually live there. To them it’s most likely a site with weaponry that neutralizes their weaponry, perhaps a handful of people manning an outpost. But I assure you they couldn’t care less if they did know of Kama’s existence.”

I didn’t want to get into any of the details Shoshona had related. The women asked questions, sure, quite intelligent questions, but all I would tell them was I was totally convinced this deal was for real. And it looked to be coming soon. When I finished my spiel there was a prolonged silence. Then, as if both women arrived at the idea the same time, or one transmitted it to the other as

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long-term lovers often do, they looked at one another and without a word turned to face me, their expressions puzzling and serious. Glenda:

“And you’re telling us all this because –”

“Let’s see if we can guess,” Rosamund finished off the sentence with a look would melt an iceberg.

“There’s a confrontation in the offing,” said Glen, “and you want to know if we dainty ladies wish to join forces or remain home and fashion quilts for our lads on the front lines.”

“That’s it, is it?” This from Rosamund, standing now, hands defiantly on hips. When I didn’t reply, Glenda chimed in, “Boris, you’re a toad. A real toad!”

“I was thinking typical male asshole, actually. But then I come from lower-class tribal stock.”

“Give me a break,” I growled. “The two of you could probably take on those religious creeps all on your twosome, chew em up and spit em out, so how in hell could we even consider a fight without you. Let’s say that while I simply was being polite and asking, I was so certain you’d kick off your Louis Vuittons and Jimmy Choos, plunge your feet into combat boots and sign up that I’ve already taken the liberty to call up a shuttle for the four of us. Now get outta here and go pack your bags. We leave tomorrow. Troops, *ten-hut!* Abouuut *face!* Hup, hup, hup, hup...”

I was left alone to face a solemn reality. My age, I held no fear of losing my life, but was this, I wondered, the end of my precious adopted home, my beautiful Kama? How can we possibly withstand the combined effort of the wealthiest, most ruthless force history has known? Was the finest civilization this planet has yet produced about to be obliterated without having existed in the eyes of the world?

I felt an overwhelming sadness.

## **BOOK NINE**

### **SPOOK**

I sorta had the ass I ain't got no more reamed up this way for my part in Shoshona's brilliant espionage bit. Like I give a shit. See, there's no real hierarchy here, but just like down below, there be some believe they know what's best for y'all and like to make noise when you disregard their reading of the rules. So to them I offered a very polite suck-on-this reply. I do believe they caught my meaning.

So what we have here at the present moment in time be twofold classic situations. On the one hand, we got us a David and Goliath. Of course, back then David slew the big bastit, whereas here things be just a tad hairier. The other classic bit is good against evil. You might think it ironic as hell those religious psychopaths are the bad dudes, but despite what you mighta been told as a kid and therefore probably still buy as an adult, this has been the case throughout history. I can't tell you how many of the present top cats actually believe in what they espouse, as opposed to merely using their bluster as a golden stairway to money and power, and in truth it don't matter none. They smart, they strong and they damn scary. What hurts is ol Spook here can't help one bit. Not that the goody-goodies are keeping a tight rein on me, there's just nothing more I'm able to do to help my folk down in that hole in the ice. Frustrating, I tell you.

So in the David/good guy versus religious/evil muthus, who gonna prevail? Well, like I been telling y'all right along, we got no way of reading the future cept by



checking out the probabilities. And the odds being quoted up this way be a flat fifty-fifty.

Stay tuned, campers. And I don't wanna catch a-one of y'all down on yo knees praying, hear what I'm saying?

## GHOST

### Kama

"I want to welcome you all here. Thank you so much for coming. You know we all want you to be part of us, short-term, long-term or forever, but since it's about to get very, very heavy in the near future please don't be heroes. If your heart tells you the situation is too much for you to bear, you're not going to be judged if you choose to return topside."

Sitting next to her, my legs straight out, head tucked into my shoulders as though neckless, I stared at the far wall and let out a sigh. Softly I said, "Babe, get on with it."

We were in the Council convening hall, seated facing one another, not in a circle so much as parentheses, our gang from New Zealand on one side, the entire Council the other.

She looked across at me, for a moment the first sign of anger I'd ever seen in her. It passed quickly. The strain she was under, it was a wonder she didn't walk over and plant an elbow on my nose bridge.

"Yes, of course. You've made your choice, and you're here. I just feel --"

I cleared my throat loudly, causing some titters.

"There are a number of things I need to make evident," Arju continued. "We expected this. The only surprise is how long it's taken. You just don't know how much

## *Completely Mad*

debate we had before releasing the neutralizing energy which created the day the world went completely mad.”

“Years,” an older male councillor with a short white beard noted. Another added, “Several.”

I studied the nine of them. All up there in years. Since everybody over the age of forty in Kama looks at least twenty years younger than their topside equivalents, some of these people could be pushing ninety. Yet every one was sharp and spry, not a sign of arthritic joints or dementia in the lot.

Kaman councillors were not voted into office. They were chosen by those already in, and once aboard they appeared to hold the position for life. Politics did not enter into it in any fashion. Nor, of course, financial gain as in Kama there was no such animal. The system here as I have come to know it is as pure as might be had in a community of whatever size; still, I could understand Pride’s anger at the generational divide between those who make the rules and the now-majority of far younger citizens for whom the rules are made.

“We were never afraid of the repercussions,” Arju was now informing us. “The reason our discussions –”

“Battle royals,” another councillor chimed in quietly.

“– went on and on was the primary philosophical question of our tiny state: do we want to remain just who we are, hidden and not part of the world, or do we want to ultimately try to stop the global insanity. The final vote was extremely close. Even then, it took five years of further planning and bickering before we did the deed.

“Our very essence is Love. But our originals were most canny. They had a background of many centuries of sharing the planet with people and races instilled with ignorance and jealousy, and being frequently attacked by cruel brute force. How do you cope with this ugliness while at the same time maintaining the spirit of Love?”

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“Live for the best, prepare for the worst,” a woman councillor said staunchly, nodding in agreement with her own words.

“You good people have noted a division which exists here between native-borns and immigrants,” Arju moved ahead. “Although we try our very best to treat all citizens equally, the reason for this us-and-them division is that every soul born here is trained from her or his earliest years to do exactly what our friend just noted. Our kids are drilled in every way we know to Love without restriction, at the same time be fully alert and aware, to be able to protect oneself as well as defend neighbor and community. Not easy, yet it is possible. And we feel certain we have achieved this with native Kamans. Naturalized citizens, even those who’ve come here as children, already were programmed by their respective cultures, and to change this firmly rooted conditioning to that which we espouse is extremely difficult if not flat-out impossible. And we’re not into brainwashing as a tool of learning.”

“Oh, we’d do it all right,” a stout woman councillor contended. “Except it doesn’t work. It was tried, early days. But push comes to shove, a person reverts to earliest training. Always.”

Annoyed at the interruption, Arju reached over to the stand alongside her, lifted a cup to her lips and, though no doubt it was cold by now, sipped some tea. Placing it back down, she took a few moments, focused her attention on Shoshona and smiled.

“My dear, what you did not only required unfathomable courage, it was a perfect piece of spyware.” Sho’s face colored and she looked down at her lap. “The information you brought us perfectly filled in the gaps of our own investigations and brought closure to our quest.”

“Wait, you already knew the religious dudes were planning this?” Rosamund wondered. “How?”

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“The pope is our mole,” replied Manu, which brought a spasm of laughter slicing through the room’s tension. He followed this with a classic Denny Crane look of innocence: “What?”

When the room had settled down, Arju added to the welcomed lightness: “Indeed, we did consider recruiting his holiness but realized his cardinals were keeping him totally out of the loop.” She paused. “But yes, we had a mole in there. He got us the basic plan, but without the knowledge Shoshona has brought us we never would have been able to properly prepare for their attack. And if you’re interested to know how our man penetrated the inner sanctum, he accomplished it exactly as Sho did.” A loud murmur went up in the room. Apparently even the other councillors had no idea.

“You mean he –”

Arju nodded. “Seduced a monsignor who was fairly high up in the scheme of things.”

“Holy shit!” I whispered reflexively.

“Only if our mole was the one behind.” Manu side-mouthed.

“Actually, Sho,” Arju went on, “you may well have saved this brave young man’s life. They had suspicion of a leak, and this monsignor was known to have quite an active sex life so they were watching him closely. Immediately we got your information, we signaled our man to get out.” A round of applause went up for my daughter’s mother. Who, by the way, was looking stunning, as young and fresh and beautiful as I’d seen her in an age.

It was Glenda who brought the meeting back to its intended purpose. “Do you think Kama has the ability to deal with the attack that’s coming?”

Ah. Finally, the moment we all have been waiting for. And hoping to avoid.

Arju tilted her head back, closed her eyes. It was like the very air around us was holding its breath.

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Slowly, enunciation each word: “We honestly don’t know. Our technical and security people are working on it. Which is why I began the meeting with my little patronizing speech, for which I apologize. I know you’re all in this as deeply as any of us, and, truthfully, I don’t think we could manage without you. You each have a skill, something beyond the norm, and my sense is we’re going to need everything you’ve got.” She looked at Sho, then over to me. “And this includes your wonderful, wonderful daughter. I must tell you, Walli has captivated the hearts of our other-worldly visitors.”

Without even a glance her way I could feel Sho eyeing me with a fiercely questioning expression. At the moment, she, as well as Manu, Glen and Rosie, had no idea of the ETs’ existence, and it was hardly up to me to clue them in. Privately, I didn’t suppose Sho’d do cartwheels of glee knowing her daughter was hanging out with a gang of ultra-strange creatures from the far beyond.

## WALLI

My favorite of the lot was Pheemoon, the shapeshifter. All the times I’ve been, I’ve never seen him as the same physical entity twice. I sense this was an attempt to playfully try to fool me, but somehow I always knew it was he. (She? I’ve never asked about his/her/its basic sex, if there was one at all.) In addition to altering his (I’ll call him him) appearance at will in a matter of moments, he performed uncanny impersonations to go with the look. He did a knockout Elvis and a delightful Martin Luther King. But the best, I believe, was standing behind one of the other ETs and suddenly becoming its twin.

Daddy had become accustomed to my going to visit them, and he even came with a few times. When Pheemoon changed himself to look like a mirror image of Ghost, the

## *Completely Mad*

whole room broke up, and stood around trying to make out which was which (even shirking their GTA duties!). But Daddy got him back.

“Please wait a moment,” he said to ‘himself’, loudly so all would hear. He stepped out of the room for less than a minute. Suddenly the doppelganger-Daddy was screeching as the real Daddy, invisible now, was tickling him in the ribs, the one place I could always get Ghost when we were messing around. Pheemoon-Daddy fell to the floor and was writhing around, crying Stop! Stop! Whereupon the invisible Daddy shouted, “I’ll stop when you stop being me!”

There was a hush in the room as all the others timidly drew closer.

“You are there but not there, friend Ghost?” Lomai, the tall, dark and very graceful snake-being wondered. According to her mind state she would change colors – but not shape; only Pheemoon did that. She was now a bright sapphire blue, which indicated puzzlement.

Suddenly Lomai took a step back and her color became greenish, denoting slight fear. Daddy had taken her hand (or what to us passed for a hand) in his own. “It’s okay,” he said softly, and I went over and took her other hand. “You can feel me, you just can’t see me,” he said.

A buzz went up from the group, and all began talking at once, mostly in their own tongues, not the English their implanted translators used when I was around.

“All humans can do this?” Lomai wondered, and I heard others repeat the question.

“None other than me, so far as I’m aware,” Daddy replied. “And please don’t ask why this is so, I have no idea. And even I can’t do it, or return to visibility, when anyone is looking. Hang on, I’ll be back again.” He slipped out of the room (apparently), leaving them all speechless, returning several moments later dressed except for his shoes, which he was carrying.

## Barry Rosenberg

Pheemoon was off the floor now, appearing as Donald Trump. “And I, me, who knows everything,” he said, waving his tiny hands around, “I believed we had humans all figured out,” he said to the others, shaking the wild strands of his orange-mopped head.

### ARJU

It was as expected. Ghost and Manu cracking little jokes like the superannuated boys they are (and for which I love them dearly). Shoshona still not sure she wants to be here, nothing to do with the imminent threat of life and limb so much as still shaky about leaving behind her glory-filled career with the consortium. (And isn't she a magnificent looking creature!) Baruch not uttering a sound (did he listen to anything that was said? I wonder), no doubt concocting in his head some new-fangled gadget which will bring immediate love and peace to humankind and all the animals of the Earth. Boris, of course, one foot in each camp, ours and topside, the only soul I've known to be equally comfortable and competent in both. Glenda and her mate Rosamund the most grounded of the lot of them, so attuned to one another's being that you can almost see a thought balloon rising from the one's head containing word for word what the other is vocalizing. Only Walli was absent, by design. She is, despite her maturity, still a kid. Give her as much time in the sunshine as possible before the storm hits. (And, oh dear, I almost blew it with my comment about her captivating the hearts of the ETs. In time, dear souls, we will let you in on Kama's biggest little secret; not yet, my lovelies, your minds have been knocked around enough this past wee while. Let it rest.)

The coming events: half dozen faux military-type installations have been situated at various points on the icecap. Their efficacy is doubtful, but it was an idea worth

## *Completely Mad*

trying. The god squad have no idea an entire city-state beneath the ice even exists. Maybe, just maybe, they'll destroy one of these dummy ops and feel convinced they got us. Again, highly improbable, but it costs nothing to try.

Our energy shields are all in place ready to be activated at a moment's notice. Prior to that happening, we've been running longer and longer alerts whereby every single source of power is shut down. Dark and cold, yes, but how essential it is to get us accustomed to being without our comfort zones. War is hell, but in our situation it's frozen over.

We've been getting sound advice from our dear friends the extraterrestrials. If only we could sign them up to become more involved, but once more they've made it clear: against the rules, no can do.

Other than that, the science/technical people do have a few tricks up their sleeves; unfortunately, a few involve mortal combat – that which we have vowed to avoid at all costs but one: our very survival. How sad it will be if we must resort to the very practices we have devoted our entire being to stamping out. In such situation we lose by winning.

## **GHOST**

It seemed like all of Kama were here. Well, in a sense they all were, the entire population being tuned in to the session, either on their internal receptors or, like me, like Walli and the rest of the crew from New Zealand and maybe five to ten thousand immigrants who had not been implanted, through headphones or via loudspeakers placed around. I meant here as in this giant amphitheater, seated as we were on the terraced embankment looking down to the ground level area crammed with bodies up to the stage. I'd venture a good half the total population was sitting here now.



## Barry Rosenberg

This was the third such session, all voluntary, but as Pride had noted many times over, even if you don't quite believe in the power of thirty thousand minds focusing as one, it doesn't hurt to join in.

Pride. Man, she was some kind of babe, that one. What can't this woman do: spiritual leader, young people's guide, shuttle pilot, *mole* and, according to Manu, a most compassionate lover and friend. I guess I had originally figured her wrong.

The gigantic hologram behind the real Pride showed her maybe twenty times size as she stood on the stage dressed in white. The crowd gradually quieted down. She gave it several moments of silence before beginning.

"Thank you so much for being here, and those not physically present, know you are with us. In these sessions, and every day of life from now until this problem has been solved and we no longer are under terrorist threat, whatever differences may have existed among young and not-so young, native and expat, we are now a solid entity, and perhaps in time when this is over and done with we'll look back and thank them for unifying us, as they claim we have unified them.

"For those of you tuning in this evening for the first time, especially our esteemed immigrant friends from topside, what we are about to do is not prayer, is different from prayer, but please understand that if prayer as a means of focusing on a positive goal is more comfortable, more meaningful, by all means go with what is familiar and works for you.

"I am going to lead you on a very powerful visualization. It is gentle and pleasant and safe, and will focus your mental energies on the matter at hand. Do, please, try to stay with me, and if you find your mind wandering during the session, not to worry, simply direct your imagery back to my lead.



## Barry Rosenberg

My eyes closed, I could feel the persuasive power as the vibration of the sound filled me, filled Walli and Glenda, and Tarq and Rosamund, and all along the row, and the rows of people in front and behind us. Oh man, whatever substances I may have done in years past to enhance my awareness were no more than a patch on the state of high I now was feeling. Power and peace melted together. Yeah, man.

How long? A few minutes? Half an hour? Time was collapsed. Then, magically it seemed, without a sign or signal, just as we had *om'd* as one, we stopped as one. Thousands of people, coordinated, not thinking, not doing. Flowing. Being. I opened my eyes, peered around, noted that everyone else had their eyes shut, closed my own.

“Together, we have created a force,” Pride now said. “In your mind, see this force as a light, so powerful, radiating through us, around us, growing, extending out to fill the air above, the earth below. The power of this light protects us, guides us. See this light, feel its strength and direct it to continue growing, expanding in every direction, penetrating and permeating every single molecule, providing a positive energy to whatever, wherever, it touches. As this light fills the cavity of our city-state, expands beyond Kama, out to the icecap, steadily growing in size and power, direct this great force to those who wish us harm, not to hurt them, but to convert them to positive thinking and acting souls. See them, and whatever implements of destruction they may have, and direct them to turn back and return to their homes topside, understanding now that we, as all beings, want simply to live in good health and peace, to enjoy our attachment with nature, with our mother planet, and sensing in their minds and hearts the folly of their mission.”

She stopped talking and in place of further speech there now came soft sound of flute music as we continued to live the image of our successfully turning back the

## *Completely Mad*

enemy. I don't know how long this state lasted, but of a moment I opened my eyes as though some silent inner voice commanded me, and saw others around me doing the same. I gently squeezed the hands I was holding and felt mine squeezed in return. To my right, Walli was hugging Tarq, then she turned and the two of us held. It was only then that I looked to the stage and saw no sign of Pride, either in person or hologram.

I had no idea whether this, and future exercises we'd be doing, would have even the tiniest effect in repelling those who wanted to quash us. But it sure did make me feel alive, a feeling I was wholly determined to continue on, me and all those around me, for a long, long time.

## **PRIDE**

"Babe, tell them what you told me. All of it. Don't leave anything out. Okay, my sweetpea?"

The kid looked embarrassed, her face flushed. One of the crusty old farts was about to say something, for sure I could guess what, but I pointed a finger at him, gave him the steely eyes, and he sat back and drew himself in.

"S'all right, darling. Just take your time," I instructed gently.

"Well. At the rally last evening, during the chanting, while everybody was *oming*, and I felt such bliss, like I was, y'know, floating above my own body, suddenly I had, well, there was this, I don't know what to call it – a vision? Except it doesn't make any sense at all." She paused, took a sip of water from the glass on the table before her.

"First I saw, well, I don't really think I *saw* it, but what came to me, there was this light shooting down from the sky. Just a line of reddish light, like, I don't know, a laser? And all of a sudden everything began to shake, the

## Barry Rosenberg

ground, everything around me. There was a deep rumbling sound that went with it, and it got louder and louder as the shaking intensified, and things were breaking off, the stage collapsed, like the worst imaginable earthquake. And then that disappeared: the light, shaking, the noise. The stage and everything else that had been destroyed were back intact and I thought, Whew, I'm glad that's over. But then I could see a number of people, not a whole lot, but several, begin collapsing in their seats, almost as if they'd suddenly been drugged. I looked over to Tarq, he was next to me on my right, and I was going to point this out to him, but he'd become one of them, he just sort of sank down, like his bones were all rubbery and he couldn't hold himself up. He was alive, they all were, the people who'd been affected, like some great sickness had come and selected just them, and I was the only one there who seemed to take notice. I wanted to help Tarq but had no idea how. I reached over and put my hands on him and he felt cold, not ice cold, maybe cool is more accurate." Again she stopped, closed her eyes for several moments. There was dead silence in the room. I think we all forgot to breathe for a time.

"But then these, these...*angels* appeared in the air above the amphitheater. I say angels, but they didn't look like angels, no halos or wings, that sort of thing, more like people dressed in strange robes. But they were moving quickly through the air, standing vertically like surfers, not stretched out horizontally like, y'know, Superman is depicted flying. They were helping us, saving us, chasing bad guys, who were all dressed in white, including face masks, which I thought odd – well, god, *all* of it was odd! – but baddies are always wearing black. And then the vision, this crazy drama, was over. In truth, I don't think the whole play took more than a few seconds, sort of, I don't know, like a loop in time, where events in the loop go on and on while hardly any real time passes." She looked around and gave a slight shrug. "That's, well, that's it, I guess."

## *Completely Mad*

“Did you tell anyone about what you experienced?”  
This from Arju.

“Just Tarq on the way back to our cottage. At first he just thought I’d gone a bit daft. So did I, except the visions were so clear and real. Next day Pride came over. By this time I’d put the whole thing out of mind, but then something occurred to me. The surfing angels I saw, the ones chasing the bad guys all in white? They had bows and were shooting golden arrows at the bad people. That must have been why I assumed they were angels. Also, they weren’t really trying to kill the baddies, but like angels they were shooting arrows dipped in Love, you know, like the cartoons of Cupid. I must’ve had this really goofy expression because both of them turned to look at me. Then Tarq said tell Pride the thing you were describing last night. I tried to shrug it off, but she –” Walli now turned and faced me “– Pride told me to repeat my story.”

“Yes, that’s right,” I now said. “Because of how interestingly what she saw fits in with what we know – what *I* know, Shoshona’s report, which I got from Manu; you councillors certainly aren’t about to share your knowledge of imminent terrorist attack with us lowly citizens. I kept after Walli, having her go back again and again and recall details.”

After a buzz in the room, one of the councillors, the one with the perfectly clipped goatee who walks like he has a stick up his ass, said, “Walli, thank you so much for sharing your, ah, vision with us. Now if you wouldn’t mind leaving us so we can discuss matters that have –”

Which is when I lost it. “See! See what I mean? You narrow-minded old fool! All of you. What, you’re now going to read the minutes of your last mindless meeting? Ask for a report from the bake sale committee? This young woman has a gift we ought to be making full use of, and you, *you* –” I actually began to sputter as they started making noises of protest. It was Arju who restored order.

## Barry Rosenberg

“Pride, from what Walli has just told us, it’s impossible to know whether this is what the religious collective intends to do, or will this be what actually happens. Nonetheless, much of what you saw, Walli dear, we already have worked out from various sources, your mother’s brilliant report being one of them. Although I honestly don’t know what to make of angels moving through the air like surfers, getting these details from you is important in that it underscores the work now being done preparing our defenses to move in the right direction. From my heart I thank you for your insights, and please, anything else that comes to you, even if it seems preposterous or trivial, immediately pass it along to us. You are a most valuable asset in our hopes of keeping Kama safe.”

Leave it to Arju, ever the diplomat, to put matters in proper perspective and calm me down. Yep, once again, Pride has gone over the top, though not such a bad thing, is it, keeping these old fogies on their toes.

And why do I feel so revved up at the prospect of battle with those god squad fuckers, me such a peaceful sort and all.

# BOOK TEN

## ARJU

They hit the activated dummy first. As expected. And as expected, their beam didn’t hit directly from wherever it had been launched (that seemed to be somewhere on the Mediterranean), rather was bounced off a satellite the

## *Completely Mad*

consortium had put up for the purpose. As the Big Boss had explained to Shoshona, the combination of originating beam (power), satellite (neutral) and target (ground) acted like your typical three-prong electrical connection, thus fooling the Kaman anti-energy system (if not Kamans ourselves, who had been clued in to expect such) into calculating the original beam was simply shooting off into space. Nor was the beam your standard energy propulsion device, but a ruby laser projection which, had we not known about it, would have duped us into not understanding what had hit the dummy target. Nonetheless, the result was jarring in more ways than one.

The second-stage thrust, from satellite to target, was precisely as Walli had envisioned: a narrow red laser-like beam striking with great force, creating a fierce vibration that shattered the icecap and earth below it, resulting in a crevasse similar to a small meteor strike. The whole attack lasted only a few minutes but left all of us gasping.

The follow-up stages which we had been warned about, the psychotronic molecule beam and human ground force, never happened. We reasoned this was due either to the god squad detecting no sign of life following the attack and chalking up a major success (which would have been a plus for us), or they'd cottoned on they'd whacked a decoy. We learned a few days later it indeed was the latter.

Two new males were present at our next Council meeting, one mid-twenties, the other in his fifties. The younger man, tall, lean, pleasant face topped by an out-of-fashion shaved head; the elder, shorter, obviously once handsome and fit but showing the early stages of middleage spread, appeared extremely nervous and had difficulty making eye contact. I had known Nyles all his life, a lovely, quiet sort of wonderful character and strength. I introduced him to everyone as the brave young man who had just returned from a most important mission topside.



## Barry Rosenberg

“Hm, yes, and I was the mission,” the older chap said softly in accented English as he focused on the folded hands in his lap. Finally, he looked up sheepishly.

“My name is Leonardo DiFabio. Until quite recently, Monsignor DiFabio. And I must say, not only has my mind been blown by the existence of this place and you people, but I feel, uh, grateful to have been so readily accepted by you considering I was part of a movement dedicated to transporting you to kingdom come.” He coughed into a fist, took a breath, paused. He was asked to explain further.

“I have to tell you, I believed what we were doing was right and just simply because our leaders believed it. They know nothing of Kama, of your existence. Their certainty has it that a handful of ex-KGB billionaire oligarchs were behind what has become known as the world gone completely mad, that neutralizing all armaments was merely a preamble to those people establishing an empire which would clamp down on all religions and punish their followers. In truth,” he smiled wryly and shook his head, “that notion still sounds more plausible than a technologically-advanced thirty thousand-strong colony existing under the ice in Greenland. Were I to return to Rome tomorrow and explain what I now know to the program’s leaders, I would at best be laughed at, worst, a prime candidate for some good old-fashioned exorcism.

“It was only when I walked into our shared flat in Rome four days ago and saw Nyles packing that I realized my love for this young man was more than just another of my misguided infatuations. I couldn’t stand losing him.” The man paused, clamped shut his eyes, fought back the tears. “I pleaded with him to stay, and when that failed, to allow me to go with him – I assumed he was returning to Britain, which is where he had told me he was from...”

## *Completely Mad*

“I said you really want to come with to my homeland?” Nyles interjected mischievously. “You’ll do this, no questions asked?”

“Then when he guided me into a scarily dark tunnel beneath the streets of the Vatican,” the priest admitted, “and this, this, *machine* suddenly appeared, sitting two feet off the ground, that all my dogmatic training grabbed hold and I thought, no, I *knew*, I was headed straight to Lucifer as punishment for my sundry sins.” This caused mild, uncomfortable laughter from the assembled councillors.

“My guilt was so overwhelming for the terrible life I had led that I stepped into that machine willingly, not even questioning where it was going or why it was being driven – piloted? – by a very attractive woman.”

“Thankfully,” Nyles added, “Pride quickly worked out that we had in the shuttle a very important variable in the equation of our survival, and that Leo was in a shaky state and needed tender, gentle care.”

“Shaky all right,” DiFabio echoed, nodding. “I must admit I’m not over it yet, and I suppose I shan’t be for some time until I convince myself all this is real and not a delusion.” He glanced around, finally making eye contact with those in the room.

“I’ve had some time to try and work out what is going on, and while I believe those involved in the project at every level truly consider themselves warriors of god, I am now convinced their goal is misguided and perhaps even evil. So understand, please, that I’m here to help you stay alive and remain undamaged. I may not be able to add much to what knowledge you’ve already gleaned from Nyles, and, I’ve been told, another person who performed an effective piece of espionage during the conference. However, I can tell you that your dummy site did not put them off one iota. They attacked it as a display of their power. And I’ll tell you: this power is awesome. They have spared no expense setting up their tools of destruction, and

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the satellite recently positioned by the Silicon Valley consortium, as well as its purpose in deflecting the laser beam, contains spyware technology that supersedes by far anything created to date. Which is how they've been able to track your operation to this corner of the world. And they will eventually narrow it down to here."

All this sounded reasonable. I glanced over to Ghost, whose personal radar mechanism for detecting imminent danger I duly regard. He gave a slight shake of the head, denoting the man appeared to represent no threat. So why did I have the sense this character knew more than he was telling us?

"Look, I realize you're skeptical of my presence here," he continued, as though reading my thoughts, "of my being on the level and shooting straight with you. But you see, I had knowledge of every thought our leaders had and every move they were going to make..."

"Hold on," I said, sitting up straight. I stared him squarely in the eye, expecting him to flinch. He did not. He just looked, I don't know, sad, somehow. "That's quite a statement you've just made. You knew their thoughts and every move *they were going to make*? What exactly was your position with these people? You're a technology expert? Systems analyst? Planner? Seer? What? As a mere monsignor amongst bishops and cardinals...as well as high-ranking imams and rabbis, what gave you an inside track be let in on their thoughts and strategies?"

DiFabio now looked extremely uncomfortable. He squirmed in his chair. I was thinking, All right, moment of truth, Father. Wriggle out of this one if you will.

"I was none of those things," he said, barely audible. A few of the very senior councillors asked him to please speak up. "Actually, I possess no technical nor administrative expertise whatsoever." He turned toward Nyles. "I never did tell you my primary role there, and how I knew so much about all that was going on. It's the one

## *Completely Mad*

thing I held back from you, because I was so terribly ashamed.”

He peered around at those assembled, squeezed his eyes closed as though hoping to shut out all reality. Opened them and looked up to the ceiling. In a soft, creaky voice:

“I was their confessor.”

## GHOST

“*Jeeesus!*”

This was Manu, upon hearing DiFabio’s story from the man himself.

The three of us were sitting at a tiny outdoor café in one of the parks. The day was as all days when rain hasn’t been scheduled: sunny, warm with a gentle, lilac-scented breeze, birds singing, the occasional deer moseying on by, pausing to stare at us with those gorgeous baleful eyes for several seconds like she’s never before seen the likes, then growing bored, nibbling some grass and moving on. The priest wasn’t missing a trick, taking in every moment, every frame.

“So what finally made you come over to the good side?” Manu wondered. “The young buck Nyles? Word from above? Penny finally dropped and you realized you’d been working for the dark side?”

“You have to understand, I may have gone against my vows as a priest, but I shall always be a believer. The Catholic faith may have its faults but –”

“Yeah yeah, whatever. At least you had the moral sense to bugger adults, not like so many of your true-believing mates.”

“Fuck’s sake, Manu, cut the man a yard of slack.”

“Oh, I’m used to it,” said DiFabio, turning to me and shrugging. “Really, it no longer bothers me.” Back to Manu: “Wasn’t my moral sense kept me away from young

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ones. That sort of bad simply is not part of the weakness in me. I always knew I was gay, from maybe twelve or thirteen, but my first sexual encounter didn't come about until I was nearly thirty, and he was of legal age. I've wrestled with my conscience right along. Coming here and seeing – feeling – the sexual openness which prevails and how clean and pure and good it is lightens the load a bit. If we win, Kama I'm saying, and I believe in my heart god will not permit this magnificent example of his creation to be destroyed, and when it transpires as your friend Pride hopes to ultimately achieve by opening up to the world –"

"Kama coming out of the closet."

"More like breaking through the ice."

"– I would like to act as sort of ambassador of Kama-style Love to a world that desperately needs it."

"Sounds terrific," I agreed. "Except –"

"Yeah, except," Manu sneered. "Except we gotta stave off the goddies and do it in such a manner shows the world what utter pricks they are. We just can't beat 'em, we've got to do it in a way that's meaningful."

I sat up bolt straight. "*Eye-ronic*," I all but shouted out. They both stared at me.

"What the hell?"

"Walter's word. Before he and I began our Spook&Ghost number all those years back, that's what he said. Killing just to get rid of a few bad guys wouldn't accomplish a damn thing and might even throw public sentiment to those we offed. We had to perform each take-out in a manner so *ironic* people would see the victim as a cartoon villain, and the actual act of murdering him wouldn't warrant a blink of the eye. That's it, guys! Now if we can –"

"Wait, I don't understand," said the confounded priest, focused on me. "You were...an assassin?"

## *Completely Mad*

Manu made a gun with his fingers. “The best, babe. From everything I’ve heard and read on Google, our boy here was the best!”

As the priest sat there with open mouth, I sank back in my chair. Something was beginning to percolate in the wee recesses of my brain.

\*

Suddenly, me, laziest man under the earth, I’m a busy little bee. I had an idea or two, but not a whole lot of tech sense. So I had to run from one geek to another to another. Now, the thing about techies is this: the shortest interval of measurable time is that between when you present a new idea and they reply, “Impossible; can’t be done!” At which point you sigh, nod and say something on the order of, “Yeah, that’s what \_\_\_\_\_ said too.” At which further point you close your eyes and silently mouth along with the geek’s next five words: “Oh, he did, did he?” Then sit back and wait for the genius’s gray matter to begin bubbling.

But that wasn’t all I got up to. Normally I don’t care for brainstorming, which most often turns out to be shitstorming, and you wind up with an anteater as a duck designed by committee. But our team from topside had this uncanny ability to run their creativity trains on the same track. So in addition to conferring with the science people, I assembled the same crew who just shortly ago were living in peaceful boredom in New Zealand’s South Island.

Glen and Rosie and Boris and Manu and Sho and Baruch and Walli were quickly ignited, and thoughts, suggestions and some brilliantly preposterous notions whirled around the centrifuge. Baruch, naturally, was the one of us out of synch with the rest, that boy humming his own tune, always. But as our prime connection with the nerd brigade, we needed him to actually get done whatever schemes we might come up with. We seemed to be getting

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something going without him until Sho wound up and slung a muffin his way, clipping him just below the hairline.

“Damn you, Baruch, will you come down from whatever orbit you’re spinning around in and contribute something!”

“Actually, that’s precisely where I was, in orbit.”

“I’m shocked, shocked I tell you.”

“The same orbit as the reflector satellite, matter of fact. I think I have an idea how to remove it from their equation. And do it” he said to me, “with a touch of irony.”

Dead silence. Maybe even quieter than that.

“I should run off and go discuss it with –” He peered around, calculating, I suppose, how many of us knew to whom he was referring, “– with some close friends.” Whereupon he quickly upped and left.

“I swear, that man,” Shoshona said of her sometimes lover. I looked at Walli. She knew. Of course she would.

## PRIDE

“Oh my god!” I yelled. “It’s got to be *me*! I’m the one to do it! Yes!!”

He looked at me, stunned. “What, you? You think you –. Hey, no way. No fucking way I’m gonna let you –” He quickly checked himself. “What I mean, it’s no job for a, a, you know –”

I propped myself on an elbow, yanked the sheet off him and wrapped it around my shoulders. “For a what, sweetums? A frail forty-seven year old woman? That sort of thinking might still work in Nooo Zeeland, where men are men and women’re still in the kitchen –”

“Yo! We were the first country to give women the vote, I’ll have you know!”

## *Completely Mad*

“And equality ended then and there. You topsider blokes are so damn sexist, racist, ageist. *Insecurist!*” I threw the sheet back at him and got off the bed. Stood there, hands on hips, knees pressing against the side of the mattress, leaning over to where my bare boobs were inches from his face. “I think it’s a great idea, and I’m going to be the one to carry it out. You watch.”

“Look,” he appealed, sitting up. “They may not even do that. What I heard, it’s a last resort. Baruch said they’re hoping a few things they’re working on might do the trick from right here.”

“Crap. You never leave a mission of this importance to the techies. This definitely is a hands-on job, and Superbitch here has got the best hands in this entire sunken ship. As you’ve learned by experience.”

He sighed and lay back on the pillow, pulling the sheet over his head. “I give up,” I heard him mutter, the sheet fluttering above his lips. I reached over, gently peeled it off his face.

“My lovely Maori warrior. Thank you for your concern. It’s been ever so long since I had anybody who truly cared for me as you do. If ever. It’ll be fine. I’ll be fine. I’ll bring you back a souvenir.” I kissed him, then hurriedly dressed, slipped into my boots and out the door.

## **GHOST**

“You’re blaming me? *Me!*?”

“Well, no. Not really. But if you hadn’t planted that notion of irony, they could’ve shot the damn thing out of the sky, no problem.”

“And then what? You think the bastards immediately wouldn’t put up another in its place? And yet another when we blew that one apart? Plus, this kind of violence isn’t the way Kama operates. You know that.”



## Barry Rosenberg

“Yeah, yeah. But man, I so love that crazy babe.”

“And she’s definitely the one going up, is she.”

“You ever tried saying no to her?”

“I did threaten to chop off her fingers once. Sorta worked.”

“You’re lucky you didn’t get those fingers jammed to the elbow up your nose.”

“I don’t think she has any kind of death wish. For some unfathomable reason she loves your wrinkled old tush, and she adores Walli as a mate for her kid. She wants to come back in one piece, and she’s just plucky enough to get the job done proper and come home a hero.”

“Heroine.”

“I don’t think they make that distinction anymore. PC and all that.”

“Aaarrrrggh!”

## ARJU

They’re almost on us. Last strike was fifty km away. The icecap’s beginning to look as though a bad mile-high golfer created a string of divots east to west.

So despite ourselves, we’ve given the okay for her to go up today. Or rather, tonight. Lordy, we’re all a pack of nerves. Yes, I know: the science people have assured us, blah blah blah. Times like this wish I was a believer. Those religious thugs certainly have one advantage over us. They can transfer their anxieties to a deity somewhere. Doesn’t do a darn bit of good, but sure beats worrying yourself sick.

## PRIDE

Men. They sure make a big deal out of everything. I don’t see much difference between shooting through blackened

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tunnels, millions of tons of earth just above me, and shooting off into blackened space. Oh, this is so exhilarating. I feel like Slim Pickins straddling the bomb in mid-air over Moscow. Should've hunted around for a cowboy hat to wave as I *yeeee-hah* my way to the target. Nah, not this journey. This one needs to have a fine, subtle touch to be effective. Mock them with a feather, not a sledgehammer. And let the world see first-hand what pompous criminals those god-fearing wankers truly are.

## **GHOST**

Again, the amphitheater was packed solid. Only we had a new leader up there: Tarq. And Walli looked so beautiful there with him, sitting on the stage floor. Me, I was surrounded by lovers past and present: Glenda, Shoshona and Arju. It was the World Cup final all over again. Main difference, if we lost the match we might all be dead by tomorrow.

We did the chanting Tarq flawlessly led us in, did the visualization, sending her so much protective and guiding light the entire galaxy must have lit up brighter than all the suns at a solar convention.

A huge screen behind Tarq now was activated. I suppose they weren't able to create a hologram from orbit. No, wait. Something just flickered in front of the screen. On and off again. Then on, then –. And suddenly there she was, inside the capsule, which appeared little different from those she navigated along the electromagnetic power lines within the earth. Utilizing the very same mode of power. She was following detailed maps of energy lines rising from the earth via the holographic screen in her vehicle, jumping from one to another until she reached the desired orbit. The journey had been timed for the satellite's pass over western Greenland. Once she left the pod she would

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have no more than three minutes max to do the job before the orbiting satellite moved out of reach.

She now turned to the holographic camera behind her, presented an enormous smile through the plexiglas face mask and gave the traditional raised thumb. Oh, how she was relishing this.

The hologram on the amphitheater's stage became distorted as she rose from her chair and made to exit the capsule. We watched as she strapped to her back a very large canister, nearly the size of herself, and opened the door. Manu, a few seats away, sat cringing and white with fear. The rest of us weren't far off his mark.

Tethered by a white flexible cord, she floated up to the satellite directly before her. For some reason, I had figured it to be far smaller than it was, which, we now saw, was perhaps four meters in diameter.

She now took hold of a hose which was connected to the canister and pointed it at the large dark sphere. Nothing seemed to happen. She shook the nozzle; still nothing. By her movements it was obvious she was experiencing frustration. We could see her banging on the canister behind her with a fist. Nothing. A groan went up in the amphitheater.

After a few moments of nothing taking place, she suddenly made a show of slapping her forehead with her gloved left hand, then throwing up both hands. She held up the nozzle, yanked on something, the hose jerked as if it had life itself, and out shot a voluminous stream of white. She had to fight to control the hose, finally getting it settled in place. The white, too dense to be pure liquid, began to cover the face of the sphere as a roar of approval rose up from the few thousand seated round us, and no doubt those watching from other venues. The creamy substance, as it had been described to us prior, was no more than foam distilled from a number of sources, including laundering soap, shaving cream and, believe it, custard. In other words,

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you could say without fear of exaggeration our Pride was tossing a custard pie in the face of the enemy.

She covered and re-covered the face of the satellite – since this side always faced the planet below, no need to blanket the entire sphere – until the flow reduced to a trickle. At this point her mission was to return to her craft and skedaddle. But wait. She now reached into her bulky space suit and withdrew...a spray can?

“Heck is she doing?” people around me cried. She began spraying paint on the foam, which had semi-solidified enough that the paint, which was red, sat on it without running or being absorbed. She made a few horizontal lines across the top of the sphere, then reached up and artfully produced a triangle, which drooped a bit at the peak, with a ball of white foam at the tip. Then she produced a second spray can and insinuated what appeared to be two dark circles in a horizontal row, then back to red, light shading on either side below the circles and –.

“She’s drawing Santa Claus!!” came a chorus of us. And indeed, using both cans simultaneously, she had created a brilliant Santa face. The moment it was finished the tether reached its full length and jerked her slightly. Still she did not turn back to her shuttle.

“What’s she doing now?” came along with a cry, growing louder, willing her back to the craft. What she was doing was painting letters beneath Santa’s face: L...O...

A muffled scream came from my right. Manu, in panic. “Damn you! Damn damn *damn* you, woman!!!”

The painted word was finished at the same moment the cord yanked her so hard she performed an involuntary back flip. Reaching out to take hold of the tether before it strangled her, she missed, tried again, missed again, finally grabbed hold by stretching an arm back over her head. She twisted about until she was in control and facing the capsule, then hand over hand pulled herself back to the pod and climbed inside. Once unstrapping the canister and

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seating herself, she bent low and came up with what looked like a half-meter length of cardboard. She held it before her body camera, saw it was upside down and quickly righted it. The sign read

### **GIRLS DO IT BETTER!**

All of us at the amphitheater were on our feet, the volume of cheering growing louder and louder. Whether it would work, whether the foam coating would absorb the laser beam instead of reflecting it down was a matter to be seen, but let the religious/consortium/mafia try and shoot a deadly laser ray at a LOVE-espousing Santa Claus in front of eight billion people (as Pride's video would be disseminated to the topside media the minute she got back here).

Just let the bastards try.

## ARJU

A battle won (perhaps), but the war was far from over. Two weeks went by without further laser attempt, nor was a replacement satellite sent up to do what the original no longer was able.

The video had gone out and was played and replayed on all the networks plus scoring the highest total of hits ever on social media. "Who is this amazing woman?" cried worldwide headlines. Then came the offers: mega-millions pledged for her to identify herself and consent to TV interviews, even more for exclusive book and movie rights to her story.

PRIDE: I'm rich! I'll have hand maidens, bathtubs filled with warm yak milk and weekly updates on my fashion wear!

SHOSHONA: Darling, within a week you'll be borrrrrred to tears!

Along with her video, we had sent out holographic images of the string of seared concavities in the icecap

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created by a laser ray bounced off the now-bankseyized satellite. (Upon closer scrutiny, one of these giant ‘divots’ revealed an unmanned secret military installation twenty-feet below the surface. And we never even knew we had company!)

It was further pointed out on social media that the craters were perpetrated by an unnamed coalition of fundamentalist religious cults which had been testing new deadly technological weaponry in hopes of evading the world gone completely mad shutdown, resulting in irreparable damage to the delicate ecology of the frozen north.

World reaction was unanimous in favor of the death-defying Santa painter, whoever she was, and dead set against the religious cult, whoever they may be, behind the environmental disaster. We figured this would be more than enough to persuade the god squad to disarm their playthings and go home, and for a while it appeared we were right. A full month passed with nary a peep from the coalition. And while there was no dancing in the street, it was obvious our state of preparedness had slipped a notch.

And then people began getting deathly sick.

## **WALLI**

It wasn’t even apparent at first. A couple of the kids from school. A few friends of friends. Even one of the older councillors. Symptoms were the same: no energy, no will, no appetite. Could hardly get off the bed to go to the bathroom. Opening the eyes required major effort.

Now, Kama has the finest medical people and facilities on the entire planet, I would say. Migrant doctors who had dealt with rare illnesses while serving in the most remote parts of topside, five-star immunologists, two from the communicable disease facility in Atlanta, supposedly

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the finest the world had to offer. So what was there to be concerned about.

Still, I recalled my vision that evening at the amphitheater. The image kept gnawing at me, and I kept pushing it to the back burner of my mind. And then the very worst thing imaginable happened. Tarq got hit.

Early evening I was at the cottage preparing dinner when I heard someone approaching. It couldn't have been Tarq because my man is silent as the night. So I dried my hands and stepped onto the veranda to see. It was Tarq, all right, but he was not alone. Two friends were supporting him, one on either side. He couldn't even stand by himself. His eyes were closed and he gave only the slightest nod of recognition as they half-dragged him in and gently lay him on our bed. And I knew.

I contacted Pride, who was still pumped up from her space endeavor and follow-up worldwide acclaim weeks before. She tried to downplay it, claiming Tarq was the healthiest human she knew. Whereupon I did something I never do: I raised my voice.

"Listen, superstar, how about you pull your head out and get over yourself! You remember my vision, right? You dragged me to the Council meeting and insisted they listen to me. Now *you* listen! Get over here. *Now!*"

She must have broken all records, wheeling (if it had wheels) her vehicle right up to the veranda, jumping out and jogging inside. She looked at him, picked up a limp hand and took his pulse. Pried open an eyelid and peered closely at the iris.

"Not a damn thing I can see wrong with him," she muttered.

She paced around the open plan dwelling, stepped outside and did the same on the grass. Finally she stopped, put her index finger to her right ear and began talking. "No, not tomorrow. Not in one hour. Ass in gear. NOW!"

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Which is when I knew how serious it was. And that my vision had been for real, not hypothetical like the earthquake I'd envisioned.

Three of them came, none of whom I had met before: two women, one European, the other African, and an oriental male. They had gadgets I'd never seen the likes of. They calculated body temperature and blood pressure. They extracted blood, rolled him on his side and took some urine, swabbed inside his mouth, testing all three samples right there. One after another they gave Pride perplexed looks, ignoring me totally. I didn't mind that. Who am I in this equation anyway – a teenager's girlfriend. But it was evident they hadn't a clue.

"It is the same with the others," said one of the women, the older African. Slightly on the stout side, she had impeccable bearing, a magnificent mop of curly hair and skin so smooth it reflected the fading outside light. "Not a single abnormality. According to these results he is as strong and healthy as it is possible to be."

"So what do we do?" Pride pressed them.

The male shrugged, threw out his hands. "The usual. Rest and liquids and keep a close check for any change."

"Not good enough!" Pride charged. The man took a step back. He was dealing not with a mere human, but the most famous person on and under the earth.

"Look, we can take him to the hospital, keep running tests," replied the European. "I'll tell you right now it'll be no advantage." She looked at me for the first time. "Are you his partner? You're able to stay with him full-time? If it were one of my children, I'd far prefer to have her at home where it's familiar and comfortable."

"Fine," I said. "Then what?"

"Exactly: then what?" chimed Pride.

The medics sighed in chorus. "Please believe us, we're working on it," the black doctor noted. She appeared



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to be senior of the three. “In no way are we taking this thing lightly, be it epidemic, or plague, or whatever. We now have twenty-seven cases. I make no jest whatsoever, but back home in a situation like this they’d already have called in the shamans.” She looked at Pride sadly. Then to me: “Witch doctors.”

“Yes, yes, I know what a shaman is. But that’s for some spiritual illness, a curse or whatever you call it. This is physiological. There’s a molecule that’s been beamed into him from far away and –”

Withering looks from the docs. Pride made a sign with her eyes. Right. Shut it, Walli girl.

When the physicians left, I said, “You must know somebody responsible who can stay here with him. Get her here. Right now. Then you’re driving me to where there are those I know will be able to help. I just don’t know whether I can convince them to do so by myself. Between the two of us we might get though. Now quit staring at me like I’m levitating and make some calls!”

## PRIDE

Let’s say my admiration for this young woman, pretty damn high since first I laid eyes on her (and a hand on her knee which nearly got me in a punch-up with her poppa), has catapulted through the roof. Sixteen, normally shy and reticent, and to protect her man look what strength comes out of her. My kind of gal.

Without telling me where we were going, she directed me with a thorough knowledge of roads and pathways, a few which even I, who knows Kama like the back of my hand, didn’t realize existed. When I saw the mountain looming ahead, I knew.

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She bolted out of the vehicle and I had to run to keep pace. I'd forgotten she was a champion high hurdler topside, and as good a shape as I keep myself I could feel my lungs beginning to cry out for air.

We got off the elevator into an area that looked deserted. Nonetheless, she immediately darted to our left along a long corridor. I had been here before, of course, but not often enough to be so familiar with the layout as she.

Then we arrived at a large closed door. Walli pressed her thumb on the eye in the jamb, the door split in two and disappeared to either side. I thought: really? She has such special dispensation with the extras she has thumb-print access to their inner sanctum, whereas I, I, biggest deal under the ice...

I experienced a pang of pure, if idiotic, jealousy. The moment passed quickly as I was more concerned with the state of health of my son (as well as the state of my lung capacity) to be so stupidly, childishly catty.

And suddenly there they were. There must have been a dozen, and as on my few prior visits no two alike. I recognized perhaps half, no, maybe eight, the others either being new additions or had been off visiting their homelands the few times I had been before.

As they turned to see who had entered, there were discordant sounds of obvious delight as they took in Walli. Strangely, one of them looked exactly like a young Muhammad Ali. And then he didn't, quickly becoming the spitting image of a six year old Shirley Temple. Ah yes, the mischievous, irrepressible Pheemoon.

Walli more fell into the room than walked, bursting into loud sobs as the beings grouped about her.

"My dear, what is wrong?" This was the shapeshifter, now morphing into a perfect in every way Mother Teresa.

"There, there, darling girl." A being that looked like a small whale with short arms and legs.

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“Here, tell us! Tell us what the problem is.” Gorilla-like with fair facial skin and a high pitch voice.

Oh, how they loved her!

And again I had to fight not to allow the fuss they were making over this teenage kid to piss me off! Jesus, get over it: your son may be dying, she’s doing the best she can to help him, and you, asshole –. Then again, I’m not called Pride because the sound is sweet.

“You’re all aware of this sickness going around?” There were murmurs which obviously inferred they did. “You know where it’s coming from, right?” Again, the same cacophony. “Well, it’s struck Tarq.” She paused. No sound came forth from the group. “Tarq!” she squealed. “My Tarq,” then, as if suddenly remembering, “her son, Tarq. Oh, you all know Pride, I take it.” There was a different sound now, excited, and they all reached out to touch me, as if they’d never met me before. So even super-intelligent beings from far-advanced galaxies go ga-ga upon encountering celebrity. It never ends, I guess.

Walli: “None of our medical people know what to do. They can’t help him. Nor the others. Which is why I’m here. Please. Help my man. And the rest of them. *Please!*”

What followed appeared to be an awkward moment, shuffling and faces looking to the floor.

“What? What’s wrong? You’re dear friends, speak to me!”

The shapeshifter now became Jesus Christ, complete with a slim branch of thorns about his head. “Walli, dear Walli, we have rules. You know we are bound by rules, yes?”

“Stuff your goddamn rules. Now stop that! Pheemoon, no more changes. Stay just as you are!” She reached out and took Jesus by the shoulders. She was taller than him by several inches, which caught me by surprise. Jesus was only five-foot five? “And the rest of you? You do remember me, huh? Walli? Whom you profess to like so

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much? Maybe even love, like the daughters you left at home to be here to help us keep the human race from blasting itself to oblivion? Walli who taught you to play Grand Theft Auto 8 like true pros?"

She was hyperventilating. I touched her lightly on the shoulder. She turned to me, looked into my face, then clamped her eyes tight and sank her head into my chest. I looked beyond her, looked each one in the eye. (Two had only a single eye, one had several on stalks.) I sensed they were reading my thoughts, so I made every effort not to conceal a thing. You must do this, I thought to them. I realize you are here as advisers and are not meant to interfere. But you must make an exception. For my son whom I love, yes of course. Mostly, though, make it for her. She's a strong young woman, but not so strong she can survive something like this. She doesn't save Tarq, she will never, ever, be the same. She will grow up to be riddled with guilt, with shame. She will live in sadness the rest of her life.

I visualized a white curtain moving across my mind, shutting off all thoughts. I had made my pitch. It was up to the ETs now.

Still holding her, face snuggled into my breasts, I nodded, then turned and slowly moved the both of us towards the door. As I reached there, a tap on top of my head. It was a tall, gorgeously luminous-skin-shrouded snake. She – I knew it was a she right away – looked down at me and in a voice sounding like music: "Sister, I am known as Lomai. I sense your sincerity and love for this being. Bring your son here. We will do what we can."

## **GHOST**

A coincidence? Doubt there is such a thing here. I was headed to the mountain where I've been engaged in some

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shenanigans of which Walter would be proud. (Or, has Walter in his own inimitable manner influenced said shenanigans? And what does it matter if they get the job done.)

Suddenly, the vehicle I was driving (right, driving: my head on the backrest, arms folded, gazing up at the ‘sky’) passed another such, going bat out of hell. Whoa: Walli and Pride. And in a hurry too big to simply let pass. I quickly gave a change of command.

“Turn around and follow that vehicle!”

“Ghost, you wish me to cancel the original destination,” said the oh-so-gentle digital voice, “and reverse my direction in order to —”

“Listen, turn the fuck around and follow that vehicle before I kick you in the cojones you don’t have. NOW!”

It is evident to me these robotic bastards are slowly, surely, taking us over, plotting total enslavement of the human race, achieving this by providing us more and better gadgets that work *most* of the time and drive us utterly loopy the rest of the time.

I caught up with them just as they were pulling into the garden outside Walli’s lovely cottage. She caught sight of my approaching vehicle just as they were entering the dwelling.

“Oh Daddy, I’m so glad you’re here! Quick, come help us get Tarq into our pod.”

She explained everything as we gently got the lad to his feet and carried him to the vehicle. When I said that I too was headed to the mountain to work on a project with the ETs, Pride directed my daughter to ride with me so there was more room for Tarq to sprawl out in her pod.

If the ETs were at all curious how we had managed to come in together, as usual they exhibited no sign. They took him to a table, placed him delicately on his back and stood around looking down at him.

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“Why don’t they *do* something instead of just standing there!” Walli whispered.

“Babe, believe me, they *are* doing something. I’ve witnessed enough of how they function to bet they’re scanning every millimeter of his being, and very likely have already begun a healing process. You can help by sending over a little of your own magical powers.”

It was half an hour later that the group broke up. Pheemoon approached us. He had shaped himself to look like Gregory House, complete with cane and limp. In perfect Hugh Laurie voice: “The invading molecule was projected into the lymphatic system and has been infecting erythrocytes and leucocytes at an alarming rate. We neutralized this offending molecule and reversed the infection. Forty-eight hours’ rest and the young man will have recovered enough to function. Give him another forty-eight hours before he returns to normal activities.” He reached into a pocket, took out a pill bottle, popped two Vicodin into his mouth. He then shifted into the Dracula character as portrayed by Bela Lugosi, leaned over Walli and cried, “Now I vont to suck your blot!”

She screeched and jumped back, playfully swatting Bela/Pheemoon before hugging him tightly and bursting into tears.

“Thank you. All of you. Thank you so much. You are so wonderful!” A few of them actually blushed, or what I assumed was blushing. Certainly some colors changed to softer hues.

“I will project into your thought processes precisely what is to be done by your most able physicians to cure the others so afflicted,” the snake being Lomai now sang. “Also, we have constructed a mind barrier around the entire Kama settlement so future projections by your foe will be unable to penetrate. Please do not mention our part in this effort, as we have been very naughty in utilizing our healing application. You see, it is not yet in your current

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time sphere and we are strictly forbidden to project future terran science into the present.”

“I – we – are ever so grateful, and I do so apologize for causing you to overstep your guidelines,” my daughter said. “But if I can’t mention you, how...what...I mean, they’ll want to know who figured out the solution.”

“You, dearest Walli, will assume that role. This is the time jump of which I have spoken,” Lomai said. “I can state no more. Now go quickly. The others need you.” To me, she said, “Brother Ghost, we will now assist you with your project if you wish to remain.”

It was Pride, curiously silent until now, who looked at me closely, single eyebrow raised: “What project? What are you up to, Ghost?”

I tapped the side of my nose and grinned evilly. “Fire and brimstone, baby. Slings and arrows. You’re not the only one around here allowed a little mischievous fun.”

# BOOK ELEVEN

## SPOOK

That Ghost, man. He can sure make a simple story all complicated. Whereas the first book, the one I was still alive, most of it anyway, he was the narrator all through, here he be telling this yarn from a buncha different characters, which, I suppose, he reckons to be artsy-fartsy. Or something. To me, it’s a gimmick, plain and simple. I guess I’m just old school: cut to the damn chase, know what I’m saying?

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Anyway, the mist enveloping the future has lifted and my powers of celestial discernment have finally kicked in so in addition to knowing the past and present, the future is now crystal clear. (Spoiler alert: those who normally don't wanna know whodunit till the very last page should skip the rest of my spiel here.) I can now report as fact what most of y'all already supposing: the good guys win. It's the *way* they win which makes the story all tied up with lace ribbon in a pretty little bow.

Ol' Spook's part in this drama may seem to y'all a touch minimal, but digest this if you will: it's my family who made it all happen. Was my *daughter* done the grunt (and groan) work which brought the info give Kama a fighting chance when otherwise they wouldn'ta had a shot in hell of beating them religious meshugas.

Was my *granddaughter* got the ETs onside and got them to break what is an ironclad rule in the game of saving a lesser civilization's ass: provide guidance, cool, just don't interfere none in they growth.

And finally, don't forget my *brother*, who's gonna be responsible for tying that bow I told y'all about. Oh, he gonna have help, mind. Already he's had Baruch and Boris working day and night with him on this thing, as well as the extraT's of course. Plus the major star of the show, who's gonna –.

Well, shit, here I be leapfrogging ahead of myself.

So sit back, turn or swipe the page and get on with the grand finale. I'll catch y'all at the Afterword.

## **BORIS**

I wouldn't have believed it had I not experienced first hand those two, shall we call them victories, over a vastly more formidable adversary.



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Of those who played a major hand in saving Kama from sure-fire disasters, if not outright annihilation, only Pride, crazy, wonderful, amazing Pride, is native-born. The rest, mostly, are the ragtag gang I was responsible in recruiting from New Zealand, although surely not for the purposes they have performed. And now this utterly outrageous plan concocted by the sometimes invisible man: were it not for the wholly unorthodox manners the past two onslaughts were dealt with, never would I give this latest bit of Kama-produced insanity the time of day, let alone the remotest possibility of succeeding.

And how well we have worked as a team. Ghost plotting all the moves of the coming outrageous drama; Baruch (after initially claiming nope, can't be done), using his tech skills and Ghost-inspired imagination, creating the bits and pieces to make it function (hopefully), and me, chief worrier, normally good for naught when it comes to either technology or organization, chipping in now and again when things appear totally bogged down with an off the cuff notion resulting in one or the other snapping fingers and crying, *That's It! Good man, Boris!* Nice to know I'm actually useful after nearly nine decades seeing myself as a fifth wheel.

Now, it wasn't easy getting this plan through Council. They are not an easy body to accept anything new in the first place. Ghost's idea, and the additions and subtractions made by Baruch, myself and others we consulted, required a huge amount of technological support, and getting techies to agree on anything is a major hassle in itself. But Ghost prevailed, mainly by praising them, then cajoling them, and finally embarrassing them by charging that they're stuck in the status quo and afraid to go for anything new and – this was his prime weapon – *exciting*.

In the end, of course, he got his way. But even he admitted the battle was not going to be a walk in the

## *Completely Mad*

woods. As he put it, “Whatever exactly luck is, we’re going to need a cargo ship of the stuff to come out of this one.”

Then one day he showed up at my place toting a cardboard box and a mischievous smile. “What’s this?” I wondered.

“Open it.”

I did. Looked inside, then, slightly angered, back at him. “Aren’t you a little old for stupid pranks, especially at a time like this?”

He continued to smile. I looked again. Still nothing. I reached my hand in and – “What the heck?”

I felt a material, slick and thick and pliable. One hundred percent transparent. I grabbed a handful and pulled it out. I was surprised how light it was, even though there was quite a lot of it.

“I vunt you should make me a suit,” he chuckled.

“Sorry, Hymie the tailor is busy davening in the back room. Come back after sundown.”

Seriously now: “The material was designed by the ETs and produced according to their specs. Among other wonderful features it’s thermal, flame retardant and –”

“– and invisible. Which is why –”

He nodded. “Fewer who know of my little now-you-see-me-now-you-don’t little trick the better. I’m going to need a suit made as I intend embarking on a project –” he pointed up to the ceiling “– where it’s too damn cold not to be fully prepared. I know you’re good with needle and thread so in behalf of the thirty thousand of your fellow citizens, get out the cloth tape, stick some pins in your mouth and get stitching.”

“*Vey iz mir*, the things I do for my country.”

## GHOST

The first sighting has taken place.

The enormity of their attack had me drawing back into myself. Barely visible to the naked eye, our advanced means of detection had thus far accounted for nearly a thousand of these dedicated (= brainwashed) warriors decked out head to toe in white. They all were armed with acetylene torches, but it was their supporting weapons scared me most. Four of them, huge and evil-looking, were being wheeled toward us from four different directions. They were reminiscent of the catapults used in ancient times to hurl oil-based fire over castle walls, only these were larger and, so our spy reports had informed us, could project objects weighing half a ton several hundred meters. Plus the fires they'd be tossing were not the kind easily extinguished. (I had to wonder whether their main objective was to burn us out or melt us down.)

They obviously had planned well and practiced long. A number of craft had landed on the icecap several miles around us. They still had no idea exactly where we were or the size of our community (and most likely even that it was a community they were dealing with). Perhaps we were to them a few dozen grizzled convicts set loose from Siberian gulags manning an assortment of rusted weaponry pilfered from now-forgotten Soviet military installations.

At least, I hoped they thought that.

\*

All four catapults began hurling great balls of fire. Only one of them came close to the icy roof of our settlement, which, for the past few hours had been totally shut down, like a submerged submarine with an enemy battleship directly above. No light, no sound, the only movement the

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shuttle I was in, which rose up slowly, silently, to the ceiling, then along it a ways to a passage I didn't know existed. The shuttle entered and continued to rise up through a few hundred feet of polar icecap. When we got near the top, an exit to the outside world became just barely noticeable. The shuttle stopped and just hung there.

Give the lady credit, she never once wondered aloud why I was naked, nor why I was tightly wrapped in clear plastic like a six-foot gray-haired sausage. Having not long before performed a very scary adventure to preserve her little world, this remarkable woman well understood sacrifice for the greater good. She now looked at me with eyes beginning to tear, reached over and held my face in her hands then moved closer and kissed me through the suit's hole over nose and lips, her tongue forcing those lips apart then doing a dance inside my partly-open mouth. She pulled her head back, ran a hand down my body and gave a gentle squeeze. I could only hope Boris had given me a bit of slack down there.

I climbed out of the shuttle and began a crawl through a narrow forty-five degree ice tunnel maybe five meters in length. At the other end I poked my head out, peered around. Just prior to wriggling my shoulders through the narrow aperture I closed my eyes, concentrated and lost my visual presence. Then I hoisted myself out onto the icecap.

I was armed, if you could call it that, with a transparent plastic knife strapped with a transparent elastic band to my left wrist, plus a length of clear plastic clothes-line, wound around my left forearm. I felt certain the outlines of these things would be visible were someone looking for it. But with everything white and those I would be dealing with being somewhat engaged with other arrangements, I figured to get away with what I had to do.

The techies had worked out the best way to take out the catapults was to disarm the trigger mechanism. To do

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this, of course, I had to get past whoever's finger was wrapped round said trigger.

I jogged along to the nearest beast. It was exactly that, enormous. I studied it a few moments. Then a few moments more. How in hell was I going to do this? Just then, the damn thing erupted. It didn't make much noise, just kicked rearwards as the projectile was hurled, knocking the operator onto his backside. I thought, Well, opportunity is what it is, peeled the knife off my wrist and plunged it through the white arctic jacket into his collarbone. It didn't kill him, but it sure put him out of action. Then I half-lifted, half-dragged him back to his original position and dumped him on the huge ugly contraption. When it was discovered the damn thing wasn't functioning someone was sure to investigate. Meantime, I worked my way to the next one.

Their mistake was completely underestimating the size of Kama. This was evident in the catapults being so close together. They stood at the corners of what would be the perimeter of a football stadium, with only one actually sitting atop Kama's roof.

Very little snow falls on the icecap, and what does is blown around by fierce windstorms which occasionally rise up and create a perfectly horizontal blizzard. No doubt the religiosos had checked the weather report before setting out. Another plus as I moved quickly along: somehow Boris had affixed clear plastic grippers on the bottoms of my 'shoes' so traction was not a problem.

What was a problem was the number of soldiers. The place was littered with them. Fortunately, they had no real visible target, which created mass confusion. I skirted around them best I could, but sometimes the best way was simply to push them out of my way. If a man wasn't confused to begin with, being knocked on his butt by something that wasn't there for sure did the trick.

By the time I hit the second catapult, I had figured out the trigger mechanism and how to disable it. Uh, sort

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of. So here was this dude standing behind it, and here's me trying to work around him using only my knife to pry apart the trigger. He sensed something was amiss because he could both see and hear it coming apart, whereupon he whacked it back together with the flat of his gloved hand, nearly cracking my head in the process. I'd moved aside just in time. Finally, I got the knife all the way into the narrow space, twisted and pulled, and it flopped off onto the icy ground.

My idea was to disable the damn things and slow down their assault until our own big guns made their appearance. (And if that didn't work invite them in for dinner.)

Catapult number three was the one sitting atop the community. Already it had made a few holes in the roof, giant craters that were alight with flames. If only they knew, they could probably do vast damage just by aiming their contraptions into a single hole and firebombing the hell out of it. Still, if they weren't stopped fairly soon, or if they found time to get these ugly mothers functioning again...

I wasted no time trying to disarm the third one's trigger. I simply came up behind the operator, kicked the back of his knee setting him off balance, unwound the plastic clothesline from my forearm and wrapped it round his throat, planted a foot in his back and yanked with all the strength I had. He began jerking about, unsure whether to go for the line or reach back for his attacker. I began pulling him backward until he lost his footing and went down, whereupon I kicked him twice in the head, hurting my semi-bare foot in the process. I quickly limped away, not bothering to check whether he was moving or not.

By this time, in addition to a bruised foot, my arms and legs were stiff from the exertion and my breath was coming in great gasps. Still I plodded on, stumbling twice

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before regaining balance. I realized I wasn't moving any faster than a walk despite my arms pumping furiously.

By the time I reached the fourth and final catapult – I noticed that none of the others had got off a shot in a while – I had reached the end of my string. I was doubled over; spent. Then I heard:

“Who the fuck are you!”

This was the soldier manning the final catapult. He was huge, close to seven feet, and looking straight at me. I peered down at myself. Oh, shit – I was visible! (And naked, of course.)

Gathering the thimble of breath I had remaining, I panted, “I'm your...I'm your...angel of death, asshole.”

“I doubt that very much, you pig fucker!” And with that he swung a haymaker that would've knocked my head off had I not collapsed from fatigue. As I lay there in a heap he reached down and tried to grab me by the chest hairs, only to realize I was wearing some kind of invisible body suit. He went for me again, this time taking some of the material in his gigantic hand and lifting me off the ground. He held me straight out, feet dangling inches above the ice, and cocked his other hand into a fist damn near the size of the fireballs he had been setting off, when suddenly he tossed his head back, his eyes grew huge and mouth dropped wide open.

A humongous dragon had appeared above us, shimmering black-brown and brilliantly illuminated, its scales clearly etched onto the backdrop of royal blue sky, accompanied by ear-shattering screeches and bursts of deafening thunder and belching a hundred-meter tongue of fluorescent flame. The arctic gear-clad troops below immediately shrank back in horror. Ten seconds later appeared another screeching, thundering, fire-bursting dragon, even greater than the first, pointing ninety degrees to the left. Then another. And yet another, the quartet of monsters facing the prime points of the compass and

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moving across the skies in descending arcs. The screeching-thundering was mind-piercing; streaks of their projectile flames hit the ice sending shattered shards flying into the face masks of the intruders.

Most of the attackers simply abandoned their torches, turned and fled. My guy dropped me onto my knees and lit out after the others. His legs being longer, he passed most of them easily. Others merely backstepped, unsure whether to hold position as now being ordered or likewise scamper.

When they were meters from the icecap the dragons swooped up dramatically, changed angles and began another coordinated assault, this time all four focusing in on a specific area. They circled and dove and rose, repeating their attacks on different clots of soldiers. Four, five, six times; then they appeared to be moving off. But at a certain distance they halted and hung there in mid-air, as if waiting for something. And then that something appeared.

Larger than the others, as if the parent of the four, a gigantic dragon, glistening white this time, appeared from nowhere, its screeching and the accompanying thunder even louder than the others. It flew perilously close to the troops before ascending and diving again towards another lot. Four swoops, then it again rose into the air, turned and faced the main thrust of remaining ground forces, poised as if ready for another attack.

But the well-schooled soldiers began to see the dragons as the holograms in fact they were, and made as if to regroup and begin a new charge. Except they had been thrown off rhythm, appeared unsure, searching around for guidance. It never came because at that moment there appeared something new: out of the giant flaming mouth of the white dragon now were projected...*angels!* One after another, a dozen, a score, no audio-visual projections these, rather beings likely robotic; wait, they were of flesh,



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definitely. They wore exotic robes of matching design, although the leader had as well a long yellow scarf. They flew through the air on boards, each of these human angels armed with bows and quivers of golden arrows.

“The cavalry has arrived, you mindless heathens!” came the amplified voice of the leader.

Welcome to the fray, His Highness Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, king of the Land of the Thunder Dragon.

The flying archers – on hoverboards – shot arrow after golden arrow at the white-costumed forces below, who now in total tucked tail and ran. The arrows did not have standard barbed heads, rather needles four or five inches long that had been dipped in a cocktail of elements which were a modified version of Baruch’s so-called Buddha machine. Shot into arms, legs and backsides, within a few minutes the ‘Buddha juice’ would induce in the retreating warriors a sense of peace and tranquility leading to a joyful understanding and Love for all living things. The icecap soon became dotted not with soldiers out to do harm, rather peacekeepers who stopped in their tracks, began looking around at the vast beauty around them, some hugging one another, others strolling hand in hand and arm in arm back towards their awaiting aircraft.

And what was I doing during all this? Waving my arms like a man crazed and yelling myself hoarse through the one gap in my plastic suit. Finally I was spotted, not at first by His Majesty, who seemed to be joyfully occupied, but by one of his men, who did a classic double-take upon seeing a naked man impersonating a windmill. He yelled something over to his king, who peered down and immediately began to laugh so hard I reckoned he might well tumble from his board. However, with perfect balance he soared my way and dipped down.

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“I can’t stop or land,” he hollered. “It’ll be too difficult to get aloft again. I shall make a pass as low and slow as possible. Jump on behind me.”

Easier said. Far, far easier. It took him three passes following the initial go-by before I could manage to get a foot on his board, whereupon he grabbed onto my arm and yanked me on.

“If you don’t mind, my dear friend, might you make yourself invisible again. They’re filming this,” he called out from in front, “and I do have a reputation to uphold, you know.” This amid uproarious cackles.

Thus I stood balanced on the hoverboard, arms wrapped around his waist, watching the final remnants of battle (although it could hardly be called that now) over his majesty’s shoulder.

“Over to the left!” I would call into his ear, and the board would swerve to the portside, an arrow flashing off the king’s bow into the rear cheek of a fleeing soldier.

“To the right, King, down to the right!”

“You really are some kind of nagging backseat driver, my dear Ghost.”

Fifteen minutes later, perhaps twenty, the archers followed his majesty and landed their boards smoothly on the ice between casually sauntering ex-soldiers and their planes. Hands were shaken, pats on backs exchanged, and each retreating member of the former opposition was given a six-inch sticker bearing a portrait of Santa Claus, the word LOVE inscribed at the base of his beard, and asked to adhere it to his uniform as souvenir of a gallant mission. To my observation, every single one complied with thanks.

Joining us now were hordes of Kamans who had come up to congratulate his majesty and the rest of his band of uncanny archers. Then all of us proceeded down into the community.

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A party began to which thirty thousand guests showed; it would run for days. While his majesty and noble archers were escorted on tours of the Kaman campus, once more fully embodied I hugged and kissed those closest: Walli and Tarq, Arju and Shoshona and Glenda and Rosamund and Boris and Manu and Baruch. Yes, and Pride, she who was forever on the campaign trail, using the present occasion to let one and all know it was time, past time, to come up from under the ice and join the world topside.

Exhausted, I quietly retreated to my cottage, peeled off my clothes and crawled into bed, dead asleep in moments. Whether it happened for real or I dreamt it, I felt a body slip in under the covers and spoon up behind me, an arm draped around my chest. I didn't even wonder who it might be. After all, did it matter?

## AFTERWORD

### SPOOK

Happily ever after? Not in the real world. Too many variables in the equation. Would the religious collective regroup and try again. Will the citizens of Kama elect to go worldly. Are they gonna reveal themselves as the ones who created the day the world went completely mad by cutting off humankind's favorite toys of destruction, and if so, how pissed are the mean, nasty, cruel and evil bods gonna be who've lost great gobs of bounty coz of it, and how will they react. Oh, so many variables.

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I can tell you this: the shit ain't quit flying, unh-uh. Say Kama does open itself up to the outside world, in which case the ETs most likely will take their Grand Theft Auto 8 disk and head on back home, leaving Earth wholly in the hands of Earthlings. And that, my friends, is as completely mad as you can get. Again, I can only squint into the future and occasionally make out events as through a glass dimly, but I can assure you Ghost and the gang have further adventures in store.

So stay tuned, y'all.

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