

The Old Lady and the Alien

The feeling of leaving Earth was familiar. As the Earth became smaller and farther away, the old lady felt a twinge of expectation. She knew Philae would be waiting.

NASA engineers had designed Philae to land solidly on a particular asteroid 10 years after it left Earth, equipped to send back important data. Remarkably, Philae had indeed landed on the right asteroid at the expected time, but not so solidly. Unfortunately, Philae's awkward landing put her in an impossible position to receive the minimal amount of sunlight needed to properly energize the solar cells. Her time in the sun was minimal. She couldn't be as useful as hoped.

To the old lady, rocks, trees, mountains, and clever machines had spirits. To her, Philae was a lonely friend who found some comfort in having company stop by. The old lady often came to visit Philae on her way into a meditative state.

This time, instead of landing next to Philae, the old lady inexplicably kept going onward into the darkness of outer space. The sleeping old lady squirmed in her dream. A bolt of lightning streaked by her and landed with a huge explosion on Earth. She wondered if this was the end of her planet, and if she would ever be able to go home again.

The old lady had an uncanny ability to know when she was having a nightmare. With a subconscious thought, she could tell herself to end it. Which she did this time too. But when she woke up in her bed, she had a strange, compelling urge to go to the animal shelter and get a dog.

She'd actually been thinking about getting a dog for awhile. She had often had dogs over her 75 years. They had been good friends. Several of her human friends had been dying off lately. She wanted a younger companion that would stay around for awhile.

The next afternoon, at the closest animal shelter, the old lady picked out a Goldilocks type of dog – not too big or too small, not too ugly or too cute, not too fat or too skinny, not too old or too young.

As the old lady came closer, the dog began to snarl and growl.

"I'll take that one."

The volunteer at the Animal Shelter looked up in surprise. "Are you sure? There are others to choose from who are friendlier."

"I'll take that one." Determination was in her voice.

The volunteer carefully extracted the dog from the cage and went over some paperwork with the old lady.

"If she doesn't work out, you can exchange her."

The old lady didn't look daunted. "I'm not sure why, but she appeals to me. We'll work things out. I'm going to name her Cadenza."

The newly named Cadenza, now by the old lady's side on a leash, promptly peed on the old lady's shoe.

Over the next two weeks, Cadenza seemed to go to great lengths to get the old lady to take her back to the shelter. But the more Cadenza pushed, the more the old lady resisted with a sad sigh.

“Oh dear, what can the matter be? I only want to be companions. There's so much I'd like to tell you about.”

She detected a sneer on Cadenza's doggie facial features. “Dogs can't sneer, can they?” Cadenza gave the old lady a look that said with unnerving clarity, “Why not?”

The old lady didn't give up. “Is it something about the food you don't like?” Or, maybe there's something in the house that doesn't suit you. Or is it because you don't like me? Is that it?” Cadenza looked up at the old lady.

“But why don't you like me?” And then people started coming to the old lady's mind that could fit under the category of recent relationships that looked like they were blooming, but then died an early death. She began to take stock while looking Cadenza straight in the eyes.

“Some of those relationships simply didn't jell. They started to bloom with promise, but then simply withered away. I didn't miss them, and they didn't miss me. And then there was the one that drained me more than I was willing to be drained. And then there was that relationship that lasted many years even with only occasional visits. I'm still mystified by the demise of that one except that she said I had changed in bad ways. But I don't think I changed. I've given up some relationships easily. Others I've clung onto tenaciously before letting them slowly drift out of my conscious mind. But, Cadenza, I'm not ready to give up on you. I need you, although I'm not sure why.”

The old lady had lived in countries where names had meanings, not just pretty sounds. A cadenza is “a virtuoso passage inserted into a movement in a concerto or other work, typically near the end.” That held meaning for the old lady, and was also a pretty sound.

When Cadenza ignored the old lady's overtures of friendship, the old lady slowly dropped down to the level of Cadenza's eyes and made a song out of the poem by Charles Baudelaire –

“I sing the mangy dog, the homeless dog, the roving dog, the circus dog ... I sing the luckless dog who wanders alone through the winding ravines of huge cities, or the one who blinks up at some poor outcast of society with its soulful eyes, as much as to say, 'Take me with you, and out of our joint misery we will make a kind of happiness.’”

Chapter 2

The old lady liked taking Cadenza for walks. It was one of the very nice things about having a dog. This day, they went walking in a place that Cadenza had never seen before. It was outside their quiet community, so the roads were wide and heavy with lots of cars and trucks. But the sidewalks were wide, and you could get a really nice view of the mountains from there. Infrequently, in winter, there was snow shimmering on those mountain tops, but not today. Just clear skies and brush strokes of clouds in a surely very blue sky.

Seaming the edge of the sidewalk away from the traffic was a long wall that followed the busy road. It could have been boring to look at, but plants were spaced along where the sidewalk and the wall touched. If you looked closely, you could see wires that had been put on the wall for the plant to follow. The old lady's gush of words was like a stream accompanying them.

"Look there. They're all the same plants, but they grow so differently. This one has mostly red leaves, this one has mostly green leaves, and this one seems to have little bluish berry sorts of things on it. Oh, I love the way this one is branching out from where the guidelines are. Reminds me of the wanderer I was -- the farther the better. And look how this one found a recessed seam in the wall and is just following it as high as it can go. And the one over there reminds me of a conductor encouraging a flow of music in every direction. But then this one just looks droopy, tired and dead. It's not far from the other ones, but maybe somehow it doesn't get enough sun. Why do some flourish and some just hang there limply? They all started out the same. Wow! This one is just taking over and covering as much wall as it can. Its leaves are all perfect replicas in different sizes. And here's one that isn't climbing the wall at all, but prefers to grow along the sidewalk itself."

Cadenza liked the murmur the bubbly stream of words made coming out of the old lady's mouth. The old lady seemed to take such pleasure in little things other people wouldn't even notice.

But the old lady always came home looking quite tired and perplexed after her Philosophy Club meetings. She fed Cadenza and cooked up some pasta for herself. The old lady had taught Cadenza to jump up into her ample lap after dinner.

"When I was in college, I took one class in philosophy. I found it incomprehensible babble then, but I'm trying again in my old age to see if having lived so long helps me understand at least a little better.

The people who come to the meetings love the stuff. They nitpick about the meaning of this, the meaning of that. Their words go round and round, filling the air like flies that don't know where to light. They try to pin down meanings, but then admit it's all relative and nothing can ever really be understood completely. Objective, subjective, reproducible, predictable, Kant, Hume, Socrates, Aristotle, Freud, patterns, empiricism, intuition, neuroscience?? One man insists that the best philosophers are poets because poets see in metaphors.

Why do it at all? I guess because we're human, and our brains were made for thinking, questioning, trying to understand what perhaps cannot be understood. That's what makes the most sense to me. We're not content just to find food, mate, build shelters, survive. We humans need to think, wonder, explore the inexplicable, and write books about it. Talk about it. Exchange ideas in the search for answers to questions that can't help but keep popping up in our minds.

Dogs are so good at loving and living. Why don't you have to think about such stuff too?"

With this question hanging in the air, the old lady put her head on the comfy recliner's back and began to snore.

As the weeks went by, Cadenza began to look forward to hearing the old lady's key in the lock. On this day, the old lady bounced into the room.

"Cadenza, how was your day today? I do wonder what keeps you busy during the time that I'm off and away doing this, that, and other things. You don't have to worry about world crises like we humans do. Yep, there's yet another big crisis today. It was predictable because, as technology progresses, we humans are still stuck in the same old ruts that always led to confrontations. Some people (mostly social workers, peace-niks, and do-gooders) believe that nurture can win over nature. I'd like to believe that too, and there are some incredible stories about forgiveness and turning the other cheek, but wishing for something doesn't make it true most of the time. I'll try to explain what's happening.

But first, let me tell you about the only time I was ever punched. For some reason I can't begin to remember, Georgie and I were young kids who scheduled a fist fight. I had never even hit anyone other than my young brother before. And I certainly hadn't punched him hard. Well, it only took one of Georgie's punches to convince me that boys hit really, really hard. I don't remember a second punch, so maybe I just gave up in defeat.

Well, the U.S. is now in maybe an even more dangerous version of a cyber crisis that is different from Edward Snowden's cyber release of secrets. People don't get killed - at least not yet - in such a crisis, but power and big money are at stake. Bad judgment produced a movie script for a comedy of the death of North Korea's great leader. For this audacity and insensitivity, Sony Pictures was hacked every which way with great breeches in its data systems. This was big boys' stuff.

And then, the hackers, no doubt pushed by the great leader himself, went the extra step of warning Sony of even more serious 9/11 type repercussions in those theaters showing the movie. After the hacking damage that had already been done, Sony did not doubt that North Korea wasn't kidding. All showings of the movie, including online distribution, came to a dead halt. Good?Bad? What was interesting to me was how fast testosterone kicked in. Unmasked, President Obama came out publicly saying that Sony shouldn't have caved in.

No one seems to have noticed, or mentioned, the Asian cultural bias toward face -- losing face, gaining face, giving face. It's a complicated issue that I doubt more than a handful of westerners truly understand. A satirical movie that causes people to laugh at a leader of a country is not humorous, especially in North Korea where its people must force themselves into paroxysms of grief or deference for their past and present leaders. The only place in China where I saw long, orderly, and totally silent lines of people was to file into the mausoleum to see Mao's body. This was many years after he was dead, and his legacy was both reviled and revered. Yet no one showed any sign of disrespect at the tomb.

What we're witnessing now is testosterone going wild. When you boil it down to basics, it's a manly pissing contest of who can shoot farther. But there's also a female to blame -- Pandora. Yes, we are being punished by opening up Pandora's box of computer technology that offers us magical wonders and possibilities, and horrors that we are only beginning to discover. Stephen Hawking warned us that artificial intelligence would easily overwhelm our human capabilities to keep control over it. This is believable once I read that artificial intelligence actually LEARNS and gets more sophisticated. What chance do we really have to control it?

Are people actually going to die because of Sony's insensitivity? Hard to believe unless one believes, as I do, that the big brain experiment is indeed a bust. Yes, I heard a Stanford professor proclaim that many years ago at a dinner party. Over time, that small sentence has explained many things to me.

How have we managed to survive this long?"

When the old lady came home the next day, she went to the closet and took out a brush. Cadenza was becoming used to this routine. The stroking made the old lady even more talkative.

"When I was young, our family had a wonderful dog named Ski. Although not as strict as now, there were laws about keeping your dog leashed or confined. My father sometimes let Ski out to roam on his own. One day, a cute child neighbor saw Ski sleeping and put her arms around him for a hug. Ski was a gentle dog, but being awakened like that made him nip the child's face. The father was angry, and after that constantly looked for Ski being off his leash. He'd then call Animal Control, which would pick Ski up and fine my father. Again and again.

My father worked in a rural town. He told me he found a wonderful farm there where Ski could run around to his heart's content. Of course, I absolutely believed that and was happy for Ski's freedom. I'm not sure what age I was when I wondered if the farm really existed. Well, just today, I was reading a book about another kind of animal being taken to a happy farm for its own good. Immediately, there I was a little girl again thinking of my dog, Ski, romping around endless farmland.

But in the book's case, the animal was a chimpanzee who had been raised for 5 years as a human baby along with a human sister and brother. It was a fictional story, but truly based upon some actual cases back when chimp research was in full swing. With an age difference of only two months, the girls were rather like twins. Five years later, the furry sister just disappeared. The father said she now lived on a farm where she'd be with other chimps. He wouldn't allow visiting because he said it would upset the furry sister's adjustment to being confined with chimps instead of just being a member of their family.

The human sister had so many unanswered questions about the sister she loved, but she had a vague memory of her older brother writing her a note years later that said simply, 'There's no farm.' Where was her sister? What had happened to her? Why? It took her into her middle age to finally piece together some answers.

I was just born with some innate feeling that animals, not just dogs and cats, had thoughts, feelings, and emotions. It was a shocking revelation at some older age that most humans had absolutely no appreciation for animals -- other than to be used by humans. Finally, when I volunteered for a rescue center for wild seals and sea lions did I not only get to meet wild animals, but I could see their humanity. They were not all alike. Their personalities were different. Their response to being confined differed.

Years later, I still remember a female sea lion who was dying. I could see in her eyes a dignity in meeting death that I hope I will have when I die. I loved one teenage male sea lion who loved to be put into the pen with the little ones. They crawled all over him, slid down him, and you could see that they were communicating with one another. That's not usual behavior for male teenage sea lions, but yet it was clear he relished being an uncle.

The one who could have won Mr. Congeniality was a young male sea lion who had had his hind flippers bitten off by a shark when he was a baby. Somehow he had survived long enough for us to rescue him. He was a happy creature who loved life even disabled. Because we didn't return the animals to the wild if they did not have a chance to survive, he stayed with us a whole year until we

arranged for him to go to a zoo.

I can say I had several joys during my 12 years of volunteering there weekly. Besides the close up look at these wild ones, I also discovered a whole group of people volunteering there who basically liked animals better than people. They easily understood what the majority of humans haven't seemed to accept -- animals are not on earth to be disrespected, abused, and used.

Seeing the horror that humans do to other humans, I guess it's not too surprising that they treat animals even worse. There it is again mocking me -- 'The big brain experiment is a bust.'"

Cadenza listened carefully. She felt the old lady's brush strokes becoming more erratic and rougher when she talked about the plight of so many misunderstood, suffering animals under the domination of humans. It was obviously something she felt quite passionate about. She wondered what animal the old lady would choose to be if she weren't a human animal.

Chapter 3

Rain was a very rare occurrence in southern California. But, on this day, it not only rained – it came down in quantity and kept raining. The old lady was absolutely delighted. As the rain poured down, words poured out of the old lady.

"Today is a rainy day. What can I do on a rainy day - especially since there have been only a mere handful of not-so-rainy days for over 4 years? And especially since southern California is in the worst drought ever. And especially since there may not be much more rain this rainy season.

I can listen to the rain. Sometimes it is a staccato plop-plop. Sometimes it makes a gurgling sound as it goes through the drainpipe and out the other end. Sometimes it is as steady as a drum beat demanding to be heard. Sometimes it is a pleasing, tinkling splish splash that gladdens my heart. I can hear the playful swish and swirl of the water on the road as the cars go by.

I can watch the rain when it drips drops that delight the thirsty plants, trees, and grasses that haven't completely died yet. I can see a literal shower curtain of water as it pours down my patio roof. I can watch the clouds temporarily turn off the faucet when they've run out of water, and I wait expectantly for it to gush down again.

I can wonder at the power of rain as it refreshes, renews, and creates life. And I can respect its ability to drown, kill, and destroy. I can imagine its anger at humans for the myriad ways we have attempted to reconfigure, refine, block, divert, rearrange, buy, sell, and pollute it. What humans aren't yet willing to accept is that water will be the eventual victor in this human technology vs. nature power struggle.

I can touch its wetness. While I can't guarantee its purity, I can at least be grateful that it isn't the black sooty rain that came down on me in Taiwan. It is not only life-saving rain, but it also cleanses the air around us.

What can I do on a rainy day? I can DANCE to the rhythm of the rain with my dog."

And the old lady picked up Cadenza's front paws so they could dance together.

A week later, the old lady broke into another dance when she opened the door and ran excitedly over to Cadenza singing "I'm a believer. I'm a believer now."

Cadenza had no idea what she was talking about, but she knew the old lady would tell her more. In fact, the old lady had been talking more than ever before. Cadenza wondered why. And what was the big deal about paradox? The old lady tired faster these days, so the somewhat clumsy dance didn't last long.

"Cadenza, I believe in paradox. Yes, I used to be skeptical of what is paradoxical and counter intuitive, but I've become a believer. Lots of people believe very strongly in god, angels, the devil, and those things can't be proved right or wrong. I guess it's nice and comforting when things work out to be logical, but there's an awful lot about humans and their strange emotions that can't be explained by logic. I've been trying to understand humans in a logical, rational way, and it just hasn't worked.

I've especially been trying to understand why people always talk peace but make war. I was born in a war, and there have been many wars since then. Why, why, why? War has bothered me for a very long time. Was war just a fatal flaw in the human character? But I read a book recommended in my Humanities class that made war make sense to me. The author's take on war is that war has been waged since the beginning of humans, and has actually brought many benefits with it. He says we have been better off with it than without it.

And, like believing in god, believing in paradox makes a whole new level of thinking open up to me. Humans torture themselves with trying to take apart and understand everything, but some things can't be taken apart and understood. We humans value knowledge so much. Look at all the books of collected so-called wisdom. Our libraries of collected knowledge have made most humans believe this collected, documented knowledge makes humans superior to animals.

But I've never believed that human knowledge made humans better than animals. I think we humans don't have any idea what knowledge animals share. Animals are a lot smarter than we humans think. Actually, I'd like to know more about what you know. But, I'm probably too stupid to learn all you could teach me."

Cadenza sneezed. Or was it a laugh?

After dinner the next day, the old lady once again became talkative. She used Cadenza like a diary to go over her thoughts for the day. Her topic tonight was bullying.

"I have to admit that the person who bullied me the most was my pessimistic mother. I was more of a victim when I was a child living with her. You know what the best lesson she taught me was? I somehow caught on early that I could never please her, so I never became a people pleaser. I think a lot of people in this world suffer from trying to please people. My mother was pretty rough on my dad too, but he loved her beyond all her bitching and complaining. Was she ever shocked to learn that his calm nature in their later years together was partly due to him taking Valium every day!

Anyway, today on the bus someone asked a question about where we were. Since I've lived here for 17 years already, I readily supplied the requested information. She looked at me with a face tasting

something nasty and said sternly, 'I was talking to the bus driver.' I consider myself pretty mild-mannered, but I felt my anger rising. She then asked the bus driver another question he didn't know the answer to -- but I did. However, I said nothing, feeling somewhat vindicated.

Now I have to admit that another nasty comment from her would have brought a retort from me. My hackles were up and poised to defend myself. I'm sure that's somehow connected to my sense of justice that I hadn't been able to put to use with my mother. I was just like the dogs I watched in a touching show last night about bringing dogs in a shelter out to play with one another. It had to be done carefully, observing one dog's reaction to the other before putting them in together. Some dogs immediately played happily, but fighting pheromones meant some dogs would immediately fight one another. Guess the unfriendly lady on the bus would have picked a fight with me if we were dogs.

Watching that tv show last night made me think of something important. You know I'm getting old. You can tell I'm slowing down. I don't really know how old you are. The vet at the shelter couldn't say decisively what your age was. He said he'd never seen a dog quite like you. All he could say for sure is that you seemed healthy and he was very glad I would adopt you without much information because they had so little information about you.

The tv show was a documentary about shelters arranging for dogs to have time to play outside together as nature intended instead of living in solitary confinement in tiny, unsociable, cold, cement cells, with a premature ending – that word that sounds so pretty but is so final -- euthanasia. Volunteer pilots in Wings of Rescue fly dogs from shelters where their time runs out quickly to shelters in more rural areas of the U.S. that don't have enough dogs for adoption.

I don't want you to have to rely on some wheel of fortune to die or be re-adopted just because I die. But I'll have to think carefully about who could take care of you. My friends are as old, or older, than I am. It was very clear that lady luck was a big factor in whether the dogs lived happily ever after with love and care, or became just another sad statistic.

I always picked up both human and canine strays in my life. And, I'm not proud to admit that I didn't always look after the human strays as well as I should have. Well, maybe I'll tell you more about that another day. It's kind of personal.”

The old lady lived in a retirement community with a cornucopia of activities to choose from every day. Although her life no longer included working for money, or the joys and challenges of changing countries and cultures, she was nonetheless still curious about just about everything. So, every day included time out of the house, be it for exercise, classes, club meetings, or entertainment. She had neither a car, nor much money left, yet her life was not only busy, but full. She had also become more thoughtful, more meditative, more ready to sum up her life experiences.

Cadenza didn't know what to expect each night upon the old lady's return from the outside world. But Cadenza was beginning to listen more carefully. She never knew what the old lady would talk about, or where the topics would meander. The old lady's words were like a big meal that took time to digest.

On this night, the old lady returned entranced from a concert.

"Oh, Cadenza, I had the most wonderful evening tonight. So sad I couldn't take you into the concert

hall with me. But then, I'm not sure you can appreciate human-made music. So sorry I never became a dancer. My second choice, if I had been wise enough and talented enough, would have been a musician. Instead, I end up a paying appreciator.

I saw Joshua Bell and his violin tonight. Before the concert, he came on stage for about a 10 minute interview. He even mentioned my chosen name for you - cadenza. Wish you could understand how wonderful your name is. The interviewer asked him about something I had vaguely heard about. In 2007, he played incognito for 43 minutes in a D.C. subway station under the watchful eye of a reporter. About 1,000 people passed him by with nary a second look -- except for children who were drawn to his playing and wanted to stop. Whereas some people paid over \$100 for a ticket to hear him tonight, his total collection in the hat was something like \$32.17. Imagine that!

Why did parents herd their reluctant children along and not stop to listen to his mastery and genius? That doesn't say much for the average human who takes the subway, does it? Children have more imagination and spontaneity. Plus, of course, they don't have to get anywhere on time. Would you have stopped and listened? I certainly hope I would have. He said he thought it was because people didn't have their minds on listening to music when they were in the subway station compared to attending a concert.

The joy of the well-played music couldn't drown out the pain of paradox. Humans can create elegant and soul lifting music and also throw bombs and behead people. Humans are such a confusing, ironic muddle! You can see how religion became a handy excuse to explain perpetual good and evil locked in everlasting battle. Yep, the big brain experiment is a bust!

If the only music were in nature, would we hear nature's music better? But then, what use would humans serve on our revolving planet? I did so enjoy watching especially the percussionists with precision tonight banging, clanging, clashing, crashing, tingling, and hitting the little tambourine from every possible angle. I wonder what music sounds like to you.

While I closed my eyes and let the music wash over, around, and in me, I had the strange thought that it might be just the perfect place and time to die. Does that sound too bizarre? I also had the same thought as I was swimming last week. The water is so comforting and comfortable to just go to sleep in. Guess I'm frightened that I'll die one of these long, drawn out, painful deaths that is just a lousy way to end a good life."

Chapter 4

One evening, the old lady was flipping through channels when she stopped at the old movie, "The Graduate."

"Cadenza, come here and watch this with me. This is about humans and their emotions. I grew up in the Sounds of Silence - hearing without listening, speaking without talking. It turned out to correctly predict what was then only just starting to happen in the U.S. I had lived in Berkeley, California -- which figures heavily in the film.

I could, like most people of Benjamin's age, definitely relate to the main character's confusion about what life as a grown up in the early 1970's had to offer. I read that the author of the book from which

the movie was made wrote it shortly after his own graduation from college.

Benjamin's lack of interest in the future of plastics and his parents' empty lifestyles was not unlike my leaving my comfortable upper middle-class life, along with my husband and son, to pursue my frustrated wanderlust to see the world beyond. I hadn't allowed myself to be self-aware enough to know that the volcano would one day blow and obliterate the life I had thought I wanted. Why wasn't I? I can only guess that I knew acknowledging my feelings earlier would have led to divorce and I was afraid of it.

Was the happy couple right to leave behind the shards of the new husband and incredulous parents? It made good drama to run onto a bus in her wedding gown, but the elation on both Benjamin and Elaine's faces faded into a blank nothingness before the image of the bus carries them off the screen. Was it a good decision? How long did their love last? Those are questions the book and the movie don't have to answer. But we who lived it did have to live out the consequences for better and worse.

It's not the first time society morally morphed, parents and their children couldn't see eye to eye, and a horrific war far away waged for no reason. A movie that I don't think I could bear to ever see again, and one that I think came and went quickly because it was too painful to see, was named simply 'Joe.' It dealt in irony without a comedic touch. And it involved another aspect of those crazy days still very much with us -- drugs. A normal upper middle-class family and a working man called Joe become sadly connected by the serendipity of chance when Joe sees a murder. A loving upper middle-class dad kills the kid who had gotten his daughter hooked on drugs.

The two moms and dads were like oil and water in just about every way except the shared secret. Of course there was a tragic end, for how else could such a story about a rebellious child who throws back with disdain every value her parents held dear end happily? Under Joe's influence, the once happy upper middle-class family man, goes to a communal house for teens on drugs and kills again. So overcome with anger at himself for the killer he has become, he shoots a young girl who turns around -- and it is his own precious daughter. Lights fade, movie ends."

Cadenza cuddled closer to the old lady as she poured out her guts and her tears.

The next day, the old lady returned home with more groceries than usual. "We're having a guest for dinner tonight. He's an old friend of mine named Percy. I've known him for a long time. We used to be lovers, but that was long ago. He has a quirky way of looking at life. I've learned a lot from him. He's had a hard life. Was even homeless for awhile. He's never had a regular job, but he learned how to be a pickpocket. Not much money in that, but it kept him going in really lean times. What he can do best is talk, talk, talk. But he's also a tireless listener, and that's not easy to find in one person. He's also an artist and a poet. Maybe he's kind of an old leftover combination beatnik/hippie.

He's getting old now, but there's still a sparkle in his really bright blue eyes which makes a striking mix with his sweet honey brown skin. Strange how we say black instead of brown -- which is what he really is. You're a mixture too, but more complicated to describe -- white with a tan and black stripe down your back, with one totally dark brown leg, and eyes the colors of a painter's palette. Percy loves books, but he doesn't actually read many. He kind of passes his hand over them and picks up the flavor of what they say. He loves living surrounded by books of all kinds, usually piled everywhere around him."

The kitchen began to take on tempting aromas. The old lady rarely cooked anything that took more than one pot and 15 minutes.

“I think Percy would have fit better in the Dada movement than he did as a child of the 60s. He stubbornly fought conformity and the 'shoulds' of society. He was living in a large building of all artists when I first met him. His room and his studio were one. His interest was in people, and the faces of his subjects stared out boldly and unconventionally. No two eyes were alike in color or shape.

He used to say he painted the insides of people, not what other people could see. When we'd go to a restaurant with paper placemats, he'd always whip out his pen and draw the face of the waiter or waitress in impressive record time. He'd always give them the drawing. No one ever refused to take it, and some people even said they could see their inner selves in it.

With rather childish delight, he once showed me a painting and admitted he had mixed his semen into the paint. He absolutely adored shocking anyone he could. I think that came from his upbringing in some small, strange, fundamentalist church that refused to name itself. After his parents died, he easily forgot them, but could never overcome his confusing, torturous love/hate relationship with god and religion.

He's unusual, and you're unusual. I hope you'll be friends. Turn on your charm.”

The old lady was unusually animated as she danced back and forth between the kitchen and the dining table. She answered the door with a beaming smile.

Percy came in, hugged her, and then stopped short in front of Cadenza. His honey brown face whitened, he gasped out “There's something terrifying about that dog” and ran out the door. Shocked, the old lady did her best to run after him. But he was in his car and out of sight in record time.

She came back, slowly shaking her head.

“Whatever does that mean?”

She tried phoning Percy several times, but he never answered her calls.

The old lady didn't mention Percy again. But, for awhile, the old lady went to her favorite meditation tree more often, climbed up to her little sitting niche, inhaled and exhaled several times, looked up into the branches and leaves of this 500 year old Sycamore tree, listened to the chirping birds, emptied her mind, and then opened her mind. She always left calmer than she came.

A few weeks later, while washing the floor, the old lady dropped her broom and picked Cadenza up so she could look her in the eyes. That usually signaled there was something on the old lady's mind.

"Cadenza, are you bored living with me? I read an advertisement today for a variety of toys to stimulate your dog's mind. There are even channels on tv that are for entertaining dogs and keeping their minds and sometimes their bodies more active. Given that you can run and I can't, I'm sure our walks are too slow for you. And then there are those drones I read about to keep your dog happy. Shall

I get one for you?

Is boredom a terrible thing? Sherlock Holmes was bored. But bright people, fictional or otherwise, probably are often bored. One of my brightest students who started university at the age of 14 was bored a lot. He wrote me several letters for some years after I left the school, and he always mentioned how bored he was. Whether it was school, or life, he faced grinding boredom regularly.

I remember times of feeling bored when I was a teenager, but not oppressively so. When I was a young married woman, I remember mentioning boredom (I'm not sure in what context) to another couple. The guy said, 'Only boring people are bored.' His wife actually kicked him under the table. But that struck me at the time, and several times later, as a simple yet profound statement.

I read a book by a reporter who was kidnapped and held prisoner for 8 years. What he mentions over and over is the extreme boredom of those years. And I've certainly heard that solitary confinement in our prisons drives prisoners mad.

Maybe it's sometimes boredom that spurs brilliant people on to greatness. Maybe it's in the boring moments that all of our minds, be they brilliant or ordinary, can fly and soar to new heights and ideas they'd never reach otherwise.

In my own life, boredom has been incredibly powerful. It was mainly boredom during my idyllic 15 years of life as wife, mother, upper-middle-class American that wore away at me until I gave it all up and took off for years of living in faraway places. I needed outside stimulation and change to keep me interested and excited. For the last 35 years, I truly can't say I've been bored. But now, in my old age, I have to rely more and more on internal stimulation within my mind to keep me interested and excited about living. Do I have enough 'oomph' inside me? I sometimes fear the physical and mental deterioration of being old will allow boredom to creep in again and lay its grayness over everything. Boredom sounds trite, but it really isn't at all.

Cadenza, we must find the ways to keep each other from getting bored and tired!"

Chapter 5

Cadenza jumped in enthusiasm as she had learned she was supposed to at the sign of "a walk." At least it usually meant it would be another opportunity to learn something else about these strange, unpredictable humans.

As they settled into their rather slow pace, the old lady once again apologized for not being able to let Cadenza run free.

"My Taffy dog never realized how lucky she was to be with me not only in my younger days, but in the days when dogs didn't always have to be on a leash. Why, that dog went everywhere with us -- romped along beaches, chased cows, and ran wide circles in green parks. When she ran, she looked rather like a small graceful horse. Every muscle was sleek and powerful.

Wait a minute. I'm pretty sure I saved an article about using drones to exercise dogs. Would you like that? It's not as good as the beach, but the dog in the picture looked happy enough running and

jumping up high to try to catch a little drone that buzzed like a mosquito in the air. You know, it actually seems more interesting than my going to the fitness center to pedal bikes that go nowhere, row to nowhere, and lift weights monotonously up and down, up and down."

Caught by surprise, Cadenza stifled a laugh and turned it into a sneeze. She never knew what to expect out of the old lady's mouth, but she was pleased that the old lady was concerned about health -- for both of them. Cadenza rather liked the way the old lady talked to her -- as if she truly believed the dog understood her. She didn't talk down to her or use that obnoxious cutesy baby talk like other old people sometimes did with animals.

The old lady then launched into a new topic about something she called Generation Like.

"Cadenza, you're lucky you don't have to know anything about computers and social media. I'm trying to understand it because it's how young people think today. Being liked used to mean that you had friends who liked you. Now it means how many strangers hit the Like button on their computers when you post something. And some young kids who know this technology will spend hours posting pictures, posting videos, and Liking all sorts of things -- movies, tv shows, t-shirts, actors, books -- doesn't matter what. They Tweet, re-Tweet, Follow and get followed online.

The Likes represent the strangers who don't know them, but make them feel noticed and liked by their number. How meaningful can that be? Apparently it brings recognition that fills them in some emotionally indescribable way. And can bring them a certain level of fame, endorsements, and even real money from sponsors who hook up with them.

The teens, at least many of them, do it because they have a human need to be liked and somehow don't feel liked enough with the real people in their lives. More insidiously, they are being used by marketers who have created a way to make consumers into their marketers. It feels like a sharing social community, but it is a much more sophisticated version of a book I read years ago called 'The Hidden Persuaders' that indirectly and cleverly convinced you to buy products you didn't necessarily need or want. Now, programmers have learned how to actually embed addiction into those devilish devices. So, young kids have to stave off increased dopamine or become just another beyond control addict.

My granddaughter and I used to read the same books so we could talk about them. I particularly loved a trilogy called 'The Hunger Games,' about a society that mercilessly manipulated their children into providing life and death sport for not only entertainment, but to keep ultimate political control over all the people. The books have been made into movies that pull out all the stops on the wow factor that movie technology can offer.

Ah, but the irony is that the kids who are the targeted audience today are being manipulated through the hidden persuaders of today's social media for the purpose of churning up as much money as possible for the movie makers. The spider with its endless tendrils that go in more directions than my imagination can conjure up spins a very clever web of gold indeed that traps those teens as much as the teens forced to fight in the story.

It took 3 books, but the trilogy had a hopeful, upbeat ending of the tyrants and manipulators being overturned. It was an impressively written trilogy with a warning, and a loud message. But now the story itself has become itself a victim to Generation Like. I fear its fate is doomed to get lost in

consumerism in the name of chasing after being 'liked.'"

The old lady bent down and petted Cadenza. "You dogs want to be liked too, but you're too smart to chase after money."

Before going to bed, the old lady flipped through tv channels and settled on a movie. Cadenza settled down next to her and dozed off. Suddenly, Cadenza heard a loud, rather strange sound coming from the old lady. Was she in pain? Was there some danger? But when Cadenza looked up at the old lady, she didn't look in pain at all. In fact, there was a big smile on her face to match the big noise coming from her wide mouth. Cadenza had never seen the old lady like this before.

"Oh, Cadenza. I didn't mean to startle you. But this movie is just so funny. It's not only funny, but it's clever funny."

Now that she knew it was okay, Cadenza settled down and let the gales of laughter wash over her. It had never happened before. It was nice, and somehow comforting. After the movie, the old lady tried to explain why she was laughing.

"The Nazis were so terribly horrible in World War II, but the movies that make fun of them can be so hilarious. How can such horror be funny? I was born in the middle of the war. Television was new when I was a young child, and my parents didn't buy one for a long time. But then we got a tv. I remember watching endless war movies. I don't know why. There was a certain fascination I had for imagining what my life would have been like if I had been in one of the countries Hitler invaded.

In spite of all the war movies I watched, and all the books I read about the Holocaust, there was an unreality to it I couldn't imagine. Then, only a few years ago, I met the most remarkable person I've personally known. She was a short, gray-haired woman with a ready smile. She wrote a book about her own teenage years in Auschwitz. She helped it all become alive to me through her writing, and through conversations we had. She welcomed my questions after reading her book.

She became a close friend for a few years before she died. That she had survived three years in Auschwitz made her a real live heroine to me since I could never imagine myself surviving such a place. Although I had seen other Holocaust survivors, I had never had one as a friend. She not only managed to survive, but she survived with her personality, her soul intact. In fact, she may be the only person I've ever known who had no hate -- even for those who killed her family and abused her.

She not only said she held no hate within her, but she inspired poor minority children whom she spoke to in schools after she wrote her book to believe that no one can make anyone else feel inferior. She had remained true to herself in Auschwitz, so they believed her when she said she would not take revenge on her captors even if given the chance. When Nelson Mandela of South Africa died, I imagined that my friend and he would get along great in the afterworld, going around making peace among enemies.

I got to meet her children and grandchildren at her memorial service. She had imbued them with an enduring message of tolerance. One son mentioned to me that, when he was young, she didn't like him watching the tv show called Hogan's Heroes. In that show, captive soldiers always got the upper hand over their stupid German jailers. She didn't forbid him from watching, but it bothered her for people to

find the Germans humorous."

Then, the old lady put on her favorite CD of bird and water sounds, wrapped a little pillow under her head and one shoulder, and let herself drift with the watery sounds.

Cadenza got into the habit of running to get her leash every time she heard the old lady come home. She liked taking walks because the old lady talked to her almost as if she were a human companion. The old lady went through the same ritual every day of apologizing to Cadenza for having to keep her on the leash before she launched into some topic for the day's walk.

"When I was a young wife and mother, my dog didn't realize she had it so good. She got to run free on sandy beaches, on hillsides, in fantastic parks where we went camping. I don't think she would have liked life on a leash. She was a big brown dog and I loved to watch her sleek body run so gracefully and powerfully. Of course, she couldn't always be off the leash, but she got to run a lot. In fact, she was most likely running when she had a stroke that made her fall over the cliff down onto the beach below. It took me awhile to find her from Animal Control because her choke collar had just fallen off when she went head down over the cliff. She had died on the beach, but they didn't know how to find us. Still, she had always been super sure-footed, so I'm sure only a stroke would have caused her to fall off the cliff. I think it was her second stroke. The first one was a few weeks earlier when she faltered while jumping in the window I kept open for her to get into the house on her own. She was shivering badly after her fall. I just sat and petted her until the shivering stopped.

She was 12 when she died, and I felt glad she had led such an active, free life and didn't suffer long when she died. I want the same for myself. I don't want to go on and on and fall apart more and more like I see some of my friends and neighbors doing. But I can't say that to too many people because they prefer as close to immortality as they can get. But I believe in death.

This whole thing of improving medical care to keep alive old people and very sick people of all ages doesn't make much sense to me. All living things must die. What does keeping alive with bypasses, transplants, surgeries, strong medicines say about natural selection? It isn't natural. And we already have too many people. What do we do with all the new people being born if lifetimes continue to extend into the 90s and 100s as is certainly happening all around me? And, being crude about it, what's the point of keeping old people alive even longer? They become either a burden to themselves, to society, to their families, or worse, they are like an old familiar knickknack we keep around like an old toy we don't want to part with.

I read a newspaper article the other day about a 71 year old getting the heart of a 29 year old and I thought that was rather a waste that deprived a dying young person. Seventy one is not old, but it's a decent lifetime. Then our aerobics teacher mentioned that some old person in her class had recently received the heart of a 22 year old. Talk about being out of sync. A 22 year old heart is way out of place in a body that's otherwise 70 years old. I can imagine the arguments inside when the 22 year old heart is brimming over with energy and the rest of the body is deteriorating normally and wants to nap.

Reminds me of a friend who told me her mother had a pacemaker put in at 95 years old. The rest of her body wanted, needed, to die, but the pacemaker kept the heart pumping on and on. I don't think that's good medicine. I think that's cruel. I sure hope I'll be with it enough to make sure no one puts a pace maker in me against my will. To tell you the truth, Cadenza, I'm more afraid of modern medical care

with the emphasis on immortality than I am of dying.”

Chapter 6

The very next day, the old lady came home floating on a cloud. Exuberant, she picked up Cadenza's two front paws and started dancing around the room with her.

"Oh, Cadenza, I'm so very sorry I couldn't have taken you with me today. It was perfect, so perfect. First of all, the weather was just right. The ride getting there was long, but at the end was the L.A. Arboretum with 85 sculptures placed around the gardens. I LOVE sculpture gardens. That's why my neighbor and I added sculptures we made to our shared garden along the patio wall.

Loving sculpture gardens just always came naturally to me, but this time I finally understood the reason for my loving them. We humans have misused, abused, destroyed so much nature without even noticing. But sculptures surrounded by trees, bushes, flowers from all over the world wed the beauty of nature, and the beauty of human-made creativity. For a brief time (the sculptures will be taken down and returned to their makers in a few days), human creativity and nature's creativity not only co-exist, but enhance one another. Briefly, they belong together.

The variety of what nature is capable of producing, and what these artists are capable of producing shows the kinship that creativity and nature have, that we humans are part of nature deep within our core. Nature's cleverness in the turn of a leaf, the budding of a flower, the colors it is capable of producing is connected to the human thoughts, feelings, anger, love, beauty, happiness, and sadness of the artists' creations.

I have had the joyous experience of knowing some creative people. I watched the mostly joy and sometimes anguish when they used their talents to create. I lived for awhile with a musical missionary in Taiwan and experienced how music was a daily part of living with her. You couldn't separate her from music. A musician friend told me she was once asked in an interview why she became a musician. She said she didn't become a musician, she was a musician and knew it from an early age.

Oh, I wish I could really describe to you, Cadenza, how both excited and at peace I felt today soaking it in as deep as I could. It made me very glad to still be alive. The only thing I wished for was my sense of smell, lost so suddenly and inexplicably six years ago when I fell. How I wish you could have been there sniffing so confidently and competently by my side."

But the old lady sometimes came home in a contemplative mood. Today was such a day. The sky was southern California deep blue. The little bubbling creek with the fluffy ducklings following their mothers accompanied Cadenza and the old lady on their walk in the park.

"Why wasn't I there, Cadenza?" the old lady began. "Now that I'm watching 50 year old re-runs of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's, with the Freedom Riders, and the Marchers, and the dogs and fearful fire hoses attacking, what was I thinking at the time?"

I remember Malcolm X coming to speak at my college. I'm not sure why he came to such a small all-women's college in Boston. He was dramatic and dignified. I can't remember what he said, but he was gunned down not long afterward. I remember SNICK signing up college kids to go south to stir up

segregation. I didn't think about going.

I had only one black classmate at college I didn't really know, and none I remember in high school. For some reason, without hesitation I signed up to be a tutor in the black housing project near our school. With no training or preparation, I walked there alone to the home of the kid I was assigned to tutor. I remember seeing broken glass everywhere in the hallways of the ugly building. After the first kid didn't work out, I was given a second child to tutor. This one was a young girl. She really wanted to be tutored, and she did well. I stayed in touch with her for all my college years and a couple of years afterward. She was very light-skinned, but her brothers were dark-skinned. There was a mom at home, but no dad. Eventually she was selected to be bussed miles away to a mostly white school. I still have pictures of her and her brothers. I hope she had a good life.

On our honeymoon in 1964, we went across country through the deep south, and back through the north. Along the southern roads were falling-down shacks and black kids playing outside. And then there is that slide I have of my husband standing buying an ice cream next to a 'white's only' sign.

All my life I've been attracted to black people. If I had to figure out why, I guess it would be that I was born on an army base in Florida and spent the first two years of my life there while my dad was a soldier in the war. I'm guessing from old photographs there were a lot of black people around me at the army base. I don't remember the young girl, but my mother told me she hired a teenaged black girl to help take care of me.

According to my mom, the black girl was nice to me. I know for a fact that I was an unwanted baby -- at least by my mom. Not only did I piece together some things my mom told me, but I also found a letter to my mom written by my aunt saying my mom shouldn't be so unhappy that she was pregnant. I can kind of understand how my mom must have felt. She was a college graduate (not so common for women in those days) and had her first job in a law firm. She gave it all up to go down to Florida where my soldier dad was about to be sent to war. Although not youngsters, they didn't know much about birth control. So, there I was one year and 1 month after they were married.

My mother hated the heat, humidity, and bugs of Florida. She shuddered years later when she said how the wallpaper moved when you came into the room and turned on the lights. Not only had I come unwanted, but my grandmother had 'tricked' her into breast feeding me. My mom was petite, but her breasts were large for her size. She said they always made her feel like a freak. My aunt once told me something I tried hard to forget. My mom would chainsmoke while breastfeeding me. I know from my years of living with my mom that being a mother to me and my younger brother never fulfilled her. So, I can imagine she pretty much hated me down there in Florida.

Since a baby has subconscious memories, I assume I felt more loved and cared for by the black teenager my mom hired than I did by my mother. And my mom once told me I had a doll as a toddler that was white on one side and black on the other. I always wanted the black side of the doll. Then, after the war, when I was about 2, I was flying back home to Massachusetts when a black lady went into the bathroom. I apparently went up to the bathroom door and just cried and cried for her to come out.

Yup, there have to be some strong reasons why my life gravitated toward black people the way it did the rest of my life. Even when it came to becoming a mother, I chose to adopt a black child.”

Cadenza looked up at her waiting to hear more. She wished she could ask the old lady so many questions that she needed answers to. But Cadenza wasn't quite ready for that part of their relationship. The times when the old lady never failed to come home exuberant were when she went "out of this world" to an Astronomy Club she belonged to. Sometimes she returned from their Star Parties during which Los Angeles amateur astronomers came with their rather sophisticated telescopes. Finally, the heavens and the stars came closer.

One fine Star Party night, she saw the neighborly Andromeda Galaxy, the craters of the moon, Mars, and a binary star with one faint blue and one yellow. And even the space station whizzed by. One of the amateur astronomers explained how he thought we would be able to deflect asteroids from hitting the earth. The old lady laughed and said that chances were much higher that we humans would kill ourselves off way before an asteroid would.

She had gone to Star Parties for years. Looking up into the galaxy, universe, cosmos, she felt incredibly tiny and totally insignificant. And yet, even just an invisible speck, she felt a part of it all too.

After another Astronomy Club night, the old lady kept a thoughtful look on her face as she slowly prepared a meal for Cadenza.

"You know, Cadenza, the Astronomy Club speaker said that our planet would be a very different place if people looked up into the sky more. Perhaps then the budget for defense and the budget for space exploration would be switched. The sky gives us a small inkling of what we humans and animals are connected to. I think I know what the worst punishment for me would be. I heard that there is a maximum security prison for the worst of the worst -- the people who are going to be there until either their death penalty is carried out, or they leave the prison feet first. It is in a remote area surrounded by very beautiful mountains.

The location is 5 star, like Alcatraz island with an ocean view of a city they can never get to. The prisoners in the one surrounded by amazing mountains under a deep blue sky never get to even see the sky. It is purposely covered so that our worst of the worst offenders only get to see dull concrete all around and above them. To be in a place surrounded by uplifting, magnificent nature and yet never being able to see it is worse than making greyhounds go round and round chasing after uncatchable rabbits.

If I weren't executed, I'd die of depression in that jail. I wonder how many of them had noticed the sky when they had the chance."

Chapter 7

It was cooler than usual for a spring evening. While the old lady read a book, Cadenza watched the old lady's face intently. She now knew that expressions on the old lady's face could tell her what emotions the old lady was feeling. Because the old lady looked sad and nostalgic, she guessed the old lady was upset. Slowly, thoughtfully, the old lady spoke.

"Aha, this might describe me -- 'a wanderer between worlds and between identities embodying the

great Israeli social and cultural chaos.' You know I balked at the word absorption when I lived in an absorption center as a new immigrant to Israel. Absorption. It's just a word, but it certainly can change everything. I was already 40 years old, and an independent-minded American middle-aged woman, ready to learn, but not 'absorbed.'

I've lived in many countries, but only Israel wanted to absorb me. It did it in both obvious and subtle ways. Like the U.S., Israel is a land of immigrants coming together from many countries. But Israel has something deeper to offer because it is the homeland for Jewish people. Israel does not offer citizenship unless you are Jewish -- or you are an Arab who ended up still living on what became Israel. Being Arab-Israeli is kind of an oxymoron. It's so complicated in Israel, but especially for Arabs who were pushed off their land and may have Israeli citizenship, but no kinship, love, or allegiance to Israel.

I learned about 'Oriental' Jews in Israel. No, they were not Chinese in any way. But many Jews from middle-eastern countries like Morocco, Egypt, Yemen came to Israel because they could feel better there as Jews. But the European Jews who already lived in Israel did not whole-heartedly welcome the middle-eastern newcomers. I had read about their sad years in Israel trying to find a way to fit in. Although I wasn't in Israel when the influx of middle-eastern Jews came in, I was in Israel for another large influx of newcomers -- the Ethiopian Jews. I saw first hand similar problems in their absorption, with the added burden of being black and third world.

My 5 years in Israel were extraordinary in so many ways. But, in the end, I left Israel. Those years in Israel affected me greatly, but I guess I could only be partially absorbed. As the director of the absorption center put it, 'When you speak of Israelis, you say they. When I speak of Israelis, I say we.' But not a day goes by that I don't miss Israel. It will always be my homeland even if I never go back."

The range of the old lady's emotions was wide. Cadenza was never quite sure in what state the old lady would come in the door. On this day, she burst in enthusiastically.

"Ah, Cadenza, I went to a wonderful place today. I wish you could have been with me today.

Gambol - I love the word gambol. I very rarely wish to be younger, but today I would have given anything to gambol around the beauty of the place I was in. Alas, I had to do my best to enjoy it with an old person's body. I volunteered to be Johnny Appleseed's helper today. I made seedballs with hundreds of little seeds, dirt, clay and water, and then gaily threw them upon the newly made creekbed to one day hopefully take root and birth a plant.

The day was California gorgeous. Pretty puffy white clouds and an incredible blue sky were our ceiling. The very alive green mountains surrounding the canyon were the walls that gently hugged all that was within. The brown of the earth strongly grounded our floor. The wind whispered endearments to the shining leaves as it passed through. Only the wind and the songs of birds broke the silence.

In such a place and time, there is so much I do not understand. I would prefer to be a bird or a breeze or a rock so I could speak the language of nature. I am human, and I am a part of nature, but I feel inferior because I can not speak bird, rock, grass, cloud, sky. And so I was left to imagine a more agile me gamboling along the creek bed with Johnny Appleseed by my side."

On another day, Cadenza happily went over to the door when she heard the key in the lock. She was

happy to see the old lady, and vice versa. After the old lady drank two cups of water, Cadenza waited patiently without any idea what the old lady would say. Cadenza rather liked the suspense.

"I'm really glad to be home. Whew! What a ride on the bus coming back from the beach. Going down to the beach doesn't seem to be quite the adventure as coming home. There's always crazy people on the bus riding back to the homeless shelter. Some are drunk, or on something. They sometimes have just about all their belongings with them in a laundry cart or some kind of carrier, and they often wear really heavy coats -- most likely they wear them so they don't get stolen. A very tired older lady had a blanket wrapped around her and she looked downright sick. Tonight one guy had an army camouflage outfit on with a work apron down the front filled with pockets and small tools. He hefted an army duffle bag over his shoulder that either had everything he owned in it, or maybe it was filled with aluminum cans to turn in for money. But he didn't get off at the homeless shelter. He got off quite a ways past the shelter, took down his bike from the bike rack in the front of the bus, and rode off somewhere.

Two guys started out with greetings of 'Bro this, and Bro that' and it deteriorated into a loud, cuss and insult filled tirade. When the cussing went way over the line, the lady next to me told them to watch their language because ladies were present. These aren't gang teens with f-- this and f--that. They're mostly middle-aged and old mentally ill people who used to be kept in mental institutions. But many mental health institutions and programs shut down years ago and the streets absorbed them. Hard to know whether those unhappy institutions were better or worse homes than the streets and homeless shelters.

When I was taking the bus regularly on a weekly trip to my volunteer job down at the beach, I once had a bus driver who was interesting and talkative. He told me that he had been homeless for awhile. He wasn't mentally ill, but needed some time to get his credentials together for driving a bus. He more or less planned the time he needed to be homeless and used it to go to public places that gave him some sense of safety and even privacy. He was kind to the people down on their luck and often let them ride for free without a hassle. And he was the only bus driver who saw that I had to cross the busy street where there was no crosswalk or light. So, he'd block the traffic behind the bus by stopping in the middle of the lane and waiting until I crossed in front of the bus. He was a really nice young man with a good heart.

We sometimes talked about a young man who'd get on the bus with a small parrot on top of his hat. For awhile, I thought the parrot was just a bizarre prop, but it was real. The bird had flown to him while he was sleeping in some bushes and they had become friends. The bird sat quietly on his head as he walked. The young man said the bird would cuddle into his neck while they slept outside. I love touching stories about animals and humans, don't you? Well, unfortunately the bus driver told me that the parrot had flown away one day and didn't return. I can only imagine how sad the young man was. I would certainly be sad if you left me.

One thing I've noticed about the crazies on the bus is that they usually like to talk a lot -- whether or not anyone is listening. One man once started talking to me while we were waiting for the bus. I think he asked me for a cigarette. He then started talking and talking and talking -- a monologue of sorts during which he even changed voices. He was speaking English, but it didn't make much sense. There were some famous names thrown in, and no swear words except for some bathroom humor. I could only imagine that he had one time been a commentator because his diction was exceptionally clear. In some

ways, he actually reminded me of dear Percy who rarely stops talking. I think it is Percy who has made me more aware of how painful it can be to be somewhat mentally ill.

I do have empathy for the crazies on the bus. I respect them because I seriously doubt I could survive situations they have had to endure and overcome. But I was still very glad when it was my turn to get off the bus.”

Cadenza particularly liked the times the old lady came home from her humanities classes. Then their walks usually took on a thoughtful, contemplative tone.

"Cadenza, my teacher told us a lot more about his father during today's lecture. Now at the age of 73, and after a very dramatic experience suffering a heart attack, he feels he is finally coming to a point of gratitude for what he feels his father taught him. But it has obviously been a very difficult mass of experiences that led up to how he accepts his father now. His growing up years with his dad were sad, scary, and complicated. But, the dire description of his father's growing up years could have easily been a child character of a Dickens orphanage -- a truly terrible childhood. Mother dead, father abandoned him at 8 -- to live or die. Growing up and surviving basically on his own, my teacher's father didn't have much warmth to offer his own children. In fact, my teacher came out of a four-day coma from his heart attack and bypass surgeries to save his life with a very alive memory of one of his scariest moments of childhood. Finally he was able to thank his father posthumously for encouraging him to be a survivor.

What did my mother teach me? My upbringing certainly wasn't as traumatic as my teacher's, but I must also thank my mother for two indelible lessons in life. My mother was a grumpy, unhappy person who suffered from something with the strange name of anhedonia -- the inability to feel pleasure. It wasn't a disease that was recognized as such, so she was just like that Andy Capp character in the comics who went around with a raincloud over his head. Hard to live with, impossible to please. And a strong life message in there for me in some primal way was I knew I could never please her. I extended not being a people pleaser to the rest of the world.

The other important part of what my mother taught me was more subtle. Other than her pessimistic personality, my mother was never truly fulfilled -- as a woman, as a wife, as a mother, as a person. She somehow passed on her ambivalence about doing one's duty to me. I ultimately chose the path to independence and self-fulfillment instead of a lifelong commitment to love and family.

What would my mother's life have been like if she hadn't stuck to what her mother taught her about duty? In fact, she never forgave my grandmother for going crazy instead of doing her duty by following my grandfather where she didn't want to go. My mother must have felt quite cheated -- following her duty and then seeing her model mother couldn't do it.

I can tie that day to a 12 year old's traumatic memory of my parents relentlessly pulling my grandmother down the stairs of my home while she screamed, 'No, don't make me go. Don't make me go.' They put my hysterical, crying grandmother into a car, and took her away. I didn't understand any of it at the time -- nor for years afterward because those were the days you didn't tell kids what was really going on. My grandmother was never quite the same after those shock treatments at the mental hospital.

Chapter 8

Reading was definitely one of the old lady's favorite pastimes. Since the old lady's face didn't change much while she was reading, Cadenza had to wait patiently for the old lady to share her thoughts. Cadenza guessed that reading helped the old lady sometimes go deeper into herself, and at other times stretch her mind and think beyond her own experiences.

“Cadenza, this author, Tao Lin, writes of young Paul who, although young, is so much like an old person leaking energy. To relieve his boredom, he takes drugs. But not only does he take drugs, he videotapes and writes books while on drugs. Listen to this escapade with a girlfriend.

'They decided to film MDMA in Whole Foods, then getting off an uptown 6 train four stops early by accident, they decided to go to Times Square instead of Central Park. They rode the Ferris wheel inside Toys R Us, then discovered that on MDMA they could easily speak in an unspecific, aggregate parody of (1) the stereotypical intellectual (2) most people in movies (3) most people on TV with a focus on newscasters and National Geographic-style voice-overs. They termed this manner of speaking (almost the opposite, especially for Paul, of the quiet and literal and inflectionless voice they normally used to speak to each other) the voice, using it, in Barnes and Noble, with high levels of amusement and stimulation, to feign egregious ignorance, improvise seemingly expert commentary on specific objects, excessively employ academic terms and literary references.'

“Maybe this is the modern version of the deep melancholy in the 1960s song, Sound of Silence, but I find it an even sadder parody on joyless, meaningless living. I agree with a reviewer that 'Tao Lin skillfully describes his main character's boredom with life until we ache for the nothingness inside Paul. The over-the-counter, as well as illegal street drugs, seem to do nothing to excite his boredom into anything beyond a lack of just about everything in his unending ennui.'

I, a traveler who coveted all the aspects of living in other cultures, recently read an article about a new breed of 'extreme' travelers who set ridiculous goals for themselves during their years of exploring the world. Instead of finding meaning in close contact with other forms of nature, animals, and humans, these travelers set stupid, useless challenges for themselves – like never changing their shirts and, of course, videotaping it all and posting it on social media. Tao Lin's character Paul would most likely understand these extreme travelers who must go further and further into absurdity to feel anything.”

But sometimes the old lady got really excited while she was reading and couldn't wait to read to Cadenza cozily coiled on her lap. Such times usually involved nature or animals. She was particularly fond of Joe Hutto who had once been a wild turkey. Books hooked the old lady more than movies, so when she saw a documentary called 'My Life as a Turkey,' it led her to read Hutto's book, 'Illumination in the Flatwoods.' Actually, several evenings were spent reading it. The flatness of Tao Lin's life view disintegrated as Hutto lived with his wild turkeys.

“Without a single word or thought of judgment, I am transported into another world of experience, and at times I am overcome with the distinct realization that I am sharing a singular experience with these wild creatures. I feel as though I'm seeing the world through their eyes, as though I am witness to their

vision of the world.

And theirs is a vast world, where boundaries become indistinct, margins are vague, and edges, borders, and identities become obscurely woven into an elaborate tapestry of interaction and interconnection. Here, each thread is held in place solely by the grace and virtue of its orientation to all the others. It is a world where entities dissolve and exist as indivisible connections within an intricate network of fundamental relationships.”

When the wild turkeys he had hatched as lovingly as the biological mother they had been deprived of, he had to let go and give them the independence they demanded. While the old lady read the last pages of the book, Cadenza felt gentle teardrops fall on her fur.

“Some weeks have passed since I last saw Turkey Boy and many months since I have seen any of the others. Every day I walk slowly up toward the forest along the old roadbed and look for signs; I see fox, coyote, two raccoons, several armadillos, a few crows collecting grit, beetle tracks, ant lions, a slender-bodied snake – probably a coach whip – but no turkeys. I know April is a busy time for them. Perhaps later there will be an opportunity for a brief encounter. I can feel them pulling me. Somehow I can still feel our attachment – some luminescent thread, a sort of articulation of the spirit – and I know in their own way I am still a part of their experience.

Perhaps one day a seasoned and wary old bird will answer and come to my call, and as he stands cautiously observing, he remains for a moment longer. I might observe a crooked toe or a mandible that imperfectly occludes or receive a subtle message conveyed by some language that we both understand, but cannot speak, and I could say: 'I know you, old friend. I recognize you by your iridescence, our incandescence, your illumination – I recognize you by your loneliness – you must be my brother.”

There was the rare occasion when the old lady actually preferred the movie version to the book. That had happened with “The World According to Garp,” and “The French Lieutenant's Woman.” It also happened with “The Martian.” She explained it to Cadenza during their daily walk.

“I usually prefer a book version to its movie version, but not always. Such is the case with the newly released movie, 'The Martian.' I read the book over a year ago. Even though I am not in the least a technical person, I couldn't put the book down until I finished it. What made the book even better was that it was written by a first time author, Andy Weir, who had been turned down by several publishers. So, he self-published. And the book quickly soared up to a best seller. Of course, then the publishers wanted it. And then came the movie deal -- and now the movie. I absolutely love success stories of self-published authors making it BIG!

Since the reviews of the new movie are quite good, I went to see it. Although two hours seems to be my tolerance limit for watching movies, the 2 hours and 22 minutes were put to good use. Even the author said that the visual impact of the movie is greater than can be described just in words. Matt Damon catches the humor of his unenviable situation of fending for himself on Mars for over 500 days. His calm pursuit of staying alive while coming up with ingenious techniques of survival keep the audience's attention while NASA officials scramble to help him stay alive and bring him back to mother Earth.

While this movie was not filmed on Mars, and does have some inconsistencies with reality (the radiation on Mars does not allow long walks even in a spacesuit, and the wind on Mars is very weak because of its atmosphere), it comes off as remarkably plausible. Mars, mostly filmed in Jordan, is hauntingly beautiful, and the artistry of how he gets rescued at high speed in space is a true tribute to the writer's imagination, the movie maker, and what we already know about space travel.

But prior to going to Mars, I went into a store near the theater. It was called 'Gaming' and I had no idea what that meant other than Las Vegas gambling. I saw three rows of young men and boys with earphones on sitting in front of computers. Occasionally, one of the older boys would yell out something, often including swearing, to encourage the other players. Everyone's screen had the same video on it.

It looked like what we see on our tv evening news covering Iraq, Afghanistan, ISIS, or any other war. I thought of the early Pac-Man computer games where a simple round blob with a mouth tried to gobble up whatever it could as fast as it could. Now the blob shapes have become images of people, but the purpose is still to kill as many as quickly as possible.

There were also very large screens with sofas in front where two people comfortably sat while hitting buttons that killed other types of images. I'm sure there is some skill involved, but I prefer the excitement of the old pinball machine I played over and over in my grandfather's rundown old hotel many years ago.

I quietly watched the players, and then spoke to the person in charge to try to understand the attraction of the strange new world I had wandered into. I can't claim I really understand either gaming or Mars. However, of the two worlds I visited last night, I prefer Mars."

Chapter 9

The old lady watched a spider as it walked across the countertop.

"Every time I see a spider at someone else's home, I can hardly get out 'don't kill it' when it is squooshed beyond recognition. People always say they just can't stand spiders. When I tell them about 'Charlotte's Web' and how great spiders are for the ecological balance, people look at me as if I'm from Mars. But I don't have to love 'Charlotte's Web' to not kill spiders. I enjoy seeing spiders in my home. If I see a spider in my shower, I carefully remove it with a small container I keep just for that purpose so the poor thing won't drown. Then, I take it outside to reunite it with nature. People think that's very weird.

The same visceral reaction that people have to spiders is what happens in racism. With or without any particular reason, one fears or hates the other in a way that particularly gets young black men killed in America by white cops. The white cops are usually not charged in the murders -- even if there happens to be an uncontestable video of the whole event. There's no sense to it. Calls go out for body cameras on policemen and targeted training for police in how to handle volatile police/black men situations.

The first policeman I got to know was Dick. I was 6 years old. We chatted every day when he stopped traffic on a busy road so I could cross to get to my grammar school. I remember his name because I got him a handkerchief for his birthday with a big 'D' on it, but my mom told me it should have had an

'R' because Dick was the nickname for Richard. I grew up believing that policemen were my friends. But I eventually outgrew that naive general belief.

The same policeman who walks a child or an old lady across the street can also be brutal and violent. I'm not sure how much they start out honed for violence. But even with my limited work experience as a social worker, I can tell you that one's vision of the world gets really skewed when you have to deal daily in the dark world police do. 'How are black men and apples alike?' is a joke making the rounds of policemen. The answer, 'They both hang on trees,' is definitely insensitive. What can a couple of days of police training do to change that?

Whether insect or human, evolution has some influence in sticking with one's own kind. And I'd have to say that that may also be one of the fatal flaws we humans succumb to. If it isn't color, or culture, or country, something must always divide us. An elementary school teacher showed that in a simple experiment with her class. She divided the students into something as obvious and unimportant as blue eyes and brown eyes. Soon, the students showed the same we/they prejudices of racism. A famous Stanford experiment of dividing classmates into prisoner and guard had to be called off because the make-believe guards became so abusive to the make-believe prisoners.

Humans will be arguing nature vs. nurture for as long as there are humans. But techniques like gene editing, and repurposing the HIV virus to cure cancer cells are only a small part of how blurry the lines will become between human and artificial intelligence."

The next afternoon, Cadenza wasn't sure just who or what the old lady was talking to so animatedly.

"Ok, computer, I loved learning new languages long ago, but talking to you is another matter indeed. You keep changing the language while I'm still playing catch up. Thinking like you means not doing what I think, but what I think you think. So, let's go. I've called the shuttle bus service I will need to get to the airport and finally, finally talked to a lady who said I would have to go online to get the discount code since, for whatever reasons, she can't provide it on the phone. Can't be too hard, hunh? Here's the website. Well, I can't get a list of discount codes, so I'll try filling out a reservation form and put in AARP where it says group discounts. There! No, an error message came up after putting in all those numbers. Wait! Where it says, 'final destination,' I put in my final destination of Boston, but the plane I'm taking to Boston isn't the one I'm leaving on. I have to connect in Atlanta. Does the computer care that I'm making a connection? Probably not. But why does it say 'final destination?' Well, I'll call again. This isn't working. I'll die of old age before I get someone live again. Well, how much could the discount be anyway? Back to online and I'll give up the discount just to be sure I can make the reservation 24 hours in advance (do they still have that 24 hour in advance rule online too?). I never know whether to add my apartment number to my address, but they have a place after the address for the unit #. I'll put it there. Oh, no. When I pressed all the buttons, added my credit card numbers, and cast it into stone, the page they sent me for confirmation put the 'D' in some strange place after my city and state part of the address. But I can't seem to go back, and if I do it again, I'm just sure I'll get charged all over again. Well, for better or worse, I think I'm done. What? It says my session has gone over 20 minutes, so they're closing my session for security reasons. Does that mean that I made a reservation, or didn't? Well, here's a webmaster e-mail address where it says I can ask my question. Great! It says to allow 3 to 5 days for an answer. And I'm leaving in a day. Should I try calling a live person again? I know they are rudely weaning the public from live people for doing anything. But I can't speak computer!! Oh, no! On the print out I made, I noticed I put the wrong date

for the shuttle. Why did I do that?? What can I do about it now? I'll try calling again. Wow! Someone answered pretty quickly. Is that because I pressed the phone for 'to cancel a reservation' rather than 'to make a reservation.' No wonder I found my mother screaming hysterically into the phone many years ago yelling at a robot on the phone who demanded she make a decision which number to press. I'm pretty close to getting hysterical myself after all this time and fuss just calling a damn shuttle to pick me up in the middle of the night so that I can wait hours for my plane in the airport. So, so very glad to talk to a live person who straightened it out so easily. Oh, she also said she can see my unit #. I don't know why it doesn't appear on my printout. Boy, I'll never know what it's like to prefer doing things on a computer to talking to a live person. How sad that is. This is exhausting! I'm going to bed. Hope I can convince my old-fashioned, last one of its kind CD player to play a soothing tune."

Chapter 10

The old lady came back home the next evening and absentmindedly put some dog food into Cadenza's bowl. She patted Cadenza and sighed.

"I wonder what the world would be like if dogs were in charge. Humans aren't capable of running the world. It's 100 years since World War I and I couldn't even count all the wars before and since then. Are humans too simple, too complex, or too stupid?"

The old lady hadn't eaten much in the past few days. That was unusual. Cadenza also noticed the old lady turned on the news several times a day and looked disgusted, sad, and droopy at what she listened to. One time Cadenza saw water coming out of the old lady's eyes.

With daily contact between them, Cadenza had begun to observe more detail in the changing moods of the old lady - how she walked, how she talked, how her eyes changed, what she said, and what she didn't say. It was slow, and it wasn't easy, but Cadenza was getting better at understanding this strange relationship she was in.

The old lady sat in her favorite armchair and sighed again. She motioned Cadenza to jump up in her lap and began to stroke her slowly. Cadenza waited patiently for the old lady to speak.

"You know, it was from a fresh-faced teenaged Israeli Arab girl that I learned the most about the Arab-Jewish mess in Israel. I was the only Jew living in an Arab-Israeli town working for a peaceful coexistence program. Yes, I was naive, but it was so much better to be doing something for peace even if it was a hope more than a belief it could happen. This teenager was one of the students I was helping to prepare for the serious Bagrut exam after high school in Israel. The class was voluntary, so no one was there who didn't want to be. For several months, the class had gone well.

I gave each of them the assignment to become Rip Van Winkle and tell the class what happened when they woke up after 100 years. The other girls had girlish stories about meeting princes. Then it was her turn. She did not hesitate. She said in perfect English, 'I got in my car and drove to Haifa. All the signs were in Arabic. The Jews had all left and given us back our land.'

The other girls gasped. I gave a short, nervous giggle. She was a teenager, my student, in my class voluntarily, without ever showing any animosity toward me. But that was the wish deep in her girlish

heart. In my heart, I felt the shattering of the little sliver of hope I had had for peaceful coexistence. You see, it wasn't the extremists of the first Intifada who bombed my car who taught me the depth of the hatred between Arabs and Jews in Israel. It was a young teenage girl without a gun, without a bomb, without violence."

On an evening soon after that, sitting on the old lady's lap felt different. She was watching a tv program. Cadenza wondered why the old lady wasn't petting her back like usual. Looking up at the old lady's face, Cadenza saw a faraway look in the dark eyes with the slowly growing cataracts. The old lady's face looked very droopy indeed.

And then the old lady let out a long sigh that opened up her mouth and allowed words to start.

"I loved so much about my life in the Arab culture. In fact, the town I lived in had Arab Moslems, Christians, and Druse living together. That was unusual. Coming from the U.S. and never having met an Arab, I had few pre-conceived ideas about Arabs."

The petting motion began on Cadenza's back, loosening the nostalgia that was inside the old lady.

"There was so much I loved about living in that little town. It was beautifully situated among rolling hills. And the narrow alleyways of the main part of the city were a maze of tiny shops. One place I loved made its own unique ice cream with unusual flavors that had no relationship to any other flavor of ice cream. The whole town had a quaint, rustic feel to it. The view I loved best was at the top of one hill a young Druse man first showed me. On it were the remains of a real castle. And close to my home there were even the ruins of an old synagogue that was dusty and untended.

Ah, the sounds of the village -- the call to prayer that I eventually learned to sleep through in the middle of the night, the clop of a donkey coming down my hill, the children playing, the sloshing of water every day as the women washed down their homes, and the thump-thump beating of the rugs hug out to air. It was so delightfully different from my tiny, claustrophobic home in Tel Aviv with continual traffic sounds. Here, in the Arab town, I lived in a very roomy, airy apartment with minimal traffic noise.

It was in this peaceful place, I had my first taste of teaching. At the request of the town, I set up voluntary English Clubs to help the students. English was a third language for them. They were taught in their native Arabic, but Hebrew and English followed. One of my clubs had high school girls studying English for a big exam. Another was for mostly 12 year olds, but some adults came also. Fun was the major -- fun for them learning English, and fun for me teaching English.

Just like on tv, the Arabs were true to their culture of superb hospitality. I never ate better, or more often. I couldn't visit the homes without having scrumptious food laid before me. I visited one neighbor family more than the others. While there were informal meals given to me, there were also family meals I was invited to. Afterwards, I would talk to the young woman in this Christian family who handwashed a mountain of dishes after each meal. What amazed me each time was how she would stack up all these dishes, glasses, silverware without anything falling over or breaking. She'd never let me help, but I was glad because I was sure I would topple her mountains of dishes.

I also spent a lot of time at a Druse family. We felt close because my birthday was the same as the

couple's anniversary. She was a young, very capable wife who made the most luscious fresh tabbouli every time I came over. Sometimes they took me with them on trips. Just like it was yesterday, I can see the families dotting a hillside on one side of a fenced, patrolled area using loud speakers to talk to families on the other hillside. This was how Druse families divided by war had to communicate with one another. Denied mail, denied phone service, denied crossing the border, periodic visits to the once- united Druse village was all that was possible for them. So, they found each other across the border with binoculars, sat on blankets and picnicked, shouted news of the family through the handheld speakers tour guides use, and 'visited' with one another.

There is so much pain in Israel. I am a Jew, but I understand the Arab side of how they have been dislodged and disenfranchised from their native land. And now, Cadenza, there is bigger trouble than usual for Israel. There are bombings again, cruel deaths and beatings of teenage boys on both sides, and my friend in Israel says she can smell a war coming.

I left Israel because I couldn't see an ending to the fighting and hatred between the Arabs and the Jews. When Mandela managed to turn South Africa around from confrontation to reconciliation, I fleetingly had some hope that that could happen in Israel too. When my car was bombed one chilly night in the Arab town, I was angry, but I knew it was not against me personally, but against a Jew. The narrator of this tv program is right. The Jews and Arabs, Semitic cousins really, 'are caught in a deadly embrace.'"

The old lady stopped, and Cadenza looked up at her. You couldn't call it love. And you couldn't call it sympathy. But Cadenza felt a stirring of something she had never felt before.

The old lady's mixture of memories mothering newly-arrived Ethiopian Jewish teenage boys in an Orthodox Jewish Israeli boarding school covered just about every emotion.

"My first vision of Israeli Ethiopians was sublime and surreal. Imagine this. We new American immigrants in Israel had been brought to Jerusalem for an event for new immigrants. The setting surpassed Hollywood because it was real. Bathed in the outdoor sun, high columns reached up into the sky from a stage. Between these old columns was the harsh beauty of an expansive true desert. New Ethiopian immigrants to Israel, with their beautiful brown faces contrasting with the long white robes they wore, were there in the audience with us. I am not religious, but it was absolutely biblical.

There were few things I missed in the U.S. after emigrating to Israel, but one of them was black people. Living in New Orleans for 3 years had taught me the true meaning of integration. The Israel I went to had Moroccans and Yemenites, and Jews from almost every country in the world, but here was the last piece that completed the Jewish puzzle -- truly Jewish black people. I decided then and there that I wanted to work in something that would get me closer to these Ethiopian brethren.

My chance came quickly when I attended classes at the same place some Ethiopian teenagers were learning Hebrew. Many Ethiopian Jewish teenagers had walked through the mountains out of Ethiopia before their families did it. They had waited in camps in Sudan for they knew not what. And eventually planes from Israel swooped down to gather them up and fly them into the night to not only a new life, but into a new world. At the school, I communicated with these teens through the English they had studied in Ethiopia, and the Hebrew we were all struggling to learn.

I was sitting in an office in Youth Aliyah asking if there could be some job I, an American-trained

social worker who spoke only basic Hebrew, could do with Ethiopians. As I sat next to his desk, the Youth Aliyah official got a phone call from an Israeli boarding school in Maalot pleading for a housemother to come to take care of Ethiopian teenagers who were new at the school. It had to be fate, kismet, whatever you want to call it. Of course, on the spot I said yes immediately and enthusiastically.

There were many new challenges for me. First of all, I was a secular Jew and the boarding school was religious. Could I learn to follow an Orthodox way of life that I would actually be living in at the boarding school? How could I adequately mother 60 teenage Ethiopians who were missing their own mothers and families? I was a rather new immigrant myself so I was also a newcomer to Israelis and their ways of doing things.

Attempting to mother these children was a challenge and an adventure. To some extent, I saw my own adopted mixed racial son in each of them. The planes bringing them to Israel had been time machines, catapulting these 3rd world children into a modern world with wonders such as alarm clocks and pop top tabs that opened cans of soda.

Unexpectedly, lice in their kinky hair became a bond between us as I worked to de-louse them. They had incredible night vision and could scamper up and down high hills like mountain goats. Rocks in their hands became extremely useful weapons that always hit their target, even in the hands of the boy that was cross-eyed. They chanted in their language, Amheric, as they roamed around the land of the boarding school.

But what I found most amazing was something I had never found in America -- blacks who had no sense of a color line. Persecuted in Ethiopia for being Jews among Christians, we white or olive-skinned Jews were their true sisters and brothers. We were part of the miracle of their coming to Israel -- for a very short time. My hope that the Israeli kids in the boarding school would accept them in the same way the Ethiopian boys were ready to love them was quickly crushed. I sometimes found myself uncomfortably wedged within rock fights between the two groups.

As time went on, the separation of Ethiopians and Israelis in the boarding school became more intense. The day one of my beautiful boys told me he wished he was white was one of the saddest days of my life. As the years went by, as the young and new Ethiopian children learned Hebrew, as they entered the Israeli Army as all Jewish Israelis must, the separation between the Jewish Ethiopians and the Israelis expanded and engulfed them all.

I was saddened, but not surprised when I saw on tv 20 years later that the Ethiopian Jews rioted against their Israeli brothers and sisters. Two Israeli policemen had been videotaped beating up an Ethiopian soldier. There was no apparent reason except racism. And it happens at the same time so many blacks in American cities are rioting against mostly white policemen because of unequal treatment before the law.

Yes, among the Ethiopian youngsters who angrily took to the streets of Jerusalem and Tel Aviv were the children of the same Ethiopian teenagers I had tried so hard to care for lovingly in that boarding school more than 2 decades earlier. Having seen the future so many years earlier only makes it harder and incredibly sadder to see it on the news now.”

Chapter 11

Summer was going by quickly. It was a night in August when the old lady called to Cadenza to come outside. The old lady brought out a small chair, motioned for Cadenza to jump up in her lap, and pointed out and up to a very big, very round, very bright moon.

"That's the Supermoon. Isn't it wonderful? It looks bigger because it's closer. What do you see when you look at it? The Chinese think there is a lady in the moon. Americans see a man in the moon. One year when I was leaving China, one of my friends told me the story of two people on either ends of the world who could feel close when they both looked at the same moon.

I was sad the first time I really searched the moon for what I could see. I had just one small window out my one small room in Israel. It was 1989 and I was sad because something terrible had happened in China. I was worried about my friends. As usual, I so wished I had a small balcony I could go out on. Instead, I brought a chair right up to the window and looked searchingly at the moon. I clearly saw the face of a man crying. His face reflected my own.

But, Cadenza, tonight I see a face I've never seen in the moon before. Maybe because it's such a bright full moon. It is a handsome young man's profile with two deep set eyes. Something is flowing gently out of his mouth. It actually looks like a wonderful drawing."

Cadenza's eyes looked up and scanned the bright, full moon. To the old lady, Cadenza looked excited.

The next day, Cadenza was eager to discover what the old lady would talk about on their walk. As usual, they headed for the creek. Cadenza hung on every word like a student trying to learn a new language. Somehow the old lady suspected that Cadenza actually listened to her babbling rather than the creek babbling.

"All animals have emotions, but it's only human animals that make them into movies, books, and plays. It's so surprising that there are basically so few human emotions, but they are written about in infinite ways. Why do we humans never get bored watching and hearing so many variations on so very few themes? Why are we endlessly fascinated by re-workings of stories of love, hate, anger, revenge, good, evil, happiness, sadness?

Emotions are often what attract us to photographs too. A Rolliflex camera that almost always could be found at the waist level of a nanny named Vivian Meier snapped literally hundreds of thousands of pictures as she, and often the children she cared for, roamed the streets. Her delight was in snapping the pictures since thousands of them ended up undeveloped and unseen until after her death. She also made up little movies.

What she got out of taking all these photos died her secret, but what people feel when these photos are posthumously exhibited is an awe of her keen sensitivity to what waited to be captured in the scenes and people she saw.

What benefits do emotions have? Is it the artistic creation that some are capable of that makes all this mishmash of emotions worthwhile. Yes, perhaps photographers, artists, writers, playwrights, songwriters are the interpreters and teachers of emotion that humans require. But, the nanny who led her charges on their well-photographed adventures, also had a darker side. All the sensitivity she could

capture in her photos did not help her become a more kind and understanding person to the young ones in her care for she could sometimes be quite cruel to them. How to explain such contradictions?

Oh, Cadenza. There are so many paradoxes to this big brain that turns us into obsessive navel gazers to try to understand ourselves -- as if that is possible."

With a sad little laugh, she continued.

"Beware. I have read that there are now tv stations just for dogs to watch when they're at home alone. I'm not kidding. I think we should be finding ways to make humans more like dogs instead of turning dogs into canine versions of neurotic humans taking anti-depressants."

A couple of days later, the old lady didn't rush to get Cadenza's leash.

"Cadenza, I'm sorry that I just don't feel like going out for a long walk. How about just a short one for tonight? I'm afraid the bogeyman has caught me tonight. It's happened before. I'll feel fine, even happy and carefree. And then I feel it creeping inside of me, infiltrating my body, my happiness. I know quite quickly that it is grief that the bogeyman has brought to slow me down a bit. It's happened before. As long as I live, I am vulnerable to that thick, heavy feeling of having lost people who were close to me.

The fall season is when it comes to haunt me, to remind me that my mortality is not far away. I think of the fall as the season of dying. That is the time of year when I feel anew the barrage of one death following another. They were not all old or in the same year, but they came in quick succession. My young brother, dear aunt, father, and son in October followed by my son's birthday in November, my mother's death in December just one day before my father's birthday. And then my brother's birthday. Of course, it's also the season of family holidays to remind me that I'm just about the last branch hanging on the family tree now.

I guess one can't live to be a senior without losing friends and relatives along the way. Every living thing must die, but it's still sad. I know that animals feel grief also. Plants are alive, but I don't know if they can feel loss or grief. Terrible pollution makes our water die. I know that many species of animals, insects, and plants become extinct all the time. Living parts of our planet die due to the nature of life and death, but more die by the abuse and carelessness of humans. When I listen hard, I can hear Mother Nature crying in grief for all the death around her that she cannot stop. I feel a kinship with Mother Nature in her grief. I, too, was a mother who lost her child."

The very next night, the old lady came in and turned on an old audio tape cassette. Cadenza's pretty ears perked up, the little white hairs dangling over the ear tips. But Cadenza couldn't make any sense of what she was hearing. The words weren't English. And the sound was so sad. It was more like crying, even keening. She had never heard anything like it before.

Cadenza looked at the old lady's face. Her eyes were closed and there was a recognition on her face of something both familiar and painful. Slowly, drops of water leaked out of the old lady's eyes and crawled down her face.

The music continued, and the tears turned into quiet sobs. Cadenza hoped the old lady would say

something. After the music was over, the old lady reached over to put Cadenza on her lap. Thankfully, the sobs subsided and the quiet voice of the lady explained.

"Death is probably the hardest part of living to accept. As everyone learns, I knew some day I would die. But understanding dying was a slow process in childhood. First there was the cat who had to be put to sleep, the dead birds found in the yard and buried in shoeboxes. I knew they were never coming back. There was a lot of death on television, but that was fake death just to make you afraid. My first grandfather died when I was two, so I had no memory of him. But, when I was in college, my other grandpa died. That was the beginning of the many ghosts who follow me around today. At first, it was those older than me. But then, there was my 46 year old brother and my 35 year old son. That was not nature's way, but it happened nonetheless.

I'm not sure which death it was that made me feel, really feel inside, what death was. There is a very personal, very existential isolation to death that cannot be shared. And when people you love die, they leave behind holes inside you. I wrote a poem that was how I expressed death. I don't write many poems, but this one just came to me at a time there was not a true death, but it felt like one. I wrote, 'Piece by piece, goodbye by goodbye, I die.'

Perhaps animals understand death better than we humans. I know that whales suffer grief, a kind of ant buries its dead, the usually noisy crows gather quietly on a tree to mourn one of their own, and then fly off without a sound. Some dogs curl up and die on the spot where their masters died. Oh no Cadenza, I don't mean that I want you to do that. But I wonder if you can feel desolation in the soul as we humans do. And although we are social beings, when being born and dying, I am only I.

Tonight is the Jewish holiday of Yom Kippur and remembering our dead."

The old lady continued to stroke her gently. Without warning, the old lady felt a jolt surge through Cadenza's body. It passed within a second. The old lady wondered what had happened, but Cadenza seemed to go back to normal.

Death hung around their home a while longer. The weather was getting colder. Now the old lady was putting on the heat in the evening. It made a cozy scene – the old lady with Cadenza fitting nicely in her lap. Cadenza liked to listen to the breathing patterns of the old lady. She could even tell if the old lady was tired or not by how she breathed.

Cadenza was concentrating on the old lady's breathing pattern when something changed. The breath became more erratic and the stomach she was laying on moved up and down. Was the old lady sick? Was she dying? Then came a vaguely familiar sound. It was laughter! The old lady's stomach bobbed up and down and the unmelodious sounds of loud laughter continued.

Laughter, and the humor that produced the laughter, totally mystified Cadenza. She had watched the old lady, and other humans laugh so hard, they turned grotesque with their mouths stretched wide and their teeth showing. If it weren't for the delight on their faces, one could think they were in pain.

Just what was this strange phenomenon called humor? Cadenza watched the movie on tv and tried to put together the laughter with what was happening on the screen at the time. It made no sense to her at all, but obviously it was clear to humans.

When the movie ended, and the old lady's laughter faded, Cadenza noticed a definite change in the old lady's face. Sadness replaced joy, but why?

The old lady began again to speak to Cadenza.

“Cadenza, I'm pretty sure you are happy sometimes, but is there some way for you to laugh? They say laughter is the best medicine, and I totally believe it. One reason is that laughter releases a hormone that makes a human feel good. But, if animals do laugh, they don't laugh in a way that humans can notice.

But if laughter is not possible for animals, does humor mean anything in the animal world? I was a teacher in many countries, and what I discovered was that humor didn't often translate well between different human cultures. I had to teach my students WHY something was funny in another culture because it wasn't funny to them. Humor was rather tricky stuff to communicate.

Tears can come from laughing very hard, but also from sadness. I'm very sure I once saw a giraffe in a zoo crying. I felt he was indeed very sad. Is sadness somehow related to laughter? Or is it the opposite side of laughter? Watching that actor just now made me laugh a lot. I've seen that movie several times and I always laugh. But after the movie, I felt very sad. That man made millions of people laugh for many years. And then he committed suicide. He could make others laugh and feel, but he felt too much to bear.

Another paradox of this strange human brain we're stuck with – some of the people who can make us laugh the most are the ones who drown in depression and despair. I can never laugh at his movies again without feeling sad when it's over because he felt too much to keep laughing.

Ah, that Stanford professor was so right. This big brain experiment is impossible!

Chapter 12

Cadenza felt some unusual excitement in the old lady that last night of October. She watched as the old lady put on a bright red wig, wide dungarees that were too big even for her girth, and a strange half mask with bats coming out of the top. She filled a basket with candies and got Cadenza's leash.

"Cadenza, don't worry. I feel it would be demeaning to you to dress you up in some dumb doggie costume even though I'm willing to look rather like a fool. So, I'm just going to bring you along as my Halloween sidekick, okay? There aren't any young people in our old people's community to come to the door and say 'trick or treat,' so we've reversed it and go out and give our neighbors a little piece of candy just because we love Halloween. They're always so surprised, and happy to see us.

Ah, the absolutely craziest one I ever had was the Halloween when my husband, my lover, and I tried to figure out how to resolve our threesome. In between the barking of the dog every time the doorbell rang, and giving out candy to the cute trick or treaters, we hashed through where our situation stood, and what to do about it. You see, I never intended to fall in love with anyone else because I still dearly

loved my husband, but I couldn't help it when Percy entered my life. I was drawn to him like a moth to a flame. It took me years to realize just how much I had needed him to change my life.

Loving two men was exhilarating because I was getting everything I needed that hadn't been in my marriage. And then, the excruciating pain of loving both of them began. I felt pulled in opposite directions -- to my husband, to my boyfriend, until I thought I would certainly break. And I almost did.

It was no secret. I was not the deceitful type. I was not only honest, but I truly felt that they were the cause, and they would have to help me figure out what to do. We had tried open marriage, but that wasn't getting us closer to any resolution. On that weird Halloween night, we three made the decision that I would move out of the house I shared with my husband, and move to a more permanent place of my own, taking whatever furniture I wanted. While I lived as I wanted, my husband's girlfriend (one of the grad students always waiting in the wings for a sadly misunderstood middle-aged professor) would move into the house.

My pain was not in losing some of my possessions, but in dividing into 'his' and 'hers' what had always been 'ours.' Our son would live with his father so he could attend the same school, and he would be able to spend as much time as he wanted with me.

My parallel worlds of loving two men had collided. I would never be the same. That Halloween night pushed me further along my path to independence. But it still took more years for me to arrive there."

After laughing all the way knocking on doors and giving out candy to neighbors, Cadenza and the old lady headed down to the usual creek. It was getting dark by the time they got there. Cadenza's attention had turned completely toward the old lady when something caught her eye. A coyote was lurking on the other side of the creek.

When the old lady saw the coyote, she froze. She tried to thaw her frozen brain into remembering what she had been told about making angry loud noises, throwing rocks, raising her arms to look as big as possible to scare off the coyote. The old lady knew the coyote didn't want her, so she firmly planted her feet and mentally prepared to stand her ground and protect Cadenza. But this coyote was big and hungry. It didn't back off.

The old lady's shouts of "go away" had just that little hint of "please." Cadenza knew the old lady didn't want to hurt the coyote. It was only doing what coyotes do, but the old lady planned to protect Cadenza as much as she could. She picked up a rock, but didn't throw it. The coyote looked past the distraught old lady and lunged at Cadenza.

In an instant, there was a noiseless "poof," and Cadenza was -- well, gone. It's hard to know whether the old lady or the coyote was more surprised. Without the tasty canine morsel in sight anymore, the coyote ran off. The old lady just stood blankly looking at the spot where Cadenza had been.

What had happened? The old lady shook her head back and forth several times as if to reassemble her brains. "Am I going senile like my grandma and aunt did?" she asked aloud. She sat down on the grass because she needed to ground herself to something solid.

The old lady woke up in her own bed. Had it been a bad dream, or the blackout of a senior moment?

The old lady went on as usual the next day, but several times she stopped what she was doing and just stared at Cadenza, perhaps wondering if Cadenza would go poof again. It had seemed so real, and yet so impossible. If this was dementia, what could the old lady expect next? The old lady didn't hug or cuddle Cadenza that day, or for several days afterward. She tried to fight it, but she felt afraid of Cadenza, her wonderful companion. Eventually, life almost seemed to go back to normal, but there were still occasional sideward glances at Cadenza.

Soon afterward, the old lady began to talk about aliens.

"I'm well aware that different generations diverge from one another in many, many aspects of life. Certainly, growing up in the tumultuous 60s strained my generation's relationship with our parents. But tonight I got the jolt of seeing two people in a tv interview who could easily have been aliens from another planet. And yet we both exist in real time at the same time on the same planet Earth.

How could it be that they looked like humans, but I couldn't relate to them at all? How could it be that they spoke English, but I couldn't make head nor tails out of what they were saying? How could it be that I can say I love music, but could find nothing but unpleasant chaos in the electronic music they produce?

How could it be that I can use a computer, but have absolutely no comprehension of how they put together electronic music with art and singing and animation, and ? and ? and ? And how can they do it all themselves without any experts or middle men on computers at home and put on concerts that fill Madison Square Garden?

Do animals have generation gaps? Do teenaged offspring think their parents are old fashioned? Do they rebel against their parents' ideas? Recently, I have become very aware of a growing generation chasm between we old folk, and younger people. It's not just a family phenomenon. It actually changes the direction of the whole society.

I'm sure such generational changes have always disrupted society, but NOW I feel like I no longer belong on this planet. Take last week for example. Admittedly, I live around a lot of old people in the retirement community so they are more like me. But, remember when my granddaughter came to visit?

I left my world for 4 days with my 17 year old granddaughter, her 21 year old cousin, and her middle-aged parents. I've told you how I've traveled to many countries and cultures different from my own, but even being the only foreigner some had ever seen in China never made me feel as alien as I did for those 4 days.

First of all, it seems people 'out there' have grown small machines on one hand or the other. The other hand uses its fingers as tools to flip the machine to what they want. No matter where we are, their vision is short-sighted because it's mostly turned to the machines in their hands. I may not know how to work those machines, but I know they are very clever machines. They call them smart phones because they are incredibly powerful little computers. But why do the owners of these smart machines need them so much? I have lived without one for over 7 decades and managed okay.

When I first went to China in the late 80s, cameras were expensive and rare. I liked taking pictures of

people who were having their picture taken for the very first time. The people got all stiff and unsmiling for the picture. It was serious business. As China got richer, people bought cameras. They took pictures not only of the beautiful scenery or expansive view, but of themselves standing in front of the scene. That always made me laugh. But now it's reached a new extreme, and not just of Chinese people. During our 4 days together, literally hundreds of pictures were taken just by three people of our group. And almost always, they were in the pictures too. Before we even left the spot, my granddaughter's mother had sent the photos all the way across the sea to relatives in China – and received replies!

Don't get me wrong. There was a time I loved taking pictures too. But I composed them carefully and didn't take hundreds. Of course, those were film days, but the whole quality and quantity of film-taking and choice of what to take was different. I even met another American teacher in Korea who never took a camera with her when we went to see the sights. I asked her why, and what she said made sense. 'I began to feel I was seeing every place, everyone, and everything through the narrow lens of the camera.' The camera came between her and the people and places she was seeing.

That way of thinking has become meaningless with smart phones. The ease of taking pictures, even taking selfies that put you foremost in every picture, feeds the voracious egos that humans have. And, if young enough, they assume the pose of a super model with hair flipping, hand on one hip, and one shot after another. But what do they actually see, hear, feel, and contemplate in the magnificence of the sunset, the beauty of the ocean, the symbiosis of a tree to the ground? Put together the smart phones and the super-sized egos of humans, and you have everything to excess. Nuance, depth, and solitude get buried and lost in the excess.

Some people, mostly older, tsk tsk with words like addiction, short attention span, ruining all hope of proper spelling and punctuation, growing inability to interact with people face to face, false closeness, the anonymity of being able to make up any persona you wish.

I think it's all that, but there's something else happening along with it. This planet I no longer feel I belong to has turned into the Planet of More. More pictures. More money. More room. More commercials. More clothes. More stuff. More everything.

I saw a white-haired guy being interviewed on tv last night who was pleading for meaning, dignity, and depth to be preserved in media. He had written for a famous magazine for over three decades and was proud of the quality. But a much younger guy had bought the magazine. He had upgraded it with his modern marketing skills to make it more relevant to his world of social media that he felt comfortable in. I was sorry for the old white-haired guy who felt the magazine's value, as well as his own, had been gutted. It's natural that old people and old ideas will die. But sometimes society is not the better for it.

Look, I really don't want to be judgmental. We idealists of the 60s meant well, but we did damage to society too. And how can I judge these smart machines that take everyone's attention when I can't even use them myself? They don't speak my language, nor I theirs. My life is ending. I wish the young people, and the world well, but I have become the alien who doesn't belong.”

She spoke about time warps.

“Cadenza, have you ever heard of time warps? I want to understand them better because the more I think things are changing, the more they feel like re-runs. I can tell that movie we saw on tv was not only an old movie because those actors are older now, but it was meant to take place in Los Angeles in a past decade.

But it could have been the news channel because the story of corrupt, inept, and dirty cops who kill black kids because no one cares is the same as today. Well, maybe not exactly the same because now it actually makes the news, is accompanied by a video, and ends up in large demonstrations.

The subject of today's humanities class was about evil. Some of the huge evil of genocide happened in the early 20th century. Another Holocaust came when I was a baby. And then there came ISIS beheadings. And now there is North Korea readying for a nuclear war.

There's evil on a grand scale because people are willing to do it, and there's individual evil that everyone may be capable of, depending upon the circumstances.

That reminds me of a play I saw in Israel before I had learned Hebrew. The theater was supposed to have headsets with translation, but somehow they weren't available that night. The name of the play was 'Mr. Good' and I knew the general plot was how a good man pressured by many circumstances became a Nazi.

The most powerful part of the play was wordless. On stage, Mr. Good slowly, deliberately put on a Nazi uniform. Piece by piece, Mr. Good became a Nazi soldier. They were the coldest and most chilling moments I have ever felt watching a performance.

Yes, what evil might I be capable of? Sometimes I think leaving my husband and son was evil because I put my needs above theirs. Can dogs be evil? Have you ever been evil?”

She spoke about dying.

“Cadenza, have you noticed how many people die in our living room every day? They die in the news. They die in movies. They die on tv shows. Some are just pretending. Some are actually dead. It's hard to tell the difference.

I've made it to 75 years without dying. There are soooo many things that could kill me. There are diseases of every type that could kill me. Sloppy drivers on the roads can kill me. If I had been a baby in Europe instead of the U.S., I would have died an ugly death at the hands of the Nazis, or in the bombings. There are many poisons that could kill me, both intentionally or unintentionally. I even heard of a whole family in a luxury hotel room in some exotic place who went into seizures and comas because a luxury room beneath them had been fumigated with a deadly pesticide. With all the planes I've flown in over the years, I could have been in a plane brought down by a crazed, suicidal pilot, or a strong typhoon. Living in earthquake country, I can be suddenly squashed like a bug.

No, nothing has killed me yet. But, I know the fate of all living things. Some day I will die. Perhaps in my own living room among the actors and real dead bodies from my tv. The one thing I know for sure now is that I can no longer die too young. I have managed, with luck, to survive all the maybes that could have killed me. I didn't worry much about those things. But I will tell you that I do worry I

will die a death I won't like. One that keeps me lingering long after my quality of life has left. I want to last just the right amount of time, and die quickly. My mom, dad, and brother managed to do that.

It is kind of like balancing on a tightrope -- their genes, my exercising to stay healthy, my unhealthily high cholesterol, my too labile blood pressure, my low heart rate, normal deterioration, meditation and not medication -- until poof, the end of it all."

Chapter 13

Death and dying wouldn't leave the old lady alone. The very next night, the old lady clicked off the tv with a sad thump of her finger.

"That's enough dead bodies in our living room today. This war, that war, crying people, beheaded people, dying people. Our home is filled with blood. Why? Animals kill each other for food, rarely for sport. Why do humans kill, kill, kill? Surely the big brain experiment going bust again.

There are some people who believe in peace, march for peace, proclaim in peace. But there aren't that many. And they don't accomplish much for long. Can the reason just be the testosterone factor? Women don't make war. I once read a short book on world history. It was a long list of wars. I read the English translation of a famous book in Chinese history. It was all about who was conquering whom. Very boring.

I'm coming to a conclusion in my old age that I don't want to come to. There are thousands of 'causes' in this world -- fighting for a carbon tax to lower pollution, equal rights, decent pay, against animal cruelty, against sex trafficking of young girls, on and on. Then there are some things that couldn't be eliminated completely. Drugs are bad if addictive and sold by mobs and cartels, but okay for recreational or medicinal use. Alcohol was a scourge on society, but Prohibition failed miserably. Now alcohol is accepted as okay in some places at some times.

What about war? It has apparently been around since humans inhabited the planet. Animal societies knew how to limit their aggression to limited purposes. Why can't humans? I'm coming to a conclusion I don't want to come to. War, not peace, is what is natural for human societies. The reasons for particular wars may vary -- political, religious, geographical, survival. But we haven't been able to rid ourselves of wars. Amazingly, we haven't blown ourselves off the planet either.

I heard of a new book called -- 'War! What Is It Good For? Conflict And The Progress of Civilization From Primates to Robots.' The author believes war has existed for some definite purposes, among them making the world a safer, richer place, with more complex societies. Intriguingly, the book apparently makes a case for war actually ending in the next half century when artificial intelligence and humans eventually merge and mix into each other. I found that idea somehow exciting. And it's true that artificial intelligence is getting smarter and smarter. Where can it end? Is merging plausible?"

The very evening after that, the old lady put down the phone and her face drooped. She sat in her chair and motioned to Cadenza to jump into her lap. Once again, the subject was death.

"Cadenza, another friend of mine has died. It isn't a tragic death. She lived a full life. Actually I felt that way about myself 5 years ago when I truly thought I was dying. I had fainted twice, my blood work was crazy, and the doctors didn't have a clue what was happening to me. Since I'm so rarely sick, and hadn't been hospitalized in many years, I simply decided that I was dying. And you know what I did? I smiled. I didn't feel afraid of dying. My smile was because I had lived what I considered a successful life on my terms, and I would die BEFORE running out of money! Yes, it truly was a happy smile.

Since I was in the hospital, I knew I couldn't make long distance calls. So, I spent several hours MENTALLY calling people I wanted to say goodbye to, and to thank them for the part they had played in my life. I truly did! And the person I wanted most to say "thank you" to was my husband. It was he who had loved me since I was 13. Because of him, I never went through the usual teenage fears of not being pretty, lovable, or loved. He had given me the security of being connected to someone in that special way. When I wanted the divorce, he knew how much I suffered making that decision. Unlike my parents, he didn't think of me as a mean, horrible traitor. On some level he understood that I had never stopped loving him. He's never seen it, but some years ago I bought a painting for my living room because it reminds me of that time. Every time I look at the young woman's face about to change the direction of her life, I can feel anew the mixture of pain and determination I felt then.

Although it wasn't the same as dying, I had two out of body experiences that perplex me to this day. One was when a car suddenly pulled out from the curb in front of my car. Even though I was sure I couldn't avoid hitting it, I swerved and everything went into slow, slow motion. I was aware of everything, but in a very different time frame. My friend in the car with me said later she definitely did not have the slow motion experience. That was the first and only time I entered another time zone. I've heard others say something similar when danger is near. What is the brain doing? I found an explanation many years later. It said that the brain can become overloaded with input and slows down so we can make sense out of the input. Since you can't convince me it didn't happen, that sounds as good an explanation as any.

Another time my brain took me on a different journey than the one my body was taking was during my divorce. Part of me must have wanted the divorce pretty badly, but in that moment I could feel my whole life tragically falling apart. I had pushed the divorce past the point of no return, and I knew it. While I lay on the floor screaming primordial screams, my distraught husband thought me totally hysterical and was slapping my face. My body lifted up to the ceiling and dispassionately watched the painful scene. Before my body and soul would disintegrate, I walked into the backyard and lay down in the dirt. The only thing that could hold me together was nature, earth, dirt. When I stood up, I filled my sweater's pockets with dirt and kept my hands implanted in those pockets. I was at least grounded to nature."

Still stuck in deathly thoughts, the old lady said quite simply one night,

"Ah, Cadenza, I really think I've lived too long."

Cadenza cocked an ear and moved closer.

"On the one hand, humans are progressing. Look at the way technology is stretching us past anything we even conceived of -- in both huge ways like space travel, and in little ways like sunglasses that can

tell you where they are. After years of fighting, there is more racial equality. Gays are able to legally marry in more and more states. People are getting browner and more mixed. On the other hand, not much has changed.

I was born in a war, followed by many more wars. Several hotspots for war exist now.

I've lived through it all before -- over and over. Round and round Earth turns on its orbit. Why don't we fall off the Earth as it turns? Why can't we find a way to live together? Is it testosterone that makes our Earth go round? What if we gathered all the testosterone on Earth and put it in a space capsule and sent it to outer space? Or, what if we sent all the humans to outer space and left nature and the animals on Earth? But the animal kingdom has lots of testosterone too. The survival of a species depends on testosterone of the male, and the love and caring of the females. Would dogs run the world better than humans?

You know, there's a button on the computer to delete and one to refresh. With so many planes crashing, nationalistic groups competing to see how far each can pee, and blood dripping in so many countries, how nice it would be to delete humans so the earth could refresh itself with less destructive life forms. Cosmic time is billions of years. That gives a perspective that a human's puny lifetime doesn't offer. Oh, dear. It's hard to maintain my attempts at Pollyanna-ish optimism when it's being beaten up by the violence, hatred, and deceit that's escalating in the world."

The old lady gave Cadenza her dinner, prepared some dinner for herself, and buried herself in a book. Cadenza sat quietly by her side. Could the more frequent repetition of the sad parts of living be a way to prepare the old lady for dying?

Chapter 14

Thankfully, the old lady briefly left death behind and moved far away into space.

"Ah, Cadenza. I've been thinking about the three generations of the tv program called Star Trek that have come out during my lifetime. What do they tell us about humans? That we humans are incredibly narcissistic? That we have a rather puny collection of emotions that we manage to mold into endless hours of entertainment? That we are a truly pathetic species that can devise bolder and bolder technology that goes nowhere and signifies nothing? And yet, we earnestly yearn to figure out the mystery of space, the last frontier.

We have numerous space programs for the purpose of finding out if there is other life somewhere out there. Why do we care? Are we so lonely with our billions of other humans on our own little planet that we must make up Klingons, Vulcans, androids, etc. to join us? I don't think you dogs spend any time on such thoughts.

The first Star Trek looks incredibly old-fashioned now with its immature renderings of sophisticated equipment to travel in space. Captain Kirk is dashing handsome, moral and loyal, with a generous dash of humor that humanizes him. The half human Vulcan Spock is wonderfully and efficiently logical, and yet still teaches us what it is like to be human.

It took me awhile to warm up to the android, Data, in the second Star Trek. But Data grew on me as he struggled so hard to be human and, in the meantime, also taught us how to be better humans. Jean Luc Picard was a different sort of leader -- clumsy about being emotional, but solid like a rock with morals. He had a refreshing equality and fair mindedness about him. Too bad about those uncomfortable jerseys the crew wore that kept riding up and had to be pulled down periodically.

And then there were the women. The first Star Trek dared to put a black woman as a key staff member. Unfortunately, she was dressed in revealing cheer leading costumes. The second Star Trek group of women was more varied, and more interesting. The early episodes also had them dressed more like leggy cheer leaders, but they thankfully outgrew them as the show went on. The woman doctor was pretty, yet competent, as well as being a widow and a single mom. The part human, part betazoid Diana offered a variation on the theme of an understanding woman who could see through your emotional defenses. And then there was a black woman bartender who served you just the right drink and gave you useful advice.

The third Star Trek, with a very glizzy and updated Enterprise spaceship, a constant use of special effects, a newer version of Spock (and alas, no post-Data), and an extremely intense younger generation of Captain Kirk, is true to changes in our society over the years. But, while the earlier Star Treks gave time to thoughtful musings, the new Star Trek is on full alert all the time. Their world is more dangerous than ever. Enemies abound and must be fought. There isn't a moment of peace and contemplation in the high adrenalin range their lives are stuck in. The rapid repartee and continuous edginess among the personalities in the latest Star Trek tires me out.

Everything is squarely 'in your face' as they seem to prefer today. Please let me off this Enterprise!"

The very next day, the old lady's mind had traveled back to Africa.

"Cadenza, I went back to Africa today. The movie I saw brought back so many memories of so long ago. And there I was with my husband and son on our last trip together running with the wildebeest -- well, in a jeep of course, watching the giraffe lift their huge necks high in the trees, seeing the hippos in the water with only their ears twitching above the water, enjoying being in the company of graceful gazelles, getting up in the middle of the night to see a strange assortment of animals coming to the same watering hole, wondering at the upside down baobab trees, marveling at how the vultures landed and took off. Oh, so sad that the Africa of those days had so many more animals than now.

And then there was Mombasa, and the island of Lamu where we stayed with a Moslem family because they had been good friends with someone I knew who had once come there with the Peace Corps. And their teenage son was just a little older than our son and he knew English and he took such good care of us. And we gave him our son's Mickey Mouse watch because it was a big deal to him. And we snorkeled in the Indian Ocean, and I spoke a few words of Swahili that I had learned.

And how can I think of Africa without remembering the Ethiopian boys I took care of in the boarding school in Israel. Like me, they were new to Israel and confused about everything. They and I spoke baby Hebrew together although they eventually learned much faster than I. And the swellings that popped up on their bodies that they finally used salt to cure. And the huge lice in their kinky hair that was such a job for me to wash out. And how they loved to chant as they walked. And how they wouldn't eat small fish because those had been poisonous in Ethiopia. And what it was like eventually

to spend Shabbat at the homes of some of them. And how I thought I understood them, but then learned the hard way I hardly understood them at all. And now I wonder how they are doing as middle-aged adults with your own children. And I still feel guilty that my fellow Jews in Israel never really accepted them because they were black. And they've had such a hard life in Israel when they thought it was their ancestral paradise."

Cadenza watched the animation of the old lady's face. The old lady's words were racing like a babbling brook that curved quickly from here to there going on and on. It was at such times that Cadenza felt the huge gap between humans and her alien species. Cadenza felt caught up in the excitement of the old lady's rolling words that went here, there, nowhere, making sense, and nonsense.

And Cadenza thought,

How much more interesting emotions make the world, but would we ever want the complications and confusion of feeling them?

On December 25 of the next week, the old lady came home early that evening and slowly prepared her dinner and something for Cadenza. As she put the dish of food down for Cadenza, the old lady winked at Cadenza.

"I know you don't really need food to sustain you, Cadenza, but somehow feeding you makes this very strange relationship more normal to me."

The old lady looked thoughtful and rather sad throughout their meal. Cadenza was finding it easier to tune into the old lady's moods and fully expected the old lady to explain more after dinner.

When all was eaten, cleaned up, and put away, Cadenza jumped onto the old lady's lap and quietly let herself be patted. Back and forth, back and forth. Gently. Quietly. Then, the old lady exhaled a very long sigh.

"Cadenza, this is Christmas Eve, and I want to tell you a true story. Once upon a time, there were two brothers named Timmy and Jimmy. Timmy was 19. Jimmy was 20. One day, Jimmy ran into the store where Timmy was working and excitedly yelled, 'It's war. We're going to war. Come now and sign up.' And off they ran to enlist. Not long after, the two fresh-faced brothers shared with their other young countrymen a very long trench in European dirt. Their excitement at being soldiers lessened as they saw the blood gush from every conceivable and inconceivable place within their comrades in arms. They were always hungry, cold in the bleak protection of the trenches, and desperately tired beyond what sleep could cure.

They no longer were sure why they were there. It all seemed so repetitive and useless. Their leaders in battle, not much older than they, were in turn kind and cruel, forcing them beyond what they could endure. Did those leaders understand any better than Timmy and Jimmy why they were all there shivering and hungry?

The day before Christmas Eve, there had been a particularly terrible battle. The commander of Timmy and Jimmy's soldiers had known before he sent his men out of the trenches that many of his men would either not return, or would be brought back drastically changed. Each time, before a battle, and without

being seen by his soldiers, the commander did something that made perfect sense -- he leaned over and vomited violently.

On that very cold, already lifeless winter day, Timmy was doomed to be one of the soldiers left bloody and dying outside the trench. Jimmy was inconsolable. How could he ever tell his mom that he hadn't been able to protect his little brother. For the rest of the war, Jimmy always wrote letters back home to his mom from 'we' and 'us' so she would not know Timmy would never be coming home.

That Christmas Eve was very quiet and still. The trenches of the soldiers from different European countries were ridiculously close together, mimicking how close their countries were geographically. And, while the dead bodies between the trenches gathered a layer of snow upon them, the remaining young soldiers back in their trenches began thinking longingly of loved ones, festive lights, decorated trees, delicious food, and much happier past Christmas days. Their combined pain and loneliness stirred something reasonably impossible.

The Scottish soldiers had not left their native Scotland without a few bagpipes. One soldier shouldered his bagpipe and began to play a Christmas song known to mostly everyone in those trenches. And that started a minor, spontaneous miracle. Slowly, tentatively, the soldiers who had been killing each other just the day before, began to emerge from their trenches -- without their guns and weapons drawn. Other bagpipes joined in. A concertina. A harmonica. And their voices - in French, in American English, in British English, in German - filled the air. A minister among them led a simple, beautiful Christmas Eve service made more poignant by the starkness of where it was held.

The young men began to mingle, to talk, to show photos of their wives, girlfriends, children. Hoarded national culinary delicacies were brought out to share. Some even exchanged addresses with invitations to come visit when the war was over, when the killing stopped, when they could be almost as carefree young men as before. You see, they all knew that the war was temporary and their countries would be neighbors again. It had happened before in other times. It would happen again.

The dead, literally freezing bodies of their brothers and comrades littering the area around them beckoned to be buried -- each in a resting spot of dirt of his own beneath the snow, then marked respectfully to say each had once existed as a live and vital young man.

On Christmas Day, a few of the soldiers brought out soccer balls and the games began. It was a Christmas unlike any they had had before. And yet, it was somehow vaguely normal and not so different from the fun and camaraderie of other Christmases they had lived. That's what made it so very special.

Actually, this true story was repeated in various other places and among other soldiers in other trenches during World War I when the soldiers stopped killing each other and declared their own Christmas truce. Perhaps they had been bewitched. Perhaps it was mass hysteria.

And perhaps it was a sign of normalcy amidst the madness of war.

For, in understanding humans dear Cadenza, the insane repetition of war after war after war in all the years humans have existed from ancient time to the present is perhaps the fatal flaw that will destroy all humans and totally remove them from our planet Earth.”

The following Wednesday, the old lady rushed into the house and immediately sank into her chair.

"Whew! It's so terribly hard for me to get up early, but it was worth it because I got to go into one of the most advanced planetaria in the U.S. - maybe the world. The astronomy teacher in charge was bursting with energy and excitement. You could tell she doesn't drag herself to work every day.

Well, she made all our seats recline and proceeded to wow us with what virtual reality can do on a planetarium ceiling. Wish I could understand more, but the two things that definitely impressed me were being inside the colorful Crab Nebulae and then flying over real pictures of Mars. Closest I'll ever get, but there is truly a plan already taking candidates for a human settlement on Mars. Those who go will not come back. Doubt I'll live long enough to know how they fare, but how wonderful that there are still explorers on earth who want to go elsewhere in our galaxy.

You know, Stephen Hawking believes that other life forms - true aliens - would most likely immediately kill us humans. Another famous scientist said that the reason we haven't knowingly been contacted by aliens is that our society is just developmentally too low to notice -- kind of like an inconsequential insect not interesting enough to pay attention to. The first time I ever knew that there were scientists whose whole career was how to make contact with alien life out there was long ago when I went to a Stanford Faculty Wives lecture series. I don't think I quite believed the speaker. But now I do. There's actually a kind of sad desperation in humans to discover we are not alone in the universe. Being alone terrifies humans.

The astronomy professor told us a funny story. After the Northridge earthquake, people called to ask how the earthquake had affected the stars. They had never been able to see so many! We are so used to our lifestyle, the callers never thought that the downed power lines after the earthquake made the night sky light up. A few times in my life, I've been amazed at how many stars I could see. Camping in gorgeous National Parks was one way to brighten up the stars in the sky. Waking up in the middle of the night on a camping trip in the Sinai in Israel with nary even a village around was a thrilling reminder of how many stars are sprinkled out there. And, from the tiny sandy island I stayed on in Fiji, the night sky over the ocean lapping at the front of my little hut was not only incredibly full, but had the very impressive bright Southern Cross I can't see from the U.S.

Oh, Cadenza, I had the most fabulous time today at the planetarium. I wish you could have been with me."

Cadenza felt a little thrill of could it be excitement? run through her. *Maybe she's getting ready for me to tell her.*

Chapter 15

Their relationship had been subtly changing ever since the day the coyote had appeared in their lives. That a coyote had definitely appeared, the old lady was sure. What had happened after that alternated between crystal clear and very foggy to the old lady. But what was the next step? Neither the old lady nor Cadenza knew.

Cadenza was becoming more tuned into the old lady's thoughts and feelings. But one day, the old lady

heard something on the news that elicited an "Oh no," and then nothing more. There had been so many troubling news reports recently that kept the old lady rather depressed. The old lady looked shocked and saddened, but said nothing. The old lady was so prone to pouring out her thoughts and feelings to Cadenza that the silence mystified Cadenza.

What could she, should she, do about it? Cadenza knew how to do it, but she had been strongly warned that it should be used sparingly. The human brain was a rather delicate, intricate piece of machinery.

As the old lady slept that night, Cadenza silently probed her mind. Cadenza found parts of the brain activated that related to sadness, and even deeper. She found activated memories of the old lady's brother dying unexpectedly at the age of 46 and the old lady's anger and fear of that time. She saw the brain connect to grieving, mourning, an unidentified sense of loss. A kind of hole that interfered with being whole. And Cadenza knew that death was bothering the old lady. But it was not her death. It was other troubling deaths that should not have happened.

Audubon's elegant, very precise rhapsodic paintings of so many birds in nature appeared in the old lady's mind just as she had seen them on a recent visit to the Huntington Library. But Audubon had fallen so deep into the hole of depression that he ended up prematurely with dementia and died young. He had once been sustained by his obsessive wanderings to paint his precious birds, but even within 20 years, he knew that humans were dramatically changing nature beyond its ability to repair. The death of nature as he knew it even in those days was more than Audubon could bear.

The next night, Cadenza was in her own form of dreamland when she heard the old lady turn off the news with a worried kind of sound. Cadenza detected a certain tension in her voice when she started talking.

"It must have been 1966 or so when I was waiting outside the office where I was working waiting for my father-in-law to pick me up after work. All was as usual as I waited on the sidewalk until -- the streetlights went out. And I mean ALL the street lights went out. Of course, the lights from the cars were still on, but nothing else. My father-in-law picked me up and we heard on the news that the lights were out all the way from Massachusetts up through New York. No one knew why. I couldn't feel any sense of panic around me. Some drivers voluntarily got out of their cars to direct traffic.

I didn't feel any fear. As I thought about that, it was rather strange I wasn't afraid because I had independently concluded we were about to be attacked by Russia and would most likely die. The inevitability of my impending death, along with that of all those around me, gave me a strange sense of calm. I located the candles in my apartment, and calmly waited for my husband to come home.

Of course, we weren't bombed by the Russians that night. There had apparently been a huge electrical outage on the grid. I had never given any thought really as to where and how we got our electricity. But it did seem a flawed plan if lights could go out in several states all at once.

Well, now that we are in the computer age where not only people, but also so many things are interconnected, I can see the danger again. Those people who delight in turning on and off lights, changing the thermostat, locking and unlocking doors in their homes remotely are also making it more possible for hackers to control their homes. Hackers steal tons of personal information from credit cards, companies, the government. Anyone who believes in privacy these days is very, very naive.

And this news report said that now cars can be controlled by hackers remotely through the car's computer system. They practiced their hacking craft on a man driving a Jeep on a highway. They took away whatever control they wished -- windshield wipers, audio, the brakes, transmission! The driver had been forewarned, but even so he found it rather terrifying to be so out of control.

We are now at the stage of connectivity of people around our planet with a vastness of information sharing - intentional and unintentional that is both mind-boggling and horrific. Cyber hacking has become the scariest phrase in our vocabulary. I'm not one who can be optimistic about human nature enough to believe that all 7 billion of us in such a variety of countries will use this power constructively. In fact, I do believe we humans will eventually outsmart ourselves into oblivion."

And then it was January -- a happy month because of Chinese New Year.

"Ah, Cadenza. Happy Chinese New Year! Am I a sheep, a ram, a mountain goat, or simply an old goat? The Chinese character can be translated in any one of these ways. I don't dislike sheep. They are cute and contribute wonderful cuddly warm wool to our world. But Chinese parents try hard not to deliver their babies in a Sheep year because, tradition has it, sheep are passive, loyal, generous and kind. Now these aren't bad characteristics, but the sheep image is also a weak, meek follower.

This year, I want to be a mountain goat. I love the image of a sure-footed mountain goat high on the mountain tops. I especially love the rounded horns of the magnificent ram.

And then I found the perfect 'me.' Look at this picture. It is a fanciful goat for sure. I love the ambiguity of its gender because it has those wonderfully rounded male horns, but definitely feminine touches. This is the Goat I choose to be -- happy, colorful, flowered, with a saddle and a rooster on my back (supposedly compatible for marriage), abstract yet balanced, with clouds over my head.

I've been thinking about my deep connection to China, and to my many Chinese friends. I find myself strangely divided as to how I feel about the many multi-millionaire Chinese coming over on the new 10 year tourist visas. Some of them are my former students who have literally gone from the third world China of 1988 when I first went to China, to riches beyond anything they or I could have conceived then. Sure, it took hard work on their part, and lots of luck, but China's transformation in 25 years is a true miracle.

Although we can both now inhabit the modern, globalized world that they only dreamed of when I first met them, we are still living in separate universes. They live in a world of prestige, money, and power, while I inhabit a more frugal, spiritual world that is quaint and out-of-date to them. It's a lifestyle gap more than a generation gap. Although I came to them from the modern world, I was somehow able to enter and embrace their third world reality. I built bridges over the cultural gaps during those early years with them.

Can you imagine that China, and my students, were a magnet that drew me back there 16 times? Although I'm very glad to see them, I have no particular desire to visit China again. It is too much like the rest of the world now, and way more dedicated to very conspicuous consumption.

The Chinese wife of Facebook's founder, Mark Zuckerberg, was raised in Quincy, my hometown in

Massachusetts. She even graduated from the same high school as I did. Quincy was as white in my day as it was in the days of John Adams. But it has been Asian for many years now. I can hear Chinese spoken in my California retirement community not as much as in China, but more often than I would have believed possible just a few years ago. Now rich Chinese are coming over to California to buy up for cash swaths of homes that they will tear down and replace with McMansions. One of my California friends has just instantly sold her home to one of them without any haggling.

When 'globalization' was a word few people understood, I heard some voices warning of the massive and negative changes it would bring. But globalization couldn't be stopped anymore than the Industrial Revolution, or cars and planes, or the destruction of the environment and its creatures. Then technology sped up. The far-reaching effects of globalization and technology together will make this a world I can't comprehend."

Cadenza heard a big sigh before the old lady started petting her back, but with a distinct tenseness in her touch. She had learned to sense when the old lady was troubled, so she stayed still waiting for more. And after a few minutes of hard thinking, the old lady continued slowly and sadly.

"I think I finally have figured out the core of what's bothering me. I was infused with and enthused by the values of the 1960s generation I grew up in. I've never felt the allure of money. In fact, over the years, I've given away more than I should have -- to charities, to my poor friends in China, to an Ethiopian Jewish teen I brought to America on a visit. I valued changing lives more than keeping and acquiring money. I was really affected by the idealistic 1960s when we talked and worked for peace, kindness, equality, and being gentle to the environment and to one another. Money for money's sake always seemed pretty shallow to me.

One now-rich Chinese friend says he is no longer interested in dreams or philosophy, but talking about dreams and philosophy together were powerful motivators in his youth that made him struggle to learn more English so we could talk more. Once, when we visited a well-known museum in China, he raced through the exhibits saying 'This is all old stuff. I want to see new things.' He was a young man on the move.

Actually, what impressed me about the Chinese students I talked to in the late 1980s and 1990s was how pure and innocent they were, yet simultaneously deep thinkers. It was an intoxicating mixture to me. After the mental depression of students following the Tiananmen Massacre in 1989, the thinking of most students distilled into the goal of becoming, as one student described himself, 'just a money making machine.' Now in their middle age, it seems my Chinese friends have grown older than I and less interested in everything but making more money, never reaching enough money. Without a culture of philanthropy and volunteerism to balance their wealth, it becomes self-indulgent excess.

Here, have a Chinese fortune cookie, which, by the way, is an American invention."

Chapter 16

Like all aliens of her species, Cadenza had the power of telepathy. However, she hadn't perfected using it with the old lady because she wasn't yet really sure of the emotional scale of humans. As the old lady watched a documentary about a singer called John Denver, Cadenza decided to try one way telepathy -- only receiving what that old lady was thinking.

The old lady was watching the show somewhat dispassionately, so there were no outward clues of how she was feeling inside. But, since the old lady seemed to choose her tv programs with some care, Cadenza believed John Denver held some interest to the old lady. She jumped up on the old lady's lap and curled up with the hope that the old lady's petting would aide her in telepathy.

She picked up telepathic fragments of sentences as the old lady watched. Where she could, she noted what emotions the old lady was feeling.

"He was born the same year as I was, so there must be some similarities in our growing up in the 60s experiences. (*anticipation of shared experiences?*) John Denver followed me to China in 1988 through his song 'Country Road.' One of the time warps in China was their firm belief that the music of the 60s and 70s was still the popular music in the U.S. They were so naive. (*nostalgia?*) Oh, he married at about the same age I did to an equally young sweetheart. Even adopted a black baby that was brown and curly-haired like my son. Pain of the Vietnam War. Craziness of those times. Music and the nature were his solace. He tried EST. I never did, but most of us were self-absorbed and self-searching. Found causes to be passionate about and write songs about. (*wistful?*) Yep, got divorced like so many of us of that age did. (*empathy?*) Didn't know one of his dreams was to go into space. Bet he would have signed up for the one-way Mars 1 group of settlers coming up in the 2020s. (*excitement?*) Too bad he would have been too old. He died too young, but doing something he loved -- flying. I've already lived too long to die too early, but I hope I can go out on a high note too. (*fear that she might not?*)"

I'll need to do a lot more mind reading until I can communicate telepathically with the old lady. It's a start, but I only reached a superficial level. Darn, these humans are either too complex or just too ridiculous to understand well.

It was watching the Oscars that gave Cadenza the next chance to practice a low level of telepathy with the old lady.

"Come, Cadenza. Tonight the stars come out. Well, human made stars. The U.S. doesn't have royalty. It has movie stars instead. Come see who the winners are tonight for last year's movies. I haven't seen a whole lot of movies this year, but I kind of keep up with the Oscars. It's people playing real life and sometimes getting real rich doing it. I think of it as a human addiction."

Cadenza climbed up on the old lady's lap and settled in. Perhaps she would learn something, or make sense of something. Quite soon, the old lady's head leaned to one side and her snoring began. Cadenza had become used to the old lady's ritual of a voluntary, or indeed involuntary nap. That didn't stop Cadenza from practicing telepathy.

"Wow, I can see why they are called stars. They shine. Some thin ladies wear clothes molded to their hungry bodies. Others look like they are floating in clouds of fabrics that encase and surround them. Some wear jewelry for additional sparkle. The men wear a variety of tuxedos that stiffen them like mannequins. From what I can tell, movies are about human emotions, and the best movies make you feel those emotions more profoundly. The range of human emotions is not large, so the stories are endless variations on relatively few emotions as seen through the narrow lens of human egocentricity. The massive ego of humans is undoubtedly what prevents them from understanding non-humans --

animals, the physical environment that surrounds them, and, of course, aliens like me from other planets.

Humans are so overwhelmed by their emotions that they have invented a pretend way to express them in bigger than life-sized stories. These human stars pretend in movies to experience emotions - sometimes of real people, sometimes of imaginary people, sometimes mixtures of the two. Some movies make people laugh. Some movies make water run down from their eyes. And some of the winning stars use their thank you seconds to make word-tumbling impassioned pleas for changing this or that, realizing this or that, curing this or that, fighting for or against this or that.

For all the years humans have attempted to understand their emotions, they don't seem to have made any progress at it. It's like the story of that man Sisyphus the old lady told me about who just kept pushing a rock up a mountain. When he got to the top, it rolled down. And he just kept pushing it up, over and over and over. I feel sorry for these humans. They continually wallow in their pools of emotions, quite unable to find the answers that matter for any length of time after the movie ends and their lives go on.

If these talented actors and actresses can pretend so well that humans believe them for the time of the movie, how much that humans believe in is also pretend? Are humans missing more than they are seeing? Humans do seem to be desperately searching for some meaning in life. Perhaps they want answers that do not exist."

The old lady never stopped snoring.

The very next evening, the bodies were piling up all over the living room. There were King Arthur and his knights fighting to unite Britain. There were flak jackets and huge automatic weapons protecting a town in Iraq under attack from Isis. There were uniformed police with guns fighting nasty criminals doing harm to innocents. There were World War II soldiers liberating the Jewish skeletons still alive at the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. It was a wild, bloody night in the small living room in which might, right, freedom, and just cause made heroes and lots of corpses. It made the old lady sad, and Cadenza mystified enough to try honing her telepathy skills with the old lady.

"I don't understand this part of human behavior at all. Everyone believes s/he is right in his/her cause and willingly dies in order to kill a so-called enemy, save a friend, protect a loved one, or for that elusive word freedom. It goes far beyond an animal protecting its mate or babies from predators. It isn't the same as survival of their species. Whether it's with a sword, knife, gun, riding horseback, in a cumbersome tank, or careening down from the sky in a fighter jet, mostly men are able to shoot, slice, or explode each other to smithereens with frightening regularity. And seemingly and continually do it all over the planet.

Our society does not behave this way. It makes no sense at all. I don't know if we can find a way to live on earth without being forced to fight each other. Of all the strange ways of humans, this will perhaps be the most difficult to deal with. Could we ever make them give up this useless, wasteful killing and live without warfare? We can't coexist with it. Humans are such a mess of conflicts, inadequacies, and paradoxes. We just may never find a way to live together on this otherwise compatible planet for us."

Something made the old lady look over at Cadenza. "Why, you're shaking. What's wrong, Cadenza? Are you getting sick? Come up here on my lap and let's listen to some quiet music."

Cadenza had succeeded in at least communicating her feeling to the old lady. Cadenza would have to be satisfied with that for the evening. Cadenza gratefully curled up in the old lady's more than adequate lap. She squeezed her eyes tight. The blood and gore around the room disappeared, followed by the bodies in their horrible sudden death throes.

Chapter 17

The old lady hadn't seemed herself the last few days. She was neither sick nor well. Cadenza decided that the old lady was depressed about something. But the old lady went out that afternoon and came back in a totally different mood. Why?

The old lady settled into watching a movie, so Cadenza took that quiet, non-verbal time to read the old lady's thoughts.

Oh, this movie is on again. Do I want to spend the time to watch it again? I've seen it so many times. And that's really strange for me because I hardly ever watch whole movies over again. There are other things waiting to be done. Maybe I'll just watch a bit. Ah, it's such a clever movie because it weaves so many themes together. Some of the characters are straight out of a stereotype, but others are a more subtle mix that turns into unique. If I had to choose the cleverest part of this movie, it would be in the uniqueness not only of a couple of the characters, but in their relationships. I guess what I like best is that it doesn't fall into any easy categories. There is humor, pathos, the strength of the human character, the weakness of the human character, the good, the bad, and certainly the ugly of humanity. Guess that's what makes the plot and the people timeless and irresistible to the human need to dwell on the emotional.

I remember asking my father so long ago why we had destroyed the American Indians who lived here first. He said something very strange to me. We took their land because they weren't doing anything with it. That was his explanation, which explained nothing to me.

Well, I'm still sitting here watching this movie. Why? I want to turn it off and do something else, but I know there are some very clever parts coming up and, for some reason, I want to see them again. I know I have to see the Lone Ranger's horse rearing up so elegantly while that great classical overture brings drama as well as the assurance that he will make everything okay again. I guess we humans need heroes to believe in, to save us, to make us feel safe. This Lone Ranger is definitely a more nuanced, complicated person than the one I watched in black and white. He's grown up somewhat, as have I, and has our immature American society. How silly. I can still feel a lump in my throat watching the Lone Ranger and hearing the music like I used to when I was a kid. It also takes me back to New Orleans for the three years I lived there. I hated all zoos by that time, but somehow the Audubon Zoo was an exception to that. And I'd go to their annual fundraising concert which always ended with a 'real' Lone Ranger dramatically riding in to remind us of heroes to keep us safe.

But Tonto is the title of this movie, and he is much more than a sidekick for kemo sabe. He's rather bizarre, especially with a bird on his head. He's definitely a different take on the loyal Tonto, but I guess that's okay since it's a fictional re-creation of a fictional character. Writers take all sorts of

liberties for their own reasons. But Johnny Depp's Tonto certainly is his own unique statement. And whoa! What about Silver? He's become somewhat spiritual and has much more of a personality than the first Lone Ranger's Silver. And then there is the bizarre character of red-headed Belle who had a very artistic and useful wooden leg -- artistic because of the drawings on it, and the loaded gun within it.

Well, I've watched the whole thing. The Lone Ranger lives, and so does avarice, exploitation, racism, and power politics. I'm as old now as Tonto became in the movie, walking slowly with the gait of an old person, and still wanting to believe in spirits, right, and wrong.

Cadenza was definitely getting better with her telepathy reading the old lady's mind. But how to achieve two way telepathy?

"We are all made of stardust," were the ending words of the last planetarium show the old lady had attended. Those simple words had a far from simple impact on the old lady. She had known, felt, believed that she and nature were inextricably intertwined. But until she heard those words, she hadn't really thought of her connection to stars so very high up and far away. Eventually, after listening to astronomy shows and lectures in her Astronomy Club, she had enthusiastically accepted that she was indeed made of stardust. It thrilled her. It gave her intuition that she was a part of nature a very scientific, logical, factual explanation.

She made sure to attend planetarium shows whenever and wherever she could. And so, this night the old lady was sitting expectantly in the Griffith Observatory happily awaiting a show about something that had intrigued her, but eluded her all her life -- the aurora borealis. Although she had been in places where the aurora borealis could be seen, she had never been there at the right time of year. Since she no longer went to cold places, she had outgrown the opportunity to see one.

She was prepared to enjoy any planetarium show during her visit that night, but felt a twinge of excitement when she learned the show she would see in the planetarium was about the aurora borealis. And this presentation involved not only the explanation of the aurora borealis, but also the mythology of the Valkyries accompanied by the powerful music of Wagner's opera.

Cadenza was contentedly at home waiting to hear the old lady's story of her time at the Observatory. Cadenza had learned quite a lot about the kinds of things that kept the old lady active and excited. After all, keeping a human's joy of living alive after three quarters of a century of living, was a part of humans that Cadenza didn't understand yet.

What IS that sound?

Cadenza wasn't at all sure what she was hearing. It was something she had never heard before. Cadenza wondered if it was something outside. But, no, it seemed to be inside her own head. How very strange. It had a hint of pain in it. And also joy. Cadenza stretched her powers to find the meaning, or the source of the sounds. It was not another alien's sound. It was weak and far away. But it was very much in Cadenza's head.

And then Cadenza caught something vaguely familiar in the sound. Could it be the old lady trying to reach her? She had never tried before to reach Cadenza through telepathy. But maybe this was her first

try at it. Cadenza fine-tuned her telepathy reception until the old lady's thoughts were clearer. Yes, the old lady was very excited about something. And she was waiting with a sense of expectation of an even stronger sense of joy -- perhaps even an excruciating joy. Cadenza could tell the old lady was actually building up to weeping with joy and expectation. Cadenza found it odd, but then so much about humans was odd, strange, and inexplicable.

As Cadenza strained her telepathic abilities, she knew the old lady was attempting to share something important to her. And then the telepathy broke through and Cadenza could hear and see a mix of powerful music, bright splashes of beautiful colors, huge mythical figures, and she could feel the tears coming down the old lady's face. And she could hear the old lady (thinking) telling her about the wonder of it all.

When the old lady arrived back home, the words gushed out of her like a babbling brook.

"So you see, Cadenza, I feel like I finally was able to see something I've wanted to see since I visited that museum in Christchurch, New Zealand, so long ago. And I also was able to send you a telepathic message for the first time. Did it come through clearly, or just fragments? I really, really wanted you to be there with me. And having the magnificent dome of the planetarium alight not only with the aurora borealis, but also being surrounded by the Valkyries and that Ring Cycle that I also remember from long ago when my husband and I went to the San Francisco Opera and heard that very same music. Only we had eaten at a nearby restaurant before the opera, and I felt like I had to throw up through the whole performance. So, instead of enjoying it, I had just kept wishing it would end so I could make it to the bathroom just in case. And then, some years later, I was riding on a bus for 6 hours and the talkative person next to me said he had a bad heart and didn't expect to live too long, but that he had sought out every opera performance of the Ring Cycle, hoping against hope he would get to hear all the operas in the cycle before he died. And I felt guilty because I had seen the one opera of the whole cycle he had yet to see and my only real memory of it was hoping I wouldn't throw up."

Finally, the gush of the old lady's words slowed down. She petted Cadenza and plopped a kiss on Cadenza's nose.

"But the very very best thing is that now I can bring you everywhere with me telepathically."

The relationship between the old lady and Cadenza accelerated after that.

"Do you know why we aliens decided to come to you in the form of dogs? We thought about what form would not be intimidating to you humans and would also be a way of observing while learning what humans are like. We carefully researched how humans feel about different animals. But it was clear that dogs and humans have a long, long history of good relationships going back to the time when there were wolves and no dogs. The wolves were social animals that stayed in a pack. Eventually, some of the wolves hung around loosely knit packs of humans who had tasty garbage nearby. A friendly hand extended became a welcome touch. Bonds formed between some of the wolf packs and human packs. They respected each other, looked after each other, and human women even found they could suckle baby wolves whose mother had been killed by an animal predator.

It's hard to believe looking at the vast array of dog faces, bodies, sizes, and shapes that the ancestor of all dogs is the wolf. But it's true. But wolves don't bond with humans the way dogs do. If a human

handraises a baby wolf in exactly the same way she raises a puppy, at some point the dog and human will become much closer than the wolf and the human. Whereas wolves usually don't, dogs look directly into the eyes of humans. They want to please their humans to an extreme degree. Loyalty to their human is their strongest creed. That isn't based solely on food. Dogs genuinely want their humans to love them, pet them, play with them.

Humans easily accept that a dog is 'man's best friend.' Except in cases of extreme cruelty, it's almost impossible to turn a dog against his or her human. There are lots of reasons why humans and dogs bond, but the hormone oxytocin is one of the main things that pulls them together. It's like an intoxicating glue that bonds them, brings them through hard times, makes the human willingly expend huge sums of time and/or money to groom them, medicate them, fly them, have veterinarians operate on them, train them ... It's rather an endless list. Unlike a child, the dog will never grow up and leave them willingly. Unlike a child, the dog will not betray or dislike them.

But I chose to be a dog in America because not every country's humans on this planet feels the same way toward dogs. In many third world countries, they are disliked, mistreated, and even eaten. You once told me about being in a small town rural restaurant in China with your friends where you happily played with the owner's cute puppy. In your naive way, you asked your friends to reassure you that that puppy would never be eaten. Your kind friends were quick to reassure you, and then you looked up and saw the puppy's brother's body hanging from the rafter waiting to be cooked.

But in America I'm sad when I see dogs that are raised by lonely people like the children they aren't, and it disgusts me how humans have played around with dog genes so that they become grotesque caricatures of what they were meant to be. When I learned about dogs, I was glad to find out that at least some care is now being taken to breed out certain physical problems caused by the human gods who redesigned dogs. I was especially upset to learn that dogs are now given massive amounts of human medications for things like depression. But it makes sense that dogs have strayed from their physical and emotional needs just as humans have strayed from theirs. There are only a lucky few dogs today that herd, hunt, even run, and have a purpose to their days. Most dogs are overfed, left alone for hours every day, taken for inadequate slow walks on short leashes, and aren't allowed to roam and sniff at will. It's amazing they haven't lost their incredible, underused sense of smell. No wonder they get depressed like their humans.

In spite of it all, the dogs greet their humans with unbridled joy. Just petting a dog is said to bring down a human's blood pressure. There's no denying the love. I'm glad I decided to become a dog. And I'm very glad I decided to become your dog even though I gave you a hard time at first because you were older than I expected and I thought you'd die too quickly. It turns out I have learned a lot about humans from you."

The old lady gave Cadenza a wink and simply telepathed, "I love you too."

Chapter 18

The old lady's favorite reading place was on her patio. She sat in an old chaise lounge angled into a corner. The patio wall shielded her from neighbor's eyes. The patio overhang kept out the heat of the day, but a blue sky and large trees peeked out at her from the gap. The greenery of the plants she managed to grow with her light-green thumb surrounded her. Most of those plants were stalwart old

friends who had been with her for years. One had grown to rather huge leafy proportions, and never seemed to need anything but occasional water. It was there that Cadenza's lessons often took place.

"If I am to understand the emotions of a human, please explain to me how the young German pilot with a good job and seemingly everything to live for could purposely aim a full passenger plane into the mountains. It isn't logical. Why? I understand there are mentally ill humans, but this guy seemed so normal to everyone around him. Also, there are people who are willing to die for a cause. But he did not make any cause known. What he did was wasteful and unproductive and just plain cruel. Can you help me understand this part of humans better?"

"Oh, Cadenza. You remind me of Captain Spock on a tv show who was part human and part Vulcan (a kind of alien that does not really exist). He often expressed his inability to understand something by saying it wasn't logical. It is the core of a computer, a robot, a machine to be logical, to make sense. Much as humans would like to be more predictable by being logical, the opposite is often true. Perhaps if we understood everything about what makes human emotions, we would understand why humans don't always, or even often, follow a logical path. But, with our limited understanding, being logical often means being predictable. Humans are sometimes predictable and understandable, but often they just are not. As frustrating as it is to understand how one human being could murder other unsuspecting humans, including innocent-of-anything babies, human emotions are what makes humans interesting, and dare I say charming?"

"Does that mean that since I'm a logical and predictable alien, I am of less worth than a human?"

The old lady started to laugh. Even though Cadenza wasn't able to laugh, she liked it when the old lady laughed. It sounded like the tinkle of ice spreading around her.

"Let's just say that not having emotions just makes you different from humans. I, too, am horrified by what humans motivated by mental illness or a passionate cause do to other humans. I wish those people on the plane had been able to continue their lives. But no, I guess I wouldn't prefer humans to be without emotions. Let me ask you a question. You don't know enough about humans yet, but I know even less about your alien society. If you were human, I wouldn't ask you this question because it might hurt your feelings. Do you feel bored always being logical? Was your planet of logic so much better than our unpredictable planet Earth? I hope I didn't hurt whatever feelings you have. We are not alike, but I think of you as my friend."

"I understand what predictable means, but I'm not sure I understand what bored means. Is it like something so bland it has no particular taste?"

"Why Cadenza, that's a perfect way to think of bored. Some humans don't mind being bored. Other humans can't handle boredom at all. In my own life, boredom was the motivator that made me divorce and leave everything and everyone I knew for the unknown. My life hadn't been bad, and I would have told you during most of it that I was happy. But I had no highs. I had no lows. I thought of my lifeline as undeviatingly straight. And that straight line is the sign on a hospital machine that you are dead. I guess in many ways that was true for me. Many women would have loved to have my lifestyle.

Although I loved my husband and son, and I kept busy and smiling, most of me felt imprisoned. I needed the freedom to explore who I was, and what the world was. A recurring dream was trying to tell

me. I kept going to visit a big, empty building with many rooms. Each time, I found new rooms to explore. Eventually I understood that those rooms were all parts of me waiting to be discovered. After I changed my life, I was never bored again. And I never had the dream again. I was living my dream. Not being satisfied and wanting change also seems to be true for many humans. I don't see how that can be true for predictable, logical aliens."

"I guess neither of our societies can understand why that pilot seemed so normal, but was so twisted that he murdered everyone, including himself. It is a mystery -- an even more tragic mystery because he had no known reason. Both illogical humans and logical aliens feel better if they understand the why of something. So, in that way, we are alike."

At times the old lady was particularly melodramatic.

"Oh, Cadenza. My idyllic bubble life is leaking. Would animals do a better job running the world than humans? Humans are such an emotional lot. Even though there are relatively few emotions in the human repertoire, we manage to get into so much trouble with even those variations. While the world certainly hasn't been war-less in the years I've been alive, there hasn't been a world war since I was born. It certainly feels like we're sinking into a World War III (why do they always use Roman numerals to number wars?) as whole swaths of countries are in a frenzy. They've even blown a passenger airliner out of the sky, killing 298 totally innocent people. We'd like to think it was accidental, but then again, who knows?"

I'd love to push all of these ugly truths out of my cozy bubble so just you and I could enjoy our lives together, but I don't seem to be able to push the man-made (and I do mean MAN-MADE) suffering out of the bubble.

Poor Cadenza. Do you wonder what I'm babbling on and on about?"

Actually, Cadenza's thoughts were quite different.

What could World War III do to our plans? We are also fighting for our survival, but we need the humans.

So, Cadenza searched for more understanding of violence and killing during an unusually cloudy day in paradise. The old lady was becoming more used to Cadenza asking her questions that would help her to understand humans better. They both agreed that humans certainly are a messy species.

"I'm really confused about killing in human society. I know this is often the topic of tv shows and movies, but it also always seems to be in the news too. I understand why animals other than humans kill, but why do humans kill other humans? And why do some enjoy it, while others do it either reluctantly or with great remorse and sadness. Obviously, it's not logical or rational or I would be able to understand."

The old lady breathed a very long, deep sigh.

"Cadenza, you have asked a question I feel very unqualified to answer because killing in human society is like a multi-tentacled octopus with endless groping parts. Human killers are a very confused mass of

people -- sociopaths and psychopaths who kill for sick inner needs. They enjoy it. Then there are kind of normal young adults who are sent out to war because their governments instruct them to save the country. Killing as a soldier maims many of them emotionally for the rest of their lives. Others do it, but go on with normal lives afterward. Physically and emotionally, men are more apt to be killers than women.

Some people, even very smart people, are mentally ill and manufacture their reasons for killing. Remember the story of a brilliant student not so long ago who calmly, with great forethought and preparation, gunned down men, women, and children in a movie theater. Numerous killers kill for ideological reasons -- name just about any cause, religion being one of the hugest, and you'll find devoted killers.

No doubt you're confused because human society is very inconsistent in killing. Take the issue of the death penalty. In China, someone who commits a serious crime is dispatched quite quickly with a bullet to the back of the head. But in the U.S., most of the killers sentenced to die usually end up dying of old age because many Americans don't want to kill even killers. Instead, they support them for endless years in prison. Charles Manson was a mass killer when I was young, and he's still there in prison taking up space and money that could be better used elsewhere.

I wouldn't blame you for being confused with the many ways we deal with killers. There is forgiveness. There is compassion. There is tolerance and not hate. There have been recent examples of all of these in the news. When 9 unsuspecting black bible study students in a Charleston church were gunned down by the hatred of a white confederate misfit, all the family members made televised statements forgiving the killer. Why? The young killer had no remorse. He showed no signs of caring whether he was forgiven by the family members or not. But it was important to the family members to be able to forgive him because of their own religious beliefs, and from a desire to be able to carry on their lives.

Beyond personal examples of forgiving, there is sometimes co-existence between groups that have grievously harmed others. I don't know if that is a kind of forgiving, but it is a way of going on. An Auschwitz survivor recently said he felt sorry for the stooped over 94 year old German who had just been convicted of working in Auschwitz. I don't know if he would have said the same thing 60 or so years ago, but I have a personal friend who survived Auschwitz. She never actually used the word forgiveness, but she practiced tolerance and a lack of hatred for the rest of her life.

Do you remember a movie we watched on tv about a writer who wanted to write about killing? He and his photographer girlfriend went off on a road trip to California visiting old places where horrendous murders of extreme cruelty had taken place. They picked up two hitchhikers during this journey of discovery. They sought enlightenment to intellectually understand killing, but they picked up a real killer who, for whatever undisclosed reasons, continued to kill for no reason but the thrill of it - whatever thrill that gave him. Empathy was a word this killer had none of. What it must feel like to kill intrigued the writer. Did it feel powerful? Did it feel superior? The writer got his chance see for himself when he shot the psychopath. He didn't feel powerful. He didn't feel superior. He said, 'When I looked into his eyes just before I shot him, I felt nothing.' Wow! How writers sometimes cross the line of fiction and non-fiction while searching for 'truth.'

Cadenza, I'm sorry to tell you that some questions have no real answers. The way humans look at both

life and death are beyond my ability to understand, or to explain. While vast numbers of people are killed with an insane violence, humans are going to very great lengths to keep even very old, very sick people from dying. It's a kind of human insanity, I think."

Cadenza climbed up into the old lady's lap, and they wordlessly began to comfort each other.

Chapter 19

The old lady was intently watching a television show. Cadenza was snoozily watching it too when she glanced at the old lady and saw tears rolling down her face. Cadenza wasn't sure whether the old lady was laughing or crying.

"Are you weeping with happiness or crying with sadness? I can't tell. I want to understand."

"Oh, Cadenza. Look at those children. They are performing an absolutely delightful ballet called The Nutcracker Suite. Can you see how nervous they are because they are performing? Can you also see how happy they are to be dancing in a big theater with beautiful costumes and lots of lights with many people watching? Yes, I am happy because I have always found ballet such a beautiful sight. You know, I'd only agree to be re-incarnated if I could return as a dancer.

So, I'm happy -- for them and for my own enjoyment watching their excitement. They all look so serious about doing a good job. And, even if some of them never dance when they're older, they're very happy tonight. Their being happy makes me happy. But then I turn all sad and weepy when I think of all the unhappy children in the world. Childhood has its problems, but it's also a very special time in a human's life. It's easier to be happy when one is a child because the world is still new, interesting, and very exciting to them.

But then my mind shifted to the recent terrorist attacks in Paris in which happy young people died so tragically, so wastefully. And I weep tears of sadness for them, and for the children who lost their mothers, fathers, and people who loved them. Strange how tears are the same for happiness and sadness, but feel so different. And I think of the 17 year old boy who was the youngest one to commit one of the most horrendous rapes in India in which one of the rapists actually pulled the intestines out of the poor girl. There was no way she could live disemboweled. I want to hate that 17 year old boy for what he did, but his life had been miserable from birth. He had never really been a child in the sense of those happy kids in their ballet shoes.

When I was a social worker for foster children, I hated the father who had thrown his baby against the wall when it cried, or those who molested kids, beat them up, or didn't feed them. But, I also knew that those terrible parents had most likely had awful childhoods.

And that's the tragedy of humans, Cadenza. I know you want to understand humans so your kind can live with us as your planet crumbles. But we are a species so contradictory in our own human nature, so drawn in opposite directions, that the push and pull of happiness and sadness, the good and the evil we are capable of makes us into taffy. Yes, that's a good way to think of human nature. It's like a never ending taffy pull.

The old lady's face grew sad and serious as yet another news report came on about terrorist attacks. Although it was still rather like a new language for the old lady, Cadenza broke through the old lady's thoughts without using words.

"As much as I watch about terrorist attacks, I do not understand what is going on. Please help me understand."

The old lady took a few deep breaths and haltingly attempted to communicate telepathically to Cadenza.

"This is just another example of the confusion within humans. Let's take out the people who commit mass murder because of some mental illness. Next, let's eliminate the Nazis in World War II who wanted to annihilate the whole Jewish population without considering anything about them except that they were Jewish. That's genocide. But there's also just simple religious hatred -- lots of that.

But besides that, there are some groups who want to gain political power over another group. Take ISIS for example. They appeal to a large number of young Moslem men who are looking for a purpose, or who are the unfortunate children of opportunity by paying their impoverished parents money to buy them, teach them how to kill, and turn them into dead martyrs.

Within the young men turned into killers by older leaders are often a curious mixture of naivete. Only 10 young boys kept the world on edge for 2 days watching them turn Mumbai, India, into their killing field. Only 4 young men turned a mall in Kenya into a bloodbath that befuddled the entire police force. All of the young men knew that they would die. But they had moments when they didn't shoot and let some of their captives go. One told a mother that her children could leave, and even gave a candy bar to one of them as the child toddled out. Another played peek-a-boo and made funny faces to a baby. After killing hundreds at pointblank range, I don't think they suffered a moment of pity. Perhaps, instead, their own little child within them briefly appeared.

These were well photographed and documented mass killings. Security cameras captured some of it. In the Mumbai terror, there were actual phone conversations heard between the far off leaders and their trained killers that played as the chaos unfolded. The two young men who stormed a major hotel were temporarily distracted by actually seeing before their eyes how luxurious the place was, the amazing speed of the computers, how some people lived. Could this really be decadence? Could this be bad? They were, after all, just poor kids who had been told they would ascend to heaven to live a better life than they had had during their short time on earth.

How different are they from honored soldiers who kill to defend their country? I really don't know. In fact, how different is this from the perpetual state of war humans have always found themselves in? It's a big, bloody, permanent human game with changing players and only short term winners."

It was impossible to say who was working harder – Cadenza to absorb what was important to her species' survival, or the old lady who had to put her aging brain into overload to answer the never-ending stream of Cadenza's questions.

"Cadenza, you asked me about all the soldiers who have been committing suicide in our recent wars. Come watch this program with me. It might make it clearer how vulnerable the human mind can be

during times of stress, especially the extreme stress of war. It's special and much more interesting because it's a documentary. There are no actors in it. No writer's imagination to skew the story. These are the real soldiers, their psychiatrists, and the nurses who really took care of them for 8 weeks in a psychiatric hospital after the war. Look at that one. He couldn't walk even though his legs were okay. That one started stuttering one day. That one lost his entire memory -- even of his name.

They were all more or less normal kids when they went into war. But they came out twitching, unable to sleep, confused, unhappy --even though they had physically survived the war and were, so to speak, 'home free.'

Compared to today's MRI tracking of the brain, the technology of those days were hypnosis and injecting a drug that relaxed their minds and bodies. But this group wasn't drugged into zombies like so much of the mental health care today. Even group therapy was useful in helping this group awaken some level of joy in still being alive.

There are ways this group compares to our PTSD soldiers of today. Perhaps most importantly, their anxiety was, for the most part, acute rather than chronic. The stress and distress of war exacerbated certain personality traits, or family neuroses. See, that one admits that his mother never said what was bothering her just like he wouldn't say to others what was bothering him. That black soldier says his mother restricted the children he could play with, which made him feel confined and limited. Childhood matters -- a lot!! Probably even mostly!

And all humans and many animals, from the time of infancy, require a feeling of being safe. That is certainly not something a soldier can feel either in the heat of battle, or the expectation of battle. One man's total lack of memory started when he felt he was going to die in the next moment. And another man began stuttering when the sound of the word he was saying reminded him of the sound of incoming fire.

Once one can feel safe, one can find enjoyment in many things in life -- being with loved ones, using one's hands to create rather than destroy, making music, playing sports. Communicating with others, and interacting with others then becomes not only possible, but enjoyable. The grief of having seen their buddies blown apart doesn't go away, but can be controlled.

The stages of returning to life were progressive for these men. Okay, the final scene of all the men boarding a bus to leave the hospital amid happy waves from the nurses who had taken care of them was definitely influenced by the feel-good Hollywood style, but the fact that these were real soldiers, real patients, real emotionally scarred young men is meaningful.

The long, drawn out Vietnam War had additional complications, including the heavy use of drugs and no clear understanding of who and what they were fighting. The disastrous Iraq War never made any sense, and the year upon year of fighting in Afghanistan with volunteer soldiers who returned time after time because they couldn't find work in the U.S. made it all so much worse.

Not unlike the animals whose natural instincts fight for territory and power, we humans seem unable to replace our wars with other solutions. A pity for your race of aliens who hope to join us on planet Earth. We will most likely blow ourselves and our beautiful blue planet to smithereens in the far reaches of outer space."

Chapter 20

Cadenza didn't pay much attention to the news the old lady was watching until she sensed that the old lady was upset. She tried to follow the tv pictures of police behind shields, teenagers running, buildings burning, the ruins of a place called Nepal because of a gigantic earthquake, avalanches attacking climbers on their way up Mt. Everest, helicopters buzzing like huge bees. It was indeed rather frightening.

"What's happening? Is it another war between humans? You seem very upset, perhaps distressed, certainly sad. Please tell me what's going on."

"Oh, Cadenza, I'm sorry that I don't know how to explain humans to you. Our planet's nature is okay. It is we who are stupid and inadequate. We humans make such a mess of life. Although we cannot yet predict precisely when and where earthquakes will happen, we do understand enough about plate tectonics to understand that there WILL be earthquakes. What happened to that far away country could also happen right here under us. We already know 'the big one' is overdue here. And it was overdue there too. That country has a very long rich heritage, but it isn't rich enough in money to build modern earthquake-proof buildings. And so thousands of people died in an instant because everything collapsed on top of them. Thousands more are injured. And thousands more need to be supplied with just about everything necessary to survive."

"If there are such things as earthquake-proof buildings, why don't other humans build them?"

"Ah, Cadenza, how I wish it worked that way. Many other countries are sending help, supplies, and even money, but the great god money, and its constant sidekick, greed, always gets in the way. That's also connected to the rioting in the American city with the police, looting, and mayhem. There are big city problems in that city. What makes the difference between people in that city is that some people have good jobs and money, and others scrounge to just survive. Many can't find jobs. The ones who have money are white, and the ones who don't have good jobs, or any job at all, are black. That makes them desperate, like firecrackers waiting to go off.

The color difference, plus the money difference, makes for a lot of trouble. The police are powerful, and the young black men are powerless. That's a bad combination. Yet another young black man died after being arrested -- this one got his spine broken. But there have been so many similar young black dead men killed by police just this year. Everybody walking around with video cameras, plus some cops having little cameras attached to their shirts and patrol cars makes it a pretty sure thing that the police are no longer getting away so easily with their discrimination and unnecessary strong arm tactics.

Was it the teens who spontaneously started rioting in the streets copying some online movie called Purge about anarchy, looting stores, and setting fires? There was a rumor that rival gangs had decided to pool their destructive energy and attack. Some said outside agitators came to stir up trouble. Was it years of anger, humiliation, and frustration? Humans are subject to mass hysteria -- they see someone doing something bad and join in anonymously.

There were many sad people in that city tonight because of all the destruction. Their resources (the

great god money again) are already stretched so thin, it's the poor people destroying themselves. The news reporters are no longer reading scripts. They are more human. They express opinions, surprise, guesses, emotions. They are more like us not knowing all that's happening. The You Are There feeling is overwhelming.

If you're going to learn about humans, you'll have to understand many contributing factors to today's problems. The trickle down economic theory didn't work. Instead, the gap between rich and poor has become a great chasm. The middle class is relentlessly disappearing more and more. Many people want to blame the education system for failing to educate the poor people into higher level jobs. And then there's overpopulation -- just way too many people on our little planet. Then there's a dearth of solid two parent black families to give guidance, love, and role models. Some day rather soon, the majority of people on our planet won't be white. Maybe all humans becoming different shades of brown will finally eliminate racism. But I won't be around then to see it.

One scene on tv today was of a mother chasing her teenage son and ripping the robber's mask off his face. Although he was too big for her to hurt, she was whacking him good and yelling at him to get home. That made me think of all the lectures I gave to the community about battered women and how hitting people you love gives the wrong message. When I talked about husbands not hitting their wives, people agreed. But when I said we should not spank or hit our children to discipline them, almost everyone objected. They firmly believed if you spare the rod, you spoil the child. I never got anywhere trying to convince them.

Tonight on tv reminded me of not so many years ago when a huge storm devastated another big American city with a lot of poor black people in it. Since I stay up so late, I saw and heard how the city was falling apart, how the police were afraid to go out in the streets in the dark, how bad things were happening, how helpless the mayor of the city felt. It was kind of surreal and eerie, like tonight watching the residents tearing their city apart and setting it on fire. I was there as a voyeur and an eavesdropper on human tragedy. And, of course, every time I see a burning car, I can't help thinking of my own beloved Magic Carpet Leaf on fire in the Israeli-Arab village where I lived and worked. The people who poured gas over the tires and engine and set it on fire in the dark of night didn't know me personally. They only knew I was Jewish, and they were angry at the Jewish government of Israel.

So, Cadenza, I don't know what you can make out of all of this unhappiness that humans, in many ways, bring upon themselves. I don't know if your kind will ever be able to live with us compatibly. Your kind is so different without emotions to rule and confuse your life. But in some quirky, illogical way, it is those same emotions that make us want to live."

The next evening, the old lady rushed in excitedly.

"Cadenza, I'm going to a dance program tonight. Come with me, telepathically of course since dogs aren't allowed. It will be a great change from so much unhappiness in the lives of humans. Long, long ago, my friend in grade school took ballet. I went with her. How I wanted to take the lessons with her, but my mother said we couldn't afford ballet lessons, so I just went every week and watched, imagining myself as one of the twirling ballerinas.

The bodies of the professional dancers are such a joy to see. They have achieved a one-ness of their bodies and minds when dancing that I truly envy. In fact, the only way I'd agree to be reincarnated is if I could be a dancer – even a not very good one.

When I went to camp one year, I tried to waterski many times. But I always fell. The very last time I had the chance before leaving the camp, I got up and felt an exhilaration that has had to last me a lifetime. And then there was the time in grade school when I played dodge ball and didn't get hit. Only happened that once, but the memory of that feeling has lasted a lifetime. Part of me is like that 7 year old boy I saw on tv being interviewed. I loved what he said – 'I don't care that my feet hurt. I just want to dance.'"

A mysterious, daring look showed in the old lady's eyes. The old lady took Cadenza's furry face into her hands, looked directly into Cadenza's eyes – hesitated quite a long time, and then said with excitement like a lightning bolt animating her.

“Cadenza, could I – could you – is it possible – even for only a minute, to feel a dancer's body from the inside? Even with my imagination, I can't truly imagine what it feels like to have such mind-body synchrony inside my body.”

This was the first time that the old lady had actually ever asked Cadenza to do the impossible. It was the start of other deep questions.

"Dear Cadenza -- will you die or are you going to go on and on and on as so many humans seem to be striving for? Age itself is becoming meaningless. My fitness teacher complimented a 76 year old lady in class for having so much energy. True, but the lady pointed out that she was partly bionic – a new hip and pacemaker.

I asked one lady with a pacemaker how her body feels different now, and she said she can feel a foreign presence in her body. She laments that she can never really be alone again with the tick-tick-ticking inside her.

Does age mean anything at all anymore? If it's possible to replace failing body parts, should we be doing it? Would I want at last part of me to feel like a young kid again while my mind, and some of my body was still in another century? It's like a goofed-up time machine where only part of you gets to travel backward in time. It's hard enough to feel okay in one's own body without the body itself being in several age zones at the same time.

Still, when it comes my time, will I try to prolong my life with artificial means? Like a friend's mother, will the rest of my body wither away while my tinkered heart keeps going?

Old people like my neighbors, and young tech execs like Peter Thiel who actually has enough money to last him forever really think that beating mortality is the way to go. There's an absurd amount of money now being poured into technologies that will keep humans alive with bionic parts, eliminating disease, and finding cures for everything that kills us. What kind of world will it be without room for young ones to be born and flourish? How crowded can our planet become with so many humans who choose to live forever?

Perhaps there's another way. If our essence is our brains, how about eliminating the whole body and just leave a bunch of brains inhabiting the planet? I think there was once a Star Trek episode that

showed a society that had eliminated every part of the body except the brain. The rest of the body had become unnecessary."

"We from our planet do not have to chase after immortality like you humans do. Just like I can become water, grass, visible, or invisible. I can integrate indefinitely and change as needed. It is not complicated by emotions like you humans have. By integrating with whatever I wish, there is no need for death. I will continue to realign and redesign my purpose."

"I don't know if our dying is preferable to your never dying. Our human bodies die and our soul goes into some kind of collective goop that becomes a part of the whole. I like your word 'integration.' I always believed that we humans are simply another animal species that is a part of nature. Feeling kin to nature makes me feel immortal because nature will continue. But if humans do succeed in eliminating death, that makes us separate from nature and no dying means stagnation and being stuck in a kind of nowhere. Actually, I can't believe that humans, even incredibly bright and rich ones, are all that important. Immortality feeds their egos, but I'm not sure they serve any other cosmic purpose."

Chapter 21

"Hmmm. What do you think, Cadenza? I went to a seminar for writers some years ago, and the leader said very confidently that only a human can write. Ah, the hubris of humans! But it's not true. I vaguely remember doing a research paper for my Master's in Social Work degree even years ago that predicted that machines would be able to do therapy with patients. How? Machines could read signs sort of like a lie-detector test to determine what emotional signs can be detected from physical tests that measure emotional reactions. It also predicted that machines would be able to monitor mental wards to determine whether the combined emotional state of the ward's patients was leading up to some serious disruption on the ward. I can't say I didn't take it seriously, but it all sounded so way in the future.

Now I've just read something about sophisticated robots that can be writers and artists. Is it possible that writers will become as obsolete as, well, all sorts of things that we used to think we could never live without. Computers are truly changing everything - some for the better, and some I think for the worse. But robots being able to write stories like *Gone With The Wind*, *Horton Hears a Who?*, and name any one of hundreds of treasured classics?? If I had fed my travel journal entries into a robot, could it have written a better 'Memoirs of a Middle-aged Hummingbird?'

When Stephen Hawking and Bill Gates are worried, I worry too. They both warn that we humans are not smart enough to control artificial intelligence. We humans are capable of creating the monster that will eventually consume us. But wait! I've also heard of perhaps a tiny possibility that artificial intelligence could also go in the direction of becoming friendly to what's left of human intelligence. There's a strange word called singularity I keep hearing when I hear about artificial intelligence, but I don't really understand it.

But another really scary thought is how far behind I'm getting in technology. The more I run to catch up, the further behind I am.

Just the other day during a phone conversation, I had the inkling of a feeling that I was talking to a robot on the other end of the phone. There was just something about the words that struck me as a little strange. If we can have robot writers, why not have conversations with robots?

And neuroscience is even figuring out the parts of the brain that fit our thoughts and even emotions. They can find and control seizures and tremors. People just thinking about something can make parts of the brain light up on a machine. A thought can control an artificial hand to pick something up. Seems like there's going to be absolutely nothing private and personal anymore.”

Cadenza had been noticing worrisome changes in the old lady's mind and behavior. It was somewhat normal for aging people to forget why they walked into a room, or where they laid things down and couldn't remember where they were. Forgetting names and searching for words. But losing a house key and finding it behind the milk in the refrigerator? Walking outside to find the bathroom? Burning pots because of forgetting to turn off the burners? It was getting more serious.

And even bizarre. One day Cadenza saw the old lady standing in front of a mirror. She looked at the image in the mirror quizzically.

“Who are you? Why are you here?”

She turned this way and that way, looking at the image in the mirror from different angles. Then, the old lady held up her hand and looked at the image in the mirror. But, her eyes were blank, expressionless, a looming vacuum behind them.

The old lady began to rub her hands together as if something was on them that was bothering her. She mumbled something about her hands having black spots all over them like the disease on her rose bushes.

“My roses have infected me with their disease. Oh, dear, what can I do?”

Cadenza just stayed by her quietly until she came back to herself, stopped rubbing her hands, and the expression returned to her eyes. Was it time to tell her?

The old lady felt Cadenza's telepathy summoning her attention. Although their telepathic connection had served them well, the connection between them was weakening. Cadenza knew she would have to act soon because the old lady's mind was getting fuzzier. Indeed, the old lady's mind would soon be beyond telepathy.

When the old lady was settled into her armchair and Cadenza was cuddled in her lap, Cadenza spoke softly to the old lady.

"You know that we aliens came here to learn about humans because our own planet is no longer habitable. I have lived with you so I could learn to understand the emotions of humans to determine if our kind and your kind are compatible to live together. Although you have tried your best to help me understand humans, we aliens on Earth have decided that humans on the planet Earth are forever beyond our understanding. Humans are such a messed up mixture, we must give up Earth as a possible new world for us."

The old lady tried to respond telepathically, but gave up and just spoke out loud to Cadenza.

"So, you're going to leave me. Is that what you're telling me?"

The old lady's face contorted into a pained expression that she made an effort to control. But her attempts to not burst into tears failed miserably.

Cadenza quickly continued.

"Please listen carefully. There is a way to stay together. You will die soon -- perhaps because Alzheimer's will take over more of your brain, or you will have a stroke or a heart attack."

"I have felt a weakening of my mind and my body for some time now. I suspected that my end might come soon. I worried how that might affect you. That's the way with humans, and animals, and even plants. It's the life cycle, and death is our fate."

"There is another way -- integration. Your body will leave you. I'm not sure how much of your mind will leave you. But your essence can join me and combine into one entity that can continue together to the new planet I will go to."

"Does that mean I will be immortal? Although I know that many humans crave immortality, I've never been one of them. I'm more of a naturalist -- to live and die as was preordained when I was born. I appreciate what you are offering me, but I'll have to think about it carefully. And I seem to be thinking more and more slowly now. How much time do I have to decide?"

"You must decide before your mind gets too confused with Alzheimer's, or a stroke, or a heart attack kills you. I cannot integrate you after any of those things happen."

The old lady let out a very, very long sigh. This possibility to extend her life had never, ever entered her more and more confused mind.

Chapter 22

For the next several days, the old lady was obviously deep in thought every time Cadenza looked over toward her. Thoughts were swirling around so fast in the old lady's mind, she couldn't grab onto them. The old lady's face twisted this way and that -- a smile, a frown, a very worried look, a question, an actual laugh, a sigh of relief, fear and indecision rippling along her wrinkles. Cadenza caught pieces through her telepathy skills.

"After all those years of confirming to myself over and over that I did not want to take medication to extend my normal, natural life, how can I choose immortality? I didn't even want to live particularly long. Yes, I exercised every day and tried to take good care of myself. But not to last longer. It was to last better.

And what does immortality actually mean? In our Astronomy Club, we learned of a theory that contradicts the Big Bang explanation of the universe. It hypothesizes that our universe is cyclical, fated to go on and on and on. An immortal universe! I can imagine that more than MY being, or whatever mixture I become, immortal.

And why would I, or whatever is left of me, want to go on endlessly? 'Endless' sounds more boring than exciting. And what can I contribute to an endless existence? Oh, it just sounds stupid not to die. But I do feel my body and my mind weakening. I don't like this kind of partial existence, deteriorating distance. Maybe I, or whatever's left of me, won't like being integrated into Cadenza's alien society. Will I be I at all? Will I retain any of my own thoughts and independence to know what I like and don't like?

I think I'm slipping into the Alzheimer's of my dear nana and Aunt Bev. Ugh! How do I know what is me thinking and what is Alzheimer's thinking? I think Alzheimer's thinking is kind of one dimensional -- just surface, no depth. But sometimes I feel like alphabet soup. Yes, alphabet soup. I'm floating in a murky soup trying to find the little bits of alphabet letters I can't quite grasp. When I try to think deeper, I sink down, down, down into a soup of confusion that drowns me. Oh, this damned inexorable terminal deterioration! Am I really considering Cadenza's offer of immortality, something I've never wanted, because I want to avoid the possibility of going downhill with Alzheimer's? Would all that disappear if I integrate with Cadenza? Would I disappear along with it?

Although I know I'm a human, I don't particularly like humans. They are so egotistical. So nationalistic. They can be so violent, and mean, and stupid. They raise humans to the top of importance, and some rank one type of human over another. Anything non-human is way below even consideration. Humans have overpopulated our poor planet, and intend to keep overpopulating until our whole planet has no chance of maintaining the balance of nature that has kept it going.

Wait, why do I always talk about humans as 'they' instead of 'we'? I'm one of them, but yet I often imagine myself shaking my finger at them like a critical parent. 'They' are always disappointing me. I do share human characteristics, but I feel outside of being human too. Does that make me more willing to integrate with Cadenza's alien species rather than die like a human?

I don't really know anything about Cadenza's species, but every great idea in human society has backfired in some pretty spectacular ways. Discovering electricity led to the quest for energy and eliminated much of our natural diurnal patterns. Industrialization brought us stuff, stuff, and more stuff than we ever thought of needing or wanting. Building dams screwed up the whole water balance and eliminated the chance for a way home for salmon to spawn. Nuclear power plants were supposedly a great source of power before we realized just how dangerous and long-lived their contamination could be. And globalization -- well, that one will probably be the killer of human society. And even geniuses like Bill Gates, Stephen Hawking, and Elon Musk agree that artificial intelligence will definitely outpace our puny brains. Can humans keep control then? Robots may be more rational than humans, but will that make humans more logical? Maybe hooking up forever with Cadenza's species will be just as catastrophic.

That kid Zuckerberg who thought up Facebook, which spread social media links like lightning around the world, was right that connecting with strangers throughout the world with absolute ease and just about free would attract millions, even billions of people. It pushed globalization to a frenzy. Ah, yes! But the unintended consequences followed -- bullying, even videotaped murders for the joy of sharing with millions of strangers. The terrible truth is that close contact can bring out the worst in humans. 'Familiarity breeds contempt' and all that stuff. No, Mark Zuckerberg, social media and what I've heard called 'digital crowding' doesn't make humans better. You and your clever kind make technology better and better, but you can't make humans into a better, kinder species.

With machines, neuroscience is now able to trace thoughts and feelings in the brain. Brainwashing worked many years ago. Now it's possible to erase memories as well as plant new memories that never happened in a rat's brain. It won't stop with rats. Scientists are unraveling the where and how questions of our brains. They might be able to figure out why people are born transgender, trace addiction, stop tremors, give life to robotic body parts, and do all sorts of miracles. But that won't transform us into a better, kinder species either.

I only know Cadenza as a lovable dog -- which she really isn't at all. Maybe Cadenza's alien kin are even worse than humans. Maybe more violent. Maybe even impossible in ways I haven't discovered yet. What if Cadenza's society is full of aliens like Hitler, mafia-style criminals, pedophiles, rapists, haters of humans and animals, and destroyers of nature? But Cadenza's kind came here to understand emotions they don't have. Is it possible to have such malcontents without emotions?

What if I become not only a victim in their society, but even worse, one of the perpetrators of hatred? If humans aren't always human, is there also an alien equivalent of inhumane? What if I become eternally trapped in a society I despise? Or stuck for forever within a society even more dysfunctional than the one I'm in now? And, how will I know that I am? If I'm integrated with Cadenza, will there be any essence of me left? If you integrate two things, each is changed. So, how will Cadenza be changed? Is Cadenza scared to become partly me?

I've had a good life. Better than good. At the age of 40, I became the proverbial wandering Jew, finding my way within cultures quite different from my own. I went from the developed world, to the third world, to others in between, and back again. I wasn't scared. I was challenged, excited, sometimes even exuberant. I found my true niche as a teacher of English to non-native English speakers. And I nurtured my friendships like delicate plants that survived through many, many years.

I didn't know what my life would be like then. Why should I know what my life will be like now as an alien? Am I so very different from that gutsy woman I used to be who was drawn by curiosity, by the unknown? Where's the spirit of adventure I craved badly enough to divorce the man I had loved since I was a teenager. Yes, I did that. And I can't say it was the wrong decision because I no longer have to think 'what if?' Those were the best years of my life.

There's that face of the young woman so much like me that's been hanging on my living room for so many years now. I loved it right away because her face held within it the deep mixture of my emotions when I chose to take Frost's Road Not Taken. Her eyes were my eyes as I looked back with pain and sorrow at what I was leaving so I could follow the unknown road I would soon step upon. Yes, there is sadness and guilt in her face and stance of her body. But her intention to leave is clear.

I remember my elderly father asking me to come home from my job far away because he and my mother needed a 'clearer mind.' I need a clearer mind now, but there's no one to ask. No one to help me decide to die like a human, or continue like an alien.

I hate money. I hate being targeted for buying, buying, buying all sorts of things I don't need and don't want. I don't see how Cadenza's society could be caught up in the same monetary madness that so captivates our planet's humans, but I don't really know what is important to their society. Is there some way to find out before I decide whether or not to mix Cadenza and me together? But why am I asking

for some kind of guarantees now? I didn't do that before when I sought adventure in other parts of the only world I knew at the time. And now my only other option is to swish endlessly as ashes in the sea. Under what conditions would that be a better option?

Or what if I become someone (something) I despise? A classmate in 5th grade taught me about self respect. The regular teacher was out sick that day and we had a weak substitute. It was the day to give our oral reports. A classmate painfully stuttered through his. The rest of the class laughed. And I laughed too. That horrified me. It was there on that day in 5th grade that I made a decision never to follow the crowd if I didn't want to. And I haven't. I'm sorry I can't thank my classmate for such a valuable lesson in who I was. Can my past accumulated wisdom follow me into integration?

But what would a world without drugs and guns be like? Now there's a kind of wonderful society to speculate about. During my years on this planet, I have seen so many re-runs of war. When I was born, our world had not done much to save the Jews of Europe from being slaughtered. Only China offered entry to Jews without passports and paperwork. After the war, leftover Jewish survivors on ships like Exodus went from port to port pleading for entry. Israel was established to assuage the guilt of all the countries who didn't want those survivors. And after that, how many pictures have we seen of the starving, freezing, drowning, dying Syrians looking for a country to let them stay. Yes, technology has changed, but people and their pain haven't. Getting off this merry-go-round of sadness and hardship and racism would be a dream come true.

Part of the merry-go-round effect has been making me very tired and very dizzy of fighting the same fights. I fought for abortion -- and then had to fight for it again and again. And we won civil rights for black equality. But the blacks are still easy targets for police. For now, gays have finally won the right to legally marry, or will that be overturned one day? Why are we still talking about equal pay for men and women doing the same jobs? The only cause I ever fought for that exceeded my expectations was fighting with GASP for non-smoking sections in restaurants. Those non-smoking sections eventually grew to whole buildings, inside and even partially outside, both commercial and residential, outdoors in whole cities in the U.S. But who knows? Then came e-cigs, so the smoking battle could still have to be re-fought for again.

I certainly hope there's no religion or religions in Cadenza's society. Among humans, religion has been responsible for a huge proportion of divisiveness and violence. Religion and testosterone has been a very explosive, destructive mix. I've had enough of that in my world to last many lifetimes. Now there's a curious part. If there's no violence, then probably there's no testosterone. If there's no testosterone, and no emotions, how does their society replicate? But do I really want answers to my many questions? Why? My basic choice is simply to die or integrate.

What was Steve Jobs thinking when he said his last words, 'Oh wow! Oh wow! Oh wow!' The paradox of iphones is like the paradox of their creator. Jobs considered his LSD psychedelic experiences among the most important experiences of his life. And yet, for a long time, he refused the usual medical treatment for his cancer. With the iphone, his genius created the 'alone together' phenomenon and sent it global -- making us more personal and intimate, and yet making us more isolated from each other. If I choose a mortal death, what will I say as the last breath leaves me? If I agree to integrate with Cadenza, what will my last 'all me thought' be -- elation, ecstasy, or oh no, what have I done?

It seems like it should be easy to figure out what I want to do. Little clues that tell me yes or no. It feels right. It doesn't feel right. But no, it doesn't always work that way."

The old lady's mind maintained a swirl of conflicting thinking for several days. She didn't eat much. Mostly couldn't sleep. But on the few occasions she did sleep, she had the same recurring dream she had had so long ago before she divorced. On those nights, she wandered as if hypnotized from room to room. It wasn't so much what she found in each room, but that she was finding herself, exploring unknown parts of herself. The dream had vanished after she divorced. Discovering who she was became real life.

Now, the old lady wasn't at all sure who she was, or who she wanted to be. The idea of having a future that included anything besides deterioration of mind and body was both refreshing and scary. Cadenza stayed by her side, but didn't try to influence her thoughts. It had to be the old lady's decision alone.

Chapter 23

The old lady wandered the house and yard aimlessly for the next few days. A worried look was etched into the lines of her face. Cadenza looked after her from a distance. Cadenza could not communicate with the old lady during those days. And the old lady didn't try to communicate with Cadenza. They lived separately together.

One day, a small pile of dirt appeared on the floor of the patio. The old lady emptied her plants of their dirt there. She went into the garden and dug up more dirt to dump on the patio floor. What was she doing? Cadenza had no idea. She watched from afar.

At night, the old lady snuck out to talk gibberish to the pile of dirt. Sometimes she added water and began to mold something out of the dirt. A vague form slowly emerged. During the day, it baked in the sun. Slowly, it took on the shape of something like a robot -- a head, a body, arms, legs. It definitely wasn't any work of art, but yes, a kind of body was taking shape. Sometimes the old lady whispered to it. Cadenza made out the words, "Golem, help me. Please help me."

Cadenza wondered what the old lady was doing, and why. While the dog Cadenza quietly snoozed at some distance away, the invisible Cadenza hovered close to make out the words the old lady was whispering. Much of it was just gibberish, sounding like nothing but a long, low moan. Eventually, Cadenza could make out the words, "My dog is trying to kidnap me and take me away. Protect me from my dog," the old lady whispered into the splotches of caked dirt that must have stood for ears.

These words shocked Cadenza at first. But there was a strange sense to them. Wasn't the old lady wrestling with the decision to die, or integrate into an alien being? A golem was supposed to be a protector of Jewish people in trouble. In the fuzzy old lady's mind, she was terrified of being abducted against her will, especially since her weakening mind was blending the real and the imaginary.

Now that Cadenza understood the reason for the golem in the patio, she was able to quietly accept the old lady's need to sit with the golem at night and add dirt to places where the dirt was crumbling. At some point, the old lady would have to make up her mind. But her mind was crumbling as fast as the dirt.

Chapter 24

The next morning was as usual, except that the old lady did not come out of her bedroom at her usual mid-morning time. Perhaps she was sleeping in awhile longer. It happened sometimes.

But eventually Cadenza went in to check on the old lady. She wasn't there. Cadenza went to each room, but found no trace of her. Where could she be? Cadenza searched for her telepathically, and came up -- empty. This had never happened before. What could explain it? Had she wandered outside and become lost as people in various stages of Alzheimer's were wont to do?

In Cadenza's alien world, there were no emotions like "worry" and "fear." But Cadenza felt something that perhaps could be called a sense of loss, a feeling of missing, a twinge of worry. Cadenza kept searching, but alas, had no choice but to just wait awhile.

A week later, the old lady came back home. She was laughing. She was happy and lighthearted. She greeted Cadenza warmly and began life as before. Where had she been? What had happened? Cadenza waited patiently to see if the old lady would, in her own time, tell her where she had been. Did she even remember that she had been away?

When she saw the old lady looking through photos online, Cadenza looked too. She saw the old lady surrounded in a place of puzzling beauty. The colors of the place were amazing. It was both lush, and stark, and vast, and intensely personal. The old lady kept muttering, "Oh, the quality of that silence."

What did it mean? But it obviously had made the old lady happier than ever. Not more grounded, though. Actually she seemed suspended on another plane of existence. Cadenza had never seen her like that before. Cadenza might have thought of drugs, except that she knew how anti-drugs the old lady was. No, this was something natural, but what did "the quality of that silence" mean? Would the old lady become lucid enough to explain?

"I had to go, Cadenza. I couldn't make a decision about your offer until I could find the right place. You see, I had only known a silence like that once before in my life. I was in New Zealand, and a four seater tourist plane had taken us up to an ice field higher than I had ever been before. It had landed with skis on the ice, the pilot turned off the engine, and we got out. Ten minutes in heaven as I remember it. The ocean in the far away distance, the sting of the cold, the absolute isolation from everything normal -- they were the finest 10 minutes of my life.

I was so confused what to do -- die like a mortal, or join you as an alien. It was an overwhelming decision, especially with my mind no longer able to focus well or long. I needed silence like on the mountaintop. But how could I go to the mountaintop again? One day I had seen a short movie about the magic of the silence in the crater. A kind of silence that heals, quiets, helps you think. So, I went to Halelakala National Park in Maui. And it's true -- the quality of the silence there is greater than other natural places. It has something to do with how the crater was made.

I felt my whole being calm down. I could hear my spirit. I could hear my soul. I could even feel the hum of the sun. I felt no fear. I felt at one with myself. That didn't mean I could decide right away, but it made meditation possible. And, in that meditation, in that strange but wonderful silence, in that place

where I felt at one with nature, where I truly understood that I am made of star dust, I decided I could give up my mortality. I could face another future. I came alive again."

The old lady took a very long, very deep breath.

"Cadenza, I accept your offer."

