

# The Sound of a Bird Woke Me

by Rolf A. F. Witzsche

Part of the Sex and Sacrament Project

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## *The Sound of a Bird Woke Me*

A gently daring brilliance is allowed to unfold into love  
in order to hold back the darkening of a failing world.

When nothing in the world remains as it had been and all is lost, the focus falls on what is intrinsically true and deeply real. In this environment, what has started as a love story built on mutual support of one-another, becomes a sex story that extends the atmosphere of support into sexual unity that reaches deeper than any form of union that is normally allowed between two friends. When the conventions, beliefs, and emotions have been reduced to ashes by a nuclear-weapons accident, the precious little that we have remaining of one-another matters intensely. and becomes a treasure to hold onto. In this harsh and stark environment, even the ordinary becomes magical.

The story ends in Hawaii, on the Island of Maui, at the end of the longest day, followed by a day of rest between dangerous rescue missions.

The story, *The Sound of a Bird Woke Me*, is a sexual love story situated in a world darkened by a nuclear-weapons nightmare that luckily still remains fiction in the real world. The story that is singled out here comprises three chapters from my novel, *Brighter than the Sun*, written in the 1980s to explore the phenomenon of nuclear war and the committed folly to allow the preparations for it far it to proceed. Let's heal the world of this follow, so that the story will remain fiction forever. Only the precious that the story describes should remain reality and grow as it eventually does in the novel, *Brighter than the Sun*.

For more information on the project that this book is a part of, please refer to the Postscript, *About the Sex and Sacrament Project*. For information on the source for this book, the novel, *Brighter than the Sun*, please visit my CYGNI website:

<http://www.ice-age-ahead-iaa.ca>

Rolf A. F. Witzsche

## Chapter 1: Lunch Break

"It's a miracle, Harry! A world-record!"

Harry smiled. "No, Paul! It's merely the first time we've got out of O'Hare without a line-up. We'll be in Seattle before the noon flights arrive."

I agreed. I liked Harry. We hadn't flown together before, but I had heard good things about him. When I volunteered to substitute for the Chicago - Vancouver run, I had no idea that this was my opportunity to meet him. All I had in mind, was to get as fast as possible away from the sweltering heat that had transformed the East Coast into a steam-bath, and of course away from anything whatsoever that was even remotely connected with the seminar which had just ended. Who else, but the government would have thought of holding a seminar in Miami, in July? The subject was as hot and dreadful as the weather, a course on civil rescue procedures for the eventuality of a nuclear war! Vancouver's 'perpetual' rain and relative isolation seemed like paradise suddenly. And beyond that I was looking forward to being with my family again. It had all been arranged. We would meet in Vancouver for a visit with Frank. The occasion was Frank's birthday and a three-day hiking trip to Garibaldi Park. The anticipation of this hike into the mountains had made the depressing two weeks in Miami almost bearable. I played a game with myself. When the topic of the course became too frightening, I imagined the four of us and our children camping among glaciers and mountain lakes, with a peace surrounding us as pure as the sky.

Spending two weeks in a classroom, for eight hours a day, had made me want to fly again so badly. I would have done it for nothing. Well, it turns out that one can't do that. One also has to accept the money that comes with it. I was lucky on top of all that. I got a direct route via Chicago and Seattle to Vancouver.

"United 023 Heavy! ... How's the weather at 40,000?" Seattle tower called in as we approached. We had confirmed our projected arrival at 11:37 as per schedule.

Harry made a gesture of approval.

"United 023 Heavy to SEATAC - Harry says it's smooth up here..."

Harry smiled.

"Hey, is that Harry Sallinger you're referring to?" SEATAC came

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back.

"The very same. The one and only, the original, the..."

"Would you give him a message, that Felix got the trailer hitch for him that he was looking for."

Harry grinned and switched his mike on. "I heard that, Felix! That's great! Thanks a million; over and out!"

He turned to me with a big smile. "I was lucky that I didn't lose my whole trailer last weekend when the mounting bar cracked. It nearly broke off, coming down from Snoqualmie Pass. Somebody might have been killed had the trailer gone wild!"

It turned out that Harry and I had much in common. We both loved mountains, photography, music, opera. We had talked about hiking most of the way out from Chicago. Having been born in Seattle, Harry knew every mountain of the Pacific Northwest that was worth climbing. When I told him about our planned trip to Garibaldi Park, he smiled. Naturally, he knew that area too.

"Will you stay right at the lake on the battleship islands, or camp at the meadows?" he asked.

"The lake, I would think," I replied. "Frank knows someone who owns a float plane. He'll fly us in, in total comfort, and pick us up three days later...."

"A bunch of Sunday climbers, eh!" he remarked.

"It will be a family affair, with kids! We have a four-year-old daughter, who isn't quite ready yet for a ten-hour hike."

"That's not much of an excuse," Harry grinned. "A guy like you should be able to carry the kid!" he joked. "But jokes aside, you'll love it, let me tell you! I've hiked in several times with my son. It's beautiful there. The meadows, the lake, and you'll love climbing the Black Tusk. It's an easy climb with a nice chimney. And then let me tell you about the glacier, a feast for the eyes...."

"I'm sure we'll have a good time there," I interrupted him. "It wouldn't even matter if the place wasn't that great. It will be fun, and more so with both our families together. We've known each other for years now. We always enjoy being away from it all in the mountains. That's where I bumped into them in the first place. I met Frank one morning in the Rocky Mountains near Boulder, where I live..."

"Somewhere near Milner Pass?" Harry asked.

I nodded.

"There is a trail that goes from the 12,000-foot level, right near the parking lot...."

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"Yes, Harry, that's where I met Frank; at the end of the trail, on the lookout hill, searching for his 28-mm lens. He looked terribly distressed. He said it had slipped out of his hands when he swapped lenses. I helped him look for it. It's the natural thing to do...."

We were interrupted at this point by Rosalinde, Harry's favorite flight attendant. She had come onto the flight deck asking if we wanted coffee or tea.

I ordered milk!

Harry declined.

"Would you rather have a glass of cold apple juice?" she replied. "I have great biscuits to go with it."

I said yes, to the whole package.

Ken Collins, our flight engineer declined also.

"One apple juice coming up," she remarked as she left the flight deck, as cheerful as she came.

"I was lucky to have found Frank's lens," I continued. "It had tumbled behind a rock. You should have seen Frank's face. The camera had been a birthday present from his wife. He was so pleased to have his lens back that he invited me to his trailer where I met his wife Jennie. Actually he wanted me to see the motor home he had built, a converted school bus. He was proud of it, and rightfully so. Even the wood paneling was made by hand, of narrow cedar strips, covered with four coats of varnish. The old school bus was a real cozy home...."

"Did you just say that his wife's name is Jennie?" Harry cut me off.

"Yes. Do you know them? Frank is also a pilot."

"Frank and Jennie! Hmmm! The combination sounds familiar. I met a couple like that at one of the conventions. She has dark hair, if I remember correctly, and a nice smile. Frank would be somewhat taller, with a freckled face, full beard. Am I right? I think he was working for CP-Air when I met him."

"Absolutely. But that was a while ago. He hasn't got the beard anymore."

"Oh, what a shame! Still, they are both very nice people."

"That's an understatement, Harry!"

"We really should get together for a visit," said Harry, "your family, his, and ours. You should all come to our place, for a week perhaps, for two if you can spare the time. I would give you a personally guided tour of the entire Northwest. I would show you Seattle as you've never seen it...."

"That sounds great!" I interrupted. "Let's do that. I'll talk to Frank

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about it. I'm sure, he would love to see you again."

Harry grinned. He always grinned when he was delighted with something.

"What is your wife's name, Harry?" I asked, as we crossed the last of the Cascade Mountains.

"Eloise!"

"That's a lovely name, Harry."

"She's a most lovely person, too, Paul, warm, gentle, intelligent. She is a psychology professor at our local university... And your wife's name is?"

"Melanie! Melanie is an artist, one of the finest. But I don't suppose you can judge art, or an artist that way..."

On our descent, Harry pointed out some places he would love to take us to. And later, as Seattle lay stretched out beneath us he explained in great detail all there is to know about Boeing's plant, whatever is noteworthy about the city, our company's office tower, his sailing club, and of course the locality of his home.

"Here, go take my binoculars," he added. "See if you can recognize our house. It's a two level rancher on that rise over there by the water." He pointed to it. "It's the house nearest the edge, the last on the block, look for a circular driveway...."

"Yes, I think I can see it. There is a greenhouse in the back of it, and an above ground swimming pool...."

"Right! Can you see anyone in the pool?"

"Harry! The whole neighborhood is in your pool."

"Ah, that's the way it is on a normal day. When you come, be sure to bring your children and your bathing suits," he added.

He took the glasses back, after that, and I took the yoke. "I can see Brian," he said. "Oh, and there's Eloise. Did you notice the garden table?"

"Yes."

"Then you have seen Eloise; the most beautiful blond you ever laid eyes on. Her hair shines like the sun; her figure like you wouldn't believe. You simply must come for a visit and meet her." He handed the binoculars back, "Here, would you like to take another look?"

I had to decline the offer, since at the very moment the tower called us for landing instructions.

We were barely four miles from the Airport when the shrill sound of the National Emergency Broadcast abruptly ended whatever train of thought I had at that moment. I felt like I was back in Miami in an

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emergency response exercise session.

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SEATAC had just opened an international addition to its collection of remote terminals that were accessible only by subway. As expected, this latest addition was the most sumptuous, and probably the most expensive passenger terminal ever built, for its size. It featured a small, but elegant restaurant, thick carpeting, a free movie theater, and two sculptures in its central lounge, and a stairway made of glass that led to a glassed in observation deck.

Leaning comfortably into the soft leather seat, Frank was engaged in a conversation with Melanie. Frank had remarked on how absolutely marvelous their days together had been. "Just look at the children!" he said, smiling at her.

The children were on the observation deck. They had a bet going, as to who would be the first to spot United's extended capacity 747, a redesigned version of the twice stretched, extended capacity short haul jumbo jet that the older of Frank's boys called an overgrown dragon fly. They had their eyes glued on the runway, watching for Flight 023 coming in that would take them to Vancouver.

It was the children's idea to stay an extra day. "We want to be on daddy's plane," they had demanded. "We want to surprise him!" "He likes being scared," Fiona added.

"Being scared and surprised isn't the same thing," Melanie explained.

To judge by their gestures, the older kids on the observation deck had an exciting conversation going. Frank smiled, "They are probably figuring out what to brag about, when they get back to their friends at home; riding the Monorail, having lunch at the Space needle, staying at a hotel with two swimming pools and a whirlpool!"

"They would have missed all this," said Melanie, "if you hadn't convinced me to trust Dick as a baby sitter."

Dick, the oldest at twelve, was more excited about the airport than anything else, especially about the subway trains that linked the various terminals together.

"If only Jennie could have come with us," said Melanie. "She would have really enjoyed this little holiday."

"I'm sure she would have," said Frank, "except she wanted you to go. She knew you would enjoy the opera more than she ever would. We only two tickets."

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"That is why she stayed home?"

Frank nodded, and smiled. "I had to promise not to say anything until now. She was afraid you might refuse her offer."

"Certainly I would have refused! You guys are really something. I should have realized she was up to something like that. That's just the kind of friend she is, a real angel! Both of you are just too much, you know; you're simply the best friends anyone could ever wish for."

"Paul would have enjoyed the opera," added Frank.

"He's been away far too often," Melanie replied. "He should have better routes that he has been getting."

Frank began to laugh; "He should come and work for our outfit!"

A wall of plate-glass gave a sweeping view of the runway and its incoming traffic, takeoffs, and lineups. Melanie glanced at the clock now and then and then at the runway. "What does this new plane look like?" she asked Frank.

"Is this where daddy's plane is coming to?" asked Fiona in a loud voice, with her arms stretched out towards a doorway where some people were lining up.

"No Fiona, he won't come to this door, but he will be here soon," said Frank. Frank took Fiona in his arms and went to the window.

"I can't wait to show him my dolly," Fiona exclaimed. "I love my daddy, you know. I'll tell him about the circus, and the fun we had."

"That wasn't a circus, Fiona," Frank explained. "You got this dolly at an amusement fair. There is much more to see and to do at a fair, than at a circus. For one thing, you can't win a dolly at a circus."

"But there was a clown there," Fiona remarked. "Right? He made funny faces. Isn't that what a circus is? Clowns are funny..."

Before Fiona could say more, the shrill sound of the National Emergency Broadcast filled the building. Then came its dreadful message.

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We must have gone two or three miles before it dawned on me that this was not a school exercise. I was shocked! The runway lay before us. Only seconds ago, everything was normal. The tower had spoken to us about a slippery spot in the breaking zone of the runway. "Hold your braking until..."

The high pitched sound cut the tower off in mid-sentence.

"Attention!" a voice called out. "Attention! This message is NOT a test..."

Those little words, "not a test," turned black into white, and white

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into a dark, murky, bottomless, gray: Nuclear War had begun! It was incomprehensible.

For one thing, the announcement sounded much too sweet for what it said. It sounded like a call for afternoon tea, too nicely spoken, too unemotional; and so it had to be. There is no voice on earth that can roar as loud in order to say what should be said to do justice to the pain that will be!

"...A Russian missile has been launched at the Pacific Northwest with sixteen warheads on board," the voice told us politely. It listed names of cities, small towns that were targeted, homes of people! Seattle was first on the list.

We were less than five hundred feet off the runway and still coming in when it finally clicked. Hey! You can no longer land here!

In a series of automatic reactions, I pushed the throttles open, the yoke back. I could feel the engines responding, building up speed, and developing thrust. Slowly the giant plane pulled away from the ground.

Moments later we were in a steep climb with all four engines blasting out smoke and thunder as much as the fuel management system would allow. We were in a race now, for our life. Still, it seemed futile to run. Where would we be able to run to, that would not likewise become an inferno? Would there be any safe place left in the world? Still, running for our life was the only thing we could do at the moment, in hope that there may be some flaw or rent in this tapestry of destruction that was about to unfold.

With the engines screaming at full power, I throttled back to conserve fuel.

Getting away was no small challenge. The announced target areas surrounded us. Two cities to the south were to be hit, and Everett in the North was targeted. To the West was the Bangor submarine base. It would likely get the largest warhead. Only a narrow path remained safe, slightly to the northwest, across the lower tip of Hood Canal, and from there over the mountains and out to sea.

Those were tense moments when it dawned on me that we were dead over ground zero. They had said that we had fifteen minutes. But what if they were wrong? Should I trust such a forecast, cut power, reduce our rate of climb to save fuel while wasting precious seconds? Which would matter most in the end, fuel or time?

I throttled down. I had to make the fuel last.

As I banked the plane towards the Olympic Mountains, I noticed a lake in the distance with a chalet at its shore. I wondered if this was one

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of those places Harry wanted us to see. He had spoken of lunches so big, almost impossible to eat, strawberry shortcakes smothered with whipped cream, desserts that were like a meal in themselves, served in an atmosphere of genuine hospitality. All would be but a memory within minutes. Whose memory? Who would be there to remember? The sunshine that still sparkled over the landscape, it would turn into the blackest of nights within minutes if the forecast would come true.

At the seminar they had spoken of overlapping fireballs, flooding the ground with temperatures hundreds of times hotter than the surface of the sun. Can anyone imagine what this does to a city? Oh God, how I wished I hadn't been at that damn seminar! They made it so clear that the Hiroshima bomb was no longer valid as a yardstick. Its fireball was so minute that it never touched the city at all. This won't happen again. We live in an era of the superlative, the huge, the outrageous! Our cities will become oceans of fire, so they told us, from which there is no escape.

Harry's children came to mind, and shoppers at the mall we had flown over, and people in swimming pools. None had a chance. They had shown a film at the seminar of a rather modest explosion by today's standards. That test blast had caused an entire island to be erased from the Pacific. The blast left a hole in the ocean floor, 175 feet deep and a mile wide. They said this had been a six-megaton blast over a solid rock. How infinitely more fragile than rock, are people? Those people had lied to us at the seminar by calling the game, nuclear war. It isn't war, by any measure. No one has a fighting chance in this computer automated extermination that is 'affectionately' accredited the name of war.

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Frank stood at the plate glass wall when the emergency broadcast began, holding Fiona in his arms. The high pitched sound caught everyone's attention. Then came the message, "This is not a test..."

"My God!!!" Frank exclaimed. In a daze he turned to Melanie, then putting Fiona on the floor he shouted to Melanie to come and get her, while he ran upstairs to the observation deck. "Come quickly kids! Dick, hurry...!" he yelled furiously at the kids, to make them move. As they came running, he pointed to a gate where there had been a boarding lineup. "Run for your life kids, gate 92 is open, run, run! Quickly!" he shouted to them, "There had been a boarding call at Gate 92 five minutes ago!"

Dick responded instantly. Reluctantly Robert started to run, to catch up. The rest followed him.

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"You must get on that plane," Frank shouted after them.

Melanie had picked Fiona up and had gone ahead some way. At the gate the children hesitated. They looked back, uncertain, waiting, waiting for Melanie.

"Go kids!" Frank shouted as loud as he could. "Don't wait for us! Get on that plane, that's your chance to stay alive!"

Robert burst into tears, but responded and moved down the ramp while Frank and Melanie followed, carrying Fiona. Frank was in tears as the children disappeared down the ramp, following Robert.

He had taken Fiona from Melanie, but the children were able to run faster. As he reached the plane with Melanie, the door was still open. What a glorious sight! But the crowd had become stalled. People pushed, shouted.

"At least let the children on," shouted Frank.

Melanie began to cry. She and Frank were near the end of the line.

"At least give the children a chance...," said another woman, repeating Frank's plea while her voice gave way to tears. Frank noticed someone actually struggling to get back out of the plane. "I must get out to my babies," a woman cried, "I must go... Please let me...!" She struggled in vain against the relentlessly pushing crowd that forced her still deeper inside.

Soon all were on board, and the door was shut. Frank heard the engines start to wind up. And even then, people were coming through the food service entrance. Mechanics, supervisors, baggage handlers, traffic officers, whoever on the field was near came climbing up over the service vehicle. A food module, quickly thrown down from the plane had become a stepping stone. People pushed and pulled each other up onto the service platform, and hung onto the plane. No one was prepared to move the service vehicle off. As the plane started to roll, under reverse thrust, miraculously everyone cleared the service vehicle railing. Not one stayed behind. They hung on for dear life, like a living clump while the plane was already on the taxiway. The plane sped forward under a burst of full power, racing to compete with others for takeoff.

Frank shook his head as the pilot pushed the throttles wide open while still turning onto the runway. Some people fell, and the rest at the door were thrown in, while the door fell shut behind them. "That guy has gone mad!" remarked Frank to Melanie. "But I love him, he is beautiful."

Frank could appreciate the pilot's struggle against the clock. "I

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must congratulate that glorious cowboy," he said. But Melanie held him back; "Later!" she urged him. "We must find the kids first!"

Frank agreed. But finding them was easier said than done. There was no order on the plane. People were stumbling, crying, praying, swearing, some were quietly looking for empty seats. Frank said he thought he had recognized Robert in the next cabin, but it seemed hopeless to get there. A steward shouted to Frank from a corner across the center row, to sit down, pointing to two empty seats in the middle. Frank was still holding Fiona. "Keep the kid on your lap," the steward demanded.

Reluctantly Melanie gave up on locating the kids and sat beside Frank.

Through all this, the Emergency Broadcast continued without interruption, relayed through the intercom. It was barely audible over the noise in the plane. It repeated the main points of its dreadful story, while giving advice about what types of shelters are useful at which distances from the blast.

"...There will be an immensely bright light for more than ten seconds," the voice said. "Be prepared! Don't look up! With the light comes a burst of intense radiation and heat, followed by a wave of high-pressure air gusts that can reach supersonic speeds. Past that, you will face fires. Keep water handy. You will become extremely thirsty and water will be hard to find. Also, it will become totally dark after the blast. You must remember not to expect outside help for several hours, or maybe days or weeks. You must be self-sufficient and do whatever you can to protect yourself! You have ten minutes.... God be with you...."

"Were you able to see Paul's plane?" Melanie asked a long time later.

Frank shook his head. "He might have come late and aborted his landing. He would go straight to Vancouver in this case. But where are we going?" Frank stood up. "Does anyone know where this flight is going?" he asked in a loud tone.

"Tokyo," a man replied in a dry soft voice.

"Tokyo?" Frank repeated. "My God, not Tokyo, not now!"

The man didn't comment. There was an icy silence between them in the chaotic tumult that Fiona alone ignored, playing quietly with her doll. By rights she should have screamed! Even a child must have sensed the dread and hopelessness everyone apparently felt.

Across the aisle from them sat a young man with his wife and

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children who had brought him to the airport fifteen minutes before the broadcast began. He still was unable to control himself, biting the side of his cheek. He raved about what he would do to the Russians and their evil empire if he had the chance. He would....

It became too ugly. Finally, a husky man in a baggy suit stood up and slapped him in the face and told him in no uncertain manner to stay put and shut up, "or else...."

His wife clutched their little daughter, almost strangling her.

"That's all nonsense!" said another man, "you don't need to be afraid, nothing will happen to Seattle. Calm down everyone, relax, the Air Force will take care of it."

"Sure they will!" said another.

"They're magicians!" said a third man from behind Frank.

"I feel so helpless," said Frank to Melanie. "We all know it's coming, we know it's not too late yet, the people are still living in the city. You want to hope that there is some way that somehow something can be done to keep the people and the city intact. You want to jump up and do something. But you know that nothing, absolutely nothing can be done."

"I refuse to believe that!" protested a boy. "They could shoot an atomic bomb at the missiles. They could explode the warheads in space, or deflect them out of their path on re-entry. There are lots of ways...."

Someone in the crowd praised the boy for his "fine intelligent thinking."

"It would be possible," said Frank to Melanie. "Except we've got no hardware built for any of this. We've done the opposite, instead. We agreed multilaterally to give each other our cities as hostages to deter aggression. We call it Mutually Assured Destruction. No doubt, the Air Force will make some heroic effort. They may even launch a suicide mission of the nature the boy has suggested, like exploding a bomb in the re-entry path. But to get the timing right would require super human precision, a one in a million chance. They may very well take this chance, for the lack of anything else, which places us in great danger again."

Melanie's face turned white. She got up. "I am going to the children, one way or another. I don't care what it takes!"

"You need not to go, lady," said an elderly gentleman behind her. "The broadcast is wrong. The Russian missiles will be aimed only at military targets; not at the city."

"Yes, but those targets are in the city," said the woman next to him. "And what happens to the rest of the warheads for which no military targets exist? They'll be used against people." She paused and smiled

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briefly at Melanie. "You'd better go to your children, lady, while you still can. I wish to God I could do the same." She began to cry bitterly, holding a photograph crumpled in her hand. She looked at it, and showed it to Melanie.

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Harry was one of the finest men I had flown with. He was thorough, methodical, careful, alert, and efficient. Not the slightest detail went unnoticed by him. Emotionally, he displayed the same character. Some referred to him as the Rock of Gibraltar. His hands still held the controls, but he was no longer in command of them.

I looked at him. How would I feel? Moments ago he had seen his family by the pool, alive, entertaining friends. How must anyone feel? A part of his being was to be murdered. His thoughts were with them no doubt, for one last embrace.

I felt a tremendous respect for him, which was superseded only by the compassion I felt for the city as a whole. "The only hope I see for us," I said to Harry, "is to cross the mountains out to sea, before the blast hits. We might get some cloud cover over the water to shield us from a possible heat-burst. Can you remember how cool it gets on the beach when a cloud comes along?"

But Harry said nothing. He didn't even change his expression.

"Hey, Harry, wake up!"

It seemed important somehow, to get him out his stupor. But he simply would not respond. Suddenly I felt ashamed of myself. We had come so close, seen his house, his family, yet not close enough to touch, to say good-bye.

My thoughts turned to Melanie and the children. Would Vancouver be in danger too? Would I see them there? I felt a flash of great fear, but didn't know why. We had arranged to meet in Vancouver, and Vancouver was not on the target list. I should be exploding with joy!

The trauma ended as the door behind us was flung open. Rosalinde burst onto the flight deck complaining bitterly that I hadn't informed the passengers as to why the landing had been aborted.

Rosalinde, a tall girl, slender, pretty, with beautiful red hair, but a sharp tongue, was no stranger to the flight deck. "It's not fair!" she yelled before she even closed the door behind her. "You guys screw up and I have to take the shit for it!"

I had to remind myself that Harry had warned me not to misjudge her. "Beneath that brusque facade is a heart of gold," he had said. "Deep

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down she's everyone's favorite."

When she noticed Harry's condition, her tone changed.

"My gosh what happened? Is Harry sick? Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Please lock the door," I said, "I will explain..."

"I am sorry for storming in like this," she replied. "I had no idea."

"No, the problem isn't with Harry," I said. "It's much worse."

"We aren't going to crash, are we? I came to complain for a concert violinist in First Class. He has a performance tonight...."

"We won't crash, but he won't play tonight either...."

"But his whole career may be at stake. Why can't we land? He's going to kill you, you know, when he finds out. He's got bumped off the flight from New York, and now this! He may be here any minute to blast you if you won't let me tell him why.... And what has this to do with old Harry?" she added, "I don't understand."

"Damn; it's hard to explain....," I said. In a way I was glad she had come up. I had totally forgotten about the passengers. They had a right to know. Some, no doubt, lived in Seattle or in the neighboring targeted areas. But how could I hope to tell them if I didn't even know how to tell Rosalinde?

"The violinist will not play in Seattle tonight, or at any other night, because there will not be a concert, an audience, or anything but a two-hundred-foot deep hole of burning ashes. In less than ten minutes a nuclear bomb will explode. The whole damn city will be erased..." I had to stop, I felt like throwing up. I switched the intercom on and looked up at Rosalinde. She had grown pale. Tears hung in her eyes. I noticed a man standing beside her, his hands covering his face. "Did you know that Harry has family in Seattle?" I asked Rosalinde.

She nodded. "I know his family. I love them. Who doesn't?"

I pressed the switch to the intercom to make it audible on the cockpit, with Rosalinde still standing beside me. I needed her support. "Ladies and gentlemen," I said, "this is your captain speaking. We have been informed that a missile has been accidentally launched against the United States of America. The missile carries sixteen nuclear warheads, targeted at Seattle, Bellevue, Tacoma, Everett, Olympia, Aberdeen, Montesano, Oak Harbor, Bellingham, the Bangor submarine base, the Hanford works at Pasco..."

I had to be brief. Each word defined a world. I could sense the people's pain reflected in their outcries. Never had I felt so consciously that those behind us in the plane were honest-to-goodness real people,

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not just passengers. I couldn't say anymore. I excused myself and simply connected the PA system to the emergency broadcast. I put my head down and wished to God this broadcast would never end.

The mountains passing beneath us gave the feeling that at least we, in this plane, had a chance. Minutes later while I was still holding Rosalinde's hand, Ken let out a shout, pointing at the ridge ahead. "There it is!"

Behind the ridge, a carpet of clouds came into view over the sea, reaching far into the distance. I had hoped for a massive front, but these seemed to do.

Under normal conditions a power dive into low-lying clouds would have been criminal. This time the situation was reversed. So, tensions rose once again as the giant aircraft, like a World War II dive-bomber, raced nearer and nearer to the ground. I leveled off, just as we entered the clouds, as if we would land on them, and slowly eased ourselves into the gray mist. I felt reasonably safe at this point, while the monotone voice of the broadcast continued.

This broadcast was our only link to the world of an impending tragedy. As long as the broadcast continued Seattle, where it originated, was still alive.

It could have been two or ten minutes later when it stopped in the middle of a word as if someone had switched the transmitter off. At this instant the clouds lit up. It felt as if a thousand lightning bolts surrounded us. We were flying through the very presence of light itself. This brightness stayed with us for almost ten seconds. But there was no blast yet. I knew Aberdeen was over fifty miles to the south of us. Sound travels slowly. A deep eerie silence followed the light. Only the noise of the wind, the engines, and some outcries from the cabin could be heard. After apparently ages had passed a loud noise shook the plane, followed by a roar of ten thousand lions. Then there was silence again.

"Was this all?" I thought. The shock felt no worse than a really bad thunderstorm. I scanned the instruments on the cockpit. We had sustained no damage. Rosalinde was still standing beside me. Everything was exactly as it had been. The amber glow of the instrumentation hadn't changed. The indicators hadn't moved. The controls still responded. We had a fully functional airplane and were still safely enveloped in clouds, eight hundred feet above the ocean, flying at a steady five hundred and forty-three miles an hour. Hurrah, the end of the world had come and passed us by!

In a sense, it all happened as anticipated. There were no surprises,

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except one, that I couldn't sense the pain or the outcry of those millions who had just perished or suffered great agonies. All I could feel, was an overwhelming relief that we ourselves had survived.

Once I allowed myself to relax, to collect my thoughts, I glanced over to Harry. I noticed he wasn't in his seat anymore. It struck me as odd that I hadn't noticed him leaving the flight deck. Sometime later Rosalinde left. She came back with a pot of hot coffee and four China cups. How beautiful this simple gesture was, the product of human culture: art, design, economy, and caring. The realization gave me an indescribable feeling that we live in a richly beautiful world that we had steadfastly ignored until now.

I thanked Rosalinde and commented that this was probably the finest cup I'd ever had.

She smiled as I drank it.

Minutes later I initiated our ascent into the sunshine. It was noon. The sun felt hot. Its brilliance was blinding. The song of a violin emerged from the cabin below. Our emergence into the sunshine sparked a celebration. So, there was a concert after all. The music was soft, but distinct. It carried a sad, deep-reaching melody that echoed the depth of my feelings, giving them form and definition. It was a song of solitude that reminded me of the mountains, the hiking trip we had planned with Melanie and the children.... But had Vancouver indeed been spared?

I pushed the throttles open to find out. I was impatient. I had to find out. Under full power the plane rose quickly over the mountains. I didn't care about the fuel this cost us. I had to see if Vancouver was still alive. Ken hadn't been able to contact Vancouver Tower, or Victoria. He had called several times after the blast. But there was no response. As I banked the aircraft to the right, towards Vancouver, two huge pillars of smoke came into view, and some lesser ones. One of the larger pillars was so immense that it dominated virtually the whole sky. I leaned back now and cut power, relieved that the pillars of fire were too far in the south to be from Vancouver or Victoria. This meant that our destination was safe!

No person on the flight deck said a word. Everyone stared at the frightful spectacle. What we saw was unbelievable. The pillars were alive, boiling within, surging upward, and billowing out into an immense top at the edge of the stratosphere. Several of the smaller pillars of smoke had already begun to merge at their tops into a dome that threatened to fill the entire sky, overpowered only the two immense pillars that had risen sixty thousand feet or higher, spreading horizontally in the stratosphere

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to form a gigantic double T.

It was painful to look at these pillars of fire. But in spite of the agony, one couldn't look anywhere else. The sight was captivating, of a scope alien to this world. The white volcanic cone of Mount Baker stood like a tiny dwarf in this scene of fire and smoke of unprecedented dimensions. I never felt more insignificant than on this day, a speck of dust in a boundless theater of horror.

As usual, Vancouver lay beneath a low overcast.

"Thank God Vancouver is still all right!" I exclaimed when I was able to lock our guidance system onto Vancouver's beacon.

"But you forget the fallout," said Ken. "Vancouver may not be all right. It may only be a matter of time before the fallout turns the entire city into a death trap."

"We must land somewhere," I said. "Besides, I expect my wife and children to be at the airport," I said to Ken, "and my friend's family."

Vancouver appeared like an oasis of life, surrounded by death.

"We don't have enough fuel anyway, to go anywhere else," Ken replied. "We have barely enough left to get us down." He added that he would try to contact the tower again.

"Tell them that I have already started our descent."

Ken transmitted the message, and repeated it continuously. By the time we were submerging into the clouds for a landing, Vancouver responded.

"You have a problem," said the tower, "we expect a tidal-wave. We can't let you in until it is over."

"Negative! We don't have the fuel. We can't stay in the air an extra minute. Please prepare the runway!"

"OK, then; this is what you will see. As you break through the clouds you will face a large fire in the mud flats in front of the runway. That's a DC9, burning. Go directly towards it and through the flames; the runway starts 200 feet behind the fire. You must use every inch, because the far end of the runway is blocked. The fire there is from a DC10 that was stormed by the crowd. The pilot was forced at gunpoint, to take off. The guy didn't have a chance. He couldn't get the wheels 'unstuck.' On the far end of the runway they had a collision."

"I'll be happy with half the runway," I called back.

As we came into the clear below the clouds, Ken called to the tower that we couldn't see any tidal wave.

"It must have passed," the Tower came back. "It must have

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traveled in a way that didn't affect us. Lucky for you, you're clear to come in!"

Actually I didn't feel lucky. The fire was large. There was danger that the burning aircraft, feeding it, might explode as we flew over it, causing shock waves. Still, in spite of the danger, it was wonderful to have a runway in sight again, and to be met by real people. We were coming to an oasis where there was life!

During the final approach I felt a strange uneasiness, a frightened feeling. It was echoed in the violinist's music that still came from the cabin below. It was a song of high aspiring melodies pervaded with sharp dissonances, a frightful and a beautiful sound, a song of a precarious paradise. Then, over the runway, the apprehension became still stronger. I sat in my seat, stiff, like a frightened child, my hands trembling. I felt a sense of kinship with the wheels as they touched the fast moving concrete - squealing and burning, - their inertia stubbornly resisting the momentum of the massive structure that bore down on them. I could feel them pull, slide, then slowly give in to the force that makes them roll.

My hands were still shaking after we had docked at the gate. I listened to the engines wind down. Eventually three uniformed men appeared on the flight deck. I referred them to Ken. I got up and insisted that I had to find my family. Surprisingly they let me go.

I passed Harry in the cocktail lounge. He was facing the door to the flight deck, his head bowed. He didn't even notice me walking by.

On the circular stairway down, I met Jennie. She came running up.

Oh, what a sight she was to my eyes! We embraced each other.

"Thank God you've made it through!" she said.

I looked at her. She was smiling. "I'm not sure that we made it," I said. "I'm not sure that any of us can say this. This thing has just begun."

She nodded as her smile faded. "You can't imagine what it was like here in Vancouver. I can hardly believe that we escaped and you are standing here; I mean that, that you weren't held up in Seattle. How did you get away? It seems like a miracle."

Her smile was wonderful to behold. She had always been great to look at. She appeared more so now. I loved her soft light hair, her face, and her gentle looks. She and Frank were one of a kind. I had loved her smile for as long as I had known them.

"Is Frank up here with you?" she asked. The door to the flight deck was open. She could see it from the stairway. She pointed towards it. "And the children, are they up there too?"

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I shook my head. I was confused, suddenly. What was she talking about?

"Are they not with you?" she asked. Her smile was beginning to fade.

I didn't answer. I couldn't see a word as if I couldn't speak.

"They must be still downstairs, Jennie," I replied later when I realized that they might have come with her as I had expected.

Her smile vanished. "Frank and Melanie.... Didn't they join you in Seattle?" She gave me a blank stare.

I turned my face from her. "In Seattle?" I asked.

"They had waited to be on your flight on the way home. Didn't you know that?"

I closed my eyes hard. I knew I wouldn't be able to bear seeing her reaction. "We didn't touch down in Seattle, Jennie, there was no time," I said quietly, almost inaudibly, since I couldn't comprehend what I was really saying, or didn't want to accept the incomprehensible. "I thought they had come back yesterday," I said after many long moments had passed in utter confusion. What dawned as tragic reality, couldn't be real. I kept pushing the thought away, pushing it back. "Frank had phoned..." I added. I couldn't say anymore.

She didn't answer. I turned to look at her. There were tears streaming down her face.

I put my arm around her back, to comfort her, as if the tragedy that now engulfed us concerned only her and not also myself.

"The children wanted to come home with you," she said through showers of tears. "It was supposed to be a surprise!"

"Oh, oh my God!" The word 'children' struck me like a blow, and this connected Melanie. It all came back to mind that they were in Seattle together. Frank had called from Seattle. He must have stood at the window when I aborted our landing. They all must have stood there. I embraced Jennie as tight as I could. I felt her tears on my cheeks, but couldn't find any myself. Oh God! Why couldn't I cry? I was facing this tragedy that was tearing my life apart, and I couldn't even cry.

"No, no!" I muttered to myself, defending my sanity, "this can't be!" Everyone gone! Everyone turned to smoke and ashes. It was incomprehensible, but my head told me that it was so. I had seen the pillars of fire. I remembered Harry's kids. Two miles away from them Melanie and the children had been waiting for me. I remembered glancing at the international terminal where we were supposed to have docked. I remembered seeing people at the observation deck. Had those been our

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children? I had been aware of many things as we flew by, though I couldn't comprehend what exactly was happening.

"We never touched down in Seattle," I repeated. I felt empty inside. I stood there bewildered. I couldn't grasp what had obviously happened. I even smiled. Not being able to cry was like crying for joy, but in reverse. At least Jennie could cry.

I felt closer to her in this dreadful bewilderment than I had ever allowed myself to feel before. I also could sense that we were infinitely distant from one another because of this great, great loss that overshadowed everything and made everything else seem meaningless. My hands were holding her. My fingers were touching her back, caressing her. I had dreamed of holding her like this. Now that the dream had come true a deep gulf emerged between us. She was Frank's woman, Frank's property. When my touching became too sensuous, she broke off the embrace. My escape into another dimension was over; it became blocked before it even started as it had been for most of my life.

I remembered having a poster in my room when I was a boy. The poster was a picture of a beautiful tropical beach. I had daydreamed about this beach for years; about palm trees, soft sand, gentle winds, swimming in warm clear waters. Years later I stood on such a beach on the island of Lido. The sand stretched as far into the distance as I could see. The dream had become reality, only the reality was different. The day was hot. It was July. The sand burned like coals. I had to sprint not to burn my feet, whenever I wanted to get to the water. Now the situation repeated itself. Jennie was so near, the only person remaining now in the world that was dear to me, that had always been dear to me, but the space between us had become an impenetrable barrier. It felt to me as she was standing at the edge of the surf and I reaching out for her across a beach of hot glowing coals. I felt her warmth as we embraced, her breast pressing against me. I smelled her hair, touched her shoulders, but we were worlds apart. I let my arms fall away from her.

In time my tears came. Those were bitter tears. Everything I had held dear had been turned to ashes. And with the tears came, strangely, a feeling that it was somehow possible to go on.

Jennie and I went back upstairs in our sorrow and sat facing each other in the plush first class cocktail lounge, trying to come to terms with the unimaginable. We didn't speak anymore. The silence was interrupted only when Ken called me back to the flight deck. He also called Harry. I

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saw Harry respond. I watched him stand up. He went into the cockpit without saying a word, barely taking note of us. Reluctantly I followed. I motioned Jennie to come with me. She nodded and wiped the tears from her face.

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"We are taking seven hundred to Calgary," Ken informed us as we entered the flight deck.

"Seven hundred?" I repeated.

"Yes," Ken confirmed. "The aircraft can haul 200,000 pounds. If we take no freight, no baggage, we can carry more than a thousand passengers, if we can squeeze them in."

"Seven hundred... A thousand... It's all the same to me," I said to Ken as I climbed into the captain's seat. "If you feel that taking seven hundred is safe, it's all right with me."

Actually the number startled me. In order to get seven hundred people on board they would have to be stacked like sardines. I was startled by the idea that this might be possible. By the same token my pathetic attitude towards this rescue venture startled me even more. I determined to pull myself together. "Let's take a thousand if you think we won't exceed the floor loading limits," I told Ken.

Ken nodded, "OK skipper, a thousand it is!" Ken relayed the change through to the tower and to the boarding gate. After he conferred with Harry, he turned to me once more and added; "This may be the first flight of the largest airlift the world has ever seen."

As I said this, I noticed Harry becoming interested in what Ken and I had to say.

Ken told us that the Government of Canada had received offers of assistance from all over the world. "A thousand planes will be involved. Vancouver must be evacuated within ten hours, before the fallout becomes critical." He began to grin and almost whispered, "I hope you gentlemen don't mind that I volunteered our services."

"That's quite all right, Ken," I said to him.

It didn't seem important to me from this point on what happened to me. Besides, I couldn't get anyway from this plane anyway. With people streaming in, there would be no way open to get out. And if I did, where would I go?

"We'll do this together," I said. I was fully prepared to go on flying until I dropped dead. That's as much as I cared about myself. I could understand Harry now. I told him so.

Harry nodded in agreement about flying together.

The tumult of loading passengers had started at this point. Someone with a loud voice directed the people to squeeze together.

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While this happened, I noticed that we were also taking on fuel. Ken was in control of everything. I was glad that one of us had a clear head still for the necessary administrative thinking. Harry was slowly coming around. I heard him telling Ken not to skimp on the fuel. "Give us a 20% buffer, even if that put us over the landing weight limit" he demanded.

Wondering about how many people we would eventually take, I felt more and more satisfied that flying an airplane at this time, was the best thing anyone could do to devote the rest of his life to. I reasoned that our life probably wouldn't last long anyway once the nuclear conflict got into full swing.

At this point my thoughts went back to Melanie and the children. I pictured them waiting for us, cheering among themselves as our giant aircraft approached in the distance, but only to see me pull the wheels up and never touch the runway, disappearing in the distance in a trail of black smoke while the broadcast started to tell its gruesome story. I couldn't get this scene out of my mind.

I trained my thoughts onto Jennie. I had directed her to the spare seat behind me. It hurt that now the only person that I had left, which I felt very close to, seemed so far away. That tragedy had created yet one more barrier. I puzzled over this problem until I felt the plane moving again. Harry had the controls. I motioned him to carry on.

"What is our flight number?" he asked, as he was about to call the tower.

Ken didn't know.

I shrugged my shoulders. "We certainly aren't United 023 anymore," I said. "United Airlines may have ceased to exist. Just tell them the 747 is ready," I said to Ken, "They'll understand."

Harry nodded, and started to call.

"Wait," I demanded, "I've got it! Tell them 'Operation Noah' is ready and requesting clearance for takeoff!"

"Operation Noah?" Harry repeated. He made a face like a kid rejecting its porridge.

"I like it!" Ken came to my rescue. "It has a ring to it. Let's stick with that."

"Let's make it official," I added. I called the tower myself, and then switched the PA system on. "Friends, as your captain, let me welcome you to the first flight of Operation Noah. The flight that you are on marks the beginning of what will become the largest airlift in history. Some of you may have lost a great deal today, homes, friends, and family. What I personally have lost, cannot be measured. But I am alive, thank God, and

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so are you. To keep things that way, a thousand aircraft have been offered to Canada to evacuate every citizen of Vancouver and Victoria before the fallout reaches critical levels. This kind of commitment means only one thing, that the world is rooting for us, that we are held dear in the hearts of mankind at this hour." I turned the intercom off and leaned back.

"That was a fine speech," Harry approved, as we became airborne.

"A fine theory anyway," I added. "I needed to say something positive, something that would get myself out of the rut."

"Well, did it work?"

"Not quite, Harry. Not quite."

"Maybe in time, it will."

"Yes, maybe," I replied.

"Anyway, your speech was perfectly timed," said Ken as we came through the overcast. The passengers now came face to face with the mushroom clouds.

I left the flight deck to check on the passengers. As soon as I opened the door, it became obvious that Ken was mistaken about the seven hundred passengers he felt we could carry. We must have had far more than a thousand persons on board, many of them children. Every square-inch of floor space was occupied. People were standing in the aisles, in the galleys, wherever one could sit, crouch, or squat. Even the stairway was occupied. It was almost impossible to get down to the main cabins. The luggage racks, as far as I could tell, accommodated most of the children. I saw people climb over other people's seats to reach the toilets. Most people had someone sitting on their lap, and this in those cramped spaces. To my surprise, I noticed Jennie in the crowd holding a bag of diapers in her hand. She was helping a woman with three tiny babies. It felt good to see her somewhat happier again and occupied.

The mood, in general, was one of despair, confusion, anger, hope, and gratitude, all mixed into one. I saw an old man who could not remember why he was there. He called for his wife, but no one answered. Some people cried while they looked out the window. Some swore at the Russians. In the rear cabin, most remarkably, undisturbed by the commotion, a group of youngsters were playing a card game. Maybe they have the best idea, I thought.

The weather was perfect in Calgary. We encountered no storms, no crosswinds, and no overcast. It was a rare, perfect day! The landing was equally perfect, thank God. We seemed to be dangerously

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overloaded. I could hardly feel the wheels touch the runway, so gently did I get us down. While we taxied to the gate I stressed the need for a quick and orderly disembarking. The 'passengers' complied so well that the plane was empty before we had finished refueling. Five minutes later we were in the air again, going back.

This time we flew directly toward the clouds that consisted entirely of white fiery smoke. The clouds were visible at a great distance. Their mushroom shapes had disappeared. The tops of the larger ones had joined to form a horizontal shelf supported by several pillars. Near the ground the picture was equally frightening. Layers of smoke extended from the base of these clouds, spreading like fingers over the surrounding area. Harry shuddered.

The silence on board was interrupted when the call came from Calgary tower, requesting us to service Abbotsford. "Vancouver has become unusable because of violent wind currents, some in excess of two-hundred knots," said the tower.

Harry and I were both familiar with Abbotsford airport. It was well known to both of us, as to everyone in the region, for its annual air show. Also, it served as an emergency backup for the Vancouver International Airport. We both knew it consisted of nothing but a big runway surrounded by fields with a few small buildings on one side. It offered no ground support, no security services, and no large-scale boarding facilities. We would be on our own in a wasteland of panic. Without saying a word Harry executed the required course correction and initiated our descent into the smoke filled Fraser Valley.

From a technical standpoint, I knew we could service Abbotsford. The runway was long enough. We certainly didn't need any special facilities. We required nothing, not even fuel. We had been refueled for a full round trip. The lack of security bothered me. The prospects of having no one to back us up were frightening.

Harry shook his head as we approached. "The runway's down in there," he said, pointing to a bank of dense smoke that lay over the Fraser River valley and the surrounding hills. Carefully we descended through layers and layers of smoke, fog, and muck, into a valley with a low ceiling over dark haze. A faint line of lights appeared beneath us, the headlights of countless cars. Their trail marked out the highway into the mountains, the same mountains we had seen from above, being also covered with smoke from the mushroom clouds.

Looking at the endless string of cars, I wondered how soon all the gas stations would be pumped dry and the traffic become stalled, turning

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that desperate escape into a trap. It seemed impossible for anyone to reverse direction in such an armada of cars.

The people at the airfield appeared to have realized the hopelessness of driving to safety. They had turned to the only other escape there was open in the valley. The fields surrounding the runways were littered with cars, and the airfield itself was crawling with people, so such so, that we had to abort the first landing approach and come around for a second attempt. Even then, we had barely slowed and entered the taxiway when they came at us with ladders. Who knows where they got them from? We were forced to stop hard in order not to run anyone down.

Harry and Ken, both volunteered to man the door, and of course the telephone. We needed to be in constant communication in order to end the loading once the plane was full and before a riot broke out. Jennie stayed with me at the flight deck. She manned the PA phone, telling people to double up on each seat and stow the children in the luggage racks. I also needed her to watch the proceedings on the ground while I remained in the cockpit monitoring the engines. She said it was a marvel the ladders didn't break and that no one got sucked into the engines. I didn't dare turn the engines off. We had to be able to roll at a moment's notice, whereby to stop the loading when the plane was full. We couldn't exceed the floor-loading limit, although that seemed not likely to happen if our last run was an indication. Our biggest problem would be to persuade those fighting for their life to voluntarily remove the ladders. Would they comply and step back without me somehow having to force the issue? The image of the burning DC10 at Vancouver was still vividly in my mind.

I stood up in my seat, telephone in hand, looking at the sea of humanity. They were desperate to get out. Some had a chance now. But was there any hope for humanity as a whole? How long would it be before the whole Earth was a burnt out cinder? Would they really be safer where we would take them? Would anyone be safe? Still, taking them out this hell was the only imperative for now that ruled the day, and the only human gesture we could extend to them in this grossly inhuman place that our world had become.

It was clear that they could force their way into the airplane much more easily than we could stop them. The initiative to end the boarding had to come from the people themselves. This seemed unlikely to happen.

"Is the plane full yet?" I asked Harry.

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"No, maybe another hundred."

"A hundred is nothing," I called back and increased the speed of the engines, to signal the crowd to back off. Since the doors couldn't be closed with the ladders still in place, and I couldn't see us pushing the ladders over with people still hanging on them, I did the only thing that made any sense at all. I put on power, making a racket. But it was to no avail. So, I increased the speed of the engines again.

I stood up, opened the flight deck hatch, and watched the proceedings. The increased noise still didn't deter them. When Harry's call came to stop the boarding, the only solution I could think of was to increase the speed of the engines still more. This time I remained seated. With the breaks full on, I increased power again.

The noise of the engines, which must have been painful before, should now have become unbearable. The shrill shriek of the blades, the bearings, the thunder of the exhaust, all merged into a thundering scream of frightening intensity.

I called to Jennie.

"They're still on the ladders," Jennie informed me.

I increased the power again to 25% below the red line. The drone became deafening, even in the cockpit it became loud now. I could see from the flight deck window that some people had backed off now. But the ladders were still in place and the people still held on. Struggling to get on board, they pushed and yelled while those inside moved deeper into the plane.

My heart went out to them. The people were fighting for their life, but so were we now.

"We're too full! Do something!" Harry shouted into the phone.

"Try to shut the door, then!" I yelled back into the phone. It was hard to understand anything on the phone anymore.

"I can't!" he shouted back. "I can't get near it!"

Reluctantly I increased power to 90%. All four engine heat gages were already beyond the red line. Even with the brakes fully secured, it became uncertain at this point whether I could keep the plane from creeping forward. Rarely is this power level ever used, not even for takeoffs on short runways. The whole aircraft shook and twisted under the force of its engines, as if flying amidst a thunderstorm. With the ladders not too stable on the ground, boarding, now, became a dangerous affair. The engine intakes were also too close. The suction created turbulence at this power-level that could pull a hat of a person.

Fortunately, sanity prevailed. The people responded.

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The moment the last person had stepped off; the ladders were taken away. "All secured! Doors are closed! Go!" Harry called.

I throttled down and leaned back into my seat. Sweat poured down my face as I carefully let the brakes go. How good it felt to get rolling again! Minutes later we were over the runway, facing a dark gray sky. We climbed sluggishly with the throttles wide open, leaving the desperation behind that still ruled on the ground and would for a long time to come. Thank God, we had won!

Calgary was only a transfer center, a stop on their journey. Trains and busses would take the people further east. But this was also to change. As we landed, the word came down that we had flown our last flight to this city as the area had become endangered, itself. Its airport would soon be needed for the city's own evacuation. It didn't make much sense to dump people where they wouldn't be safe, but we didn't have the fuel to go further.

"They'll be safe for a while," said Harry. "The others on the coast need us far more."

Before we left, a decision had been handed down to divert all available long-range aircraft to more distant destinations. For us, this meant flying to Hawaii. We were refueled one last time, and sent to Victoria in-route to Honolulu. Because fuel was already scarce at the capital, we were fueled up for the entire trip. The tower cautioned us that much of Victoria is on fire, "but the airport is still safe, and boys, flying to Honolulu will compensate for that, lucky you," the man at the tower remarked.

"What do you think that 'lucky' is supposed to mean?" asked Harry.

I shrugged my shoulders. "Victoria couldn't be worse!"

"Worse than it was at Abbotsford? Not likely!" said Ken.

When saying good-bye to Calgary, possibly forever, I felt the urge to get my captain's hat out and put it on, as if it were to salute the great city of Canada's oil patch that was, like Vancouver, destined to become a ghost town. Harry looked at me and shook his head. He must have thought I was crazy.

"Let's do a better job this time," he said after we were back at 30,000 feet. He never explained what he thought we had done wrong in the first place, nor did I feel like probing for it. So we left it at that. I think the strain was getting the better of us all. Considering everything that had

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happened, it was a marvel we were able to cope at all.

As we crossed the Rocky Mountains Jennie came to mind. I remarked to Harry that she had been most helpful throughout our trips.

"Why don't you go down to her," answered Ken. "Go, and spend a little time with your friend. The way you've been looking out for her ever since she came on board, I would say...."

"She's his best friend's wife," interrupted Harry.

I nodded to Ken, and left the flight deck. Harry was at the controls anyway.

I found Jennie at the lower First Class cabin. She was searching the lockers for food. She had some coffee brewing. Fortunately, she hadn't noticed me. Tears stood in her eyes. These were hard times for all of us.

Uncertain as to what I should do or say, I leaned against the wall of the aircraft and was content just to watch her.

My thoughts went back to the time when Frank first introduced me to her in his camper on the summit of Milner Pass. Her face seemed to sparkle with a rare inner joy. I was captivated by it. I had been in love with her from this first moment on. She impressed me as someone quite special, although I could never really define what made me feel that way. I thought it was her eyes, perhaps, or her voice. Her voice was lovely and clear. She spoke with a vitality that was hard to ignore, and a smile that was hard to forget. I will never forget her gesture when she invited me to stay for lunch. There was something profoundly gentle and inviting about her.

After lunch at the camper we talked and then went for a short hike together. When we returned it was tea time. I was given the privilege of viewing their photography work. Jennie's work consisted mostly of studies of people - at work, on the farm, hiking, playing, attending school, and riding the bus. Those pictures portrayed a rare sense of humanity and a humor that never degrades its subjects, but shows a deep compassion.

The picture of a workman caught my eye. He was kneeling on a sidewalk, apparently in the process of reaching into a manhole when the back of his pants had come apart. He smiled as he tried to cover the rent. Another picture portrayed a small girl, running as fast as she could against the background of the gold colored glass-facade of an office building. "Can you see the wonderful strength that radiates from this fragile looking girl?" Jennie asked, "and how it contrasts against the hidden fragility of the magnanimous, represented by this glittering front?" Then she added

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that the picture was taken a week before the corporation that owned the building had gone into receivership.

Jennie's work impressed me also in other ways. It was similar in a way to the work Melanie did as a print-maker and sculptor. They both transformed abstract ideas and feelings into concrete shapes.

Frank's pictures, on the other hand, were quite different, photos of mountains, happy companions, of tiny wild flowers growing in patches of earth between rocks. One photo looked straight down, on a wide alpine valley, partly filled with a layer of fog. The scene was framed on two sides by Frank's climbing boots dangling over the void.

"Which do you treasure most?" I asked him. "The exciting ones?"

He nodded. "Yes, those at first. But one grows up, you know. After one has conquered again and again, and still longs for more, one finds a new way to win. With this comes a new series of pictures."

I looked up at Jennie. How little all this mattered now!

It was several hours past midnight when Frank and Jennie had accompanied me back to my car, two miles below the summit. We walked quietly, arm in arm, in the moonlight.

Naturally, I drove them back to their camper before I set out for home on a long, lonely drive after a most exciting day. The mountains across the valley stood ominous in the dark; huge imposing, monolithic shapes from an alien world, created by a civilization of giants, so it seemed. They stood tall and cold and ominous against the moonlit sky. There was no color in them, no richness of detail, only gray against black. Everything was as gray and dim as the moonlight itself.

In some respects, this somber scene was reminiscent of the way my marriage had become. What had happened to the fine texture and colorful detail, the noontime landscape? How much of it had been allowed to fade? I thought of Melanie's devotion, her caring, her smiles, and her achievements. I was ashamed of my response to them, as it had become. Where was the bright intimate glow that should be touching us?

Getting back to Boulder was a two-hour drive. But the drive didn't mark an end to this new friendship that was sparked on the mountain. Rather, it marked a beginning. As I was driving home through the lower parts of the mountains, a series of yellow signs became illumined in the shine of the headlights. They contrasted brightly against the black of the night, like highway markers. However, those weren't highway markers. They bore an inscription that made me shudder as I read it. "Posted,

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Private Property, Trespassers will be prosecuted."

A week later I remembered the signs again when Frank and Jennie stopped by on their way home. I swore to myself that there would be no such signs posted between us. I made a special effort to assure that the opposite would be the case. I invited them back to us as often as it was practical, and we were consequently invited by them in return. Out of this beginning, that started oddly with a protest, a long series of visits evolved that added a bright new dimension to all our lives. As for Melanie and I, being touched now and then by our friend's gentleness and excitement with living, brought back a certain color into our marriage and some of the fine details that for a period had become lost.

Now this association seemed to be broken. Both of our families were evidently dead, unless...! Unless, they had managed to get away from Seattle on a plane!

Hurrah, that was it! That's what must have happened! What an idea! What possibilities! Immediately I made myself known to Jennie.

"Have you ever thought that Frank and Melanie might have gotten onto a different plane and escaped the holocaust?" I said to her softly. "They were all waiting for me right at the airport, were they not?" I stepped closer towards her in the brightly-lit galley.

She began to smile at the thought. "Excuse me for crying," she said and looked away. "I was thinking about Frank and the children, I couldn't quite accept that they should be dead. I couldn't feel it. You may be right that they could have gotten away. Do you think it is possible?"

I nodded. "It is reasonable to assume that they found space on one of the aircraft that I saw standing around. Surely, some of the aircraft must have been fueled up and able to get away. After all, they had the same fifteen minutes warning that we had! Ten minutes should have been enough to get safely away, and five minutes to board them!"

Jennie's face lit up. "Maybe it wasn't quite as frantic there as it was in Vancouver."

With that thought her lovely smile came back. I began to dry the tears off her face, with a napkin. Jennie was familiar with SEATAC's satellite terminals that are well spaced out and usually less crowded. With them being cut off from the main complex via the subway link, there might have been less panic with fewer people around. I suggested that it might have been easy for them to get away, certainly in comparison to what we have seen. "They might have simply walked on an aircraft. There were several aircraft docked. Some might have been ready for takeoff!"

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As I spoke, tears came into her eyes again. "I should have thought of that myself, Paul. That sounds totally possible. How foolish of me to lose hope so quickly!"

She put her arms around me.

"Go on and cry, Jennie," I said to myself.

I began to cry myself moments later. Those were the first tears that came, tears of joy, and her embrace of me felt wonderful.

Our embrace lasted for a long time, and with it a new feeling emerged that I hadn't felt for her for a long time. We had been alone together on occasions, but never like this. She had become more than a friend to me, suddenly. She was a woman struggling with this chaos as I was. I had always admired her as a woman, even while I had loved her as a friend. Now everything was different. The boundaries became blurred. The woman became to the foreground. Our embrace ended with a kiss. We smiled at each other, but in a different way as before. It seemed that we had become drawn closer to one another by the power on that great joy that now enveloped us, born by a bright hope.

"Just look at yourself," she said gently when our kiss ended. "If you go on crying like this you might ruin your uniform!" She took a paper-napkin from the tray and proceeded to wipe the tears off my face that I hadn't even been aware of.

The flight to Victoria was a short one. When the engines slowed, I excused myself and headed back to the flight deck. Harry looked at me. "It's about time!" he grumbled.

I sat down. In my mind, I was still with Jennie. "I didn't stay away that long!" I said casually.

"That's not what I meant!" Harry came back, short, sharp.

His manner shocked me. "Then what?" I asked, still puzzled by it all. There wasn't an emergency. He was well able to fly the plane by himself. "What's eating you, Harry?"

"Must I spell it out. Jennie is your best friend's wife!"

"Yes!" I said. "So what's the fuss about?"

"Is that how you show respect?"

I sat back, flabbergasted. What happened to him? I looked at Ken. "Nothing happened between Jennie and I," I said to Ken. "We just realized that our families might have had a chance to get away from Seattle in time. They had been waiting for me there. They couldn't have been in a more ideal place for getting away." Suddenly I coughed and stopped. "Forgive me," I added quietly.

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"You better calm yourself," Ken said to Harry. "You've been through so much!"

"Calm myself!" Harry replied to Ken. "Look who is speaking, the womanizer! You're worse than he is. I have eyes. I've seen you lots of times with girls of every description, dozens of them, a different one in every city: stewardesses, waitresses, office girls. The way you're carrying on is...!" He searched for words.

"Oh my God," I said to myself, "if this is a delayed response, this madness could grip me, too." I determined that it wouldn't.

Ken defended himself. "Pull yourself together, Harry," he said calmly.

"Why should I? You disgust me," Harry came back, "no decent man goes out with other people's women!"

"Why the hell not, Harry!" Ken raised his voice at him.

"Because it sickening, chasing after every skirt that crosses your way!"

"Oh, is that so? Let me tell you what is sickening! Segregation is sickening. The way you flaunted your wife, that is sickening!" Ken blew up at him. "People are not property that you own like a car. You speak of your wife like she was some piece of property, your most precious possession. It's you who's disgusting. Half the guys in the company have been invited to meet the great Harry Salinger's gorgeous blond wife, 'with the best figure you ever laid your eyes on.' Isn't that so, Harry? That is disgusting. I never said this before. I let it be. In fact, the whole damn stinking society that we've become disgusts me; a bunch of slave owners that isolate their woman. It is a wonder they don't use branding irons on them!"

The conversation stopped abruptly when the flight deck door opened.

Jennie entered with a stack of trays. "Your dinner, gentlemen!" she said kindly, and handed each of us a plate of sandwiches, coffee, juice, and a glass of wine.

I asked her to come closer, and as she did, gave her a kiss. I couldn't help but glance at Harry out of the corner of an eye, to see his reaction. He looked away and shook his head.

"We have plenty of time for eating," said Harry moments later as he arranged the cutlery on his tray. He spoke in the nicest manner suddenly as if the previous moments hadn't happened. He explained that we had been rerouted to come in from the North. The best approach was from the North, because of the smoke from the fires.

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Eating that fine food, mere leftovers that Jennie had found in the First Class freezer locker, created a strange feeling. Here we were, dining like kings, drinking wine and freshly brewed coffee, descending toward a burning city that we knew was absolute hell. It didn't seem right for us to even have a meal.

The tower asked us to slow our approach. We were number seven in line.

When Jennie left the flight deck to put the dishes away, Harry apologized quickly.

The landing itself was routine. From there on, however, it wasn't. It was as though we had ventured into a dragon's lair. A powerful, disorganized frenzy possessed everyone. We were at the mercy of the beast, the tower. Safety was no concern. Who cared about trivialities like that? Survival was the game! This game applied to airplanes as it did to people. We were fast learners to realize that. Since there was obviously no room anywhere, we were assigned a small spot on a grassy field beside the runway, a soft boggy patch. It was risky to stop rolling. I protested and went back onto the paved area that was terribly clogged with planes loading passengers and fuel. By some miracle I squeezed our giant crate into line. I was surprised also, to see a tank truck race across the runway, to meet us.

"Operation Noah, we'll top you off!" the tower called. Who knows how he managed to guide the tank truck to us? There wasn't much fuel needed. Then came the dangerous part, the passengers. They came in a long string of busses that appeared out of nowhere over a field.

We got twelve busloads, seven hundred all told, and twenty-five boxes of food to feed them. The whole loading process proceeded like a finely executed military operation. In seven minutes the doors were closed, and one minute later we were lining up for the runway.

During the loading shots could be heard in the distance, but no one regarded them. It didn't even strike me until we had time to think, how desperate the situation must have become that people would start shooting at one another in times like these.

"I think the people in this city are the lucky ones," I said to Ken. "They stand a chance to be all rescued. In the moment of this deep crisis the world appears to be responsive to the human need and will do all it can to meet the emergency."

"This won't last," said Harry. "In a day the airports will be out of fuel. When the fallout comes down on the East Coast, there won't be an airlift operating to rescue anybody. Nothing happens without fuel, and

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the fuel cannot be produced without a functioning economy. People won't go to work when they are scared for their life. Nor will there be food when the transportation and distribution system breaks down. More people will likely die in the chaos of the economic disintegration than will die of radiation related causes."

Ken muttered something about Harry being mad. Eventually though, he agreed, wondering if there was enough fuel in Honolulu to sustain the airlift for more than a day.

Honolulu was a different world altogether. This became evident before we even saw the islands. There was order on the islands, politeness, and concern. We were the first of the great airlift to reach Honolulu. Low clouds concealed the islands as we began our descent. The air traffic control center reported showers and gusts, advised on breaking conditions. The runway was ours, we were told. We had priority over everyone. No wait was imposed. This was VIP treatment. The weather was insignificant, compared to the nature of the operation. Gusts or no gusts, we were coming in. We were heavy, but not too heavy.

As we disembarked we were welcomed as honored guests. They were obviously aware that the nature of this airlift was such, that it would soon touch the lives of nearly everyone on the island. Still they opened their doors in a magnificent welcome. In a way, I realized, it had already touched everyone.

An appeal for accommodation and volunteer help had gone out. It had met with a strong response. Banners were strung across the halls on the arrivals level. "Welcome operation Noah," they read. The Salvation Army was present with food counters that resembled World War II field kitchens, dispensing soup from boiling vats, and hot chocolate, coffee, milk, tea, and sandwiches. Service clubs had set up other tables. Numerous organizations eager to help meet the most urgent needs of the flood of refugees were present, and it seemed that more were expected. Church and social groups offered assistance for those who required special care. The National Guard was also on hand to provide transportation to hotels and homes.

I wondered if this great urge to help was not in effect a celebration of a growing awareness that the nuclear war had remained limited to just a single missile, a fact that must have seemed most unlikely at first, something that we hadn't had time to contemplate before.

The same warm reception we got on the ground, had previously

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been extended to us in the air. "Welcome to Hawaii, Noah One," the tower had greeted us as soon as we signed on. We were given VIP treatment in every respect but one. "Could you fly another mission?" the tower practically requested in the first sentence. "We've got no replacement crew yet, and as you know, the situation is critical back on the mainland."

We all knew that this was the understatement of the year. It was no doubt getting more desperate by the hour. How could we refuse?

Harry tried. "Look man, we've been seventeen hours in the air," he called back. "Don't you think that's enough?"

"Right," the tower called back. "Normally it would be criminally irresponsible to send a man on another ten-hour flight after seventeen hours in the air. But nothing is normal anymore...."

"We'll go!" I called back.

"I'll have some camping cots set up in the upstairs lounge, as sleeping quarters..." the tower responded.

I knew that I would have gone back even without those arrangements, and Jennie likewise.

We got off the plane when the mechanics arrived.

As we entered the main hall, Jennie let out a shriek of surprise: "See, your creation is famous!" She pointed to the banners across the hall.

"Actually I am not proud of it," I replied some minutes later.

"Why not? It's a great idea!"

I told her I had noticed TV reporters among the crowd, probably gathering up stories of broken families, lost possessions, tales of panic and worse.

"Did you see the TV cameras?" I asked. I pointed one out to her. "That's why I think it was a stupid idea," I added.

Now and then one could see a camera pointed at the banners as if this compassionate effort by so many people could be wrapped up under a central theme, like a motto for a party.

"This isn't a party, or some miraculous dispensation of the grace of God," I said to Jennie. "This is the loveliest natural thing in the world; people helping people in need. To make it into something unnatural or miraculous distorts what it really is. It is degrading to the human spirit!"

She agreed.

Perhaps people didn't see it as some miraculous thing. It was wonderful to witness the caring; the compassion of those volunteers; to see how it lightened the glum faces that had emerged from our plane.

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We paused near the entrance to the hall. Jennie said that she was hungry. That's when I spotted the soup kitchens. I also noticed a stocky man with a brightly colored shirt coming directly toward us. He marched directly towards us, smiling. His shirt was the brightest I had seen for a long time; it was almost fluorescent. He could only be a tourist, I thought. I felt that an Islander would never wear a thing like that.

"Howdy!" he greeted us in a loud voice, shaking my hand.

I stood perplexed and returned the greeting.

"Are you the captain of that Noah ship that came in?" he asked.

I hesitated, but couldn't deny it.

"It's mighty nice to make your acquaintance," he said. "I am Peter McTaggart, from Fort Lauderdale, Florida. My great, great grandparents were rescued by someone like you," he explained. "I always wanted to meet a person who would do a thing like that. People like you are rare nowadays!"

I looked at him. Wondering what he was up to, I glanced at Jennie. Jennie shrugged her shoulders.

"Is there something we can do for you?" I asked.

"What's happening here," he said, "is similar to what happened to them." He searched for a way to explain himself. "Before my ancestors got married they became the focal point of a violent family dispute. As I heard their story told, a traveler became aware of their plight and helped them to get away. Supposedly he bought them passage on a boat, bound for New Orleans. He even gave them money to live on. I've always been intrigued to find out what kind of person this man might have been."

"I can assure you, you haven't found this person in us," I replied to McTaggart. "As you may realize, there was considerable self-interest involved. Where would we have gone, if we hadn't stayed on the airplane? Flying this air-lift was out of necessity, rather than by choice."

"And we'll be flying right back in about fifteen minutes," added Jennie, "and tomorrow we'll do the same again, and many times after that until everyone has been evacuated."

"And we aren't the only ones," I added mechanically. My heart wasn't in it. Having reached some degree of safety at last, I was in a good mind just to stay put. In fact, this was my intention deep down in my thoughts, though I didn't think it would ever happen. "There will be a thousand flight crews involved when the airlift gets into full swing," I said to McTaggart.

"...That's a dangerous business, isn't it, because of the radiation?" McTaggart replied.

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"Radiation is the least of the problems," I said. I began telling him about our experience in Abbotsford, and about the shooting in Victoria; "Sure it's dangerous, but it is far more dangerous for the people that are left behind who have to worry about radiation. It's important to get them out as quickly as possible. Actually, it may well be too late already. Still, we must do everything we can to give them a chance." I had to be careful not to grin here, not to let on that I really had hoped against hope that it would be possible for us to stay.

McTaggart, who had been blunt and boisterous before, became quiet now. He remarked thoughtfully: "It's a strange thing, what is happening here. I have never met anyone like you people in all my years in business. My business is in Chicago. I buy real estate when I see a chance for development. Then I bring in the resources, exploit the need and make a profit. That's how business works. That's how money is made, through sheer self-interest. Now you're almost telling me that I should be ashamed of the way I've lived."

"No, No!" replied Jennie. "You mustn't judge yourself so harshly."

"...But I must!" McTaggart replied. "Either I have been wrong all my life, or you people are crazy, which I don't think you are."

McTaggart hesitated, looking at the floor. "What you are doing goes against the most basic laws of nature. It's unnatural for one to risk one's life to help others, especially if you don't even know if it will do any good. And yet, you're telling me it is being done all over the place..."

We talked several more minutes along these lines. Finally, we excused ourselves. Jennie said it was time to get back on the plane.

"That means you have another ten more hours to fly," he remarked. "But you look tired already. And what happens to you after you come back?"

"Oh, we'll find a hole to crawl into," I joked. "Did I tell you that I came from your home-city this morning, and from Miami before that?" I said to him. "We nearly landed at SEATAC. We were facing the runway when the holocaust was announced. Luckily we had enough fuel to get out of there, and get to Vancouver. After that the real flying began back and forth across the mountains, landing in chaos, amidst gunshots. Yes, it's been a long day. Eighteen hours in the air, maybe more...."

McTaggart shook his head. He raised his hand, but said nothing. Moments later, he reached into his upper pocket, brought a bundle of keys out, and slid one of them off the ring that held them together.

"Here take this!" he said to me. "It's for my flat in an apartment complex on Maui, called Papakeea. You may be in need of a place to sleep

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when you get back. I don't have any need for it now. I would like you to use it. The apartment number is on the key. The complex is a short way past Lahaina, right at the far end of Kaanapali Beach. You can't miss it. But don't get the idea that I think you're right," he added. "I am giving you this key because it is my pleasure to do so, not because I feel I should."

Jennie and I assured him that we appreciated his offer.

I even said that I would gladly pay for the use of it, except I didn't know if the company I worked for was still in existence.

"No, no, there's nothing to pay," he insisted. "With what's happening these days, money isn't worth anything anyway." He shook our hands, saying good-bye, and left quickly.

We went to the sandwich counter for something to eat, and walked back to the plane. I didn't know how to tell Jennie that we shouldn't go back. I checked my watch. We were five minutes overdue already. They probably locked the doors already or had left. I hoped they would have, then I wouldn't have to explain. But the doors were still open. I heard the engines wind up. I knew Harry couldn't fly this mission by himself. I also knew that it had to be flown. How then is a person to react? I just couldn't turn my back at him. Staying behind in paradise was a dream that would never be, a wonderful dream, but nothing more than that. I put the key in my wallet.

"What the hack," I said to Jennie as I stepped aboard with her, our sandwiches still in hand. She stared at me questioningly, as I locked the cabin door behind us. She might have been wondering what this, 'what the hack,' was all about. I didn't let on. I reached for the phone and called Harry up on the flight deck. "Let's roll Harry!"

We both went upstairs. Jennie said nothing and started to smile again. I could hear the engines accelerate to get us rolling. I shared my sandwiches that I had collected. So did Jennie. The sharing was more a nice gesture than a necessity. "We've got boxes and boxes full of food," said Harry, grinning. "There is enough here to feed eight hundred."

"Noah Heavy, you've got the runway," the tower called back.

"All right, here we come," Harry exclaimed. Within seconds we thundered once more over the concrete and out over the sea.

"Good luck Noah!" the tower signed off.

The return flight was our sleeping and dining cruise. First we ate

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our sandwiches, then some of the buns and biscuits out of the food boxes. We hadn't reached cruising altitude when the flight deck became suddenly rather empty. We had agreed among us that Harry, Jennie and Ken should sleep first. I would have my turn at sleeping on the way back to Hawaii.

It soon became apparent that this was a bad decision. I should have asked for someone to stay with me. It was hard to stay awake in this lonely dark world of the cockpit with no one around. The soft whine of the engines, the hiss of the airflow over the hull, the occasional clank of a storage compartment door left open, were the only sounds to be heard.

At first I gave myself to star watching, for something to do. The aircraft flew more accurately by itself, under computer control. Still, I couldn't dare fall asleep. The pilot's job is to handle emergency situations. Harry had specifically warned me about the risks of falling asleep. It had happened to him once when his captain was off the deck for dinner and the altitude control system malfunctioned. He nearly executed four hundred people while sleeping.

As it was, far more fearful feelings came over me, than those about falling asleep. As I looked out into the dark star-filled sky, I became afraid for humanity. As if the clock had moved forward and the war had sequenced on, our plane suddenly appeared in my mind like it was the last outpost of a dying species seeking refuge at the edge of its poisoned world. The thought shocked me. Frightening images crept into the mind in the dark. For all I knew, these images could have already become reality. Our destination cities might lie in ashes when we arrived, with no place for us to land. Our 'ark' might be cradling the last remnant of the civilization that had once created it. And that too, I realized, might last only another six hours until the fuel ran out and this final flicker of a once proud civilization would end. I also realized that the autopilot would then need constant adjusting to bypass the dead cities. But adjust it to what? That's when I awoke.

The Earth was dark below us as we were halfway the coast. Clouds covered the sea. A high overcast at 40,000 feet shielded the stars and the mushroom clouds were still far from our sight.

In order to hold back more of those gloomy dreams, I resorted to singing. A most unprofessional Hallelujah, Hallelujah, according to Handel's famous chorus, filled the flight deck. But this didn't do much good either. Consequently, I went downstairs and brewed myself a pot of coffee and drank it black, then went for a walk through the dark aircraft,

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my cup in my hand, and brought the rest of the coffee back to the 'bridge.' Here I invented a game of checking and re-checked the navigation systems.

I went downstairs twice more, once more for a walk, and once for something to eat. The main cabins were in a terrible state, as filthy as a cattle car, but, surprisingly, they didn't stink. There had been no time anywhere, for a cleanup.

The long flight ended with an automatic descent initiated by the flight control system. The engines were throttled back. The nose dipped ever so slightly. Giant glowing pillars of fire marked the horizon. I quickly woke everyone up.

Harry said that I shouldn't have waited so long. Jennie was surprised that the night was already over. There was a faint sign of dawn on the northern horizon. I went and prepared breakfast with more coffee and a lot of re-heated buns and an assortment of jam, but no butter and no fried eggs. In fact, we were still having breakfast, such as it was, when I landed the plane.

We were a part of a military style formation of ten aircraft, landing at thirty seconds intervals. On this run our assignment was to service Vancouver. The chaos didn't seem to bother me anymore; shots, outcries, confusion, and haste by the control tower, had become normal business. I no longer expected it any other way. Oh how fast one can get used to this! The desperation was no less and no more than what we had seen in Victoria. In some ways the atmosphere was less tense in Vancouver while many more gunshots could be heard. I even invented a new measurement for chaos, expressed in gunshots per minute.

We took on eight hundred people from Frank's hometown, were refueled in record time, and sped down the runway in exactly twelve minutes from touching down. On takeoff, the tower repeated a routine warning to all flight crews not to mix with the 'passengers.' The fallout had become heavier. "You can't see it, feel it, and smell it," the tower said, "but it settles on people's clothing and may be deadly. Don't take any unnecessary chances."

The return trip was my time to sleep. Sleep wasn't easily accomplished, in spite of being dead-tired. Although this flight was becoming the best organized yet, there was too little room left in the aircraft for anyone to sleep comfortably. And it was noisy! The First Class

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cabin below us had been designated as a nursery. The bar became used as a changing table, and the upstairs lounge, where I hoped to sleep, served as an emergency hospital. We appeared to have picked up a section of a hospital ward. I fell asleep, though, crouched on a seat by a window. A man in great pain needed my camp-cot much more urgently.

When I woke, the noise had abated. Sunshine filled the cabin. Jennie sat next to me with a bag of sandwiches and a Styrofoam cup of tea. I gazed down onto the sea below us while eating breakfast once more.

"Guess where we're heading," said Jennie with a twinkle in her eye.

"Honolulu?" I replied mechanically.

"Guess again!"

"Ah, then it must be Maui," I replied.

"Right on!" she said, "but how did you guess it so quickly!"

"Because that's where Papakeea is," I said with a grin.

"Papakeea what?"

"Our new home; the apartment complex."

"Do you know where it is?"

I shrugged my shoulders and pointed to the horizon. "Somewhere there. We'll find it. Just wait and see!"

"Oh you!" she said and punched me gently.

Looking down onto the sea it seemed to me that we were coming near to the islands. The weather had improved. The morning sun had burned off the clouds over the water. There were some white cumulus 'mountains' scattered across the sky, and one big gray one in the distance that was producing some rain. We tried a game of matching the shadows on the sea to the clouds that caused them. Also there were many light patches of shallow turquoise waters. "That's where the divers must get their corals from," Jennie observed. She was very close to me now. We both looked through the same small window while we talked. Still, I didn't dare touch her.

"How long has it been that we have known each other?" I asked her at one point.

"Seven years. Maybe more. Why do you want to know?"

"Because I still remember the day we met, that bright morning in the Colorado Mountains when Frank introduced me to you. You responded by asking me to stay for lunch. Your smile felt so warm, I shall always remember it. I've loved you ever since, you know. Now something is happening again."

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"You are different," she replied. "I've always felt comfortable being with you, knowing that you would keep our relationship at a level that would require no compromises. But now I'm afraid that what we once meant to each other may be gone, and be gone forever. Still, I'm not scared."

"Is it wise to keep things the way they were?" I asked. "We both have changed, Jennie. What has happened has changed us. The world itself has changed! But we are still human beings and respond to our feelings as we always have. Even if it were possible to go back to the way we were, I'm not sure that I would want to."

She smiled in reply and said nothing more on the subject.

I pointed to the sea once again where I had spotted a fishing boat. "We must be close to the islands," I said, and hugged her slightly. I was right. Soon, the windward side of Maui came into view. It was high time for me to get back to the cockpit. I kissed her quickly, and hurried to the flight deck.

The warm feeling that this simple kiss generated stayed with me. It felt great! I felt at this moment as if I could take on the world and win. Indeed, the world had changed, and I with it.

The tower at Kahaluie cautioned us that our landing would be difficult. The runway wasn't designed to handle heavy long-range jets, overloaded, sluggish in response and slow to stop. But that 'small' obstacle didn't disturb me, not in the least. It was merely a challenge. The weather was ideal. I felt great. I felt as though I could do anything. And I did. I trimmed the engines just right. I eased the giant crate onto the first fifty feet of runway without the slightest bounce or undue loading of the runway. At the end I stopped the thing with room to spare.

It was all done with ease. The passengers must have thought that I did this stunt twice a day, to have executed it so perfectly; not that anyone was aware that this had been a dangerous landing. In a way, it was almost a shame that we were getting off now. The tower had already told us that a new crew stood ready to take over, and that accommodation had been arranged for us at a small hotel in Hana.

"In Hana!" I exclaimed as we taxied to the ramp. I had always wanted to stay in Hana, but never managed to do so. I promised Harry and Ken that they would have a wonderful time there. Then I showed them the key to our own place.

"Lucky you," Harry grinned as we said good-bye to each other.

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We were on our own from then on. Luckily, the local airlift committee had a few rental cars for needy VIPs like us. They said it had been chaotic, even on the islands, but things were back to normal, except for the flood of refugees coming in.

While we drove away, I told Jennie that it had been a couple of years since my last visit to the island. Surprisingly, nothing had changed. I said that everything appeared exactly as I remembered. A wonderful sense of peace flowed from this familiarity.

I had selected the long route, through the center of Wailuku, and from there via a narrow highway along the base of a mountain range, to the coast. I had fond memories of this drive. I wasn't disappointed at seeing it again after more than ten years. The mountaintops had always been shrouded with clouds and they still were. I supposed to Jennie that they would most likely continue to be that way for a long time after the last of mankind might be exterminated from the face of the planet.

She just laughed.

Being touched by this timeless familiarity was like a celebration for me. We passed beneath archways of branches that stretched from both sides across the narrow road lined with wildflowers. Nothing had changed. Far to the left lay sugar cane fields, stretching endlessly into the distance. I felt as though I had just come home from a war, to a place of deep peace.

Driving along the coast, we came into a dry area. Nothing grew there; however, the sea sparkled beautifully in the sunshine. "Let's stop somewhere along a beach," Jennie suggested.

I recalled that there had been many beaches along this road. One especially came to mind, not too far off from where we were. I had loved this particular beach for its unusually soft sand. Also it was right beside the highway.

We found it ideal. There wasn't another person on the beach with us. Though it was close to the highway, it was just another one of those quiet and beautifully lonesome stretches of sand that the islands had long been famous for. Its closeness to the highway didn't seem to matter. I didn't to us. There was no traffic, anyway. Only the sound of the surf could be heard, and the wind.

The air was clear, cool, and the sand as soft as I remembered it. With each step our feet sank two or three inches. Neither of us spoke as we walked along the edge of the water, wading through the shallow surf. In time some unimportant small talk interrupted the quiet when one or the other remarked on the lack of seashells or driftwood.

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While we walked, I recalled another morning like this, with Melanie and the children. I closed my eyes for a moment and listened to the surf. Scenes of our holiday came to mind, of bodysurfing, swimming, snorkeling. It had been a wonderful vacation for the whole family. Now the beach was empty, with no children's voices shrieking for excitement when the waves pushed them down. Jennie and I were alone, carrying within us the agonizing realization of how much had changed in the world. Still it was wonderful to be at this beach, to be away from smoke and chaos, to see clean water, feel the fresh moist air, look up into a sky that portrayed not the slightest hint of the pain and horror that we had become so closely linked with. I couldn't shed the feeling that we would soon be right in the middle of it again. In this respect, our walk on the beach was a holiday, too, a holiday of a different sort, from an ugly reality! I vowed that I would savor this holiday to the utmost. A day in this age of uncertainty might well be like half a lifetime; and a single experience of living not grasped, like a touch of life lost forever.

With this background in thought, our walk on the beach took on a new meaning. The sand, the surf, the air, the water, to be able to feel, to be aware of them, all were like miracles now. I wondered how many thousands of billions of miles a traveler would have to traverse the far reaches of space to locate other worlds comparable in riches to our own. I looked at Jennie with total appreciation and smiled as if she were the most precious miracle in the universe, which indeed, she was. She must have thought that I had gone 'bonkers' to smile as I did when all the evidence of the world would have one cry. But how could I not smile at her? She appeared like a jewel to me. In my way of looking at things, she was a jewel within a jewel of the universe. Her legs looked infinitely soft, smooth, perfectly formed; her figure graceful, shapely, well proportioned, and her gestures were always gentle. Of course I realized that beauty was a response rooted in the beholder, a reflection of values found in the Soul and acknowledged in appreciation.

Here the thought struck me, that from the first moment I met her, my heart had been filled with such a deep appreciation for her, which went so deep that I had never dared to admit its wonder to myself, much less proclaim it to others, least of all to her. I stopped in my tracks and thought about it, all the while watching her. I observed her every move, wondering if it was possible to re-capture that dizzying feeling that I had felt when I first fell in love with her, that I had later learned to suppress.

Her image blended well with the silver hue of the water reflecting

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the bright sky at the beach. Her hair barely moved in the breeze of the morning. Her breasts appeared so inviting to touch. But I also knew that I ought not even to think about this level of appreciation. Discouraged, I let my gaze fall. The crude reality was, that mankind had become much more segregated than most people would admit to themselves. The East/West segregation, enforced by nuclear war, appeared almost shallow by comparison to what happened on the deeper, private level.

Oh boy, I thought, did we ever fool ourselves with vain hopes, believing that we were close to resolving the nuclear arms crisis! How could we even dream to tackle the East/West segregation while a much more deeply rooted segregation governed our heart and soul in our everyday private living?

Deeply discouraged by this realization, I suggested to Jennie that it was time to go on.

In the car we began to talk about Papakeea. We had to face the situation that we would be living together. I suggested to her that McTaggart's apartment was probably much like the one we had during our last holiday. Most of these complexes appeared to be basically alike. "You will love it," I said to her. "It will be one of those wonderful places by the sea, surrounded by lawns, palm trees, and small gardens with lily-ponds. It may even have a few swimming pools, and certainly a Jacuzzi."

The subject got Jennie to ask all sorts of questions. She wanted to know how big the kitchen would be, and the living room; whether the place might have a dining room or a dinette, and how many bedrooms and beds we had in our last apartment there.

I answered as best I could. There was only one bedroom in the place we had rented earlier, but I couldn't remember what it was like.

"If there's just one bed, I'll sleep on the Chesterfield, or we'll buy a camping mattress or something like that," I said to Jennie at one point. "There are plenty of stores in Lahaina, where I could get a cot."

"We should stop there anyway," she suggested, "we need to get groceries, tooth paste, soap, I need a bathing suit and a few other things..."

"Sure," I agreed, "but who knows, maybe the stores aren't open anymore."

It suddenly dawned on me that she would also need a nightgown. If the stores were still open, I determined that I would buy her one. It would make a lovely surprise present. With this thought in my mind we came to Lahaina.

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Some places were closed, as we suspected, but most were open. There was commotion, here and there. People were milling about in the streets, some debating the war. We heard talk about Russia taking us over, which someone said had already started, which I denied. However, while listening to their talk, the idea came that it would be wise to stock up on groceries for more than just a few days, especially the non-perishable items.

Since I had most of my expense money left over, as it has been hard to spend money during the seminar, we went on a gigantic shopping spree. We shopped in three super markets. Surprisingly, groceries were as freely available as at any time before. Also our money was still accepted without the slightest hesitation, something McTaggart would have found strange. Luckily we had a car to transport everything.

Afterwards, while Jennie was trying on bathing suits in a store, I slipped out to a store across the street and purchased a nightgown for her. I hid it in a grocery bag and gave it to her as a "housewarming present," the moment we entered our apartment. She seemed pleased. She smiled and remarked on how 'thoughtful' it was of me, emphasizing the word, thoughtful.

I blushed and gave no reply. We quickly carried our groceries in and stashed them away into cupboards and closets, and piled the larger items in a corner of the bedroom.

McTaggart's apartment was not a large place. It had a bathroom, a bedroom with two single beds, and a kitchen/dining-room/living-room combination, nicely appointed. It was situated on the second floor. I barely noticed that it offered a sweeping view of the ocean, with palm trees in the foreground swaying in the wind.

"We'll be able to see the sunset from the kitchen table," I said to Jennie as I put the rest of the groceries away.

She was in the bedroom by then, getting the beds ready for our much-needed sleep.

"There are always beautiful sunsets here," I repeated.

Actually she was right not to answer. Sunsets mattered little at the moment. We had been on the go for twenty-eight hours, much of it under difficult circumstances. What we needed more than anything in the world, were a few hours of uninterrupted sleep, followed by a proper hot dinner and some relaxation before our next sequence of flights would begin. I was certain that Jennie would want to come back with me, and that we would remain together no matter what happened.

I kept the windows ajar and the balcony doors wide open for our

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sleep. It was quiet outside, except for the sound of the wind in the palm trees. We were far from the road. In the background, the surf could be heard. The thing I remembered having loved about the islands, was the gentle breeze of warm moist air that constantly sweeps in from the sea, and the timeless sound of the surf. I remembered that it had always been easy to fall asleep in this wonderful, gentle atmosphere. It certainly was so again.

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It was late afternoon. The birds' voices rang shrill and clear over the silence. A gentle breeze swept through the apartment. Jennie was still sleeping. The air was fresh, smelling of the sea.

As quietly as I could, I made my way to the kitchen. I had a craving for tea. I put the kettle on and sat by the table in the living room enjoying the sunshine that came through the partly drawn curtains. The atmosphere created a warm, peaceful feeling that underlined the stillness of the hour. The mellow sunshine shimmered in the palm leaves near the balcony, where a lizard made its way up the brickwork of the building. It moved effortlessly. It halted once, looked into the room through the window and continued straight up the wall. Moments later it disappeared. I went onto the balcony to see where it had gone. I couldn't find it as if it had vanished off the face of the Earth.

In the distance, a sailboat negotiated a turnabout in its play with the wind. On the grounds below us children were playing, diving into a circular swimming pool, and splashing each other.

I leaned over the railing to watch them. As I did, I remembered Harry's kids. Seeing the children at play jolted me. I felt a sudden emptiness. Fiona came to mind. Could I have seen her at the airport behind the wall of plate-glass if I had known that they were there? They must have been all there. They must have seen my plane approach. Fiona might have been told that this was daddy's plane. But they saw me pass them by without stopping at the most dangerous hour in their life, a mere ten feet over the runway, hardly a thousand feet from where they stood. We had come so close to meet, but too distant to touch and too far for a cry to penetrate.

I was glad when the kettle began to simmer. It woke Jennie. When I noticed her, she stood drowsily in the balcony doorway. She yawned, then joined me at the railing. She brushed her hair back, looked into the sunshine, squinted, then smiled at me.

"How fortunate she is, to be partly asleep," I thought. She didn't seem tortured by the thoughts I had just encountered. Hearing the kettle boil I went into the kitchen to make tea. The kitchen counter was open to the living and dining room area of the apartment. I could see Jennie perfectly from the kitchen as she stood in the light of the setting sun. She stepped back after a while, put her hands over her head and leaned against the frame of the balcony door, still looking out towards the beach.

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She said she was glad to see the sunshine.

Seeing her in the thin nightgown that I had bought her aroused a deep, profound feeling in me that became almost painful. Her silhouette was like a scene from a dream world in the light of sun touching her. Although she probably wasn't the beauty queen of the world, to me she was more than that. What I saw was angel, excitingly female, beautiful to look at. Only once before had I felt anything nearly as powerful as this, when I first met Melanie. Now this feeling resurfaced again in a new dimension. It pervaded my being. It fed me with life. It separated the moment from the logical, the familiar, and the things I had control over. It was insanity in the conventional sense, but it was totally sane in our new unfolding reality and Jennie was at the center of it.

This response, a response to a greater sanity, seemed to be built into the design of the human being that thereby becomes transposed into the surreal world where the conventional is replaced with the wonderful and the inexplicable. A door had been opened between us by the recognition of a truth that had been stored away in consciousness to be triggered into life by a greater openness towards reality. With so little certainty left now in the world, our being together became more profound in its reality. She was tangibly real. Our being together was real.

I remembered the day when I first met Jennie high up in the Rocky Mountains. She was coming out of Frank's camper to greet me. I had already felt a bit of that same feeling then. For one brief fleeting moment something had happened that day that had brightened the world. Perhaps it was the surprise of the situation that allowed her to respond without reservation to the innermost design of her as a human being, letting go for that moment all the traditions of relationships, responsibilities, commitments, obligations, and the myths surrounding them. There had been magnificence in this moment, a brightness that made the glaciers appear dull by comparison, and the mountains insignificant. Moments later when Frank introduced us the formality of it became a call to 'order' that drew the attention back to the conventional world by which the magic ended. Still, its echo had lingered in the mind.

Seeing Jennie leaning in the balcony doorway re-kindled still another feeling, one that I had first felt at the beach after we arrived on the island. It came as a sense of peace that unfolded by taking a holiday from the so-called real world, setting aside all the rationality of the ages that has kept mankind 'politely' distant from each other, including Jennie and I.

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I knew that it was not by accident, therefore, that the nightgown, which I had bought Jennie for a present, had been selected by me for its exquisitely thin fabric that now appeared almost transparent. I should have looked away from her according to the rules of politeness, but there was something in the honesty of the moment that didn't allow this. Also, I had the feeling that I was not the only factor in the equation of this moment of peace. Humanity played a large role in its unfolding. I realized that I hadn't designed the nightgown that I had bought. I had merely bought it. It already existed when I entered the store. It had been created for a purpose, perhaps the same purpose that it now fulfilled, a purpose that is rooted in the design of our humanity, a design to acknowledge and respond to what is intrinsically beautiful and good.

Jennie's slender body stood darkly against the sunlit fabric. The sunlit gown suited her. She looked grander in it, grander than the most beautiful model may ever have looked, and more exquisite than the most exquisite work of art. How could I not gaze at her? How could I look away?

Gazing at her was wonderful. Nor did I design the feeling that I felt. I didn't design humanity. I wanted to touch her, kiss her nipples - right through the fabric if it had to be - run my hands over her back, her thighs, her chest. I felt infinitesimally close to her!

I knew that Melanie would never have allowed this, nor would have Jennie herself, just a day earlier. But now, we lived in another time. Our world had been turned upside down. We had become a part of another world in which everything that was human had become immensely more precious.

In the background to this peace and joy, thoughts of doubt resurfaced. I feared that we would never see Frank or Melanie again. We had been hoping against hope that they were still living, somewhere on this earth, we had been building scenarios that they might have escaped by. But was this just hopeful dreaming? They seemed too far distant, too far out of reach. And even if they lived, how would we ever find each other again in this overturning world? I wished them well. I wished them a good life wherever they would end up if they still lived. I dearly wished that we would see them again, but I wished more deeply that they would find hope, peace, joy, and happiness until that day would come. I wished that their world would be one without grief and without pain. I also knew that I was dreaming again. The world had become too much a cauldron of agony for that to be likely.

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I was going to say something to Jennie about this, but I decided not to. I didn't want to spoil the peace of the moment and its magic 'eternity' that had somehow crowded out the world we had known too much of, and the ugly reality we had seen. The unfolding peace had substituted in its place a different reality that I wanted to hold on to. I wanted this moment to remain. I wanted it to linger for all times.

When Jennie finally turned around and looked at me with a sad smile, which was so unlike her, the magic was over. But moments later the sadness vanished. Something was in the air. Did she realize what my thoughts were? She looked at herself, blushed, and stepped out of the sunshine. She went to the far side of the balcony where there was shade, and looked down onto the garden.

Strangely, at this moment I became angry with myself. I wanted to join her there. I longed for her, but couldn't move. Some hero I was! I realized that it was pure delusion when I imagined that one could simply cast to the wind the great apartheid that had divided mankind by sex since the most distant ages.

"I need you, Jennie," I heard myself whisper, but whisper was all I could do. Oh, why must the world of women be shunned out of respect, divided by marriages? Why did this apartheid exist? I needed more at this moment than it allowed. Mere survival was no longer enough in this unfolding theater of tragedy. Something had to drive the urge for survival. Survival should have felt like the most precious privilege in this torn-apart world, but it didn't suffice any longer. There is more to being alive than mere survival. Survival didn't seem precious in the face of the constant denial and self-denial that draws everything down to the lowest denominator. Why couldn't I acknowledge to myself what I felt deep inside? Why couldn't I tell her about it? I had to laugh at myself. What a hypocrite I was!

A girl named Vanessa came to mind; a stewardess I had long admired; a black African girl. She had told me how a friend of her once tried to console her in a time of a great personal crisis. This friend had said to her, "But Vanessa, I have never regarded you as a black person!" The girl nearly committed suicide over this blatant denial of the worth of her identity. And, damn, I was doing the same thing in a different way and couldn't help myself! I was saying to her, you are a wonderful friend, while I should be saying to her that I cherished her deeply as a most precious, beautiful woman, a gem from the treasure chest of our humanity. What on earth was I lying to her for with this act of silence, and subjection to apartheid? Was I even lying to myself?

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Before I could find the answer, Jennie altered the situation. She came in from the balcony and sat into the living room, on the sofa across the way from me in the kitchen. There, I could see her clearly again, in her full beauty. "Would you like some tea?" I asked. I could almost kick myself. That was the least of what my thoughts were centered on. I poured the tea.

I pulled myself together as I looked for a cup. I promised myself; this time I will be honest! I started by serving the tea that I had made, and I did in a manner that allowed me to come close to her. I sat down beside her, almost trembling.

Oh how does one deal with a mythology, like marriage, that has persisted over countless centuries that shouldn't allow such closeness? I didn't know how. Apparently, neither did she. Once I had served the tea I feasted my eyes on her, unabashedly. That, apparently, was all the honesty I could muster. Naturally, it didn't escape her attention. She responded with a smile, a lovely, gentle smile. She didn't seem to mind that couldn't help myself, noticing, but neither did she come right out and talk about it. Nor did I. Thus, the silence continued, but in a more 'gentle' way, now.

Eventually, I became embarrassed by it all and escaped into the kitchen once more. My excuse, this time, was that I had forgotten the sugar. Of course, I could see her from there just the same.

Looking at her from a distance was different. Or was it? I had thought, that by retreating, the situation would become less intense. I was wrong. It remained as beautiful, as exciting, and as agonizing beyond measure, as it had been when I sat right beside her. I experienced a paradox in this that I couldn't resolve. There was a deep peace in those moments that refreshed the soul, but this peace left me exhausted as though I had run a mile in three minutes.

I filled the sugar bowl, set a small pitcher of milk beside it on a tray, and went back to her. The sugar bowl was shaped like a coconut. I had found it the night before in a cupboard. I placed some slices of lemon on a plate beside it. I did everything I could to avoid what I really wanted to do.

My heart began to pound as I came close to her again. She looked at me with a grin as if she wanted to comment. Perhaps the grin was in response to the shape of the sugar bowl. Still, she didn't say a word. God, she was as shy in her way as I was, and I was too shy to ask what in heavens' name the grin was for.

Eventually, I retreated to a chair at the dining table across the

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room. I knew deep within my mind that this wasn't a game. It was an exploration to find whatever had been lost through centuries of false civility, a search for something that could bridge the isolation which had kept us apart since the day we met. I feared that pushing too hard could widen the gulf, and pushing too little would cause the isolation to persist and perhaps be strengthened.

I suggested to Jennie that I should open the package of pound cake we had bought. I sliced it carefully, though still watching her out of the corner of an eye. She smiled when our eyes met. Moments later she got up and came towards the kitchen. She stopped at the doorway for a minute or two, until I had finished slicing the cake. I arranged the pieces carefully. Then she grinned at me. I responded with a grin of my own that turned quickly into a stare as she lifted her nightgown over her shoulder and pulled it off.

"Let's not play games with each other," she said to me as she folded the gown and leaned back against the doorpost. Let's stop playing games.

I stood petrified, with the plate of cake in my hand, my mouth wide open, stunned. There she was, like a beautiful dream: naked, honest, inviting, beautiful. The odd thing was that I still couldn't touch her. I began to reach out, but pulled my hand back. I held onto the plate of cake and carried it into the living room. I offered her a piece. She declined. Thank God she declined! I put the cake down. With the deepest honesty that was within me I put my arm around her and hugged her, gently. "Thanks, Jennie!" was all I could say.

I let go of her after a long time had passed, so it seemed, and sat on a nearby chair and kept on looking at her. Oh, why was she so patient with me? Was it compassion? Did she feel my great need? Or was it love? She felt soft, warm, wonderful, why did I let go of her? I valued her as a fragile remnant of a fragile world that was fast slipping away. I was frightened. What a laugh! Me, a veteran of thousands of flights, being frightened? Yes, I was. I was frightened for both of us. I knew she wasn't a dream, she was tangibly real, and the chaos in the world was real, too, but the two realities had become exclusive of one another. I also knew that none of that was cause. The cause was that I loved her.

I beheld her like a delicate butterfly, fluttering through the open balcony door where she had stood. As I saw her standing before me in the same brilliance, like the loveliest of all women, bold, free, delicate, infinitely precious, more cherish-able than the most delicate butterfly, I

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stood up and embraced her again. "I am in love with you, Jennie," I said. "I always have been." I felt wonderfully alive. We were no longer just surviving, but living. At least I had begun to life. How absurd the denial of the past now appeared that I had wallowed in, in my thoughts before for all these years before, and even earlier, whenever I met another woman, which had blocked from me this wonderful experience of a boundless unity, of being alive as a human being.

Out of the depth of this re-awakening arose the total acceptance of her, and of myself too, a total honesty, an acceptance of my own feelings, an acceptance of her as she was, a feeling of unity unfettered by any myth or fear. On this platform I was finally able to embrace her fully and without reservation. It was as if we had gained access at last to a new dimension of reality that we hadn't even been aware of before.

She felt warm. I felt her breasts resting tightly against my chest. She felt wonderful to touch, soft, smooth, gently outlined. There was no shame in this union anymore, or tensions to mar it, or guilt, or torment, and no pain in the heart in response to being honest and free. Neither was there the rage of excitement that might have been associated with such moments had we stood on lesser platform, like a platform of uncontrollable passions that drives the human spirit to fill an emptiness with the intensity of rage. There was no emptiness in my feeling that led up this, that needed to be filled. There was only love that needed to be acknowledged and allowed to be. The isolation had been invalidated. Something had been created that was infinitely rich, which would now remain. "I have been in love from the first moment I saw you," I said quietly.

"I too," she said softly.

We remained for a long time in each other's embrace. It seemed that this moment would never end. The peace of it was reflected in everything. The lace curtains moved gently with the wind. The sun stood low, painting the sky a warm orange red.

"What a precious thing our human world is!" said Jennie with a soft smile once we faced each other again.

"And what a privilege it is to be part of it!" I answered and smiled back at her, "and to be able to experience its wonders!"

She nodded. "We should never take anything for granted that is so intrinsically good and beautiful."

"Especially not each other," I added, and kissed her. "What we take for granted we lose. We must build on what we have achieved. If we don't move ahead and build on every achievement no matter how slight

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or profound, we stand still. But life can't stand still. If we let life stand still, we may be in danger to lose everything."

She smiled at me and pointed to the sunset, which she said was but the prelude to a new dawn.

I kissed her for this wonderful thought. The silence between us had finally been broken. For years I had respectfully nurtured 'this' silence. Now we had drawn the curtains aside.

The sky had turned a dark pink. The palms at the beach stood tall and black against the richly colored sky. There were no shadows on the lawn any longer. Still, the sand on the beach glowed as brightly as before.

"Oh, if only we could know where beyond the horizon our children might be," I said, "and Frank and Melanie!"

She nodded; "I wish I knew what they are doing, if they are well, if they are happy." Moment later she began to cry. "If only I could see them once more!"

I tried to comfort her. I said that they could be anywhere in the world, in China, Mexico, Japan, Europe, possibly even in the good old USA. "They might be in Honolulu, for all we know."

"Wouldn't it be wonderful if we bumped into them in Honolulu on our way back!" she said smiling again, and wiped a tear off her face.

I had to smile at the thought myself, but then I shook my head: "Don't get your hopes up too high, Jennie. There's a slim chance of finding them until there are computer listings compiled to help locate the displaced persons."

"But we are going back, aren't we?" she said.

I nodded; "I can't be at peace with myself in any other way, Jennie. I must go. We both should go, because our world is a human world and this world needs to be cherished. This means rescuing of it what can be rescued. The earth without human beings would be an empty sphere. It would be like a solar system without a sun," I said. "We must protect our humanity in all aspects and raise it up, because we are a part of this world, and this world is a part of us. We need it to be alive and the means consciously living, treasuring life, fighting for it."

"I had hoped you would say something like that," she said and put a finger over my lips. "You said enough, and you said it more beautifully than I could have. We'll both go back," she added. "Only let's treat ourselves to a quiet dinner together, before we go back, if we can. We need to celebrate what we have built here. That's an acknowledgment, too, isn't it? We need these celebrations."

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I replied with a nod and a gentle embrace. "I know just the place," I said. "There is a great restaurant not far from here. It's a small place and right at the beach. There is a large tree growing right through the middle of it. We must celebrate our day there! This would be fitting our first day of really being together. Afterwards, I'll give Honolulu a call. I promised then that I would call to see what time they need us."

"Why don't you call before we go for dinner?" she said, and kissed me. "While you call, I will freshen up."

I raised my hand, slightly. I didn't like the idea. But she didn't respond.

"If you call now, we could plan our time better," she said moments later.

Of course she had a point there. Deep down, however, I couldn't shed the feeling that this was not what I ought to do.

"Maybe, they won't need us," she added.

"Ah, there is little chance for that," I replied.

Without saying another word, she went into the bathroom. Reluctantly, I went to my flight uniform and got the 800 number of the refugee center from my top pocket. I kept hoping that I wouldn't get a line through, but I also felt bad about this thought. The thought was that Honolulu was on another island and might be hard to reach. Still, I took the phone off its shelf and brought it to the chesterfield near the open balcony door as if I would be dialing for a long time. I knew I would give it my best in spite of my nagging reservations, because going back was in both of our thoughts. Skipping out in this hour of need was not an option.

As I waited for the circuits to create a channel to the operations desk of my airline, the desperation in Vancouver came to mind and our experience in Abbotsford. Would the chaos have become worse? It seemed logical that it should have. It might be absolute hell by now. We had to expect that. Fallout would surely have risen past the critical level. I was just about to hang up when I finally got through.

"Yes, can I help you?" said a voice.

"Do you still need volunteer pilots for the airlift?" I said. I stuttered out of a hidden fear when I asked for my airline, hoping in some slight fashion that the voice would answer, No!

"I'll connect you," said the voice.

I was connected to our Honolulu office. I was told that our company didn't exist anymore.

"I would like to speak with someone who is in charge of the airlift," I added.

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I was passed back to the switchboard, then to security. Someone switched me through to the control tower. The tower, however, was too busy for anyone to answer the phone. Eventually I reached someone who had some dealings with what was going on.

"Just come any time you're ready," the man said, "we'll fit you in. The traffic's unbelievable. It busier than it was during the war. They group them into squadrons before they land or take off. And this goes on hour after hour. And the crowds we have here, like you wouldn't believe!"

"Do you know what the situation is like in Vancouver?" I asked.

"Vancouver was terrible to the end! It's closed now. They've got three-hundred-mile-an-hour winds that are feeding the firestorms in the South. Vancouver was shut down an hour ago. At midnight we'll have the last run coming in from there."

"Already?"

"A lot of people have fled to Vancouver Island. We're picking them up through Alaska. Alaska is one of the few places with enough fuel for an unlimited number of round trips. It's close enough too, to get to the island and back without refueling. The problem is, we have to land on a highway. An earthquake has damaged the only large airport in the north of the island. Can you land a 747 on a highway?"

"On a highway?" I asked.

"Yes on a highway! They took the dividers off a four-lane highway."

"Have we lost any aircraft there?"

"Some. Eleven all told. That's not bad, considering the risks."

"That's terrible."

"Oh, if you want an easy mission, I can pass you through to the East Coast Operations Center. All our big aircraft will soon be withdrawn. They have plans in place to evacuate the entire northeastern United States all the way down to St. Louis. The fallout has already spread as far as Kansas City and is getting more radioactive the farther East it goes. In two days it will be over New York like the Mt. St. Helens ash-fall had years ago."

I could well imagine what this meant.

I assured the man that I would much rather service a highway outpost than fly into the big eastern cities in such a crisis. I told him I would call back as soon as we were ready to leave.

"Don't hurry too much!" he replied. "I have no plane to give you at the moment, but I'll put you on the 'Vancouver Island run.' I have a small 747 coming in after midnight that is suitable for the Alaska run. I

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have you logged in for around two-AM!"

I said that was great. I had only one more question after that, how to get to Honolulu from Maui at two in the morning.

"Take the shuttle!" he said. "There is an hourly shuttle between Honolulu and all the islands to distribute the refugees. Take the midnight shuttle!"

I thanked the man, put the receiver down and called to Jennie.

"They want us!" I called to her.

There was no answer. I knocked on the bathroom door.

"Vancouver has already been shut down. Three-hundred-mile-an-hour winds shut the airport down. Most have already by evacuated to Vancouver Island by boat."

"Not the entire city! That can't be closed already. That's impossible! That can't be!" Her voice came through the closed door, strong at first but getting fainter.

"Well, Jennie, that's what the man said. Most of the people have fled to Vancouver Island. We are going to lift them out from there! Apparently they have converted a highway into some primitive airport."

"Why don't you come in, Paul?" she interrupted me. "It's no good talking through a closed door."

I didn't need to hear this invitation twice. She was sitting in the bathtub surrounded by a sea of foam, with only her head sticking out. What a peaceful sight!

"I feel terrible that I asked you to call," she said. "This mission is troubling you, isn't it?"

I nodded. "Maybe we shouldn't go. It's tempting to just stay put."

"But if Melanie or Frank were there, and the children, wouldn't we go?" she asked.

"Of course we would. We would do anything to get them out."

"That's why we must go, Paul. That's why we must help, whoever needs our help."

"But not on the East Coast, I made that clear to them!" I said strongly to Jennie, and then laughed at myself. When I became serious again, I told her about the fallout pattern and the evacuation plans that the dispatcher had talked about.

"Of course I'm not scared of the fallout," I insisted at the end, "I'm more scared about the 200 million hand guns that people own, especially in the East. No! I'd rather take my chances landing on a highway in the remotest part of the wilderness."

I told her about the north end of Vancouver Island. This part of

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the world was apparently still free of fallout, but was crawling with over a hundred thousand people who became stranded there, waiting to be airlifted out. "We're their only hope," I said firmly; "we must go to them."

She stood up and reached for a towel. She looked rather sad now.

"Hold it! They won't need us until 2.00 AM!" I said. I tried to cheer her.

She began to smile again, and sat down deep into the warm water. Eventually she sat up and handed me the soap and a brush.

"Would you wash my back, please?"

It felt wonderful being there, kneeling beside the bathtub, washing her back gently, her shoulders, legs, breasts.... The situation didn't seem at all strange or unnatural. It was peaceful. The disaster seemed so far away in this moment of intimacy that I tried to make last for as long as I could. Eventually she stood up and invited me to join her.

"Let's go to the bedroom," I broke the silence a long time thereafter.

She shook her head; "Maybe we shouldn't, I haven't any pills, I...."

I interrupted her, "I wish to God that we had enough of a future so that this mattered! How long will it be until someone hits the button in earnest and retaliates?"

I noticed tears in her eyes again. "Why did you have to say this? Couldn't you keep the illusions alive by which all those rescue flights have some meaning? There is always a reason for one to hope. There must be."

"And then what?"

She thought about it for a moment and began to laugh again; "OK, Paul, it still won't work. I have no pills, nor anything else. If we do come though this alive, and I know we will, we may have to survive under the most primitive conditions. Becoming pregnant in times like this might be fatal."

Now I began to laugh, too; "No, I don't want to invade you and get you pregnant. I want to appreciate you. There are better ways for doing that than getting you pregnant, don't you think?"

She looked at me astonished after I had stepped out of the tub. She let herself slide back into the hot water. She didn't even reply right away, but looked at me with a gentle exploring look.

Actually I was surprised myself, at the language I had used. How vulgar! I told her I was ashamed of it, but still couldn't think of a better way to say it.

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"This means that you are totally serious," she came back.

I nodded slightly.

She shook her head slightly, but then handed me the towel again.

It was cool in the bedroom, refreshing, and comfortably peaceful in the dark atmosphere. One could see the shadows of the palm leaves projected on the far wall and the ceiling.

Eventually, and all too soon as it seemed, we dressed. I went outside onto the balcony, waiting for her there. I watched the gas-torches on the grounds. A breeze had come up. The giant fans of palm trees were swaying in the wind. The flames flickered. I wondered what we might have to face when we resumed our mission. Would we be able to return? Would we be able to stay together? Would we survive the next day, or would the nuclear fire spread further and destroy everything that is fragile, beautiful, and human?

When I looked up I noticed Jennie standing beside me. She smiled at me. She said she was ready now.

"We may not survive this," she said. "But if this is the end, let's end our life as human beings, helping one another."

I smiled back at her and nodded. Still, in spite of the happiness I felt being with her, I couldn't shed the feeling that this day might be our last one on the islands, if not our last day altogether. I didn't dare voice the thought. However, to judge by her lack of talkativeness, she might have been thinking the same.

I took great care to close all of the windows, took my coat from the rack, stepped outside and locked the apartment thoroughly, dead bolt and all, as though we wouldn't be back for many days. This time I decided to be true to my feelings. Perhaps Jennie did, too, for she suggested that we select the longest possible route to the parking lot, across the gardens, lawns, along the beach, past both of the swimming pools, the lily pond....

At the lily pond, we stopped to watch the old toads with great interest. Jennie had to laugh. They obviously believed themselves to be perfectly hidden, while in fact they were right in plain view near the torchlight. We could actually touch them before they would notice us and jump away.

It was fun chasing the toads, seeing Jennie laugh again like a child, and holding hands with her as though we were children, indeed, holding on to each other. By this playing the heavy mood dissipated. It was as if the New World we had touched upon had won us over. The Old World lay in flames, everything of value in it had been torn apart. But out of this

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chaos and fear a new spark had sprung that lit a fire in us that was new, a flame-less fire that seemed to be building, a fire that wasn't destructive.

We walked to the car arm in arm. I felt great. For years I had denied myself the right to be this close to her. I had denied myself what now seemed like one of the most basic rights of any human being to associate intimately with other human beings. We ended up embracing each other in full appreciation of our newfound reality, as two human beings, male and female, bound to one other by nothing more than a commitment to being alive. And this we were. We were intensely alive. In this fashion we arrived at the restaurant.

"Oh, what a romantic place this is!" she said excitedly as we entered. She was delighted with everything about it, the setting, the decor, and the atmosphere. I shared her feelings. The place was charming, simple, and comfortable. By name it was a steak house. We had smelled the aroma of roasting steak long before we crossed the street. Still, Jennie wanted to have something special, something unique to the islands, rather than steak. Following the waiter's suggestion, we ordered the Mahi, which simply means the 'right' fish, the finest fish of the season. It was well prepared, covered with a delicious dressing, graciously served with a glass of white wine.

We had been seated in a quiet corner, at a table by the seashore. We could see the surf in the moonlight. The place was dimly lit. Soft music filtered from nearby speakers, mingled with the sound of the surf. This was exactly the contrast that we needed, a contrast to a world that we tried so hard not to think about. It was amazing that the restaurant was still in operation, and that the prices had remained the same as one would have expected in normal times.

Isolated by hanging baskets of flowers and planters filled with tropical greenery, I had the feeling that we were totally by ourselves in the restaurant. Perhaps we were. I had feared that the place would be crowded with angry people, all debating the horrors of a nuclear war. The opposite was true. Maybe the people were all glued to their TV screens. In this atmosphere of horror, they probably didn't feel like celebrating their living, not even that they were still alive. Or perhaps they didn't realize, as we had realized, that they have a great treasure in themselves that is worth celebrating. We needed this wonderful intimate supper to celebrate those treasures of our humanity. This celebration also marked the beginning of a new era for us.

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The service at the restaurant was not the greatest. There was only one waiter, probably the owner. But who cared? Who needs speedy waiters in times like these? We didn't. The place was an oasis for us, in which there was no talk about war. There was only music in the air that spoke of love, a flow of gentle melodies for and by a gentle people, the native Hawaiians.

"We are on a holiday," I said to her. "We are on a holiday of the kind I had dreamed about at the beach. We are on a holiday of love, filled with the most precious romance."

She nodded.

We smiled at each other across the table, often in silence. I wanted to tell her how much I appreciated the privilege of being with her. I wanted to say to her; I love you! I love you! I love you! But those words were not needed. They would have spoiled everything. There was no need to tell with words what our eyes said much better.

The gentle silence in these moments was filled with a symphony of communication, heart to heart, soul to soul. When words intruded the scene, they were anticlimactic.

"I knew that you have always loved me," she broke the silence. "You have loved me from the moment we met, as you said earlier. I had seen it in your eyes. You had loved me as no other man ever did, including Frank. I believe you even loved me in a way you never loved Melanie, or ever could, because in spite of her loveliness she also represented a barrier for you against other women. There had never been such a barrier between us. That made our love richer. I only hope that someday we can dissolve this barrier that Melanie had given herself to become, so that your embrace in love will be as rich as ours is."

She paused for a moment. "Except, why had I always felt so embarrassed for loving you? Why could I never allow myself to acknowledge my love for you openly, and to acknowledge our love? Would Frank have stood in the way? I always assumed he would have, without giving him a chance to defend himself against this indictment? I shouldn't have been that cruel to you and unjust to him."

I tried to answer, but she hushed me. "I don't think an answer can ever be found," she said. "It belongs to the past and the past is no more."

While we chose the desert, it struck me that I hadn't realized since we left Vancouver, how charmingly she was dressed. She wore the same black velvet dress and jacket that I had seen many times, that blended beautifully with her hair and her complexion. Perhaps her appearance hadn't had the same meaning before. I was lost for words,

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suddenly, to pay proper homage to her. I could only wonder why it had taken me thirty-six hours to notice what now was so overwhelming. I put together some phrases of flattery about her fine appearance, but they missed the mark by a long way. I finally invited her for a dance to the soft music that pervaded the place, a dance between the courses of our meal.

She began to grin when we sat down and I thanked her most cordially. She replied to me with that same smile on her face that I had cherished from the moment that I saw her that day at the summit of Milner Pass. "You're quite handsome yourself, Captain!" she said in the most romantic tone of voice as we became seated again.

Our dessert consisted of a giant orange, expertly peeled at the table, sliced, served on a bed of sherbet, and topped with a creamy sweet sauce that I had never tasted before. Perhaps it tasted so great because of the mood I was in. Perhaps the simplest, sloppiest pudding might have tasted just like that, as we gently stared at one another. I was glad we were quite alone in the restaurant. I had experienced something that day that I had never experienced before, a touch of life that I had virtually forced myself to ignore in the past, as much as the whole world had done, so it seemed.

"Tell me," I asked her, "what prompted you tonight to take your nightgown off?"

She grinned. "It was necessary! If you could have seen yourself, you wouldn't ask. You needed it off. But more than you, I needed this done. For most of my life I had hid beneath my wedding veil. Frank was everything to me, but it wasn't because this union was the pinnacle of my existence, as I told myself it was, but because there was nothing else. When the PA system announced in Vancouver that we had only fifteen minutes left to live, my whole world was suddenly empty. I needed Frank, but Frank wasn't there. Suddenly the whole airport erupted into a mad scramble. Everybody rushed about to get on a plane, any plane, to get away! People were crushed to death. Can you imagine what this was like? Then someone taps you on the shoulder. A stranger stands in front of you with a yearning to appreciate one final moment to live as a human being. Paul, in those moments before you die, you don't think anymore, you react by reflexes, you live by what's deep inside you. I embraced this man, can you believe this. The experience changed my life!"

I didn't know how to respond. I didn't know whether to shake my head or nod.

"Paul, when it became evident later on, that we were going to survive, Frank came to mind, and with it a feeling that I had done some

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great wickedness to Frank. I felt ashamed for it, but out of the depth of my soul came another message, a deep-seated protest. What should I be ashamed of? One's feelings aren't the domain of another. My feelings are mine, not Frank's! In reacting to them to what flows from the depth of my soul, how could I possibly hurt Frank, unless he regarded me, indeed, as his property, which I was sure he never had."

"It felt so good being myself at last," she said. "It overwhelmed me. In this tumultuous overturning I saw myself no longer as Frank's wife, but as simply me. I saw a person standing on her own two feet, though still deeply in love with Frank, except this love was suddenly richer. Now, this new dimension of love has expanded to also include you, fully, and the world," she grinned.

"When you landed in Vancouver, there was hope again. You were the last plane coming in with people on board, except you came without Frank. I felt a numbness setting in, an utter hopelessness. I stood there in tears, as you know. But if this had happened ten minutes earlier I might not have been moved by my love for Frank, as I had been then. I might have felt totally empty inside, as if, with Frank gone, there remained nothing left of my life. This brief episode at the airport during the moments of chaos and an unfolding love for a man who might have struggled against similar barriers, had somehow taken away the wedding veil and given me my life back in which I could love Frank for the wonderful person he is and always will be."

I could only stare at her as she said these things. "I had no idea," I said.

"It really feels great being my own master again," she added. "I feel a freedom now, that I can't even define, that I've just begun to explore. I feel so different, so rich!"

My mouth hung open. "I thought you and Frank had the most wonderful marriage anyone could possibly have!"

She nodded and smiled. Her smile was as gentle, just as it had been all evening. "Paul, I wasn't referring to that when I spoke about the wedding veil. I was referring to the veil itself, which one creates in one's own mind, which isolates one from the world. Frank had not done this. I had created the veil. Humanity had created it. A veil hides, you know. It hides and hints at something mysterious, and by that it takes away from what there really is. That's what I'm free of. That's why I had to take the nightgown off which you had bought me. It had become an impregnable veil. This beautiful thin nighty suddenly appeared to me like another wedding veil, if you believe that. It had to come off. I'm free of those

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myths now that I have lived under, the mythology that forces a person under its spell to behave like a different human being. It dawned on me during the moments of great crisis when I embraced the Russian soldier that I really wasn't any different than I had always been. I was the same person that I had been before Frank and I were married. The veil of the mythological was gone, that separates people. It has separated the sexes into two isolated camps, and I had been stuck in such a camp for so many years, but I am no longer. This doesn't mean I won't wear your beautiful nighty again. I will gladly wear it, but not as a veil. I will wear it as a token of your love for me. I will wear it proudly, whenever it can be worn proudly, when it is no longer a veil, even if it is so thin that it won't hide anything."

She told me that she actually had to laugh when she realized the utter absurdity of this 'thing' called a wedding veil. She said that it is a contradiction in language. "A wedding should signify a union," she said in a most serious tone. "Not a separation. A union that is solid, secure, a platform from which one can build upwards to reach for infinity and embrace the whole human race. Frank and I should have supported each other in this reaching higher on the scale of our existence, instead of mysteriously tying each other down as servants to some ancient model for relationships which reveals itself as inherently unnatural, which in the end isolated me from my own self. This model had strangled both of our lives, Paul. This is what I'm beginning to feel free off, that allows me to love Frank and not mourn him, that allowed me to love you and take my nighty off for you with love. I really wish that Frank could be here so that I could tell him about my great breakthrough."

I suppose, I must have smiled, maybe grinned, or laughed.

"That's not something to be taken lightly!" she protested. "You're caught up in this river, too. I know are, even as deeply as I was. I also know that you have become freer. Everyone will come to this point who is honest with himself, or herself. The man at the airport was a soldier, Paul! As far as I could tell he was from Russia, a naval officer whose ship lay at anchor in the harbor. I am sure he would have laid his life on the line to defend his world. It didn't really sink in until much later that the soldier I held in my arms had in effect stood ready to kill the very person he himself would be, were he by birth married to the other side. And he would have done it gladly, Paul! The mythological veil, whatever its name may be, hides mankind from itself. Under this veil, atrocities are committed with ease. Maybe that is what I meant when I said we mustn't play games with one another. God only knows how many people have

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been put to death under this veil, or been tortured to death. In ancient times the death sentence was actually being applied against those who violated the prescribed marriage boundary."

I was amazed at her; flabbergasted! I knew instinctively that she was right. She was telling me in a different context what my experience that evening had in essence been all about. Nobody would have convinced me of this earlier. I would have laughed had anyone suggested that she would say the kind of things she said. I felt closer to her that night than I ever felt towards anyone before. She had laid out my own soul before me and defined for me what I felt, which until this moment had lacked a clear definition.

The next time the waiter came by, I quickly requested another coffee to make those wonderful moments last for us as long as we could make them last. The waiter suggested a fine liquor when he came back, which we sipped ever so slowly to savor the mood we were in. Something was in progress here, something gentle, and something that had no name because it was still too new, even though Jennie had courageously dared to define it.

We left the restaurant totally satisfied. We went to town, strolling hand in hand through the old parts of Lahaina, along dimly lit streets, amidst crowds of people. We passed the windows of the town's brightly-lit shops. The absorbing intimacy of the evening had made the pain of the world appear so far away, so unreal, so like a dream. There were many glum faces in the crowd, but those no longer mattered to us. What mattered, was, that we smiled, that we felt intimately at one with each other.

We stopped at every display window, I am sure of that, and often went inside the stores to examine the wares. Everything that a tourist would want was on sale, from seashells to exquisite diamond jewelry. Browsing created the feeling that the world was in the midst of the deepest peace. I relished this feeling. Maybe others did, too. Maybe that's why things appeared so strikingly normal and people had wisely determined to keep it that way.

Still, as time wore on, the glad feeling faded. The weight of what we would soon have to face exacted its toll. The cruel reality became stronger than our new inner peace, even though that peace was founded on a more solid reality. As if it were in response to a deeply drawn urge to acknowledge this more solid reality, with which to hold back our fear, we put our arms around each other and avoided even the slightest syllable

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about the awesome task that lay before us.

As time passed, we walked slower, and slower, and went into every shop. We even tried on various items of clothing that we saw, though we had no intention to purchase any.

At the center of town, we stopped and purchased an ice-cream cone each, in a brightly colored and brightly-lit store. We had a double scoop of Pina Colada, and another scoop of Swiss Orange Chocolate, both of which tasted wonderful, and on top of that a scoop of the finest vanilla. The giant cone in itself was enough to make the evening last for as long as it possibly could. We took the cones outside to the park and ate them under the legendary Banyan tree that covered the entire Town Square. The tree had long been a famous landmark. For decades, people had loved and dreamed beneath its branches. My dream that night was for a safer world, and that our paths would never part. Actually, I felt these were related, though I couldn't see how.

Long after our ice creams were gone, Jennie said quietly that she was now ready to face the world. But those were just words, bravely spoken. I was certain that Jennie was no more-ready than I was.

Still, while being careful not to hurry, we turned back towards the car. We stopped at every window again, browsed through every store, tried on hats, scarves, and bracelets, and checked out the trinkets and toys that were offered for sale.

"Let me buy you a present to remember this day by," I said to her in a small, narrow shop in a side alley. The walls of the shop were covered with everything that was interesting and valuable, from rare seashells to fine wooden boxes, carved figures, items of brass, silver, and gold. In long glass cases behind the counters, a wide variety of jewelry was displayed, polished pink coral - an ideal present for her, I thought.

She smiled when I asked her, but urged me not to buy anything. "Not now," she entreated. "Wait until the last day."

Reluctantly, I agreed.

But what if this is our last day? I wondered. What then? Who can be certain that we may live through to the end of tomorrow? Was her denial of my present a rejection of some gnawing fears?

Evidently, neither of us was ready to face the world, I was sure of that. But if so, why were we going back? The answer was simple. We had no choice. The human need was too great to be ignored. The rescue work had to be carried out. There existed no other option. Not to go, to suppress the compassion I felt for those in need would have been a

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betrayal of everything I believed in, even a betrayal of myself. That, I could allow no longer. I had stepped too far away from this grave to step back into it. We simply did not have a choice. Our love to one another was intertwined with that sense of unity that embraced all.

It was quiet in the car as we drove back to the airport. There were shadows on the road, shadows of trees projected by the moonlight. We spoke only of trivial things now, of make-believe ideas that seemed supportive in some way.

As we turned away from the shore, Jennie noticed that the mountains were still wrapped in the same covering of clouds that we had seen when we came. "I suppose they will still be like that tomorrow when we come back," she said.

I agreed, but I couldn't shed the feeling that we would not make it back to see them.

At Kahuluie airport we had almost an hour until the next shuttle arrived at one o'clock. We had just missed the midnight shuttle and I was glad that we did. This also must have been the first time in my life that I was glad for having to wait at an airport. With great joy I also realized that I no longer wished that shuttle would never come.

The wait didn't delay us. It gave us plenty of time, though, for one last stroll and a cup of coffee in peace. The air was moist and aromatic. We walked arm in arm in the dim moonlight and held each other close. The thought that this may indeed be our last day on the island, in not forever, grew stronger. The feeling emerged that this might indeed be our last day. The feeling grew to such force that I nearly protested out loud; NO; no; no; that can't be! - There will be a tomorrow - and it will be as beautiful as we care to make it! I didn't voice those words.

We strolled back to the terminal more quickly now. I would have loved to run. I was happy in the night. As soon as we came near the terminal, I excused myself and sneaked away into the souvenir shop. Luckily the shop was still open. The storekeeper said it was because of the shuttle flights, which kept coming in all night.

I bought Jennie the most delicate, red coral necklace the shop had, and two cups of coffees as a decoy, and a package of chewing gum. I kept the necklace well-hidden until we were on the plane and back in the air.

As we were alone in the plane, I brought the necklace out and placed it in her hand. Tears formed in her eyes as she asked if this was the

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souvenir that should not be bought until the last day.

"Yes!" I nodded and laid the necklace on her neck. "This may be our last day on the island, or maybe our last day altogether. It certainly has been our last day of exile from each other," I added. "It is fit, therefore, Jennie, that a souvenir be bought to remember those moments by, to celebrate the way in which the conventional has ended, the celebrate the last day of the Old World and the joy of seeing it disappear from the horizon."

I grinned at her as I closed the clasp and moved back to see how it would complement her wonderful charm. It did full justice to it. "May this gift adorn my lovely female friend who brings out the female in me," I whispered to her.

She smiled back at me.

Maybe an emergency shuttle isn't the most likely place to celebrate the beginning of something that may never fully be. The plane was filthy. There was a sour stench in the air. There were no snacks or drinks served. But for me, this filthy plane was fit enough to celebrate our 'continuous' beginning. The physical surroundings no longer seemed to matter. Not even hope seemed to matter. The moment itself, just being alive, was enough.

Jennie looked down at the necklace that blended well with the black velvet of her dress.

"Tomorrow, perhaps," I said to her, softly, "I may need to buy you another present like this for another reason, and maybe another again, the day after, and at all the days after that."

Her smile faded. She turned to me and whispered as it were a state secret; "Do you think there is the slightest possibility that I could have been infected by the man at the airport? The man at the airport said that he had the AIDS virus. It didn't matter, then."

I shook my head. "Hack no! It takes more than a single kiss, no matter how intimate, to become infected." I almost laughed. "And even if you were infected; so what?" I said. I began stroking her hair as we faced one another. Thinking in terms of years suddenly was like thinking in terms of eternity. "I wish we had the kind of a future where all of this matters," I repeated. "What matters is, what happens here, today, now! And even if it should happen, against all odds, that you have become infected and the world should hold together for many more decades and centuries, a cure for AIDS may not be far off when this happens, so don't worry my love."

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"That's what I thought, too," she said, and began to smile again. Soon her smile turned into a gentle grin. The dark mood that had gripped us and had receded several times during the past hours, now appeared to have been turned away for good. It was replaced with a hope that actually didn't seem important anymore compared to the excitement of just being alive at the moment, and to be with each other the way we were.

There were tears in her eyes when we kissed. It had been a significant day in every respect. Everything fitted together. When the wheels touch the runway, I remarked that this was probably the finest day we could possibly have had.

She nodded and smiled, touched her necklace, and then added that it must seem totally ridiculous for anyone to make a statement like this in a time of the deepest crisis that ever occurred in the history of humanity. "But I know it is true!" she added and grinned.

I kissed her in response. "This has been our day," I said, "and it still is. May it never end."

She closed her eyes, embraced me, and agreed that it was so, with a kiss.

## Postscript: *About the Sex and Sacrament Project*

The Sex and Sacrament project developed out of my Kaleidoscope that started as a project to select individual stories from my 14 novels that are sufficiently complete in themselves to be republished in the form of special-focus short stories. The earliest were presented as PDF e-books, later as audio books, some as videos, and the most recent additions in the form of separate books. All are designed to make the special-focus stories more directly accessible.

Many of the selected stories are from my series of 12 novels, *The Lodging for the Rose*. The series is large, because its core subject, **universal love**, is immensely wide in scope, even while it is rarely recognized as a critical element of civilization. From this extensive background, numerous stories stood out with a potential for inspiring healing in the world outside the framework of the novels. In the resulting Kaleidoscope of stories certain groups of stories stood out with vistas on a common theme, such as sex and the sacred. The Sex and Sacrament Project emerged from this scene, with a special scene of its own.

The combination of Sex and Sacrament as a theme was chosen as a project to gently highlight the fact that in spite of the wide division and deep isolation of numerous types in the human 'landscape,' we remain fundamentally what we have always been, a people of a common humanity that we all share as human beings. In this context the focus on sex was chosen for it being one of the longest-enduring aspects of our humanity with a high-level uniting and equalizing quality that transcends all the little artificial things we place in our way to keep us isolated to the point that we fight wars against each other, religiously, politically, militarily, socially, and even in the sciences.

**The Sacrament** was chosen in combination with sex, for its potential to bring the divine quality of humanity into focus, which is spiritual in nature and begs to be recognized as such. Our spiritual name is *intelligence, creativity, power, productivity, sublimity, and beauty*, expressed in art, literature, science. With them we have developed the ability to 'see' the future that has not yet happened, and to uplift the present for it to meet its needs before they occur. With these qualities in our 'pocket' we can recognize the principles of the universe and their changing dynamics in cosmic space, and thereby become inspired to

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prepare our world for the rapid start of the next Ice Age in the 2050s, for which the transition is already in progress.

In preparing for the next Ice Age, we have the power at hand as we stand today, to produce 6,000 new cities to meet the future requirements, and to do this in the short time we have still remaining, and provide them to one-another for free. This isn't utopia. It is absolutely required in order to enable the relocation of most nations on earth into the tropics, together with their agriculture and industries, for our collective continued living in an Ice Age world. We can do this. But will we?

No other form of life on Earth has the grand qualities and resulting capabilities to do this, that we have as humanity in rich abundance, which define us as human and as a shadow of the Divine, both impersonal in nature and wide in individuality.

The concept of the Sacrament stands in the background here as a celebration of who and what we are, which is profound and enduring, regardless of the mess we have allowed to come upon us.

**Sex comes into this profound context** for its historically enduring quality, as something real that time has not erased. Our sexual qualities and their intimacies are also supportive of the grand, cooperative civilization that we have become. Sexual intimacies lead to social intimacies, and beyond that to regional and national intimacies, becoming expressed in the Principle of the General Welfare, without which civilization would not exist, and likely neither would we exist.

The concept of the general welfare, which may be the most fundamental factor in civilization is fast vanishing and has become almost completely lost in the present world, as a principle. Entire industries have become destroyed in many parts of the world, under the thumb of greed, looting, privatization, and so on, so much so that the world is now hanging precariously on a thread.

Instead of meeting the human need, we now live in a world where greed, like a wrecking ball, is forcing far-reaching financial collapse, imposing terrorism, and is staging the ever-looming potential for a nuclear war amidst the mounting food crisis that, even without war, brings with it the danger of unleashing pandemic diseases.

And again, this isn't fiction, or a theory of the future. This is here, though it is largely denied, while universal love, which should be the impetus in civilization, is regarded as fiction and sex is degraded as a nuisance, a mistake by God.

But what is Sex, really? Does anybody know? Is it spiritual? Is it

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sin? Is it private? Is it divine? Should we shun it like the plague, or should we share it with the generosity of a great love, and celebrate it in a sacrament with the divine as an element of the goodness of living? Should we amputate it and hide it in denial of what God has created, or should we acknowledge it to one another and ourselves as an element of the fullness of God? No patent answers can be given, but its dimension, which is evidently wide, can be explored.

**The Sex and Sacrament project** leans in the direction of having a uniting impetus. The focus on the combination may have the potential to draw the two great spiritual aspects into one; our long enduring unity as humanity and our power as an ‘infinite’ species. While both of these are becoming evermore denied in modern time for purely artificial reasons, the resulting tragedies can be dealt with by us becoming aware of them.

One of the world’s greatest spiritual pioneers and spiritual healers of the late 1800s, generally known under the name, Mary Baker Eddy, wrote in 1881 in the opening paragraph of the platform of her science of healing, saying, “that there is neither a personal Deity, a personal devil, nor a personal man.” Her statement renders sex as something far greater than a personal possession, something inherent in the sacrament with the divine. In 1870 she rendered Soul as substance, and man its shadow. Evidently, a lot of healing flowed from this type of recognition for which she became widely known for as a healer.

Mary Baker Eddy is also the only founder of a major religion that I know of, who has made no provisions for formal marriage bonds, in line with her recognition of an impersonal deity and humanity, as if to say to society, you need to stand on higher ground, on the universal, spiritual platform of reality. On this higher platform, the link between sex and the sacrament becomes drawn evermore into the foreground, where it totally alters the marriage-relationships scene, socially and politically, and the nature of intimacies. With the uniting factor sex is raised to a higher level that countless people are instinctively aware of, but cannot locate the root for, nor find wisdom to bridge the gap to from old traditions and debilitating doctrines.

Religion has deep problems with sex on the low-level platform. A case in point is the story of the adulterous woman in John 8 who has committed the crime of having had unauthorized sex, for which the law of the priests demanded the death penalty. The case was brought before Christ Jesus, demanding a judgement that was designed to entrap him in defending the woman. To deny the law would have been treason, and to allow the woman to die, would have destroyed his reputation as a healer.

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But he did neither. He healed the accusers instead, of their intention to become murderers. According to law, the accusers would become the executioners, who would be required to throw stones at the woman until she would die of the injuries inflicted. Thus he healed the accusers of their intention by illustrating that no crime had been committed that was rooted in anything real. When the accusers saw that they had no case that would stand up before God, they left the scene.

With this example, Christ Jesus illustrated the scientific spiritual platform on which terrorism in all its forms can be healed, which appears to be the only possible platform for such healing that exists.

Terrorism has an ancient root that can be summarized as “denial of the fullness of God’s creation,” as Mary Baker Eddy has termed it. It appears that sex was dragged into the terrorist scene quite early in history, as a cause for inciting it, which to a lesser degree is still happening with destructive consequences in the breakdown of social relationships. But was the woman in the case cited, faultless? No, she wasn’t?

After the accusers had left the scene, now standing alone with the woman, Christ Jesus may have asked her to look into her own heart, deep into the soul. Had the sexual intimacy in her case occurred in the sacred context, as in the sacrament, as a celebration of the fullness of God’s creation? Or had it occurred in the small personal context of sex-slavery, that is never more than slavery and has corresponding effects? She may have nodded to the latter, to which he would have answered, “sin no more,” as is reported in the Bible story. Thus, Christ Jesus evidently healed the woman too, of her incorrect sense of sexual intimacy, which is healed once it is corrected.

For a scientifically alert person, as Christ Jesus evidently was, the case wasn’t hard to resolve from a purely scientific spiritual standpoint. On a lower-level platform, however, the case appears to be ponderous and impossible to reconcile with the platforms of doctrinal imperial religion, so that in some cases the entire story was simply removed from the Bible, like in the *1970 Oxford Study Edition of the New English Bible*, where the chapter, John 8, begins with verse 12 instead of verse 1.

Consequently, with the case being swept under the rug, rather than inspiring a scientific uplift in society, the healing of sex and related relationships remains yet to be accomplished in a significant manner, to the present day, where the sacrament at the intimate level, uplifts social intimacies, and national intimacies, and so on, all the way to the world-political level towards the end of wars, terrorism, murder, looting, and destruction, and inspires our commitment to meet the Ice Age Challenge

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for which the transition is already in progress. We can do all this in the natural context of the goodness of living as human beings.