

The Ocelot the Way He Is

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“The Pharisee?”

Luis looked across to his housemate’s unkempt twin bed. Good thing the guy hoarded; White pages, maybe a couple years old, sat on the floor, cover ripped, with a gray dusting from disuse.

The text message was clear enough. He snapped his Blackberry back to sleep. But it buzzed.

“Quom?”

“We want you to look him up when you go out on your mission,” Luis’s older brother said. “That’s how it goes with us. Anybody who speaks out without a real stake is fair game for a test. Tell him you’re starting over. You’re doing it for me.”

Luis understood. “They” would make an example of this millstone. He picked up a SanDisk off the ruffled bedspread and clipped into a silver digital camera. No wonder, Luis thought, his brother had been processed out of the Army after just three restless years.

“I can read it.” He thumbed through about ten pictures. He eyed a picture of a handsome white man in a dark chair, a taller man standing behind, reaching below a shirt collar.

“You can give that back to him if you want when you go there,” Quom said, “when you get done. We got a much better tape anyway.” Luis rummaged through the available flat surface under his bed and pulled up a little translucent collapsible plastic tube.

“I did keep some royal jelly that they used in the latrine,” Quom said. “The Pharisee will have some use for it. Maybe the Egyptians, in ancient evenings, that is, used it. Fortunately, I didn’t need it. You know, it wasn’t easy to haze me.”

Luis started to pack his little grippe, all ready for door-to-door. He suddenly sensed that he had been born too late for an upcoming door-to-door solicitation job like this to ever work.

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Bill put away his new CoolPix Nikon after snapping an image of the electrocardiograph. The doctor walked in to this examination room that felt like a work cubicle, and Bill even let his contemporary lift up his t-shirt and gently apply the electrodes. The test took less than a minute. As Bill had requested once before, the doctor left the sticky pads on. Bill could remove them gently when he reached home.

“I can’t give you more than 30 days of your b.p. meds this time,” the doctor said. “You have to go to the heart specialist. He might want you to be open to surgery.” Sounded like Vatican-driven openness to procreation.

“Last year, you mentioned a pacemaker.”

“He could even say, do a bypass. You’re a walking time bomb.”

“Mother went into hospice yesterday. Maybe it will get better when all of this is over. I wish I could make 70 first before they do me. I’m not exactly walking in the moonlight.”

“Don’t let this go on more than a week. I may not even be able to let you drive.”

“If I just had some time, to be left alone again, get my piano music performed and published first. And my novel, too. It’s more than a bucket list. Have a chance to be somebody again first before hitting the world. I thought I could get some momentum first. That keeps me going. But if I go through all the monitoring and prep, maybe I can find out why I was behind physically when I was a kid. I never really got to be a young man. It was over and gone before it started.”

“One week. That will be all,” the doctor said. And Bill did not have anyone to “love him back” in a personal bullpen.

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Nolan finished a set of flies with cast iron handbars, and sat up on the weight bench. No partner from the Community today, no one to spot. He liked the simplicity of the place, just free weights, nothing fancy. No need for the fancy stuff. He stood up and looked at himself in the tall mirror. He liked the way his shoulders had finally filled in, toward the top of his 80 inches. He didn’t mind the idea of fitting a Scandinavian stereotype, the token antidote to reverse discrimination as a college freshman. He’d be “just legal” very soon. Any day, any hour, now. Well, he wouldn’t tell “anybody” when. The nearest Legal Seafoods was 60 miles away, all the way back in DC. He didn’t have time for a nice business luncheon there now. Nor did anyone else. Nobody knew.

Lounging on the bench, he brought up his iPad. As so often was the case, he actually got a better signal here than at his grandfather’s hideaway “cabin in the woods,” two miles back up the dirt road, but still four miles from the main highway. And it was still easier to browse stuff on a tablet than a phone. That was always strange because most residents of the Community didn’t have computers, which were discouraged if still allowed. This time, Bill’s main blog came up OK, and Nolan quickly navigated through the archives to a posting about a sermon they had both heard, “What we need rules for.” He recalled his own comment, “It gets very personal.” He checked the second comment, from some lab unknown named Luis. “Especially if you have to start over.”

Nolan turned off the iPad, and finished a set of leg lifts and one more set of flies. He glanced at the changing and rubdown room. Such a convenient hideaway did not demand on technology. He closed the door. To shower, he would ride his old mountain bike back to grandpa’s house. Even he preferred some creature comforts – hot water – to the cold shower out back here. He enjoyed these weekend “extended family” invitations to house sit. Particularly when he had someone to “do.”

Once back in the weekend home – Virginia’s Camp David, so to speak, everything in his video studio was running. Today, the WiFi signal was strong again. Maybe not forever.

He thought about the pistol locked away in a bedroom safe. He had practiced with it twice. He thought, in a normal world he would never use it again. Being young, he thought he could face his first external threats about the time he reached biological summer. People would need him.

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Bill adjusted the radio dial in his mother's little cubicle, as some Schumann piano music came through the speaker, though diminished. She raised her hand.

LaShanna moved toward her and motioned to Bill, who held up the glass of water with a straw. Mother's lips moved. The last thing she had asked had been, "Why am I here?"

Twenty minutes later, he talked to the lead physician at the hospice.

"They sometimes rally a little," the swarthy, curly-haired resident said. Bill caught a micro-peek at his hands, which still looked over-scrubbed. As if there were the wrong kind of hope.

"But we could have to think about a nursing home if it goes on?"

"It's a little early to wonder about that."

Bill and LaShanna sat a few minutes in the living room, looking out through a bay window on a residential street and '40s-era brick homes, basking in warm fall sunshine. Once, through the same rotunda, he and the other kids had watched a "good snow" melt in the mid-Atlantic winter sun. The second graders wanted to get home for "second recess" before the whiteness was gone. Snow, after all, was more precious than sand, even if playing in both was fun. Once, the following year in third grade, his classroom was a more ordinary setting behind them, with little outerworld view – just as the patients were denied now. In this less glorious setting, the teasing had started. The caregiver barely knew his own ancient history.

"This was my first and second grade classroom. We come full circle." He looked up and saw an elderly couple, both wearing volunteer badges, walking back toward the patient regions.

"What do you mean, we?" Lashanna asked. "You want to feel relieved, I know. I'll have to find another job soon, and I'm already behind in this month's rent, with two boys in middle school."

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That Friday evening, not at all attached to his mother's bedside, Bill attended a concert over at a local community college, for which he had purchased tickets the day before his mother went into the hospice. For the first time in 18 months, he had left his home without having to have somebody there for Mother, or Mumsy.

The first half of the program consisted of a "recomposed" Mozart piano concerto, the *Coronation*, with all the polytonality in the piano bass part invented by a friend of his, but played by a local teen pianist, Nolan. His list of recitals did not diminish even as he started college down at William and Mary. Nolan played an encore, a favorite from Bill's own teen years, the last Prelude from Rachmaninoff's op. 32, in glorious D-flat Major. Nolan seemed dressed a bit informally, in a kind of soft corduroy and soft pastel blue shirt, his blond hair in a modest mop.

Bill enjoyed his Coke and brownie, enough to make him gulp, during the intermission. His own dopamines flowed within himself during main event for the second half, the Schumann Symphony #2 in C.

He stood for all the applause, snapped a couple of pics, and walked back up the aisle slowly, spotting Nolan, having descended from the auditorium stage, towering above the front-row “orchestra seat” crowd. Bill decided he would wait for him. Oh, 50 years ago, that would have been a no-no.

In fact, Nolan made eye contact (as if from on high) as he approached, and Bill caught himself going into his habitual fixed smile. Yup, his heart raced a bit, and the doctor wouldn’t have approved. Nolan wore no tie, and left his collar just a tad open. Bill measured himself, as barely reaching Nolan’s chin.

“I’ll break the ice, Bill. It’s cool that you came. Everything got better for you today?”

“I knew you could pull this off, Nolan. I would have come for the Schumann, though. The symphony that talks to itself.”

Another kid burst forth from the proscenium door, and snuck up behind. He sported similar features, but kept his tie on over a plaid shirt, and grew a more pronounced bowl that probably got cut rarely.

“I remember,” Bill said. “A few years ago, when I saw *There Will Be Blood*, near the front of the AMC Georgetown, you were next.” The Kid stood next to Nolan, about reaching the throat.

“Yup, *prochaine*.”

“It looked like a family movie outing. Like your parents, maybe an older sister. You made them all stay for the closing credits to hear the last movement of the Brahms Violin Concerto in D.”

“You were perturbed that they skipped a few measures to close the credits. I see you around at the Town all the time. But I never let you get my name. It’s Brian.”

“Well, I just would have called you The Kid.”

“When talking to yourself,” Nolan said, “like Schumann.”

“You must have played, like violin. I don’t remember seeing you in the string section.”

“No, I’ve started med school. Too many talents for the old Gospel parable. This is my night out.”

“And dressed up to perform.”

“Or to kill. I did violin for ten years. Like your nine of piano.” That meant he had read Bill’s blogs. No need to be a follower or friend. They’re public. For everyone. “I guess I’m too well over-protected to get it tonight. You used to like to see me go at the Town. God thing, I won’t have to scrub for two more years anyway. It’ll be warmer tomorrow, before the big sun storm.”

“Well, Bill,” Nolan jumped back into the conversation, “Milady says I can help you. I’m gonna house sit this weekend for the grandfather, so to speak, but I keep my stuff up there anyway. It’s kind of out of public sight.”

“I’ve got my music from my own college days to get produced. You know how to do everything.”

“I probably do.” Some egocentricity seemed appropriate. “And you had some video.”

“In the works.”

"I saw another comment on your blog. Not anonymous, tried to Google the guy. Following mine. Rather uncool."

"I'll check."

"Look, I'll send you an email tomorrow morning. Give you directions as to where to show up."

"Thanks." Nolan tapped his shoulder and exited quickly.

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Indeed (or "But alas!" as he had always written in stories in ninth grade) he found an email from Nolan early Saturday morning. He had to look thrice, once at AOL (no more April Fool probes to Jupiter) and twice at Gmail. It turned up on Gmail as he munched on high-fiber oatmeal at his crude command post at the foot of the basement stairs. It seemed to have been sent several hours earlier before suddenly showing up.

Bill would need to drive to the "Bull Run Mountains," behind Manassas, maybe about 50 miles, and get there by about 3:00. The location rang a bell. Six months before, after he had started bringing in caregivers for his mom every day, he had visited an "intentional community," called "Up the Stream." He didn't remember the brook very well, but recalled sitting in a meeting, 40 minutes after, listening to the guide, a man about his age, Clarabeau, explaining about bartering work credits instead of money. In less than an hour, he had felt he had been there his whole alternate life. But, three hours later, after touring a furniture factory, tofu warehouse, common mess hall, and various simple rooms and quarters, he had driven home back to his own space. He had seen how people lived less individually, and simply, in an "income-sharing" model universe. He thought, that's how civilizations on other planets probably evolve, all barter, without money at all. It's safer "out here" if you don't have a reserve currency in the first place.

The email sported a paper-clip icon for an attachment, a pdf with the driving directions. No problem, his Webroot Spysweeper scanner accepted it.

Still in tattered, unmatched, frayed (and flayed) pajamas, he checked the weather websites. Severe thunderstorms might come up from the south today, maybe even a late season autumn tornado watch. And he saw a sidebar story, that experts expected a coronal mass ejection to reach the Earth tonight. No worry, just a glancing blow this time. But nobody would know for sure until the first satellites transmitted reports to the government, before getting knocked out. And maybe, "They just aren't telling us," just like "they" don't talk about Roswell.

Bill packed. It seemed appropriate to take some of his old handwritten music composition drafts and flash drives of his music. He had tried to make an optical CD copy once, and somehow the computer had refused to format the disc. He didn't have time this morning to try again. It sounded as though this could run late. He put toothpaste, medication, and a change of jeans and shirt, for an overnigher "just in case." An odd command had appeared on the PDF. "Come in your shorts." Oh, that's a JK or LOL. He went into the basement laundry room, and pulled some gray gym shorts, his own set, out of a bag. At the spa, they had doubled as "swim trunks" when he waded in the hot tub – and that was all he could do with water. As a kid, he hadn't liked to wade above his chest. Still alone, he dropped his pants, in

private, put the item on over his usual loose undergarment, without looking at himself. He was no temple Mormon.

He picked up the cereal bowl, rather dirty, to run it upstairs. He heard a doorbell ring. It was always a bit faint downstairs. He remembered, he had left the master front door key, ready to turn, when the guy from Medical Supplies came for the oxygen. He was that sure, or perhaps determined, that his mother would not return. He would move on.

He opened the door. He saw a young Polynesian man, short, in black suit and tie. But he didn't question his presence until he had jarred the loose screen door. The diminutive young man stepped onto the porch, without invitation.

"The pickup? The O-2?" Bill asked.

"Well, you've let me in, so you have to listen to my pitch," the young man said. "I'm Luis."

Bill noticed, Luis carried a little satchel that looked like it contained coupons and brochures.

"I don't buy things from solicitors," Bill said. "With the Internet..." And, the unpredictable home invasions...

"How's someone like me supposed to make a living unless someone like you needs to buy something from me?" Luis asked. "Maybe you'd like to make a donation."

"Not now. Please leave."

"You don't want to take in the homeless, I see. I've looked you up, you see, Googled you. You live with your mother. And when she's gone, you can start over, like me."

"Leave."

"Well, you can't have everything you want after all, then." And Luis did leave. But a little pasty tube dropped out of his knapsack, on to the cracking brick sidewalk, as he ambled away. Bill picked it up and held it in fingers gingerly, wondering if he should be careful with it. Maybe take it with him.

Start over. You don't make bad things, or bad people all right. You let go of it all, and start over.

The phone rang shortly. The O-2 man wouldn't come until Monday.

Bill made a quick trip to the hospice. Again, his mother was barely responsive. But she had taken a little fluid in. Her lips barely twitched.

He had no idea what to expect for supper tonight. Despite, or in spite of his rail-like form, Nolan had always been given to munching or snacking. He decided to indulge in a Texas burger at a local Thirsty's sports bar, as he watched the beginning of an NL playoff game, not involving the Nats.

He had put together what he needed. Kept the flash drive with his backups and music, as far as he had entered into the Sibelius music composition software, in the glove compartment. Camera. MacBook laptop with his own copies of Sibelius and Final Cut. So what if they were starter versions. And the paper copies.

Before leaving, he repositioned his own clothing, removing his T-shirt, and putting on an older form-fitted purple shirt with buttons more closely spaced than usual. He had owned it ever since his days in the Village three decades before.

The landline rang again. He thought he'd better answer, not give away the idea he wasn't home.

"This is the outpatient department from Northern Virginia Doctor's," the female voice said, after Bill identified himself. "This is to confirm your stress test Tuesday morning."

"I didn't think my doctor had set it up. I thought it was up to me."

"I've got your Medicare Part B referral here. You'll do a 20-minute stress and be fitted for a Holter. I've sent an email with the instructions." The line suddenly disconnected.

Bill noticed that his modem was down now. Really down, with only one light on the left, red, glaring at him. He wouldn't get to read the email, which would order him to do some humiliating things. It was just as well. It was time to go. This guy Nolan could read him with telepathy anyway.

Bill made his final preparations. He checked the area near the porch screen door, and spotted a blue Sandisk, shifted into a ground crevasse along the old porch. He thought he had picked up everything. The visitor had left, with no deal. But he had somehow dropped this second freebie. He wondered about a particular recent incident in a bar. He dropped it in his shirt pocket, behind the smartphone. It could get forgotten. Oh, yes. The little tubeworm vial, too. Put that with his handwritten stuff, in his knapsack, not quite a duffel bag. Maybe these two unknown items served a non-criminal purpose.

He remembered one more detail. He took 40 seconds to trim his fingernails, with an economy-sized clipper still on his nightstand.

He then left home in his blue Focus, arming the security system and locking the Medeco. As he backed out of the driveway, his driveway now, he barely bothered to check that he had turned the vintage garage door lock lever. He made his way out I-66, under clear skies, with a vague darkness toward the west. He rehearsed his own message, things he probably would not say, but suspected Nolan had figured out.

He passed a few bars and restaurants before ramping onto the Interstate. There was even an old singles club, which had survived decades of "world turning." He remembered an evening, four decades before, when he had tried conventional dating, that cameras hadn't been allowed inside. That was to protect the shy people. Then, orders of magnitude more recently, "they" had made everybody surrender their cell phones before going inside a second-rate hotel ballroom for a "Black Party" this past summer. The evening had not become as kinky as he had expected, all of this to his liking. He hadn't surrendered his little silver Canon. When he tried to use it, a bouncer grabbed him. He would be ejected unless he turned over the Sandisk. He really didn't think he had gotten off much of a shot anyhow. Trouble was, there were pictures of his mom's house on there, stuff that could have tracked him. Not that many images, maybe fifty or so. But it all made sense.

He glided onto the Interstate, and found the traffic unusually light. He resisted turning on Sirius XM-The Blend until he thought a little more.

Being a self-publisher who attracted global attention but whose “much speaking” didn’t pay its own freight, he could walk back into the moral arguments. The blowback (not the same as payback) could become a “bitch.” Arguments were not commutative. He could see that even a “free market” might not let him stay out there forever. He had attracted risk to other people – even his mother – and didn’t have the operating “profit” to cover it. He should have a stake in other people, somehow, even though he didn’t have his own kids. He should face what others faced.

He had gotten out of things. He had served without serving, so to speak, as he had bragged about his experience four decades ago in Army Basic Combat Training. Others had gone off to Vietnam – the wrongful war – instead of him, because of his confining book smarts. He had played the system. Then, in relationships, he had refused to make anyone all right. (Oh, that has been his reaction when thrown into special education as a sub.) He had refused because it didn’t mean anything if he did. He couldn’t afford to let it mean anything. There was a word they used to use for his behavior back in the ‘60s, but nobody would use it today. Call it “cowardice.” Nobody mentioned that as a vice, at least in this context, as prerequisite for belonging to society before you drew attention to yourself – today. Not in the age of viral YouTubes and Likeonomics. Yet, if you don’t step up when you are challenged to, you lose the right to become a victim, to be memorialized, to enjoy eternal pleasantries with loved ones. You remain alone, independent. But if someone comes after you, you wind up paying for their sins as if they were your own. “Don’t be a coward,” as an aphorism, is indeed a double-negative.

Bill took himself out of introspection mode, flipped on the radio. A song he had requested on the Sirius website played. “Imagine Me Naked.” Just don’t imagine “me.”

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The Sirius XM Blend coverage went into an interview mode about the time Bill pulled off the Interstate. As he got onto a through two-lane road, he flipped the radio button to FM. The discussion sounded apropos.

“No, the danger this writer pointed out applies just to servers. A terrorist could plant his go signal on an amateur’s site.”

“OK, that’s not quite as bad, or the same as, putting an unwanted image on somebody’s home computer.”

“Well, presumably you can always check your site. You don’t always have a particular computer with you.” The radio static took over.

So Bill shifted to another channel. It was only now that he noticed the outdoors getting darker quickly, as he reached the first turnoff in his handwritten instructions.

He found another channel that worked. “Well, the big story is the space storm. They won’t know how intense it will be on the XL scale until mid-afternoon. They could have to put in some brownouts or redirect some power to protect the grid, particularly New York and north, specifically in Canada, closer to the Magnetic North Pole.”

According to Nolan's directions, he had two more turns to find. He hoped he had written them down right. He could try to bring up his email on his Droid smartphone, but the service might be spotty out here. And with bad space weather approaching as well as severe thunderstorms, he needed to do things the low-tech, "collectivist '70s" way. But Nolan was supposed to be all set up, right?

Water splatted on his windshield, and was coming down in a torrent in 30 seconds. At least the road was still paved, if bumpy. He drove into the woods, as wind picked up. A weak tree could take him out for good. The second turn led to gravel, and the rain let up just a little.

Bill drove the two miles, as he noticed a stream, which he hoped would not overflow. The sky vomited in spurts, like a sick kid, with maybe three spit-ups, until he reached the final turn. He had another 8000 feet to go, he figured – that's horizontally. The road felt sticky. Nolan hadn't said anything about needing a four-wheel drive – but this was the country. A place where the supply of new people was not infinite, a region for people who were settled in life, and were OK with propane tanks and septic systems.

He chugged along on his well-inflated new tires, as the rain finally let go, and in about five minutes he could spot a tract house, half of it log cabin, in a slight clearing, sized as a baseball outfield, surrounded by a '50s-style chain-link fence. The road was so muddy that he tried the grass, and found even that mushy. He stopped. He would have to carry his hard copies and laptop himself. It would be awkward to manage all this to the door. But he would try.

He thought about trying the phone first. He reached for it in his pocket, and grabbed the little Sandisk, fumbling both. He put them back into the pocket. He shouldn't fool around. He recalled the tube of anointing oil, or whatever it could be. He topped on a dry spot and fished for it out of his knapsack. He let the engine run, in park, and then started creeping along, enjoying the anticipation. He stuck the plastic vial and the USB from his glove compartment into a small envelope and into a back pocket. He had no other convenient spaces.

He recalled one happy thought. "The Kid." He flipped on his car radio for a moment and listened to the sound of music. He visualized and imagined. After a song about the moonlight, out of place, finished, he snapped it off.

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The mid-afternoon sun was peeping through, as he put his opus-works and hardware down on the wooden porch floor and tapped the door. Would this really happen?

He felt like somebody making a landline call in the days before answering machines. But in about 30 seconds, the door swung away, and he beheld Nolan in front of him.

He felt Nolan's embrace before he had a chance to notice anything with his beady eyes. Bill's bald head fit just against Nolan's tender chin. The young man was all lean.

Bill actually spied the living room or ashram (or whatever, underneath the frame part of the home) before he looked back at Nolan, maybe for a moment of anticipation. He spotted a Yamaha electric piano, mounted properly in original kit shelving, a super MacBook, a professional video cam, a workspace—all to his left and center. A gunmetal gray shelf, apparently fastened to the wall by one of those 800-number gadgets, held some technical books and papers. To the right, below an open picture

window, a full sized sofa, covered with a white sheet. Behind Nolan's head, directly, and the last thing Bill's eyes picked up from the setting, as a surreal *Life of Pi* poster, complete with the Bengal tiger and majestic boy.

He looked up at Nolan, who smiled. There were no surprises. A bowl cut of a blond, almost gold mop with a sheen; a fitted shirt, buttons close, only the top open; sockless feet, sandals, thick hairs.

"This isn't exactly a roadside attraction," Bill said. "But maybe the music..."

"It looks like you got it all," Nolan said. "We can get right to work, at first, if you want."

Indeed they did. Nolan went right to his MacBook and got the Sibelius software program set up.

"As you play, I have a way to change the metronome. You've got key signatures."

"It's four movements. It's gonna take me like an hour to play this." Bill ran through the form of his sonata. "I can't play the scherzo fast enough."

Nolan looked at the sheets. He stretched his big soft hands, graced with some soft dark hair. "You'd have to expect me to practice this some day. But I can set the tempo back up in playback. It looks like this will take about 60 gig.

"Hope the storms hold off."

"Oh, they might not matter so much. That's why I come out here."

Bill emptied the back pocket. Nolan put the vial and USB aside, on a table near the entrance. "No, we won't forget," he said. "But if you play well enough, we might not need your amateur pre-recording."

Bill hammered through his sonata: the playful opening in C of the first movement, followed by an unusual move to relative minor for a second subject, a tone row development section, and a return to passion for the recapitulation, ending quietly as he dissolved between major and minor. He did lumber through the scherzo, but made the most of the episodic middle sections. Nolan would look up often from playing DJ at his console, and pay attention to the new music, laid out in ambitious forms. The slow movement was a dirge, again based on a tone row but harmonized, and eventually played back in a palindrome. The finale started out playful, but in Rachmaninoff style worked up to an epilogue with a "big tune" which could modulate to polar remote keys by putting together successive relative minors and going to majors.

At the triumphant end, forty minutes later, Nolan said, "And I'm supposed to hold applause." Then, he clapped.

"That's the name of the last theme that came in a dream. I don't think I ever posted it."

"Then I guess I can really read your mind," Nolan said, with hand going on the shoulder. "I'm going to show you how to re-notate the scores. We can back it up then. You'll have to find a safe place to finish it."

Nolan went through the technology, and even got Bill to repeat the steps.

“We’ll make the backup optical, a CD,” Nolan said.

“That you probably did read in my blogs.”

“Now, Bill, you also wanted me to help you do a video. You do look right to go on CNN, don’t you?”

Nolan started to manipulate the tripod and set up the videocam.

“And you have about a hundred pics to put underneath your video while you talk,” Nolan said, as he manipulated a few of them, including a shot of the Wren building at William and Mary.

The sunlight was diminishing, and the rumbles of thunder were coming back. Bill heard a scratching on the door as it flung into the room, and a huge cat pranced in and jumped up on the sofa, unphased by the showerhead the animal had left open. Nolan jumped up to shut it off, slamming the door.

“Oh, that’s Jenny. She’s part serval.”

“And probably very attached to you,” Bill said, as Bill walked over to the sofa, curiously placed in front of a notched log wall rather than before the picture window. Jenny made room. Nolan followed. Bill sat on the left side, and Jenny climbed into Bill’s lap.

“They say servals aren’t flexible. The same person has to feed her.”

“Jenny’s pretty good. She’s different. And she knows her boundaries. Never jumps on the technical stuff. But she’s tried to play a real piano at Up the Stream.”

“So you know about it.”

“Oh yes. Last year, as a high school senior, I wrote a term paper about intentional communities. I volunteered there a week to learn how it works. We’ll go over there for a little supper, and pay a little visit to their gym. It’ll do you good.”

Bill nodded. Indeed it will.

“It’s so coincidental.”

“Well, this is always grandpa’s place. Real people and real cats live beyond that log wall. We can have the big cat here, and it’s just about a 150 miles to William and Mary. Three hours.”

“You get what happened to me there, a half century ago.”

Nolan draped his left arm around Bill now and fingered. “Well, I get that it didn’t just happen to you. It was the way it was when you grew up.”

“So you buy the point of my story. I guess, there are things we have to do. That generates so much else that happens. It gives you a stake in other generations. The first book said that government shouldn’t be making us do it. But we have to, or future generations will wither away and what we wrote and said will come to nothing. So practical needs make us do it. So it becomes a moral issue for people like me, who are different.”

“We’re all different.”

“But we’re not all challenged. Nolan, you seem to be on top of everything.”

“Literally?” He squeezed on Bill’s neck.

“For those of us that are, it’s a moral problem. We should define it as one.”

“So that’s what this ‘short film’ video will say. Yeah.”

Nolan reached across with his right hand, tugged at Bill’s phone in the shirt pocket, and pulled out the little blue SanDisk.

“You even forgot this!” Nolan blinked.

“You know about ...”

Nolan shushed Bill, walked over to his Mac, inserted the disk into a clip, then the USB, and awakened the machine with his thumbprint. It simply flashed the message “Communications Error.” “*Nolo contendere*,” Nolan said. “You still have to wait a little while. No matter. All’s well that ends well.”

Jenny started climbing up in Bill’s lap, kneading. “You know, in that movie, Pi had to make his whole life on the boat on meeting Richard Parker’s real needs,” Bill said. “He even set Richard free. That’s the greatest gift to a healthy animal, its freedom.” By now, Nolan was back, the arm around Bill, tugging the collar a tad. Nolan then let his hand drape down so that Bill could stroke it. Then Nolan crossed his right leg over the left, so that Bill could even reach the ankle.

“Like Jenny, here, she wouldn’t be ready for it. We’ve spoiled her.” Nolan took her in his arms, released his grip on Bill. “She’ll have supper with us. You’ll see.”

“In the Army, after Basic – you know I got drafted anyway after grad school – we named the best looking soldiers after animals. My favorite got called an ocelot. A little bigger than this cat.

“Like me?” Nolan joked, tightening the shoulder grip once more. “But not exactly the way I am yet.”

Bill felt his cell phone buzz in his breast pocket. Nolan reached over and pulled it out. “Looks like a VM. I bet you it can wait. It’s a Saturday afternoon.”

“If it’s a gifted animal, indulging it gives it – her – a purpose. But if it’s a needy person, it doesn’t.”

“OK. Maybe we could bike to the gym, just a mile or so. It’s on the reservation, so to speak. Then supper with the Clarabeau. And then the best for the last. So you can keep your promises and make it personal. I’ll get ready. Maybe a bathroom break now.”

OK, the potty place, in the log section, was simple and clean enough, and unremarkable, with standup shower. This place could hardly stage a family. Bill emerged back into the living room, computers off, and empty. But in 20 seconds or so, he heard pops like the crack of a bat, not quite fireworks. Bill thought to tap the gray shelf, and it clanked, like metal.

Bill poked outside. Sure enough, Nolan stood by the driveway, with a baseball bat, and a few balls, and fungoed one of them over the fence.

"It's not out," Bill said. "I doubt your granddaddy makes any ground rules." As he approached, he felt a surge below from eye-copying the shaggy legs. The shirt hadn't changed, but the sleeves were rolled up.

Nolan tossed a couple batting practice pitches to Bill, who managed to reach the fence on a couple bounces. When they traded places, Nolan was one for two in this game of "homerama."

As they pranced back to the "cabin," Bill remembered the little tube. Maybe it would fit into his pocket along with the cell and petite disk.

But Nolan picked up the little vial and dropped it into his own shirt pocket.

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"You didn't change," Nolan said, as they each mounted a mountain bike. "I thought you would come prepared. But I thought ahead. I've got jocks ready for you when we get to the camp. No, no bike built for two."

Bill thumbed around with his phone, and tried to call voice mail, suddenly noticing the bars had dropped.

"Let's go. It may work farther away," Nolan said.

The wet path worked to Bill's advantage. Nolan couldn't pedal that fast in mud either. The heavy rain had stopped, but a light mist, capable of leaving a coat of heavy dew, hung in the air as it got darker. "Good thing wind's down," Nolan said. "Wouldn't want a tree to fall on you, or even me. But in this weather, no need to think about wind resistance."

Bill actually enjoyed the ride, for about ten minutes, down a path that made three turns, and then came to a fence with gate, which Nolan opened with an ordinary key. Jenny followed along.

In about five minutes, maintaining a fast pace on a gravel path, they came to the outskirts of a community, with one-story frame and shingle buildings at various angles to a path, which diverged.

The first building, stained plywood frame about the size of an ice fishing hut, appeared on the left, like a sentinel, but obviously useful, and padlocked. Nolan slowed, and pedaled over toward it, beckoning Bill to play peeping Tom. Bill spotted some more computing equipment, a laser printer, and some copying and laminating gear. The place was not that cluttered; everything was laid out on two simple tables. Bill thought he shouldn't ask why this would be on the border of community property. Bill's usually indifferent nose picked up a little aroma of lacquer, reminding him of seventh grade "industrial arts."

Nolan led them up to a small gabled building, and opened the unlocked door. Inside, Bill saw a typical gym, with free weights, benches, inclines, parallel and chinning bars. There were two proscenium doors behind, as if leading to secret chambers.

Bill stopped, and checked his phone again. This time, he got into his VM. The “Voice of Music” read, “Hello, Mr. B., this is Arlington Hospice. We are without power, and I’m calling you on cell. I wonder if you can help us with your mother.” The message stopped.

Nolan vanished into the back chamber for a few seconds, and returned.

“No words now,” Nolan said. “Come here, and turn around. I’m going to make this fairer.”

Bill obeyed (“to” Nolan, as in French). He felt strong hands on his shoulders. “Relax a moment,” Nolan ordered.

Bill felt some massage strokes, as in 6/4 Brahms time, and then a pleasant squeeze against his upper chest, and a little tug on the second button, almost at collar level. He felt fingers slide in a couple inches. He relaxed. Nolan let up, and Bill turned around, leaning against Nolan’s shoulder.

“I know what you can feel for,” Nolan said. “And it means a lot to you.”

Bill reached for the second collar-level button. Nolan grabbed his hand

“No fair. You need to don the shorts. Just go to the locker room. You won’t need any help. I’m not the sub.”

Bill looked up.

“Go!”

Bill went into the little dressing area, and saw a door ajar, halfway, leading to an inner sanctum, dark, apparently furnished with a cot and some little electronics, parked like drain flies. Below him he saw a pair of gray Bermuda shorts on a bench. They were a little more substantial than the trunks he had worn “lying beneath.” He thought, he had unwittingly come prepared to help in a locker room, LOL. He unsnapped his jeans, found the zipper already failing, and let the clothing drop to the floor, and stepped out, almost as if needing permission for a baby step. The cat wandered in and rubbed his bare, bald legs. Oh, nothing to be ashamed of. Oh, he thought, his practice (before today) of never wearing shorts anymore made a statement, about what was not OK. The idea would get around, and affect people, until now. He donned the replacement shorts.

He ambled out, and saw Nolan doing some pull-ups, with sleeves rolled up enough to suggest muscle knots, underneath rather new hair. The buttons would stay for now. Next, Nolan lay back and whipped out about 15 leg lifts.

“Ready?” Nolan snapped, and beckoned. Nolan actually lifted Bill up by the waist, and helped him complete ten reps of the pull-ups. Bill glanced down, enough to see the again cat staring at his own now ladylike gams.

“How many can you do by yourself?” Nolan asked. Bill managed to get off four.

They took turns spotting each other for free weights – Nolan getting over 400, and Bill satisfied with the bar alone, before walking down the path a bit further for dinner.

Three buildings down, they came to a log and plywood structure that appeared, to a peeping Tom at least, to have a loft. Nolan knocked, and a wiry but not bald man a little younger than Bill answered. Bill recognized a familiar scene: on one wall, shelving with books and board games – including his own *Do Ask, Do Tell* series. There was a simple TV at the other end of the room, an '80s-style stereo system, with a small collection of CDs and vinyl records, mostly pop. Below the loft, he saw an upright piano, and a game table all set up. To the left, he saw a fireplace, with a mantle, and candles on top. Bill counted them as if they were floors of a building. There were 18.

“Bill, this is, shall I still call you Clarabeau,” Nolan said. *Men* shake hands. They did so firmly.

A middle-aged woman, tall, bowl cut normally befitting a young man, walked in through the front, and lassoed Clarabeau by the waist. “And this is Beatrice,” Clarabeau said. “We call this house Beatrix, named after her.”

“The soufflé will be ready in about 20 minutes,” Beatrice said. “The kitchen’s a few buildings down.

“So she has to watch it from the distance. Difficult unless you’re a Clarabeau like me,” Clarabeau said.

“Well, not until we bunk him down,” Beatrice said. Bill felt his diaphragm jump.

“Yeah, we need an inquisition.”

Nolan intervened, with a degree of protectionism. “Bill, why don’t you play a little of your sonata on a real piano. It doesn’t need any power but yours.”

“It’ll always be around,” Beatrice said. “No matter how crazy the world gets.”

Bill banged out the last three minutes of the sonata, the “Applause Theme,” and played it pretty well, even if the piano sounded off key, maybe like a prop for Berg’s opera *Wozzeck*.

And all three audience members clapped, perhaps British style, until Jenny meowed.

“I’ve got to check on the food.”

Clarabeau set up a chess clock, and some pieces.

“I guess I’m on the road.” Bill played a Sicilian Defense, but Clarabeau deviated from established theory quickly, trying to keep a pawn center. In a 15-minute game, Bill displayed his old stuff, disorganizing White’s pieces with counterplay, winning a pawn and keeping it.

Then Bill played Nolan, who stayed with established theory, and let Bill try his Sveshnilov Sicilian. Nolan did the Bishop sacrifice, Bill did the rook maneuver, but somehow his undressed King did not survive the exposure to public scrutiny. Bill felt a twinge below as he resigned.

A half hour had passed, but Beatrice brought in the soufflé, and some beet salad, carrying them both in wooden containers, in cloth bags. Oprah would have been proud.

They cleared away the chess pieces, and ate dinner at the simple card table.

"I remember your taking the tour a couple springs ago," Clarabeau started, as they munched on the soufflé. "You never offered to come for the three weeks."

"I don't think ..."

"I did just one," Nolan said.

"That's because you were special," Beatrice said.

"You've got Bill's books. And we worked on the video," Nolan said. "Bill just needs a clean up."

"We only have Internet two hours a day here," Clarabeau said, "but I looked at some of your postings, Bill. Yeah, you would have had to destroy them to live here. Cauterize 'em, like tumor cells."

"I don't recruit converts. Or do anything where I have to sell someone else's script," Bill said. "I played by gambit and it worked in a sense. I don't think 'don't ask, don't tell' would have been repealed if I hadn't been hammering away at it for 15 years, being found on search engines, not going away. And that spread to all the other issues. I had to weigh in on everything. It became silly, because I didn't have the stakes other people did. I could watch the world from a perch of fantasy."

"One thing is puzzling," Clarabeau said, "really disturbing. You seem to take delight in this whole thing about your own experience with the Army. You flunked a lot of kids when you were teaching algebra at college, sending some of them to Vietnam, and then when you went in, as pathetic as you were in training, according to your own account, you used your education to manipulate the system so you wouldn't have to go to Nam yourself and risk getting maimed and then expecting someone to love you anyway when you came back. You present yourself as a coward and brag about it! If you really wanted to man up, you'd just skip to Canada yourself. And no blaming that country."

"Bill's going to do something about that," Nolan said, intervening. "He'll go through medical hoops to find out if there was really something wrong, something genetic or born with, and if he can get through it, join up with something. It has to get personal. You wrote that yourself before I preached it. Right, Bill?"

"You asked the right question," Bill said. "That's what I'm trying to get people to do. Not many will. Or even can. Of course, nobody thinks about the draft that way today, partly because the war itself was discredited. So the courageous thing to do would have been to join a protest and get arrested, or leave the country?"

"By your own words, it would have been to join something and care about the people in it," Clarabeau argued.

"Not exactly. Everybody, except maybe Nolan, seems to have an idea about what I'm supposed to do."

"You know, Bill, it really gets personal," Nolan said.

"So, I'm different. Oh, we all are different. But I'm in a position to become dependent on others and, moreover, understand the implications of my dependence and fantasy if too many people follow my example. So, yes, that puts me in a morally problematic position, like that of a football fan. It's like this. We all think diversity is good, because someone will always find it in their self-interest to do what other

people need. But will they? Look at the draft before. Look at the military today, for example. We depend on low-income people to fill the ranks. How do we fill our volunteer fire departments? What makes people really step up? It seems like sometimes it is class. People in other parts of the world don't get a choice but to work for nothing to support our lifestyles. Yeah, I wanted to get this all down so that everyone understands before I join anything at my age."

"I always thought we take care of our own before we have to join anything," Nolan said. "The Army didn't used to be like that, though. Bill rammed the draft down our throats like a candlestick in his book. Kind of a preemptory clue. But now, all around the world, it gets a lot more personal. Even kids like me get it when we go overseas on excursions."

"People will have to leave home and share themselves, or they'll have a lot of doorbell rings," Bill said.

"You obviously like Nolan," Clarabeau said. "I'm not sure he needs to love you back. But I get the idea you aren't interested in anyone that can't become perfect. It's like what do you want to see."

"I always thought there's something better than just reproducing," Bill said. There's achievement. There's knowledge. What's really out there. But, yeah, we may only find out when we take our chances. It seems like we have a new spin on equality: equal access to unfairness, or risk, or sacrifice." What made it hard was that the individual sacrifices would all be different for everyone.

Clarabeau got up, went over near the TV, and turned on a radio.

"The power failures are scattered. The worst are in lower Manhattan, a lot of New Jersey near the Turnpike and up north, northern Virginia, around Dallas, around Kansas City, and around Minneapolis. The heaviest part of the solar storm is supposed to come tonight, but the US will be on the night side, and it's a time of year of less sun. Not that many problems in Europe, but it went dark earlier. What's odd is that people are reporting electronics, phones and computers fried, and even some newer cars won't run. This just doesn't happen from a solar storm."

"Well," Clarabeau said, "Something else is going on. Should we show him the real original?"

Nolan nodded, kneading Bill's shoulders again. "This doesn't have to be in a bar," Nolan said. "He didn't want to come today. He'll get to try some real medicine tonight back home without scrubbing again."

The video monitor came back on, with amazing clarity and depth, like 3-D without glasses. "The Kid" – Brian – sat in the barber chair, as other guys surrounded. The camera, it turned out, was overhead. A tall guy, also blond and certainly resembling Nolan for the quarter-tone of time his face appeared, put down a Coca Cola, reached over, and slowly unbuttoned the plaid shirt, rubbing the chest that was gradually, almost tediously, exposed. Maybe there was nothing to lose.

Clarabeau brought over a little jewel box cover. "We thought it best to preserve this event for you on optical media. No magneto. Nolan, make sure he doesn't drop this from the mountain bike."

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Nolan led the way, as the sun was setting, and the skies had pretty much cleared. The dusk was not chilly, and that might prove convenient. The cat actually forged ahead, as if she got what should happen. Just once, she brought down a sparrow and started to carry it in her jaws.

They went back into the gym building.

"It was a light dinner," Nolan said, "but we won't pound iron. You wouldn't want dessert this time, or at least not the usual ice cream." The cat led the way into the locker room, and pushed the door open into the anteroom.

"I can imagine that there are sequels on that optical CD," Bill said. "If I'm a man, I must react to what I will see visually." Bill glanced down, straining his peripheral vision as if taking a driver's eye test, and spotted a few small items on the bench. One looked like a dental dam.

Nolan looked down, from a still safe distance of maybe five feet, and made eye contact. "You'll get to see the rest of it some day. Of that, I'm sure. But it could be a while."

As the cat, having swallowed her prey from the path, rubbed against Bill's sanded lower legs and mewed once. The meow sounded like a miniature roar. "I guess I have to decide who is going to become an angel," Bill said.

"You get one peak experience from me, Bill," Nolan announced. "That's all you need."

Nolan followed the cat, grabbing Bill's hand, through the locker room into the "other room," which seemed illuminated in light blue from an invisible source. Bill turned around, let Nolan embrace him, and massage his neck. Bill fumbled with the second button and got it open, giving access to about five inches of tender chest. Bill touched it, and fingered, careful to mind the nails.

Nolan muscled Bill down to the table, and quickly unbuttoned Bill's shirt. Bill closed his eyes and relaxed for the some warm lather, and then a feeling of scraping, when he felt it below. He didn't look until Nolan rolled some sort of illuminated robot over his chest, making it feel hot.

Then Nolan lay beside him. Bill resumed opening Nolan's shirt, disengaging another tiny button.

"Since I'm too young for you, the wand doesn't work the same way," Nolan said. "Use the clear cream. Start up to anyway and keep going. You can take maybe five minutes. Then we have to go back. I don't want a radiation doughnut in the middle, you understand."

Bill felt the tender, liquid smoothness with his fingertips. He kissed the exposed skin once. The gel was now within easy reach. He rubbed it in, and finished the revelation, one button at a time. Bill could make out a wad in the middle, the calyx, and some fuzz toward the nipples. Nolan handed him a bot and then withdrew it as it blinked blue once.

The Ocelot would stay the way he was.

Bill turned himself over. This time, no women were needed, given the immediate future.

Enjoy those 15 minutes of pleasure. Fell filled, and get wet. Just let it go. Don't hold back, as father had once said.

When it was over, Nolan whispered, "You really came alive tonight."

"Without the Lord, though." For Bill, sexual excitement had always happened in the passive voice. Tonight had not shown any change. He could not outgrow who he really was.

“Oh, Mandy,” Nolan said. “You wouldn’t have melted in my arms if I weren’t white.”

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Nolan and Bill rode bikes off the ashram, back the tree-line path, away from the dusk, Bill in his trousers again. When they got back to the house, the power was still out. Nolan reached under the metal hood and tested one of his computers. It did boot up. He gave Bill his own little Gateway laptop. “I remembered to put it away,” Nolan said. “Keep your CD backup. Some day some of this will work well enough that you can use it.”

Nolan followed Bill, at some distance, out to his Ford Focus. Bill tediously unlocked it and turned the ignition. It sputtered once. Repeated tries did not produce anything.

Bill walked back. “I’ve got to go back, too, see what happened at my house. I’ll take you to your mom first,” Nolan said. “Now that I’ve done you, you could check your cell phone messages. Oh, not even mine works. I remember. You’ll have to go to the hospice. I mean, yeah, you told me you were on hooky when you came to my concert. It should take an hour and a half. Hopefully no roadblocks. Maybe we need to do US 29.”

Indeed, the oldest black pickup truck started. “That’s the nice thing about a vintage truck from the ‘60s,” he said. “This family is prepared.” Bill climbed in, and the serval jumped in, curled on his lap quickly, after sniffing like a pooch.

They rode back in silence for the first hour or so. But when they got to Fairfax Circle, they encountered a roadblock, maybe 20 minutes. All they needed was their local Virginia driver’s licenses, and to look presentable to the profilers. They checked the radio once. A couple more areas had the power outages and odd personal equipment damage. Central Virginia, from where they had been all the way SE through Richmond down to Williamsburg. And around Cleveland, and then down through central Ohio, *Days of our Lives* country. The World Series, in Phoenix, was still on.

As Nolan coasted past the light traffic toward “home” – mostly older cars and pickups, he recapitulated: “Let me get this right. So in your mind, if somebody loses it, they shouldn’t expect to carry on and have children. They should sit in the back of the bus. You don’t see a limitless future, you see a plot twist and conclusion now. And that makes you tick.”

“You’ve done your homework. You’d get 100 on my free response test,” Bill said.

“Well I did get an A on my first theme at WM,” Nolan said. “Maybe I’ve got another one. But school sounds like it’s on the borderline right now. Not cool.”

“I have a feeling you’ll never disappoint me or anyone, Nolan.”

“Well, my future might not what be what it could have been. If your life is over at your age, that’s up to you. You got out of this.”

“You did everything in the real world. Played real piano, produced plays at the church. Maybe this isn’t the work of Luddites, but people who want it to be like it was during the Eisenhower years, when I was growing up.”

"I get it. Childhood isn't bad. Would we all look 18 forever. But I'm game for it."

"You think this is about me? All the places that are down, that's where I lived."

"That comment on your blog is the only clue."

That would be next. "If they can attack someone like me with radio frequency or flux guns, why not the big boys like Google and Facebook."

"They're the obvious bullies. And you used to write yourself, Bill, 'There is no *they*'."

The traffic came and went in spurts as they approached the Beltway, which looked rather empty. "Did I make the world better by loving only good people? I know, why do I call you, or anyone good? I guess society doesn't have to be compassionate until people want to be."

"You won't have a choice from now on, Bill."

-13-

As they got closer to home, the streetlights and traffic signals seemed to have come back on, but the quiet streets were eerie, and businesses seemed closed. Bars looked dark, even before midnight. Nolan stopped at the family home, a '60s-style split level rambler, with timer lights on, a giveaway to many that no one really was there. Bill had to wait only a few minutes. "We're OK," he said. "Let's check your house first."

Nolan passed several accidents, head-ons, as if the signals had turned to all green before failing completely.

"See if you recognize any of your buddies at work," Nolan said, as they eased past a crash. Bill spotted a young man looking like Brian, conspicuous in shorts, leaning over a smaller figure, lying on the pavement. The victim could have been Luis, but people of native nationalities had always been harder for Bill to remember.

Twenty minutes later, Nolan's truck pulled up into the driveway of Bill's house – or that is, the trust house.

"The garage door is manual. It always has been. Come on in." Bill unlocked the Medeco cylinder for his den door. The security pad did not blink, suggesting that power might have been off for twelve hours.

"I have a generator," Bill said. "But maybe that didn't kick in. This street has power, like yours."

"Let's check your stuff," Nolan said, dropping down the basement stairs as if he knew the place. Bill watched as Nolan pressed the start button on his Dell XPS. Initial results were not good. The black and white warning screen came up, inviting safe mode boot. Nolan checked that, and the blue screen came up.

"Well, we spared your little laptop," Nolan said. "Use it. Let's go pick up your mom."

“I guess for once, I’ve got to do what I’ve got to do.” In these new circumstances, obligation would generate all his new relationships, all remaining meaning in his life. “But if the grid is flayed, there won’t be as many cheesy telemarketers trying to make you join them to support your instant families.”

“But there will be door-to-door. Just like there will be Rollerball.”

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Indeed, the streets for three or four blocks leading to the hospice were dark. Nolan pulled up into the parking lot and left it illegally parked, as it was stuffed with inoperable cars.

Bill and Nolan approached the back entrance, of a building that seemed half-lit, perhaps from whatever generators had survived.

The security guard greeted them.

“You’re Mr. B. We’re glad to see you.” A male nurse, rather underwhelming in appearance, came through the doors.

“Yup. Your mother is ready to go back home. We need to send out as many clients as we can. You know, a lot of them perked up during the storm. It’s a bit of a miracle. Your mother thinks she can live forever.”

LaShanna followed by two pre-teen boys, followed, wheeling mother forward. Mother waved. “The kids are coming to live with you, too.”

Nolan put Bill’s mother in the front seat, safely strapped in. Bill, LaShanna, and the family had to ride in the truck bed.

The kids were settling in as LaShanna made the twin beds in Bill’s room, whereas Bill had to clear off a cot in the basement for himself. His little laptop worked, and he had a PDF of the score of his sonata showing. Some day he would have to get a real piano again. Yup, the Casio upstairs no longer worked.

“You’re mother’s going to be around long enough for you to get a future,” LaShanna said. Then she would let go, but that wouldn’t be said.

He claimed his shower privileges once that evening, and looked at himself in the mirror for the first time at home in months, his shirt left open from the encounter with Nolan. He unbuckled and looked down below, too, and saw reason for shame. But his final release, even with a certain desecration, would curiously let him experience a taste of fatherhood in the days to come. There would be boys to go to college in a few years. No wonder people took to selling insurance.

He went downstairs to look at his music, on his aging desktop. The cable was kaput, but he actually got a wireless bar signal from his pad. This time, the old computer booted up, even without safe mode, although it took about five minutes for the video to respond and bring up a normal windows desktop, but the two out of five possible bars indicating connection to wireless showed. He got a map of the DC area to come up, showing where power was working. The report said that electronics had been fried as close as five miles away. He was surprised he had been spared. And, fortunately, Nolan had made CDs

anyway. He'd watch the rest of what happened to Brian before going to bed – downstairs now in his remaining retreat, his only personal space. The computer, because of its omnipresent little webcam, would not spare him one final peak at his own blank chest.

But then, suddenly, his computer got a blue screen. And before he could touch the mouse, the lights went out. And they stayed off for a long time.

END