

**EVERYTHING
THAT YOU FEEL!**



A Novel By
Gair Linhart

EVERYTHING THAT YOU FEEL!

or

Without Guile

A Novel by

GAIR LINHART

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1st Edition

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All quoted song lyrics by Gair Linhart except:

“Bring It On Home To Me” (Chapter 15) – Sam Cooke

“The Piñata Song” (Chapter 29) – Traditional

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NOTE TO READERS

The (fictitious) State Hospital and Training School at (fictitious) Pecos Bend, New Mexico, in various instances within this novel, is referred to by its (fictitious) characters as “the hospital”, or as “the training school”. Both appellations refer to the same facility.

1 — ANGELS

Nicholas Nighthawk Romero watched his cousin Arturo drain his can of Budweiser and flip the empty beneath the mesquite bush. The white core of the sun was melting into the amethyst mountain, creating a rosy mist that was achingly lovely, like a way-pretty girl one knows he'll never possess. Tomorrow was the fiesta, and his people would celebrate their patron saint and their ancient harvest rites as well.

"Well," he said to his cousin, "I am going to dance, and probably get tired 'cause I still haven't recovered from riding the bulls yesterday, but I want to dance anyway."

"Sí," said Arturo popping the top on another *cerveza fría*. You'll just have to tough it out. You should've ditched school today, so you could rest up."

"No way, dude...I'm going to graduate this year."

"Yeah, but you never have to go on the first day."

"No man...last year, I had a bad attitude like that and only hurt myself. I just wanna get that paper and get out. You can't get any good jobs without a diploma. At least not that I've found."

"I thought you liked building with us..."

"Sí, pero, you guys never work more than six months out of the year."

"The rest of the year is for hunting or ranching or working on your house. Can't your mom get you a job working at the hospital with the water-heads?"

"Sure, but that's harder than hell work, lifting them and changing their diapers, and bathing and feeding them and everything. She's usually exhausted when she gets home."

Arturo leaned backward to chug deeply on his fifth beer, losing his balance a bit, and his cowboy hat. There is nothing unusual about Indians and cowboys being one and the same in the vicinity of Pecos Bend, New Mexico. In spite of studies indicating that Native Americans are not inherently alcoholic, Arturo was a lousy drinker. He'd begun to swagger and stagger, and his tongue was thick.

"They shouldn't keep those people alive anyway. It costs millions to keep a state hospital like that going. The money should be going to poor people like us, not to hundreds of dummies who don't know their own names. I'd have no problem with putting a bullet right into each of them if they needed someone to do it, just like you would an injured animal." He made the imaginary motions and sound effects of repeatedly discharging a large handgun.

Wham! The backdoor of the old adobe house was flung violently open. Arturo nearly collapsed with fright as his aunt Erlinda, Nick's mother, flew forth, black eyes flashing like ebony castanets.

"Niño estúpido! You stupid, stupid boy! You don't know what you say. Those people are angels and their lives are hard. Most of them have more courage than you and, by staying alive in their painful existence, they protect us. Who's to say who may live or die, when someone decides that *they* may perish? We will be next. This has happened to us before and can easily happen

again in a world where the sanctity of all human life is not recognized. But how could someone like you, with '*chit*' for brains, understand these things? Now pick up your beer cans and get out of my yard!"

2 — TURMOIL

Davy Suggs woke to the unearthly sounds of Frank Tafoya, in the room next to his. It was Frank's habit, shortly before sunrise, to hyperventilate his lungs with deep, noisy gulps. At the same time, he would grind his teeth with an unbelievable loudness, like blue corn on a *metate*. Davy could easily hear through the adjoining bathroom and thin wall. This would all culminate with a series of animal-like cries as Frank's head filled with, who could guess what stars and lights. At the moment of this strange cerebral climax, he would batter his heavily scarred brow ridges with his fists to consummate the effect.

Five years earlier, when Davy had first come to the Hospital and Training School at Pecos Bend, New Mexico, he had been frightened by Frank. He had tried to imitate the breathing, teeth-gnashing, and head-banging in hopes that it might bring about sensations similar to those he'd experienced when he, as a child, had been given liquor or inhalants; but he had only wound up with a sore head.

In time, as he'd progressed to his present age of seventeen, he'd lost any conscious interest in Frank. This morning the sounds meant no more to him than would birdsongs or the clinking bottles of the milkman to an ordinary person. Sharing a cottage with the pitiful creature, however, reinforced, in just one of the countless ways within Davy's mind, his sad position in the stratum of humanity.

A song came into Davy's mind. It was a happy song he'd heard at the chapel. Then—glorious remembrance—his state-appointed guardian, yesterday, had taken him to the flea market. He'd had only five dollars, but had found a secondhand Sony Walkman tape player that worked, for just that amount of money. He had a tape of the very song in his head, in his top drawer. His bare feet trotted over to his dresser. For the first time in his life, Davy had recently been given his own room.

Here is the tape player. Here is the cassette tape...it goes it like this... doesn't go in easily... push it harder...won't play...play button won't even go down. Push harder, still nothing...pop-out tape...It was in backward... try again...tiny gears wind, but no music...pop-out cassette again...long loop of tape pulled down inside player...Not Again! Familiar waves of anger and panic...Try to get out the precious tape...Now It Breaks! Can't fix cassettes! Try another tape...nothing! Nothing, goddammit...now this player IS BROKE LIKE THEY ALL DO! Already!

Smash, went the player and headphones against a cinder block wall...Smash, crash went Davy's fist, numb with rage, into the thin veneer of his bedroom door.

"Dave! Davy! What's wrong?" came the voices of the morning-shift staff. The door flew open.

"Fuck you, you asshole..."

“Take it easy Davy...Careful, he’ll bite you...get his legs...GET HIS LEGS! What's wrong? Talk to me! Get a pillow off the bed and put it under his head...Watch out for his teeth...”

Davy was now stretched on the linoleum floor with three male attendants restraining him with the “Mandt” holds (part of a system for managing aggressive individuals) which had fairly recently taken the place of straitjackets and papoose boards. Earl, the lead tech, was unhappy because a report would have to be written. Although a big kindly man, well cast for his job in Cottage Three, he had never learned to read or write very well—he’d been bluffing for years. The time was 7:10 AM.

At that moment, as the mythically beautiful New Mexico sunrise was rousing the piñon jays and roadrunners, Earl was not the only soul among those hundreds living and working at the Hospital and Training School campus to be concerned about literacy. On the other side of the oasis (botanically speaking) was a cottage that housed gentler types in contrast to Davy and Frank’s “behavior” cottage. In this old brick building, twenty-five-year-old Elsie Giron had lived since the age of nine. She had known great suffering before being brought to the institution which was, to her, a sanctuary. Recreation leaders had long since given up on taking Elsie on field trips or community outings. Such were the only occasions that caused the usually smiley little woman to exhibit adverse behavior. Otherwise, hers was a delightful personality; she’d been adored by many of her staff of providers.

Among such fans, Elsie’s state-appointed foster grandma, Florence (Flo) Riley, could defiantly be numbered. “Have you seen my kid?” she asked the new service coordinator who happened to be at the desk. “She’s not in her room.”

“To whom are you referring?” asked the coordinator.

“Elsie.”

“Elsie... Isn't she the high functioning, Down syndrome client?”

“No, she’s the little mongoloid lady. She's real bright; she talks and sings, and everything.”

“A-hem, yes,” coughed the recently BA degreed girl dryly. “She should still be in her room, shouldn't she? Who is her provider?”

“I wouldn't know. I can't keep track of all the zombies who work here. I'm not a zombie. Are you?”

“A-HEM!” the young lady coughed again, avoiding Grandma Flo’s earnest, probing gaze. “Let me inform the cottage supervisor,” she offered, rising from behind the desk and flouncing down the glossy, beige painted hall, her flipped hair bouncing behind her, Grandma Flo at her heels.

The cottage supervisor, a lady with hair color and other physical attributes reminiscent of a battleship, was going over the night log with the assembled nurses and “DD Techs” (developmental disability technicians). A quick investigation confirmed that Elsie was, indeed, not in her room. Other bedrooms were searched. Closets, bathrooms, kitchens, and boiler rooms

were scrutinized. Just as the young service coordinator, whose name was Brandy, was about to phone the gate to report a possible elopement, there came a cry: "She's in the filing room behind the office, and she's torn up half the files and documents in there!"

"Not the med-charts," shrieked the head nurse, as one having a nightmare.

"Some of them too..."

It was true. As Brandy pushed through the crowd in the office, and into the large closet that served as filing room, she perceived heaps of torn papers. Elsie had wedged herself behind two heavy filing cabinets and wound herself tightly around a cold water pipe. She was loudly howling, resisting all attempts to coax or pry her loose.

Eventually the supervisor, who in spite of her ominous countenance was in some ways an insightful woman, ordered everyone except Grandma Flo out of the room and adjoining office. In less than three minutes the two women emerged, Elsie wildly disheveled, but docile. "Why did you do it, Elsie?" asked the workers. "We'll be in the worst trouble now." But Elsie's eyes were far away.

"What made her do it, Grandma?" asked Elsie's young DD Tech, afraid of being fired.

"I don't know dear-heart. Who can say what goes on in these kids' heads?"

"I've called the psychologist," said Brandy. "He'll be here at eight-thirty."

At the sound of Brandy's voice, Elsie's veins froze again, cold with the fear which had come to her early that morning, causing her to tiptoe from her warm room to the filing office.

So, she was back here again, this young blonde one who had guessed her terrible secret—the secret which she had kept hidden all these years, since she had so foolishly watched *Sesame Street* along with cartoons in the afternoons. Nightly she prayed that this wicked blonde girl would be taken somewhere far away. But here she was, still. Tears of rage and helplessness filled her eyes, as she broke away from Grandma and ran to her room. Away from the wicked girl who had guessed her awful secret, which threatened her safety, home, and happiness—that she—Elsie—could read.

At that moment in a brick building surrounded by lilac bushes, situated just across from the similar cottage which housed the violently frustrated Davy, a pale soul lay on the cold tile of a shower floor. In the office of the building a bearded man, with the eyes of a cat or wolf, completed the routine night logs and then punched out on the time-clock.

3 — NICK AND HECTOR

On that same fine October morning, in yet another unit of the institution, a still sleepy Nicholas Nighthawk Romero was also present. In spite of his resolve to finish high school, as he had communicated to his cousin several weeks earlier, capricious fate had decided otherwise. Mere days into the semester, he'd been expelled over a football game melee.

"Me and my buddies were down under the stands," he related to the male nurse who he was helping with morning enemas. "Some of them had to take a leak really bad because they'd been chugging beers. These guys from Mesa High? They just kept staring at us, and I was feeling very disgusted anyway because my girlfriend had been ignoring me and flirting all night. One of these guys said something about us being taco benders, and a fight started and I kicked the hell out of the one guy's stomach—the one who said it."

"Summon a gum, you really did it," laughed Bill, the nurse.

"It's not that I hate Mexicans or being mistaken for one, even. It was just the way he said it. My dad got hurt fighting in Korea, and my grandfather was at Guadalcanal. So here I am, I guess, 'til I can get my GED and go to college or something."

"Well," said the nurse, "I went to college and look where it got me."

"You're making some good bucks..."

"Yeah, but the shit smells just as bad..."

Nick laughed. Bill liked working with the handsome boy whose family had come over from the Kewa (Santa Domingo) Pueblo, on the Rio Grande, to work at the hospital. Despite his youth, he had graceful hands and could be trusted with the trachea and gastrostomy tubes, and the delicate monitoring instruments. The man left, and Nicholas resumed his duties. Seven-thirty, already, and he hadn't even started bathing his first client.

Laura Yazzie smiled a smile this morning at Nick, and a pretty smile it was. During the two weeks of tough training that all new hires—from Ph.D.s to laborers—were compelled to receive, the staff development department had encouraged conversation with the residents. Never the less, Jason was still a little reticent about speaking to people who clearly could not talk back, and who probably couldn't understand spoken language. His position in the hierarchical structure ranked him lower than an army private, hence he was reluctant to appear foolish or conspicuous. So this morning, the youth simply returned Laura's greeting with a smile of his own. Two weeks earlier, Nick had only seen a small body with its skewed backbone and windswept arms and legs. Today he was conscious only of Laura's smile, and he was momentarily lost in its wonder. The darkest of Navajo eyes glittered and sparkled like obsidian. He no longer noticed that only one of the eyes truly focused; the other pointed down and in. Her perfect teeth were as white as the petals of certain bleached desert flowers which he had seen in his wanderings.

In this particular ward, for the most medically fragile in the facility, there were no individual bedrooms—just beds with high rails. Laura Yazzie weighed fifty-eight pounds—eight pounds over the limit for a one-person lift—he really should call another worker. One hundred

pounds and above meant three lifters. Some hydrocephalics, with their large heads, were also to be lifted by three. Knowing that this rule was variously interpreted from cottage to cottage and that he was behind schedule, Nick decided to go ahead. His lowly position had one great advantage; he had been designated as a floater who could be sent to any of the sixteen cottages on the big campus, as needed. If questioned about lifting Laura by himself, he could say: "Well, they do it this way over in 'Don Gaspar'," or in some other cottage. More importantly, he was gaining tremendous insights into a broad spectrum of various disabilities—from these with medical fragilities—on through to the "high functioning" and everything in between.

He cradled Laura Yazzie in his long arms and sure hands, easily lifting her from her bed to the rubber gurney. He tossed a blanket over her to protect her from chills. He set the plastic box containing her soap, toothbrush, and other personal items, at her feet, then rolled her to the bathing room. Thinking that he would warm the rubber "slab" upon which she would be bathed, he removed the chrome segmented hose, with its shower-head, from its hook and turned on the main faucet. Theoretically, governors on the water heaters protected the clients from being scalded. Cold water promptly squirted from a crack in the hose, drenching his jeans. Maintenance had been supposed to repair this, the last time he'd worked here. Undaunted, he turned off the water and unscrewed the shower-head. Now a pleasant sluice of warm water flowed from the tube. He shampooed Laura's long black hair, allowing no suds near her eyes. Jason worked quickly and competently, from the head and down, as he'd been trained. With liquid soap and a fluffy washcloth he carefully cleaned delicate areas and folds. Because of her twisted body and limbs, there were extra creases that required proper rinsing and drying.

After using a blow dryer stenciled with an admonishment to use only with the low heat setting, he finally had her diapered, dressed, and into her wheelchair—a horizontal affair with custom molded foam for her unique body.

His next client was more difficult. Although more normally proportioned, "Che-Che" was big, solid, and very tightly muscled, like a small boulder. His eyes were perpetually closed. With the help of two lady techs, Nick maneuvered his one hundred and ten pounds onto the slab. Che-Che always kept his hands tightly clasped below his chin, and his elbows frozen to his ribs, so it required some massage and effort to get at his underarms, properly. After shaving the old man, Nick was tempted to cut corners and skip the deodorant; some instinct, however, made him turn. Sure enough, he was being watched by the vigilant cottage supervisor who had crept in on rubber shoes. He forged ahead with the Mennen Speed Stick.

"You're doing a good job, Nicholas, but try to move it along a little. Soon it will be breakfast time...and be careful with Che-Che...he will bite. He took a man's fingertip off at the first knuckle, once."

"OK."

As he set about trying to loosen the tightly clenched jaws to brush Che-Che's teeth, Nick wondered if he would ever get a job where the constant refrain was other than: "Do a good job but don't take too long". He wondered how the older ladies, who worked with the same clients, were able to stay ahead of the game.

Nick had purposely left Hector for last so that the shockingly frail boy could sleep. Hector was handsome with haunting, melancholy eyes. He could not verbalize, but had some receptive language capabilities, at times indicating yes or no, with eye blinks. The lad was fifteen years of age, five-foot-four in height (had he stood), and now weighed only sixty-two pounds. His beautiful skin was like the translucent white of the Santos in the ancient mission church. He had come to the medically fragile unit because he had stopped eating, following the departure of a beloved special ed. teacher who had, for several years, meant everything to him.

Normally, Nick would have taken the time to coax a sad smile from the boy, but he had to hurry. So he limited his attempts to rocket ship noises, as he easily carried the emaciated youth, directly from his bed to the bathing slab. "I know I shouldn't be carrying you this far, but there are so many rules in this place that I'll bet old Elmer Fudd himself breaks a dozen before he eats breakfast." As Nick pronounced the word "Fudd" he allowed his upper lip to flap and fart, which resulted in the merest hint of a smile behind the boy's seraphic eyes. Of course, it was the rude sound itself; Hector could not know that "Elmer Fudd" was the ubiquitous nickname for Dr. Elliot, the facility's generally ineffectual administrator.

4 — THE BRASS

At an organizational meeting later that morning, prescribing psychologist Allan Hoffman tried to keep his mind on the business at hand but was much distracted by striking natural attributes of lead service coordinator (social worker) Marnie Fain, clad today in a tight-fitting skirt and sweater. Upon his eight-fifteen arrival at the facility, he had been simultaneously besieged by the supervisors of two cottages. He had offered weak resistance to their demands for increased medication for Davy Suggs and Elsie Giron. Al Hoffman had a genuine desire to be of service to the many individuals assigned to his large caseload, but his insight into the inner thoughts of most of his assignees was often slight—a circumstance not uncommon to the one-thousand-plus employees of the large facility.

As Al's thoughts strayed to salient points of Marnie's anatomy, Eric Cardel, a key lawyer from watchdog group: "Protection and Advocacy" was expounding upon a familiar theme. "So to be in compliance with the court order, the rate of placement into community-based housing needs to be dramatically accelerated..."

"But we haven't heard from the Governor, yet. Many of us, with family members in the hospital units, feel that they are safer remaining here. If the Department of Health has difficulties in preventing abuse and neglect in this centralized campus, how much worse will it be with our loved ones spread out over the vastness of New Mexico?" The speaker was Roberta Calderon, president of the Family and Provider Association; she was the mother of Charles Calderon, a medically fragile man residing in the same wing as Laura Yazzie and Hector.

"A decision has been reached in Santa Fe," interjected Dr. Elliot, the facility administrator. "Over the next two years, we will be transitioning to a community-based model."

"Not without a fight from us," remarked Mrs. Calderon, gathering her papers and rising to her feet. Five-foot-three inches in height, the trim gray-haired lady held herself ramrod straight and exerted a presence that seemed much taller. "Our State Senators and Reps., on the budget committee, have many questions that they will address at the legislative session. We'll be seeing you there."

"Please, Mrs. Calderon—" pleaded Dr. Elliot, but the determined woman had marched out of the meeting.

Addressing Eric Cardel, who had spearheaded lawsuits determining the seemingly sealed fate of the facility, service coordinator Marnie Fain observed: "I'm sure we all want to see transitions take place as quickly as possible, but available placements are currently quite limited..."

"Meryl Hope-Gurule, from Vibrance Special Home Services, Inc., wanted to be here today, but could not attend," replied Mr. Cardel. "However, she assures us that all haste is being made to dramatically expand housing situations that will facilitate transitions sufficient to actualize compliance with the court order."

“Fine, fine,” intoned Dr. Elliot. I’ve been in communication with Ms. Hope-Gurule, as well. I see that it’s nearly noon, so I suggest—”

“Hold on, hold on!” Joey Naples, the stocky, union representative was on his feet. “This place is the second-largest employer in the county. Our friends in the legislature are wondering about the loss of jobs and so are we. We—”

“Mr. Naples...I met with the Secretary of Health who assures us that, in order to make up for any placements that cannot be provided by independent companies, the state will facilitate residential alternatives, with our employees also transferring to those settings. There will be no loss of jobs.”

“But workers are receiving RIF (Reduction In Force) termination notices already...”

“Only workers whose work status is categorized as temporary.”

“Some of those temporary workers have been here for years! And what about food services and maintenance? Sorry, but your figures just don’t add up—”

“It has been projected that no jobs will be lost. This meeting is adjourned.”

Blinking from a nearly somnambulant state, psychologist Allan Hoffman stood, stretched, and sidled to where Marnie Fain was in conversation with Protection and Advocacy attorney Eric Cardel. At the first opportunity, he hoped to suggest a location for lunch. Hopefully, Mr. Cardel would have a previous engagement.

5 — THROUGH THE WINDOW

“Uh...Hey! Can I help you?” Jack Elbon, seated at the kitchen table of the *Sueños* group home for residents with developmental disabilities, where he had recently become employed on weekends, had been startled by a burly bearded man who had raised a kitchen window from outside. Incredibly, the person was now coolly straddling the sill—the window was a low one—and obviously intending entry.

“Maybe you didn’t hear me,” repeated Jack, “What the hell are you doing?”

“Don’t worry about it,” came an abrasive grunt from the stranger, apparently intended to be an adequate response.

Although slender and usually benign in appearance, Jack had, in the course of his thirty-six years, worked in assorted tough professions, from tending bar in smoky holes to driving taxicabs in big cities.

Now, God or providence, along with hard work and sacrifice on his part, had given him a little acre with a ruined house that he was restoring—a formerly roofless, windowless, adobe winery in a fertile valley of arid New Mexico. Having lived most of his adult life as a student, musician, or laborer, always under the cold dread of hearing the landlord’s knock at five AM, he was in a sort of paradise as a poor but autonomous property owner.

Jack’s new home, however, was in an isolated village where his cousin had joined a hippie colony during the back-to-the-land movement of the late sixties. Although he owed no rent or mortgage, Jack had needed to find a way to earn a modest living. In cities, he’d painted houses, pushed hacks, and made music in bars at night; but in Rio Verde (population: 70, elevation: 7,740 feet), there were no such vocational options.

That winter, a friend had suggested that Jack’s hodge-podge of college credits might pass as an associate’s degree in backward New Mexico and that he might apply at the state hospital’s education department. Little had Jack suspected that this suggestion would alter his life.

Following an intensive two weeks of training, and background checks by the New Mexico Department of Health, by March he’d become a sub in the Special Ed. (for residents aged twenty-one and younger) and Adult Services departments of the Hospital and Training School campus. Both of these huge departments had proven to be in need of him on weekdays; multiple employees of the Special Ed., or Adult Service day-programs, were always sure to be absent, partly due to the liberal sick-leave and vacation benefits that the state provided. So Jack would rise early and drive down, from his hamlet of Rio Verde, to the town of Pecos Bend where the Hospital and Training School had existed since the 1920s, to work with residents like Davy, Laura Yazzie, Elsie Giron, and three hundred-some souls from all over vast New Mexico and elsewhere. It was an amazing cross-section of a branch of humanity that he had barely known existed.

On his second day, another sub had asked him whether he’d like any extra work at a group home that was operated by a different, for-profit, company called “Vibrance” (Vibrance

Special Home Services, Inc.). It seemed that his recent training, and having had his fingerprints checked out by the Department of Health, would make him an employable commodity for some other human service entities too. Jack needed to raise funds to finish his home restoration and to have water drilled for on his property, so he'd been happy to grab all the work he could get.

To his surprise, with just a couple of week's experience at the state facility, a supervisor at the *Sueños* group home had seated him at the home's kitchen table to explain logs, meds, diet sheets, schedules, checkbooks, shopping, and a thousand other things regarding the five residents. Then, a bemused but willing Jack was presented with the house and van keys and left alone with his new charges.

Fortunately, it had developed that he had a talent for the work and a rapport with the people living at both the large state hospital and at the community-based home; all had obviously been born with profound disadvantages, mental and, often painfully, physical.

In recent years, his main concerns in life had been keeping band members paid and navigating romantic intrigues. When he had applied for work at the hospital, he had vague ideas about retarded people being happy, cuddly cherubs, always eager to hug strangers, or, of being rather cute microcephalics like Zippy of the underground comics, usually ready with an incongruous, funny comment. He'd assumed that they all could be participants in the Special Olympics if they so wished; he was astonished to find that such opportunities existed for only a small percentage. In fact, soon after beginning his work in various programs at the huge state facility and at the group home, he had realized that most of his preconceptions were wrong. They had been quickly replaced by compassion and a desire to do what he could to be of service while earning an honest buck.

But who in the heck was this ornery looking man, with strange, marble cat-eyes, who was now in the home's kitchen?

"I've got a check," muttered the object, ignoring Jack Elbon, as he removed an envelope that was fastened by a magnet to the refrigerator.

"Oh, so you work here?"

"Mm, hmm..."

"How come you didn't use the door?"

"Don't worry about it..."

"Look, buddy, I think I'd better call..."

But the large man trousered what he'd apparently come for and strode out through the door, rather than using the still open kitchen window.

Sensing furtive movement, Jack turned toward the dining room behind him. Peering shyly around the corner was a resident, a slight man named Arley Wellburn. "I guess he works here, does he?" asked Jack.

"Work here?" echoed Arley.

"Yes, does that man work here?"

"That man? That man?"

"Yes, that man...does he work here?"

“Work here?”

“Never mind, Arley,” replied Jack, realizing the futility of the conversation. “Please wash your hands, and ask the others to wash theirs too, and start thinking about dinner.”

“Wash hands?”

But Jack was listening to a recorded telephone message and formulating a reply.

6 — ESPERANZA HOME

The world had turned; it was now early April. Nicholas Nighthawk Romero had buckled down to his studies over the winter and had received his GED. Like Jack Elbon, who was still working weekends at the *Sueños* home, he was now employed by the rapidly expanding Vibrance Special Home Services, Inc., but in his case, in a full-time capacity. He had been one of the many workers at the hospital whose temporary status had caused him to be laid off, but with his recent work record and new GED, employment at Vibrance had come rapidly.

Lead service coordinator (social worker) Marnie Fain, with righteous zeal, had worked in high gear to transition residents from what she perceived to be the repressive state institution, into “community-based” situations. Hundreds remained, but private companies, like Vibrance, had quickly swollen to absorb the outflow of “consumers” from the large facility.

In various neighborhoods—some nice, others scrabbly—various homes and trailers had been hastily converted to meet ADA standards. In these, for some weeks, Nick had been working as a floater, or substitute, as needed, at the rapidly growing number of homes administered by Vibrance. He was pleased with his assignments because he had been able to continue working with many of the same “clients” (like “consumers”, another antiseptic, budget-driven label for the disabled people) he had known at the hospital.

At 11:00 on a Saturday morning, at the *Esperanza* home, two women—one young and one older—were on duty. Mayzee, the younger, had been attempting to feed blended eggs and toast to the recent transferee, Hector. “This one—he don’t want to eat nothing. He was a toothpick when he got here, and now he’s losing even more weight—fast. The Doctors? They don’t know what to do with him...they’ll probably tube him. At least with the stomach tubes, they’re easier to feed. My cousin? She worked with the ‘tubers’ before she started working with the ‘behaviors’. They’re easier, except for the lifting and changing.”

“Well, eet has to be a beeg change for Hector,” replied Rosa, a matronly lady of the Kewa (Santo Domingo) pueblo, “heem coming here all of a sudden, to live with new people, in a whole new setting...eet has to be hard. The way these keedos get bounced around, from place to place—eet ees a pity—”

—*What’s that?* cried Hector to himself, jumping in startlement as Mayzee’s cell phone ripped out with a sudden, brash ring tone.

“Hi, Tiffany?... She was wearing *what?* Honey, with legs like hers, if you wanted to know her age, all you’d have to do, would be to, like, saw them off and count the rings! Somebody needs to tell her to go back home and put some clothes on! I heard one boy at the casino ask her: ‘You have such pretty blonde hair... Why do you dye the roots black?’ They say that her mom is a dancer down at the Chi-Chi lounge—that was on the news. How Phyllis—who I used to be so stupidly impressed with—can, like, stand to be around her, I have no idea...”

“Come on, Hector...I’ll put you out on the back porch for a leetle while,” said Rosa, directing his wheelchair out of the kitchen, through a TV room, and out double doors to a back

deck. “*Qué bonito es Nuevo Mexico en la primavera.*” Like many from the Rio Grande pueblos, she had, years earlier, moved over to Pecos Bend for the work. Of course, she drove home on Sundays to help *Mamá* and attend church.

It was, indeed, a lovely spring day; but Hector was deeply blue. *Where are you...my darling person?* he asked, within his mind. *You give me everything...you always have...you always have. You are my sun...You are my moon. There was a cake...There was a tear...And you were gone...*

A roadrunner played on the back fence, silhouetted against the blue mountains. Billowy clouds floated across the azure sky, but Hector could see only the person whose absence had left such a jagged wound. By not eating, he, perhaps, hoped to fade away, ending his suffering.

“Well, Babe, it’s, like, just as easy to fall for a guy with assets—not that I’ve ever been that way...” Mayzee, with her phone tucked between her shoulder and ear, had swooped out, loosened the brakes on Hector’s chair, and spun him toward the big common room. “But I told Chuck, that if we weren’t going to the concert tonight, he’ll be having a real fun time, skiing without me, with his sisters in Durango next weekend—how he can stand them, I’ll never know. Can you believe that the one who looks like Miss Piggy actually plays the bassoon? No, I am *not* kidding you—the *bassoon!* It’s, like, such a humiliation for me when he invites her somewhere with us, and expects me to hear all about the women’s symphony orchestra and her college curriculum—”

Watch my foot...WATCH MY FOOT...HANG UP AND DRIVE!...OUCH! She always does that! lamented Hector as Mayzee’s inattention resulted in his right foot being painfully banged against the door frame. *Oh, no...don’t leave me by Doctor Phil...I can’t stand Doctor Phil!...what a busybody! I wish he’d just shut his pie-hole! I don’t even like TV. Oh, well...at least it isn’t Jerry Springer this time...Why do people who have everything, make themselves so miserable?*

“*Cómo estás, Amigo?* How’s my friend?”

It’s Nick From the big place! remarked Hector, to himself, feeling a bit of joy at seeing the young man.

“Hey, I’m workin’ here this afternoon and we’re going to the rec. center, to meet up with the guys from the *Sueños* house for music, and I’ll show you my dancing. There’s a guy, from the old training school—like me, only older—who leads the jams and he’ll even let you guys play...he’s played all over, in Cali and in England, but he lives here now—”

“I can’t believe you’re, like, talking to him, as if he can even understand you,” said Mayzee, with a sideways head flounce, as she popped into the room.

“Oh, Hector’s my old buddy...we go way back,” replied Nick, noting Mayzee’s cute face, shape, and lacquered hair and nails, while instantly registering to himself: not my type, whatsoever.

Technically, Mayzee was correct. Hector couldn’t know that Nick was talking about an outing, but he was glad to see a kind and enthusiastic face from the old place, even if it did

remind him of “Darling Person”. But feeling bittersweet was better than utter despair and Hector emanated a weak smile.

“We can go for ice-cream afterwards,” suggested Nick, noting, with concern, the lad’s extreme emaciation.

“Good luck with getting this one to eat...”

“Oh, I know what he likes...a chocolate milkshake will work OK...”

Rosa, who was, in fact, an aunt of Nicholas, bustled into the room with blankets, and expostulations warning the young aides to keep the fragile boy and Laura Yazzie—who had also recently transitioned to the community-based “medically fragile” residence—well bundled up. “I don’t really think he should be going out...it’s still *primavera* and pretty chilly...”

“*Por supuesto, Tia*...No worries, Auntie...we’ll keep them warm, I promise...”

“Well, eet ees what they (the service coordinator and house supervisor) want, so I guess they gotta go. I’ve gotta stay here with the other two. I’m glad, *mijo*, that you worked weeth them before, at the ‘ospital. I am glad that you are following your mama and our family in thees work.”

“Well, I am—at least for now...”

“That’s what I said twenty-five years ago, but here I still am. Thees work can get eento your blood. These keedos are angels, and when we care for them we are walking with God! Well, *cuidate*, and be home by their deenertime.”

7 — PANIC

Jack Elbon had arrived early at the Pecos Bend Recreation Center, bringing with him, in the transport van, three of the people who lived at the *Sueños* group home. He had borrowed, appropriated, and scraped together a collection of well-used musical instruments for the people to play, in addition to his dependable Yamaha electric piano which had traveled with him across the water and on many US highways. There was a battered acoustic guitar, a squawky violin, big maracas from Mexico—patched with duct tape—and a crazy percussion instrument that he'd found at a flea market. It was built on a very stout broom or shovel handle with a rubber foot to allow it to be bounced; it had a cymbal at its top, another on its side, a drum two feet from the ground, tambourine-type jingly things, and a tensioned run of brake cable which extended most of its length. When struck by a drumstick the cable produced a highly satisfying and unique sort of *thunk*, along with the cymbals' resonant overtones. Bouncing the thing on the floor produced another variety of deeply engaging sound. It was painted red, white, and blue; a little tag on its side proclaimed that it had seen action at the 1964 Republican convention in support of Barry Goldwater.

Arley, the pleasant young man with a strong tendency to perseverate (a term used by the SLPs—speech-language pathologists—in reference to a tendency to become stuck on a word or phrase, repeating it again and again), had come with Jack and the other two, bringing with him his ukulele. His mother, a lovely, elderly lady with a southern twang, was waiting eagerly, with homemade cookies.

A frequent visitor to the group home, she had told Jack about her son: “When Arley was just a boy, his father died overseas, in the service. I had to go to work. I hated to put him into the training school but there seemed to be no other way. The one thing that he loved, then, was singing and music, so I started taking him, every week, for lessons at Hendershot's (a small, local music store) with Mr. Willent. Arley had a hard time in the cottage that he was in at the hospital; there was another boy who was a bully. The music lessons seemed to relax him. Even though we knew he'd never really be able to play, we got him his ukulele which he loved to hold and to plunk on, some. And in spite of his speech impediments, we found that he could carry a tune and sing along, most of the way, through the old numbers. So we kept it up for years until Mr. Willent retired. So I'm very grateful that you're here for him.”

Like Nick, Jack was not very sure he'd be working in the field for very long: “Well, Mrs. Wellburn—”

“Call me Lindy...”

“Lindy...I'm just trying to finish my house in Rio Verde. Then I'll likely head out of New Mexico again, for a while.”

“Well, I'm just glad you're here now, to sing a song for my boy.”

At the group home, as he'd observed Arley “plunking” along with his right hand on the strings of his ukulele, focusing his limited cognition on his singing without inclination or ability

to make chords with his left hand on the little instrument's neck, Jack had had a realization. Although a pianist, he recalled a technique that blues and country guitarists often used—open tunings. This was simply the practice of tuning the strings so that a euphonious chord was produced without the need to make complex configurations with one's left hand—sometimes a slide, made from an old bottleneck, was used, instead. With a borrowed guitar and Arley's ukulele, he'd experimented and come up with an open C chord that would drone or blend nicely with songs played in the key of C—a good middling key for most singing voices.

He had open-tuned the flea-market violin also, and soon the folks were delightedly strumming or bowing along and blending their efforts—actually producing something fairly musical, rather than just racket!

Today, Jack had had to struggle to get Elsie Giron, a new transferee to the group home, to go with the others. She'd sat down like a lump in her bedroom and refused to move. "Come on, Elsie...please don't spoil the afternoon for everybody else..." He bent down to try to get her to her feet, but the diminutive woman had flown into her clothes-closet. As Jack attempted to follow her, she'd grabbed a handful of wire hangers and slashed out with them, resulting in some bloody trauma on the upper side of his left hand. He'd retreated to the kitchen for ice to forestall swelling. Opening the freezer, he'd noticed a lone popsicle. With it, he'd been able to coax Elsie along.

Now, at the rec. center, they were getting ready. Jack's lightweight Yamaha keyboard was on its stand. Arley was seated with his ukulele in his lap, and Jim Gallup, a seventy-year-old man who was also a resident of the home, was bowing away at the violin's four strings, producing surprisingly clear tones. Elsie sat huddled on the floor, refusing, in spite of all encouragement, to show interest in the instruments or in Lindy Wellburn's colorful sugar-cookies.

As they were about to begin, the big doors of the rec. center banged open. First came Mayzee, her mobile device between her ear and shoulder, backing in with a long, gurney styled wheelchair bearing a somewhat puzzled-appearing Laura Yazzie, who had been well cocooned in blankets and a wool hat by the vigilant Rosa. Next came Jason, wheeling Hector who, in spite of his recent declines in weight and health, was propped up in a more conventional wheelchair, his emaciated legs extended forward. In accordance with the sweeping court order which dictated the hospital's closure, Laura and Hector had both been recently "placed" into the *Esperanza* home, run by Vibrance, Inc.—the same company that managed the *Sueños* home where Jack Elbon worked weekends with Arley, Elsie, old Jim, and two others who were presently home for the weekend with their families.

"Great to see you—thanks for coming over," welcomed Jack, pleased to see more participants. "Bring 'em on up..."

"Hang on, Tiffany," said Mayzee to her ever-present phone conversation partner, then to Jack: "These two can't do anything...they'll just have to listen."

"They can do a lot if you will, please, just help them...they're in today's band. Bring 'em on up!"

“Hold that thought, Tiffany...I’ll call you back,” communicated Mayzee, rolling her eyes derisively at Jack.

“Come on, buddy,” said Nick to Hector. “Let’s take this big blanket off—it’s warm in here.” This done, he rolled Hector up the ramp and onto the stage with the other musicians.

Why is he bringing me up here? wondered Hector. *I’ve never been one of the ones who make the music...*

“What’s he gonna play?” Nick asked the older man.

“Well, maybe if you help him hold a drumstick, you guys can play that thing,” answered Jack, referring to the “crazy instrument”. With his left hand, Nick got a grip on the instrument’s long shaft, and with his right, he assisted Hector in gripping the stick.

“OK,” announced Jack, “here’s a little number that I cooked up this morning, just for us. It’s called “Keep On”...I’m gonna sing each line, then you-all sing it...ready? Here goes...a-one, two, a-one—”

If you can’t run (*to be echoed: If you can’t run*)

Keep on walkin’ (*echoed: Keep on walkin’*)

If you can’t roll (*echoed: If you can’t roll*)

Keep on rockin’ (*echoed: Keep on rockin’ ...*)

If you can’t sing (*each line echoed*)

Then keep on squawkin’...

But you gotta keep on...

You gotta keep on...

“—Hey, not bad!” Jack tossed in this optimistic comment in spite of the fact that the only singers were Nick, Mrs. Wellburn, and Arley, who was stuck repeating: “If you can’t run,” after each line, but at least he was singing in key. Old Jim Gallup was sawing away at the fiddle, held in his lap as if it was a board, but he seemed to derive satisfaction from the activity.

Do you mean they’re really gonna let me play this thing? thought Hector. *Unbelievable!*

As Nick helped him smash the crazy instrument’s top cymbal, Hector’s face broke into a rare, full smile.

If you can’t swim,

Keep on floatin',
If you can't sail,
Keep on boatin',
If you can't read,
Then keep on rote-in'
But you gotta keep on...
You gotta keep on..."

As he sang, Jack observed, with irritation, that Mayzee was yapping on her phone again and that Laura Yazzie lay on her gurney with the big maracas inert beside her. But he was not working at the same home as she, that day, and lacking real authority he wondered what he could do, as he plowed ahead through his song:

It ain't no good to sit there cryin',
Stay in that pan, even though it's fryin',
You'll win the race if you die tryin',
Keep on pushin', I ain't lyin'! (*"Nice fiddle, Jim!"*)

If you can't fly
Then keep on glidin'
If you can't slip,
Keep on slidin',
If you can't drive,
Just keep on ridin'

But you gotta keep on

You gotta keep on...

The song ended. As Mrs. Wellburn's enthusiastic applause died down, Mayzee's endless phone-gab continued: "Come on now, Tiffany... spill! Who else was there? You've, like *got* to tell me...I haven't been *this* bored since Chuck's sister cornered me with details of her college curriculum...No, I am *not* kidding you, her *college curriculum!*"

Jack, his patience about spent, was about to say something caustic when he realized that something was very wrong...*Where was Elsie!?* The little woman was not where she had been, sitting close to the front doors! Waves of panic swept through him, but hoping for a break, he pretended all was well and said "That was fantastic! Hey, I left something in the van—I'll be right back. Meanwhile, somebody think of what song we should play next..."

"Song? Song? Next? Play next?" reverberated Arley's voice through the cavernous room as Jack hustled out with a sinking heart. To his accelerating chagrin, there was no sign of Elsie...her "elopement" must have been initiated some short time earlier. He had a commanding view of the largely deserted main street that the center was located on, and he saw no sign of her for at least a quarter of a mile in either direction.

"Damn, damn, DAMN!" he swore to himself. "I'm gonna lose a perfectly good job that is actually fun, and she'll likely get run over and they'll put me in jail, and I'll have to kill myself to escape my own guilt! DAMN!"

Now he started up the transport van, hoping that Mrs. Wellburn and the others might hold the fort long enough for him to make a desperate attempt at catching her. Up the road he raced, half a mile one way, then back, then a full mile in the opposite direction. He tore around a couple of small, residential blocks, again without success. "OK, Jack Elbon, you tried...time is passing...you've gotta report this. Oh, well... it was a nice job while it lasted...guess I'll be busting my butt laying adobes again." He determined that he would circle one more block before making his call. As he turned down a third, dusty, intersecting road, a savage pack of mongrel dogs gave pursuit, actually attempting to bite the van's fast-spinning tires.

8 — DODGED BULLET

It had been a good Saturday for Davy. Recent violent behavior, on his part, had resulted in his being placed on a “one on one” status with hospital staff. After a couple of weeks without incident, he had been permitted to go off campus with just Earl, the burly lead-tech, for an outing. Upon their arrival at the flea market, with his little bit of discretionary money, he’d purchased a large, only somewhat wheezy, harmonica of the “Echo-Harp” variety. It’s deep, quivering reeds gave him satisfaction, akin to singing at the chapel, as he pumped it with his lungs: in and out...in and out...in and out.

This he had done, innumerable times, as he sat in the shade of cottonwood trees by the *acecia madre* (irrigation canal) with Earl, fishing line in the water, the radio tuned to a broadcast of a baseball game being played by Albuquerque’s AAA team.

“Ya see Davy, how good life can be when you’re good and don’t pull any of your stupid biting people and shit?” asked Earl, between innings. The fact that the aggressive behavior had, ironically, helped make the lazy day possible, was ignored or not remarked upon by either one of them as the old Hohner harp sighed soothingly...in and out...in and out. Incredibly (the quixotic nature of desert fishermen is remarkable) the bobber had twice jerked, and Earl had let Davy reel in a pair of respectably sized bullheads. Indeed, it had been years since Earl had caught anything in this location. A good day, *sí*.

Must get home...must get home...find Grandma...find Grandma...must get home, thought Elsie, who rarely spoke aloud, even to herself, as she moved along on her short legs, with surprising speed. She was thinking of her warm cottage at the training school that had been her home for two decades—the home which had freed her from horribly abusive home life.

Her first two weeks at the *Sueños* home had done little to change her mind; the overworked staff there had had little time to assuage her fears, and the frightening man with the yellow eyes, who worked the graveyard shift, had simply locked her into her room nightly.

Having fruitlessly circled a block of manufactured homes with front yards of mainly dirt and weeds, Jack sadly pointed the van back towards the rec. center. He’d been off on his search for nearly ten minutes; time to give up.

“Good God, what if Elsie’s encountered a mean dog pack like chased me, or coyotes, even...they’ll hang me or I’ll hang myself. Who should I call first...the cops?” Approaching the center, he was surprised to see an oncoming van, similar to the one he was driving, swerve a bit towards him, flashing its headlights. “What—?”

Now the gray vehicle—somehow familiar-looking—honked its horn and the driver, also familiar, hollered: “Hey!” Now Jack saw the D.O.H. (Department of Health) symbol on the van’s side...It was from the hospital! Now he saw the tough little black kid from Cottage Three—the young man said to be so dangerous—in the passenger seat, and, in a back seat—Elsie!

“Lose someone?” asked the driver, smiling like a toughly built cherub, his chest and arms bulging through a white t-shirt.

“Thank you!...*Gracias*...Bless you!... Praise God,” stammered Jack, “but where was she?”

“On the ditch-bank road...we were fishing and she came flying around the corner and ran right into us. She knows that ditch leads back to the training school, where she was probably headed...she lived there a long time, you know...”

“Yeah, we were having music in the rec. center and she slipped away...it was completely my fault. I know you have to write this up...I understand. I’m just glad she’s safe!”

“Aw, she’d have been alright...we won’t say nothing about it, this time, I guess.”

“Well, that’s really good of you...I just got into this, as a job, a few weeks ago, but I’m starting to like it and—hey what’s he got? An Echo-harp isn’t it...Say! Come on in with us...This guy—what’s his name?”

“Davy.”

“Yeah, Davy can jam with us and you can have some refreshments.”

“*Bueno*,” replied Earl...Come on, Davy...You too, Missy...you gotta go back in here.”

9 — GREATEST GENERATION

“Why in the hell doesn’t anybody come...can’t they see the hall light blinking?” swore Grandma Flo from the floor of what had been her residence, for the past eight days and nights, at the Wildflower Meadows Senior Care facility, out by the county highway. A spill at her trailer home in Blue Lake Estates had resulted in a torn ankle ligament. Following a short spell at the county hospital, she’d been sent to what was commonly referred to as the ‘old folks home’ for rehab, although she felt that her stay was more likely to be fatal. “Hells bells! Our wounded got better treatment under mortar fire at (Korean battles of) the Punchbowl and Bloody Ridge—in those goddamn muddy tents, too! Hey!!! Someone come and pick me up!” Flo was referring to her days as a member of the Women’s Army Core. Her accident was the reason she had not kept up with Elsie’s relocation to her new residence, although she’d tried, via telephone. She’d also had to do her best to communicate with the best of her neighbors, to try to make sure that her dogs were being fed, and to prevent the meth-heads or alkie who abounded in Blue Lake Estates (which, in actuality, had no more of a blue lake than did Wildflower Meadows have much more around it than weeds, salt cedar, and other invasive species) from plundering her place. Still, her humble trailer was her home, and her dogs, and Elsie, were her children and her life, which she sorely missed.

Florence Riley (Flo’s full name) had a roommate at the “Meadows”, but Perla was in her nineties and seemed to be entirely unaware of anything or anybody and was numb to communication of any sort. But, as she fell, Flo had been able to keep a grip on the call button which activated the hall light above their door which opened onto the long, long hallway. The severely overworked staff, always too few in number, routinely ignored the lights as a matter of course. When residents were found deceased, no reports were ever made regarding call lights which happened to have been activated when the people were discovered. Hence there was no actual need for a “death panel” of pinched faced bureaucrats with wire-rimmed glasses, seated behind a document laden table, to give thumbs up or down. Understaffing and diluted services, thanks to pie in the sky promises of politicians, solved the problem nicely.

“Well,” muttered Flo to herself, noting the dimming light filtering in beneath the shade of the room’s window, “at least it’s still evening. I guess someone’ll come sooner or later. Thank God it ain’t night, or I really would lie here ‘til I croak...”

10 — FAST CROWD

On the same Friday evening, at the bar of the La Fonda Hotel in Santa Fe, Meryl Hope-Gurule, C.E.O. of Vibrance Special Home Services, Inc., pouted prettily at attorney Eric Cardel's suggested choice from the venerable restaurant's wine list.

"Oh, no Eric...I'm telling you, this is all just DRECK!" For the past hour she, Eric, and the others had exuberantly poured down multiple pre-dinner martinis, following a decisive hearing, that afternoon, at a legislative session in the State Capitol Roundhouse. "If this is all they have, we're absolutely going to have to head out Canyon Road to the most divine little gallery-bistro where they have *Cabernet Sauvignon* and *Lamb L'Arabique*."

"They aren't going to have any tables now...it's nearly six..."

"Oh, they'll find a table for me, darling, believe it!"

"Well, where are Allan and Marnie?"

"Who cares? That nerd has the hots for her, obviously, and she has the fashion sense of a hamster...how can we take them out there? Come on...we'll put the top down on my Z and puff up a fatty, that I've got all rolled up, on the way. It's a new strain called 'Girl Scout Cookies'. I can't be here another second. Handle it, won't you Eric?"

"Ha, Ha! Well, OK! I'll just square things, then we'll go."

"Hurry...I'll be out in the car..."

As he headed for the Gent's room, Eric thought, to himself: Who wouldn't have the hots for that built little Marnie? But knowing that Meryl was making it all happen—today's big go-ahead for twenty new homes to be administered by Vibrance—with himself as an independent consultant, having resigned his position with Protection and Advocacy soon after the closure mandate for the hospital had gone through, he'd have dinner wherever Meryl wished. He could try with the other little squab any time—he had her number. But knowing that he did not want the social worker or the psychologist to suspect they'd been used (their perspectives on deficiencies at the hospital, shared that afternoon with the senate committee, had been pivotal) he tactfully stopped by the waiter's station: "Please extend our apologies to the other couple...Ms. Hope-Gurule has had an emergency at home. They'll have whatever they wish, on my account...I'll be in next week." A neatly folded fifty sealed the deal.

From the time that Allan had asked her to join him on the patio of La Fonda, Marnie had known that he would likely try to kiss her that evening, sooner or later. She liked Al; he was smart and sensitive, but the suave Eric, with his wry smile and exquisitely tailored blue suit, made Allan Hoffman seem, in contrast, like a rather gangling bird. Informed of Meryl's family "emergency" she had been genuinely concerned. Calling, later that evening, she'd expressed as much to Meryl's voice mail, adding a gracious thank you for the lovely dinner at La Fonda. Buoyed by the rare, elegant night in Santa Fe, she'd laughingly let Allan kiss her before her drive home to Pecos Bend. The real source of her exhilaration, however, was the knowledge that, thanks to their efforts, many more would be freed from the brutal institution.

A far more somber mood had enveloped the thirty people representing the Family and Provider Association, as they departed from Santa Fe. The experts that they'd brought to speak to the finance committee had expressed a powerful argument, that by dispersing the hospital residents to widely spread locations, monitoring for abuse, neglect, and exploitation—difficult enough at the centralized facility—would become far less effective and more expensive. Mrs. Calderon and others had expressed compelling personnel concerns for their loved one's needs for specialized medical and other services, which they felt were being ably provided at the hospital.

During a break, they had trooped up to the Governor's office on the top floor. "The Governor promised to be at the finance meeting...can he come down now?"

"Unfortunately, the Governor was unable to be here for today's committee meeting. He did refer you to the secretary of health, who should be present—"

"He's not there, either," replied Mrs. Calderon, exasperated.

"I'm terribly sorry," intoned the Governor's young aide, but as you know, a decision has been reached, regarding the hospital's closure. Today's meeting was just to address details for implementing the placement of the residents."

"You mean to decide who benefits from all of that money allocated for the waiver. Is Vibrance the only company that has applied? There must be others..."

"I'm afraid you'll have to ask the secretary."

"But he's not there! And the Governor *promised* to meet with us."

"I'm terribly sorry...I'll communicate your concerns."

Governor Joseph Martin, at that moment breathing deeply of the bracing sea air of Cape Cod, was assuredly not concerned with much other than whether key assembled personages viewed him (as had been hinted) as being presidential timber. The mere invitation was evidence of such a consideration. In any case, he reflected, as he prepared for his post-swim, pre-dinner massage and manicure, that it was certainly good to be out of the bum-fuck desert and away from the ever-baying state senators, reps., lobbyists, and journalists. He'd really have to find time to look at real estate here on Monday. Money was no object...just finding the time. Maybe people from his party's national committee could help.

11 — GROCERY STORE

After his close call with Elsie Giron, Jack Elbon decided that he would try to concentrate on just doing a good job, both at the Hospital and Training School—his main place of employment—and weekends at *Sueños*, the Vibrance administered group home. He was still not classified as a permanent employee in either position, and he knew that he could be easily fired for any reason. His old adobe house and property still needed many improvements that only money could make happen—especially having a deep well drilled which was likely to cost some thousands of dollars. Hence, he wanted to keep his nose clean and pull as many hours as possible while he could. It was obvious that the hospital was going to be closing; then these flexible hours might not be so available. He wanted to get back to London—his favorite city—if possible, to form another band, once he had his house buttoned up. A shattering affair of the heart had rendered his old home town of Cleveland, Ohio, a place to be strictly avoided, but establishing a secure base in New Mexico would, he felt, allow him to travel abroad once again.

Encountering Jack, one evening, at the Price Chopper grocery store in Pecos Bend, Nicholas Nighthawk Romero asked: “So, when are we gonna have music at the rec. center again?”

“Not for a while, I guess. I just need to focus on pulling more hours and working on my house this summer. I’ve been a bandleader for the past fifteen years; old habits are hard to break, so I guess I naturally started making music with the disabled people. But now I’ve got to just focus on working and getting my house finished before another winter comes.”

“Too bad...my guys really enjoyed it, especially Hector...”

“Hector?”

“Yeah, the anemic kid who was there. Do you know he started eating again after that day?”

“Really?”

“Yeah, he’d been just wasting away. They were going to give him a feeding tube, but that day was sort of a turning point for him. He had a blast!”

“Yeah, it turned out fine, once I caught up to Elsie—or she caught up to me, I should say—thanks to Earl from Cottage Three. It sure was nice of him, not to bust me...”

“Earl’s a good guy. He’s married to my auntie. Hey, I was gonna ask you...could I borrow that old guitar if you aren’t using it? I used to play, some, and I think I could do something with it for our guys. I’m not a floater anymore...I’m permanent now, days, at *Esperanza*.”

“Sure, you can have it and the other stuff...I’ll bring it by the home.”

Nick glanced around the grocery store and lowered his voice. “I wanted to ask you about something else, too, but my cousin’s waiting for me outside.”

“Well, come up to Rio Verde and see my *casa*. I don’t have a phone out there, yet, but I’m always there when I’m not working. But it seems like I always am working, either at the hospital or *Sueños*. But it's good ‘cause it’s gonna cost me a lot to have my well drilled.”

“I would but I don’t have wheels right now...I’m saving for a real nice truck I’ve got my eye on...”

“Then stop by *Sueños*, when I’m working there.”

Nick’s handsome brow furrowed. “No, that won’t work either, for this. Maybe—”
HONK, HONK!

“Oops, that’s my cousin Arturo, waiting for me...He’s getting impatient...”

“I don’t doubt it...it’s bloody hot out there.”

“Well, it’s probably nothing, anyway. Thanks, Mr. Elbon...”

“PLEASE! Call me Jack...”

“OK...Jack”

“*Bueno*, Nighthawk,” replied Jack with a smile. “Hey, wait a minute...that old guitar is in my truck. I’ll give it to you right now.”

Jack, however, did keep playing his piano at the *Sueños* home, as time permitted, with Arley singing and plunking his Uke. Elsie even started participating, some, too.

Grandma Flo had survived her “rehab” stint at the nursing home and was a frequent visitor, along with Lindy Wellburn. They made a funny pair; Lindy was a gentile lady with refined southern manners, while Flo was blunt and brassy: “I’d like to give that goddamn Governor a turpentine enema, for lettin’ them turn all of these people out of the hospital! I know it’s turned out OK for your boy and some of them, but it almost killed Elsie.” The two elderly ladies became close friends and soon were collaborating on backyard barbeques and birthday parties for the “kids.” Under the state-funded Foster Grandparent program at the Hospital and Training School, Florence had been paid a modest stipend, and lunch at the cafeteria, for her long hours with Elsie. Vibrance, Inc., however, offered no such support. Lindy, who was better off, financially, than Flo, kindly helped out with transportation and some of her other expenses to enable her to remain in Elsie’s life.

12 — DEEP CURRENTS

Seated behind the wheel of her new Mercedes, in the parking lot of the historic Luna Mansion (restaurant) in Los Lunas, following a regional conference, Merle Hope-Gurule was emphatic: “I’m telling you, Eric, they need state-appointed guardians for at least a hundred clients. We can do much better with that, than with the group homes.”

“That would sound like a conflict of interest to me, or to anybody. How do you know this?” he asked.

“Little Miss padded-bra, of course.” Eric knew she was referring to lead service coordinator Marnie Fain, from the state hospital. Although no choir-boy himself, and valuing all of Meryl’s inside information, it was chilling the way she pretended to be friends with Marnie or anyone else who might be useful. Regarding Marnie’s pectoral physiology, his practiced eye made him feel certain that Meryl’s nickname for her was, in fact, entirely without foundation. He really needed to scoop her up...he’d just been too busy dealing with the never-ending imperatives demanded of him by Vibrance. His rapidly-growing brokerage account balance, however, with its promise of a truly livable boat with all the Marnies he could inveigle aboard, kept him very dedicated. And Meryl, definitely no Girl Scout herself, kept his time occupied in various other ways.

“What’s to say we can’t have a separate corporation—a non-profit—to provide guardianships? Why would there be a conflict of interest?” Meryl asked.

“If that corporation was steering people to Vibrance homes, obviously.”

“Why would that happen?”

“Because of your exceedingly compelling personality, dear.”

“Well, it’s too good to pass up, Eric...The guardians can engage residential services, for the consumers, with whatever provider they choose. Besides, there’s an infinity of old people and veterans, too, needing appointed guardians. The point is, we’d be in control of all that capital, and it would come without our having to worry about more rentals, or maintenance, or staffing. Compared to what we’re doing now, it would be like free money! A 501 (c) (3) is, really, like a license to steal!”

“Well, maybe...”

“Handle it, Eric. I know you can. Now it’s time for me to powder my nose. Here, sweetheart...you first. Make it snow!”

On a Sunday evening, after having worked all weekend at *Sueños*, and the previous week at the Hospital and Training School, Jack felt like a beer and a game of pool before starting his climb up into the high hills that cradled Rio Verde. Dolly’s, in Pecos Bend, was just his type of place. It had a jukebox that was always moaning out gems by Merle Haggard or Patsy Cline unless it was chugging out plaintive Spanish waltzes or happy *rancheras*. Growing up in ethnically diversified Cleveland, Ohio, he’d found the polka music there to be hopelessly square. But the

Norteño twist on the polka beat, with trumpets and silvery guitar lines, picked out on two strings in close harmony, he found delightful:

When I had *dinero*, I was your *caballero*

But now that I have *cero*, I'm not even your *perro*

Eef you ain't got no-theeng, Don't be looking for no lov-eeng

Si no hay pesos, Pues no hay besos

My money's missing...So no more kissing!

Why shouldn't he have a *cerveza* or two? He'd earned it! The lights were, indeed, soothingly dim, and, as expected, the honky-tonk music, which he'd also come to appreciate in enclaves of Cleveland's West Side that had been settled by Appalachian people, come north for jobs, seemed equally mellow.

The pool table was in use, but, although undoubtedly rusty, Jack squared his shoulders, slapped his pair of quarters down on the table, and sat down with his Coors-Original to wait his turn.

He was starting to feel intimidated, watching the two players, who were really good, as they pulled off intricate bank shots.

"*Hola, Jack...*"

"Nicholas! Nicholas Nighthawk Romero... *Cómo estás?* Jack loved showing off his bad Spanish and the mirth that doing so often elicited.

"*Bien, Bien. "Cómo es el trabajo?"*

"Work? Oh, fine...I love the work...I just got off, from doing the whole weekend at *Sueños*. That little Elsie...the one who ran away from the rec. center? She's happier now since her foster grandma from the hospital—Flo—has been coming almost every day. I think I'll take tomorrow off, though; I'm wiped out. How are things at *Esperanza?*"

Nick glanced around the aged, red pine interior of the saloon. "Well, we've been worried about a guy who works graveyard...that's what I wanted to tell you about when I saw you last week at the grocery store."

"Why?"

"Well, he's supposed to be a *brujo*, and I'm starting to think so too, even though I don't normally believe in any of that stuff. But I've started wearing this to work, like most of the others."

"I was gonna say, that your cross is really exquisite. What's the stone...Lapis?"

"No, it's a really dark turquoise, from Arizona, where my dad's family was from."

"And I dig the silver chain...those links are very unique, aren't they?"

“Yeah, I got it from the Alamo band of Navajo people, over behind Ladron Mountain.”

“Thieves Mountain...I’ve been there.”

“You’ve been everywhere, Jack Elbon, *qué no*?”

“Nah. But I have been getting itchy feet again lately...it’s a family curse. In any case, you say this guy’s a witch?”

“Yeah, but please don’t talk so loud. Maybe we can sit in a booth after your game.”

Jack sensed a real concern in Nick’s manner. “No...go and grab us a booth, please. I’m way out of practice anyway...either of these guys would murder me. I’ll grab us a couple more beers. How come you guys all drink Budweiser? Awful stuff!”

“Don’t be bad-rappin’ my beer, bro...”

“OK...I’ll have one too...anything that’s cold works for me! Just let me go to the can, first. *Dónde es el baño*? Never mind...I think I smell it...”

“*Hijo-la*, bro! You’re too much!”

A few minutes later, the two men were seated in a quiet booth.

“Well, this guy who has been working the graveyard at *Esperanza*?...he got fired by the training school about a year or so ago. My mom works in Cottage Five, next to Cottage Four, where he worked...”

“Yeah, I’ve worked with your mom...Erlinda, right?”

“Yeah, that’s my mom. My grandma worked at the hospital, too. Well, this guy was accused of repeatedly "smashing" a patient. He called himself a *brujo* or sorcerer, and he intimidated his co-workers with threats of his witchcraft. That’s when they started wearing crosses to work. He always wore tight white pants, and when he grabbed my mom’s supervisor and banged himself up against her butt, over and over; that’s when he got fired by the state.”

“Hmmm...that about figures. The violent abuse against a helpless person wasn’t enough by itself...”

“Well, the helpless person, maybe, couldn’t talk...or was too scared...or there were no witnesses. The worker—Carlos Robledo is his name—tried to appeal his getting fired, but people saw him with the supervisor...”

“Well, then why would he be working for Vibrance?”

“Vibrance is hiring anybody with a warm body, for all of the new homes they are trying to staff, mostly here in this county, close to the hospital. Now they’re even renting trailers out in Blue Lake Estates to move people into.”

“Jeez, that’s where Grandma Flo lives. I dropped her off the other day...it looks pretty rough...”

“Yeah, life has always been hard on the *llano*. Well, anyway, this Robledo guy has us all worried. I don’t trust him with Hector or Laura Yazzie, but he’s there alone with them all night. I guess he worked graveyard at your *Sueños* home, too, until not too long ago...a couple or three months, maybe...”

“Oh, really? I’ve never met him, thank heavens. Guess he didn’t work on weekends or...HEY WAIT A MINUTE...” Jack had suddenly remembered the rude character who had

come in through the window on a Saturday, soon after he'd started. He'd been wearing tight white jeans! Jack had eventually been able to confirm that the man actually was an employee, come to pick up his check, but he had forgotten his name—in fact, the whole incident. “Robledo, you say?”

“Sí.”

Jack described his encounter, along with physical attributes of the unsavory person: “...and there was something about his eyes—they were yellow or something—”

“That’s him!”

“Maybe Vibrance doesn’t know about him getting canned from the hospital?”

“They don’t give a rat’s ass about who they hire.”

“Yeah, I remember that little chick, from your house, who couldn’t shut up, talking on her cell-phone, that Saturday at the rec. center. What was her name?”

Nick looked uncomfortable, and his handsome face flushed darkly. “Uh...Mayzee.”

“What a bird-brain!”

“Er, um, actually she’s been doing better with the clients...some...quite a bit...and, ah, actually I’ve been, uh, going out with her, some...”

“Oh! Sorry...uh...why not? She looked real cute!”

“Yeah, I said no way, then, when I first met her, but one thing lead to another, and she’s starting to develop a little more *alma*...soul, you might say...Hector and her are real close, now...he just adores her...”

“Incredible!”

“But she doesn’t trust Robledo alone with the clients at night, either...none of us do. My auntie Rosa, who works there too, tried reaching the lady who owns Vibrance...what’s her name? Meryl something?”

“Meryl Hope-Gurule. I’ve never met her, but her name is on the company letterheads and everything.”

“Yeah, but she’s never available to talk to anybody. But Aunt Rosa talked to Eric somebody, at the office, who said there’s really nothing criminal in Robledo’s record that would keep him from working.”

“Eric Cardel?”

“Yeah, that was his name.”

“Hmmm...seems like he was one of those same ‘Protection and Advocacy’ lawyers who engineered the court-order that the hospital be closed. I read about it in the newspaper. Funny, he’s working for a residential company now...”

“Do you think maybe you could try talking to someone about it? You might know how to talk to some of these big-shots better than we do.”

“Sheeit...I’m just a sub, myself. And I’ve only been working in this field for a short time.”

“Yeah, but you sub for teachers in education. You know how to talk to people. Our people...we don’t always talk right, but we can tell about a lot of things. Our families have been

working at the Hospital and Training School for generations. Before then, we kept retarded people at home 'til their time came to die, which was sooner without the trach tubes, and feeding-tubes, and I.V. needles, and everything...maybe it was kinder in some ways, really, back then; but this is how it is, now. This guy—Robledo—he's no good...we all know it. Something tells me that you could tell that, too, from meeting him just once..."

"Yeah, I guess maybe I did. But then I totally forgot about him."

"Rosa thought maybe you could try talking to the service coordinator at the hospital, since you still work there, too..."

"Which service coordinator?"

"The main one—Marnie, I think her name is..."

"Ooh, boy...yeah, I was chatting to her, a little bit—about nothing in particular—there in the canteen. After my orientation, and having worked for a couple of weeks, I decided that I didn't want to date chicks from work—too sticky—but she about made me change my mind."

"Yeah, she's pretty hot for an old chick. She must be up in her thirties...Oh, sorry...guess you might be, too..."

"I'm thirty-six. Just call me grandpa."

"Rosa, and my mom, and everybody knows you haven't been working long enough to be sucked into their whole system yet...and they know your heart because of your music."

"Oh, really? They must not know me very well, 'cause I'm just trying to make money while I can, to finish my house, then get out of here—for a few years, maybe."

"It would give you a reason to talk to Marnie, again," said Nick suggestively.

"That, buddy, is a low-minded thought."

"Well, do you know, our people can sometimes see things...there are reasons that paths cross. My mom and Aunt Rosa...they have perceptions, believe me. Sometimes we have to let life lead us some, instead of trying too hard to control everything and—oh well, come on! You could kill two stones with one bird! She ain't hooked up and neither are you."

"I am not lookin' to get hooked up with *anybody*, believe me!"

"No, but Mom says she has good *alma*—that Marnie. We can tell, even if she thinks closing up the hospital is nothing but a good thing. And we figure maybe you'll do *bastante OK, también*, Jack Elbon. You weren't raised Catholic, were you? No. See, us Catholics, some of us, get to taking this *brujo* stuff too seriously, maybe. It's just how most of us were raised around here, and us Indians?—we've had our other witches..."

"Well, my ancestors burned a few witches, too, I'm sure," replied Jack, reflecting to himself that maybe the man in question was actually guilty of nothing more than being a big jerk.

"This guy...he's a bad-'un," answered Nick, as if reading Jack's thoughts. This we know. And thanks for the guitar! I play it for our guys every day; it really makes Hector happy. He's gaining weight. Hey! Drink up...This round's on me."

13 — OUIJA BOARD

“No! Believe me, we don’t want them coming here! Don’t you watch PBS? It was on *Frontline*.”

Dr. Elliot, the hospital’s administrator, chewed his bottom lip and regarded lead service coordinator Marnie Fain with consternation. “Well, they have a well-thought-of Facilitated Communication department at Syracuse University...some view their work as being a real breakthrough. How can we cancel their presentation on such short notice?”

“Tell him, Allan...”

“Well,” said the young psychologist warily, hoping to neither contradict Marnie nor run afoul of his boss, “the compilation of the baseline data indicates that there is a relative correlation between the behavioral exponent which may or may not, after factoring the standard deviation from the mean, show an inverse gravitation towards meaningful interfacing of a multiplicity of stimuli—”

“STOP IT, ALLAN! Just stop. This has all been exposed and debunked. It’s ruined the lives of many innocent parents, teachers, and family members. It’s bad enough, the way their hopes were cruelly raised, but there are actually innocent people in jail.”

Dr. Elliot, unwilling to admit that he was hazy as to what it was all about, turned to lead Speech-Language Pathologist, Corrine Stepson. “I think we could all benefit from a basic overview. Please give us an objective definition, Corrine.”

“Facilitated Communication,” began the plump, but attractive, SLP, “is said to be a means of assisting people with autism or severe communication disabilities, in pointing to letters on an alphabet board, keyboard, or another device, so that they can communicate independently. The person with the disability, who is often non-verbal, is called the communication partner, while the person holding their arm is called the facilitator. The facilitator holds or touches the communication partner’s elbow, wrist, or hand, while the communication partner points to letters of the alphabet on a keyboard or other device—”

“How about a Ouija Board?” interrupted Marnie, with a contemptuous snort.

“Please, Miss Fain! Continue, Corrine.”

“Well, it’s hotly debated as to whether the facilitator or the disabled person is actually doing the spelling. Both proponents and nay-sayers hold onto their respective positions.”

“So it’s hand-over-hand prompting like we’ve been doing with adaptive switch activation, feeding, art, and many other things for years. Then there would be no actual harm that I can see, in going ahead with the presentation, Miss Fain--”

“No,” countered Marnie, “it’s hand-over-hand *spelling*, supposedly. The abject harm has come when, to everybody’s shock, the disabled person starts typing or pointing out allegations of sexual or other abuse directed at family members or others! Incredibly, this has led to prosecutions, convictions, and ruined lives. Do you want to risk that here?”

Acutely aware of how sexy Marnie looked when she was mad, Allan Hoffman made a feeble effort to redeem himself: “It *would* seem possible that the facilitator’s subconscious could be a realizing factor, but in the absence of double-blind trials—”

“Very well,” declared Dr. Elliot, reluctant to have to admit to the hospital’s board that he’d actually been bamboozled into paying for the presentation, “we’ll go ahead with it.”

“AND YOU CAN’T UNDERSTAND WHY THIS FACILITY IS PERCEIVED TO BE MEDIEVAL?” stormed Marnie. Closure can’t happen soon enough, as far as I’m concerned!”

“Please Miss Fain. A decision has been made.”

14 — MOM

HONK-HONK

“Hey...Clair just called for you. She’s gonna call back in twenty minutes. She says it’s important.”

“OK...I’ll get down. I’ll be right over.”

Jack Elbon’s aging hippie cousin Phil, who had one of the few telephones in Rio Verde, had pulled up in his battered gray Chevy pick-up truck. He’d come to New Mexico in 1969 and had bought a hundred-year-old adobe house, with a corrugated steel-roof, for eight-hundred dollars—thought to be a good bit of money at the time. Jack, fed up after two years of college and eager to see more of the world, had ridden his thumb west, in the seventies. Rio Verde, with all of its beauty and squalor—and, above all, FREEDOM—had captured his imagination; he’d resolved to own property there, himself, one day. Such an opportunity had not presented itself until, in the eighties, he’d purchased his adobe ruin for twice what his cousin had paid for his *casa*. Opportunities to make music in the U.K. and elsewhere had postponed his restoration; but now he was intent on making the place secure and livable, to serve as a haven to which he might always return.

Descending from his roof, where he’d been adding mortar to gaps around his stove-pipe, he wondered what his older sister Clair had on her mind. Ever the free spirit, she had, for the past year or so, been part of a Sufi-inspired colony, comprised of other spiritually-inclined souls, located north of Santa Fe. Although the group seemed pretty benign, Jack enjoyed teasing. Answering her call at Phil’s, he greeted her: “Clair...what’s up? How’re things within the cult? Been drinking any good Kool-Aid, lately?”

As usual, his sister did not rise to his bait. “Jack, Mom’s fallen again. I’m flying to Florida tonight.”

“Oh, no!”

“Nothing’s broken, but I talked to the hospital she’s at...she hit her head hard, resulting in quite a concussion. She’s probably going to be all right, but they’re monitoring her for possible subdural hematoma.”

“Aw, Jeez...”

“Her macular degeneration has increased a lot since dad died, and she’s having trouble getting around in that big house by herself.”

“Well, I’ll go out and stay with her if I need to. God, I hate bloody hot Florida, though; I just melt. Why did Dad have to pick there to retire?”

“Jack, Mom and I have been talking, recently. We’ve been considering the idea of her moving out here.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“It seems as if she might have enough income, from what dad left and her pension from her years at the library, to get into an assisted living apartment in Albuquerque or Santa Fe.”

“Well, she could come here...”

“No, Jack. Your house is too cold in the winter. She has hypothermia, you know...”

“I could install a regular furnace instead of the wood-stove...”

“No, she needs to be closer to doctors and other services.”

“I guess that’s true.”

“At any rate, I’ve got to leave for the airport soon. I’ll call Phil when we know more.”

“All right...Thanks for going. Safe journeys.”

In the days following his conversation with Nick at the bar, Jack was doubtful about getting tangled up in something so hearsay, and, with which he was not even directly involved. Male witches? Silver crosses? New Mexico was, of course, known as “The Land of Enchantment” (or, historically, *“La Tierra de Los Diablos”*). Indeed, his adopted home state was full of many legends and strange superstitions, but what if Carlos Robledo was just a churlish lout? Nick, however, seemed like a young man with a rare, good head on his shoulders, and his mother had not seemed to be prone to hysteria either; to the contrary, she and her sister Rosa had struck him as being women of great wisdom and compassion, so he decided to make inquiries.

He tried speaking to his supervisor at *Sueños*, but she was a recent replacement, even newer at the home than Jack.

“Do you know where Ed Nossling (who had been in charge when Jack started) works now?”

“No, but I don’t think he’s with Vibrance anymore,” replied the new boss, whose name was Ruth. “He’s never at any of the supervisor’s meetings.”

“Wow...there sure is a lot of turnover in this company...”

“That’s very true, but it’s true of almost everything in the field of human services...when it comes to direct care, anyway.”

“Hmmm...that’s where you’d think the most stability is needed. Is Meryl ever at your supervisor’s meetings?”

“The owner? Oh, no...I’ve never met her.”

Jack wondered if he should call Adult Protective Services, but what did he really have to report? Not a thing. So, because Nick’s mom and his aunt Rosa had, according to Nick, suggested that he speak with Marnie Fain, and because he’d more or less promised that he would, and because he already knew her to talk to, a little, Jack found out the location of her office at the Hospital and Training School campus. He made his way there during his lunch break. “Hi—excuse me...could you spare a minute or two?”

“Yes...please, come in. Sit down.”

“I met you, briefly, in the canteen. I’ve been a sub here, in Special Ed, and with Adult Services too, since last March; I don’t know if I mentioned that...”

“No, you were telling me about where you live...Cuchara, is it?”

“No, Rio Verde.”

“Oh, yes...that’s even further back up in there, isn’t it? We have residents here, who are from Rio Verde.”

“Yes, I know.” Jack considered saying that centuries of marriages between relatives, and fetal alcohol syndrome were likely factors, but decided, instead, to come to his point. “I’ve been working here, most weekdays, but I have also been working, for nearly as long, at a Vibrance group home on weekends.”

“Oh, have you? Vibrance is doing an incredible job of helping us to transition people out of here.”

“Um, yeah. At any rate, it seems like a man is working at a Vibrance home, now, who used to work here. My understanding is that he worked in Cottage Four and was terminated because of abusive behavior towards a co-worker and possibly a resident.”

“I think I know to whom you are referring.”

“Now, it seems as if he’s working graveyard at the *Esperanza* home—also run by Vibrance. Some of the staff people are worried that he could be...um...an endangerment to the clients who live there.”

“Then they need to report it.”

“Apparently they communicated their concerns to Eric who’s an administrator of some sort, with the company...”

“Eric Cardel?”

“Yes...”

“He’s no longer with Vibrance. He’s applied for non-profit status for a corporation which will facilitate state-appointed guardianships for the many elderly and disabled in New Mexico, who have no involved family members.”

“Oh.”

“But if the man’s co-workers even suspect abuse or neglect, they are actually required, by law, to report it to Adult Protective Services.”

“Well, it’s possible that they have already, but you see, the man—who I met just once, when I first started—is very intimidating to them, in some ways.”

“Then they can request to remain anonymous, or you can. But I feel quite sure that Vibrance would not have employed him if they did not have confidence that he was not a risk. They require background checks for all of their employees. Nevertheless, this should be reported. Will you do it?”

“Well, maybe that would be best since he doesn’t work at *Sueños*, anymore, and since I don’t have any of his present co-employees’...um...preconceptions.”

“Such as?”

“Well, I think I’ll just leave out that part out of it. Do I phone A.P.S., or what?”

“Yes, here’s the number.”

“OK...thanks for your time.”

“That’s why I’m here—I’ll look into it myself, some.”

Although Marnie, who had been to another high-level meeting that morning, was wearing severe professional attire, Jack had to work hard to remain undistracted. While not the most pretty woman he’d ever seen, she had something which had a galvanizing effect on the average male, including himself. He had to remind himself that he was now a sort of professional; he’d have to fight down his natural inclination of asking her something such as: “Hey, do you like to shoot pool?” or “I was gonna drive down to the river after work. Wanna come?”

In addition to its being, in this respect, a good thing that he repressed such inclinations, his circumspection was, in fact, additionally fortunate because Marnie's mind, apart from her work that day, was quite occupied with thoughts of her date that evening with Eric Cardel.

Although of rigid military bearing, and possessing a tool steel spine which made him seem much taller than his six foot seven inches, Dr. Ahmad Mobasseri, the director of the Adult Services and Special Ed. departments, like many people of Persian descent, had a heart for the poetic. A lieutenant in the Shah's army, before the 'seventy-nine revolution, "Ahm" had seen many extremes of the human condition; he knew that the Hospital and Training School at Pecos Bend, New Mexico was, for the vast majority of its residents, not the snake pit that the newspapers and the "jackals" (as he termed the idealistic lawyers from Protection and Advocacy) so portrayed it. He was openly contemptuous of Dr. Elliot and frequently expressed his opinion that those who were bringing about closure would "one day be stoned" by an outraged citizenry. Since he had, for some years, very efficiently directed the daytime activities of the hospital's residents while adroitly navigating ever-changing regulations and directives along with staggering amounts of required documentation, he was seemingly irreplaceable; he could, and did, bluntly vent his viewpoints with impunity. He absorbed turmoil like a thirsty plant; in fact, he seemed to flower by drinking it in.

Late one afternoon, needing to stretch his legs, he made a rare stroll across the campus, over to the canteen. Upon entering, he perceived that for once, somebody was playing the old piano with style and considerable virtuosity. And somebody was really singing...*really singing!* Though not musical, himself, Ahm's poetic soul recognized the goods when he heard them. Having acquired an iced coffee, and having, in his deep, old-world voice and accent, kidded canteen supervisor, Aggie: "Some of stray cats by our building are meesing...how are your tacos today?" he directed his attention towards the other end of the long room. He was not surprised that the pianist was his youngish sub; he knew that Jack Elbon had had some success as a performer. But the singer! A recently arrived resident—a handsome young man in his mid-twenties, perhaps—totally blind, highly verbal, with classic overtones of autism (rocking, side to side head turnings, wringing finger motions) had a voice that was simply heart-melting, and a natural gift for employing it:

It's a beautiful day...

Outside the sky is blue

Spring's love is in the air

No one should have a right to feel unhappy but I do...

It's a beautiful day

Clouds are drifting by
And birds are singing too
But somehow I can't hear them,
'Cause there isn't any you...

Ahm leaned on the counter and listened raptly, with furrowed brow. Aggie and the canteen girls had stopped their work. The few employees present, on their breaks, had stopped their gossipy chattering, and the few clients present had stopped making their usual, unusual sounds and peculiar vocalizations. The unique effect and energies, that only finely performed music is capable of generating, had stilled them all.

About separations...
I will never understand
About separations...
That let love...
Slip through your hands...

The canteen's automatic doors hissed open. A noisy group from Cottage Three, including DD Tech Earl, with little black Davy, tumbled in. But something in the canteen's atmosphere stilled them, as well, as Jack, fired by the younger man's singing, applied himself to the song's musical bridge. Then, again, the miracle of the young man's voice:

It's a beautiful day...
Life is a short, sweet song
There is no time to cry...
Like fireflies on a summer's evening,
Our years flicker by

So I'll try to forget
A happiness so true
That it could make a day
As lovely as today seem sad and blue
Without you...
And it's a beautiful day...
Beautiful day...
Beautiful day...
Beautiful day...

The music faded; then there was a burst of unanimous, resounding applause. Before Earl could stop him, Davy had run to the pianist and singer. From his pocket, he produced the wheezy Echo-Harp. On its lower end he rhythmically respired: in and out...in and out...in and out...as he had at the rec. center. Jack caught the slow, bluesy beat on the piano. "Hey, Ben," (the new resident's name) "do you know this one?"

Well, if you ever...
Change your mind...
About leavin',
Leavin' me behind...

Obviously, Ben—who, as it would be revealed, had a phenomenal memory of the lyrics to hundreds of songs—did know the old Sam Cooke *bijou*, because he was now singing:

Bring it to me,
Bring all your lovin',
Bring it on home to me...

The small but captivated audience was clapping along, in time, as the music and Ben's soulful singing wailed plaintively. The normally stern Dr. Ahm continued to listen thoughtfully.

You know I laughed...

When you left me,

But you know I only hurt myself...

Come on, Bring it to me...

Bring your sweet lovin',

Bring it on home to me,

Yeah,

Yeah,

Oh, yeah...

When the song ended, Ahm walked to where Jack was seated at the piano. "Come to my office before you leave today, please."

"Yes, sir, Ahm," answered Jack, reflecting to himself that he was likely in for it. He'd probably been somewhat neglectful of the two other clients whom he had brought in with Ben, although they were placidly seated at a table nearby, having finished with their root-beer floats.

When he reported to Dr. Mobasser's office at 4:00, however, the director of the Adult Services day programs was affable. "Meester Ailbone. I can yoose you. There is piano in the geem, yes? Up on stage?"

"Well, yes, but it's out of tune."

"Ees no problem...vee tune. I want you please, continue verk where vee need you, like you haf been, in mornings. But afternoons, I want you do music program in geem...vee vill send people from day programs. Please identify some who you think vill most benefit. Make leest of them for us, please—also, leest of vat you need...here ees form. Just put 'Musical Activities' on top, here...make leest here...I sign."

"Wow...gosh...Thanks! But what if I'm scheduled all day in one of the Special Ed classes?"

"I feex. They vill send keeds also. If vee want to do musical play, Careestamas show, vatever, vee have arts people make scenery. Go to maintenance, tell them Ahm said make you

copy of key to geem. Vee spend all times now, vorrying about auditors, objectives, compliance, keeping data. Vee still do these things, but I vill use you for enreech-a-ment. Too many people for just musical therapist to provide services to all.”

“Um...I don’t suppose I could get paid more for doing this?”

“Ven you finish college vith four-year degree, I can geeve more. You become degreed, vith musical therapy, you make much-a-more. Until then, no. State Personnel Office vill not pay. You vant verk extra hours, we can do thees.”

“Oh, sure...just thought I’d ask.”

“Ees no problem. Now go. Bring leests tomorrow.”

“Uh, gosh...thanks, again Ahm!...uh...Doctor Mobasseri!”

“Ees Ahm, only.”

“Yessir, Ahm. It’s going to be a real opportunity and I’m sure that—”

“Go.”

16 — HOT DATE

Eric Cardel had put the top down on his recently acquired blue-gray BMW Z4, for the ride with Marnie up to Silvio's in Las Vegas (New Mexico). Upon their arrival, however, it looked cloudy, so he put the top back up. On the way, they'd had lots to talk about, particularly the approval by the New Mexico corporation commission of his 501 (c) (3) papers for the non-profit corporation of which he was to be C.E.O. Though still awaiting final acceptance by the IRS (virtually a given) he and his three-person board of directors which included Meryl-Hope Gurule, the president of New Mexico Citizen's Bank, and a retired state senator, he was now in business.

"Do you have a name yet for your company?" asked Marnie after they'd been shown to their table."

"I want to call it Compassionate Conservators."

"That's so wonderful, Eric...what a perfect name!"

"Well, of course, the board has to have their input too."

The champagne arrived; Eric filled their glasses to the brim. Marnie raised hers: "To Compassionate Conservators!"

"Thanks, Marnie—if that is our final choice of a name. All that really matters, though, is that we make a meaningful difference in the quality of life for so many in New Mexico who are in such need."

"I *know* you will Eric...I know it!"

Clink! went the delicate glasses with their delicate wine.

After a really superior dinner of braised veal cutlets, followed by coffee and crème brûlée, Marnie made for the Ladies and Eric to the Gents. In a stall, his practiced hands deftly produced, from an inner pocket of his trousers, a small powder-filled case and a tiny silver spoon. He'd decided to wait before offering any 'candy' to Marnie. She might find it off-putting at this point. He figured that after he'd applied more liquor and had his inevitable way with her, she'd be ready to try some of this really primo snoot. He was optimistic; he'd found glasses-wearing girls, such as this little squab, to be reliably pliant. They could be tigresses, too, but he'd soon have her tamed and trained. Such were his thoughts as he combed back his sleek dark hair and made sure his finely chiseled nose was innocent of any white residue.

Stepping out of the restaurant, his steadying hand in the small of Marnie's back, he breathed deeply of the soft, fresh, chaparral-scented summer air. "Hey, it hardly rained at all...It's blown over."

"Yes, look at the stars!"

"Mmm, hmm...We can put the top down again."

"Yummy! The moon should be coming up, soon."

"Do you know that—HEY!" Eric and Marnie had reached the far end of the restaurant's well-lit parking lot. There, under the bright lamps, they saw at once a long, jagged scratch

running, bow to stern, along the driver's side of the svelte, expensive automobile. Worse still, the fine fabric of the convertible's roof had long slits, width-wise, in three places!

“Oh, Eric! Your beautiful car! Why would anybody do this? I'm *so* sorry!”

“So am I,” replied the attorney through tightly clenched jaws. So am I.”

17 — TOUGH PROGNOSIS

In spite of his fun new role as music activities director, afternoons at the gym of the Hospital and Training School, Jack Elbon continued to work some evenings or weekends at the *Sueños* home. He was fond of the residents and especially of Lindy Wellburn and Grandma Flo. As it developed, by patiently communicating with Elsie, he and the two elderly women had discovered that the lady had been desperately afraid that if it was discovered that she was able to read, she would be put out of the hospital. Now, more secure in her new surroundings, she had been joyfully expanding her reading skills and horizons, no longer afraid of having a shelf of books in her room with her very own fabulous collection of illustrated classics, many of which had been paid for by Lindy Wellburn.

Without the stipend which the hospital had paid her, for being Elsie's foster grandma, Florence had to live off of her too-slim social security check. Nor was Vibrance willing to have her eat the company's food when she was present with Elsie at meal-time, so Lindy had been augmenting the home's food supply some. Jack continued to try to give Flo lifts into Pecos Bend, or back to her trailer in Blue Lake Estates—he passed her turn-off on his way to or from Rio Verde—when he was able. One evening, after nine, as he was driving himself and Flo towards their respective homes, she had bad news. “Do you know, dear-heart, that Lindy was diagnosed last week as having small-cell lung cancer?”

“Oh, no!”

“Well, you know, she's been hooked on those goddamned coffin-nails for decades. I'm glad you don't smoke. Anyhow, that's why you didn't see her this week. They want to start chemo and radiation and everything—I'll be driving her, some, in her car...”

“Jeez. Maybe I can take her some, too...but my truck might be pretty bouncy for her...and with these big wheels, could she get in?” Jack's vintage Toyota 4X4 did have a stiff suspension and high clearance. Flo was pretty spry and able to pull herself up and in.

“No, dear-heart. She's draggin' an oxygen tank now, too. But she's keepin' her spirits up. She's just glad her boy is in a good home...that he made it out of the loon-bin while she was still alive.”

“Oh...ah. Well, I'll help however I can. Do you know my mom is moving out here to live, in a few days? She's getting to be very blind, from macular degeneration.”

“How old is your mother?”

“She's only seventy-six but she can't see, and has been falling down some. She's going to be living in Santa Fe, closer to my sister, Clair.”

“Well, we'd like to meet her.”

“I'm sure you will.”

The gym at the Hospital and Training School was much more than a gym. It did have basketball hoops at either end, but one long side was an impressive stage with real curtains, ramps for

wheel-chair access, a good sound system, and lights. Across from it were extensive wooden bleachers. With these and chairs, a very large audience could be accommodated. Dr. Ahm, true to his word, had had the piano tuned up and Jack had ordered a generous supply of tambourines, maracas, chimes, wrist bells, and small guitars. With the help of the nice art teacher, and with input from verbal residents such as Davy and Ben, a musical play had been planned. It was about a boy who, due to his disability, had been compelled to live apart from loved ones.

Today, with the vocally gifted Ben echoing the lyrics and joining Jack in the choruses, they set about rehearsing a song from the musical play that they had written:

This is not a perfect world

This is not a perfect life

You know...

I know...

If we want a perfect world

If we want a perfect life

We will surely cry...

We will surely cry...

But if we find a little love

Wherever it may be

Water it like a flower

Tend it like a tree

Maybe for a moment

Perfect heaven we will see

Maybe for an instant

Perfect heaven we will see

Arms and legs and eyes can fail

Dearest ones can slip away

Sometimes it can seem like

Even God has turned away

But if we give a little love

We can touch what is divine

Maybe for a moment

Perfect heaven we can find

Maybe for an instant

Perfect heaven we will find

18 — NIGHT WATCHERS

Hector, at 3:30 AM, and terribly thirsty for a drink of water, had not been asleep. But he was surprised to hear Rosa's voice in the kitchen of the *Esperanza* home: "I am that sure my credit-card must have slept out of my purse here somewhere. I've got to find eet...maybe it slept out in one of the keedo's rooms...I'll just go and look..."

"You *sonso* women are always leaving things and showing up too late *en la noche*. That loopy little *puta*, with the hair, showed up at two AM last night, trying to find her cell-phone. Don't you sleep?" queried Carlos Robledo, the troublous man who worked the night shift.

But Rosa had already slipped from the kitchen, down the hall, and into Laura Yazzie's room. Turning on a bedside lamp, she carefully examined the twisted frame and limbs of the sleeping woman. Satisfied, she dimmed the light, exited, and went on to the room that Hector shared with another man. "*Cómo Estás*, my darling? *Por qué* you are not sleeping?"

Although incapable of speech, Hector had learned to say much with his eyes. He turned his plaintive gaze towards the water carafe on the dresser.

"Oh, you are thirsty, *pobrecito*. Here, let me seet you up some...have you had nothing to dreenk since deenor?" Twenty-five years of observation regarding intake of fluids, told Rosa that such was the case. Satisfied that Hector's thirst was quenched, she turned her attention to Che-Che, Hector's roommate. Having ascertained that his adult undergarment was wet, she efficiently set about getting him into a dry replacement.

"It's taking you a long time to look for a credit card...I know how to take care of these people...don't worry about it."

"Oh, ees no *problema*. I found eet...see?"

"Uh-huh. Funny that Apache kid was here, real late, two nights ago. He said he lost his ring."

"*Mi sobrino*, Neecholas? *Hijo*, that nephew of mine ees so forgetful!...I guess he gets eet from my side of the *familia*. *Pero*, we aren't Apaches, neither, except for a few keedos that we adopted when they had no homes, *pobrecitos*. Well, *buenas noches*."

"Unh-huh..."

Upon stepping out of the front door, Rosa paused to kiss the silver crucifix that she had been wearing next to her body and to breathe a grateful prayer.

19 — DOLLY'S

With the help of Jack's older sister Clair and her daughter (Jack's niece) Lucy, who had driven a U-Haul van cross-country, Vera Elbon was now ensconced in a nice assisted living facility in Santa Fe. It has been previously chronicled that although his mother was an exacting Scottish librarian and school teacher, with whom he'd often battled, growing up, Jack worshiped her as an angel. He had taken time off from his heavy work schedule to help her get moved in and squared away in her new mini-apartment. Having seen, first-hand, the disturbing living conditions that Grandma Flo and other elderly mobile home dwellers were forced to endure, Jack was grateful that his mom's modest library pension and social security were enough to provide for what seemed to be a clean, safe residence. Her blindness, however, caused her to need more help than the already over-worked staff at the Margate Assistive Living Facility was able to provide. Clair's fellow "group" members, who lived not too far away on their herb-farm and spiritual retreat, were always happy to pick up a few bucks providing extra services to Vera. Although skeptical that it would last, Jack was grateful that things seemed under control for the time being, and that he could carry on with his work. With money from his new vocation, he was nearly ready to have his well drilled. The huge, antique iron woodstove that he'd recently scored would keep his adobe hacienda very cozy in the coming winter too... Mom could come down (then up) to Rio Verde for Christmas! At the libraries, Vera Elbon had worked, with her usual great compassion, with "slow learners" (at that time, also commonly referred to as "the retarded"). She was thrilled about Jack's new vocation and wanted to know everything about it.

But a distant, nagging voice, in the back of Jack's mind, was starting to ask, more and more frequently: was he ever, really, going to see London or Paris again?

Being only human, the stress of his long work hours and trying to help his mom and Grandma Flo, who was helping Lindy Wellburn with her radiation and chemo treatments, Jack Elbon found himself, one evening, heading back into Dolly's Cantina. He was feeling tired and somewhat crabby from overwork and was ready for cold beer—from the can, from the tap, or from the bottle! This time he got his eight-ball game and, to his surprise, he actually won, against a quite respectable player named Fidel. As he relaxed and waited for the next rack, he was somewhat surprised to see two professionals from the Hospital and Training School: head-bender/pill pusher-in-chief, Allan Hoffman, and the ever-alluring lead service coordinator, Marnie Fain. Dolly's was the nearest bar to the hospital and it was not unusual to see off-duty workers, but rarely departmental heads like this pair. Then again, why not? reflected Jack. They likely got thirsty too, and there were no martini lounges in Pecos Bend. Oh well, work was the one thing he wished to not think about. After speaking with Marnie in her office, he had left a message with Adult Protective Services regarding reports of problems at the *Esperanza* house but had not received a reply.

Uh-oh...the man he'd been shooting pool with was returning from the bar, with a small round tray upon which sat two shot glasses of clear liquid. In the course of Jack's checkered

career, he'd learned painful, enduring lessons about the wisdom of sticking to beer. "Oh, you didn't need to—"

"No, but I know you take care of those keeds out there...I have a lot of respect for all of you, doing that work—I could never do eet..."

Jack, having experienced *El Toro*, *Jose Cuervo*, and even worse cactus squeezins—both comin' and goin'—shuddered inside. But how could he be rude? Fidel, perhaps sensing Jack's reticence asked: "Have you tried *Patrón*?"

"Um, no, I guess maybe not..."

"Well, eet es not like other tequilas, believe me...eet es very upleefing...*SALUD!*"

"*Bueno, pues...SALUD!*" responded Jack, not wishing to be a wet blanket. Indeed the taste was as clear and clean as a mountain spring with just a hint of smokiness and pine needles. "*Mucho gusto, Señor!*"

"*El gusto es mío,*" responded Fidel as he shoved his quarters into the table and the balls dropped with satisfying thunk-thunk-thunk-thunks.

This time Jack, trying a dicey shot, inadvertently pocketed the eight-ball, losing the game. A waitress materialized. "Are you guys doing OK?"

"Uh, *dos Patróns, por favor,*" responded Jack, producing a ten-dollar bill, "and put a buck in the tip jar, and bring me the change in quarters."

After loading up the jukebox with Waylon Jennings, Dwight Yoakam, and Merle Haggard, Jack noisily racked the balls, belted down his shot, and was ready for the rubber game.

I love a hot joint...a cold beer...a jukebox, and a spinnin' eight ball...

Gimmie a hot joint...cold beer...jukebox, and a spinnin' eight ball...

As bad as things can get; I still can make it through...

If there's a hot joint, cold beer, jukebox, baby and you!

waited the music machine, appropriately.

BANG! Fidel's break shot sent the red three-ball bouncing, then rolling towards the bar. Jack scurried to retrieve it; to his surprise, a smirking Marnie Fain was holding it out to him.

"Lose this?"

"Uh, yeah it might come in handy for our purposes. How's it going?"

"Well. Do you know Allan?"

"A little bit...how are you?" said Jack, extending his hand to the psychologist, somewhat abashed at being exposed as an occasional honky-tonk man to these co-workers who were far up the food chain from him. But then again, here they were, too.

"Looks like you're something of a big stick," said Allan in a way that caused Marnie to giggle extensively and Jack to realize that they were a good deal more buzzed than he was.

“No. While I do seek catharsis, I’m a Jungian myself with Zen overtones. *Be-er now*, I say, and make it a cold one!”

Allan laughed but Marnie just rolled her eyes at the bad pun.

“*Vámonos*, bro,” called Fidel. “I’m late for dinner and my old lady’s gonna kill me.”

“OK, sorry”...said Jack returning to the table. Still open?”

“*Si*. A beeg one went in, but since I knocked one off, eet ees still open.”

“OK, then I’ll try for stripes. *Esquina!*” declared Jack, feeling cocky, now. He tried a long, end to end bank shot and amazingly sank the thirteen into his near right corner.

“*Vaya!*” exclaimed Fidel, impressed.

“Mmm, thanks,” acknowledged Jack. But he muffed the next straight-on shot.

“Dang!...ya see I sink the tough ones and then I miss the easy ones.”

“That’s me, bro. That’s me, *también*. But look at where you left me. *Hijo-la...*”

While Fidel was contemplating his next shot, Jack fumbled in his pocket for a small automatic knife that he carried, with serrations behind the length of its smooth, very sharp edge. Aware that it’s always a good idea to be circumspect prior to whipping out a knife in a pool-room, especially a knife which could be technically classified as being a switch-blade, he glanced around to make sure that there were no drunks at an adjoining table who might get the wrong idea. Thus satisfied, he unobtrusively (he hoped) sprang it open behind his left hand. He felt that the pool cue’s tip, rubbed glassy smooth by countless players, would be given more grip if scratched some by the serrated section of the knife’s blade. This he proceeded to endeavor, as Fidel pulled off an impressive razor-fine cut into a side pocket. Jack bore down on the leather tip with the knife a bit—it was a pretty straight cue for a bar stick—he just hoped to improve its bite a little...OH NO! His hands told him that a disaster had occurred! Under the knife’s pressure, the rounded part of the tip had snapped right off of the pool cue’s white ferrule. His eyes automatically shot over to Mrs. Esquivel (Dolly), the bar’s intimidating proprietress. She was, blessedly, looking away, but a silvery, mocking laugh from, of all people, Marnie Fain made it clear that he’d been observed! That Marnie should be observing him at all was a startling revelation, by no means unnoticed by Jack’s id. But the crisis needed to be quickly addressed. Hell, he could get 86’d out of the place for something like this! He shook his head and fiercely squinted at Marnie in such a way that he hoped would communicate the need for her to shut-up. He sidled to the rack of bar sticks and, nonchalantly (he hoped), slipped the freshly injured cue back and extracted another, without pausing to examine its straightness. Predictably, this one had a twist or two, down by its business end; hence it did not take Fidel long to win the third game and to quickly take his leave, obviously motivated by the prospect of facing a cold dinner and an angry *esposa*.

Dwight Yoakam’s blue yodel oozed most satisfyingly from the box. Jack resolved to have just one more beer to chase down the two tequila shots. In doing so he passed the table occupied by Allan and Marnie, who were now getting quite loud.

“Come sit with us,” invited Allan. We’re drinking Rusty Nails—hey waitress—three more, please—”

“No, no...I can’t,” demurred Jack, “but I’ll have a draft beer, thanks. I’ve got a tail light out, and I’d rather not wind up in the jug tonight.”

“We’ve heard that you’ve been bringing some good music into our house of horrors,” said the psychologist. “God knows it needs it.”

“Well, Michael does a pretty good job,” said Jack, referring to the highly paid, certified music therapist employed by the hospital.

“Michael actually works about four hours out of what’s supposed to be an eight hour day,” remarked Allan. “That’s why Ahm has you doing the program in the gym, to shame him into earning his fat paycheck. Why don’t you get your music therapy degree?”

“Well, I’m too old to be a college boy again at this point. I learned a lot in college but I’m really here, just trying to finish an old adobe house I bought. And I have people in London who want me to go back and play in a new band.”

“Have you recorded any albums?” asked Marnie, with a caustic tone to her voice.

“Well, no, but some 45’s and EPs...”

“Have you had any hits?”

“Well, some have done pretty well regionally, and we played some good gigs over there in the U.K.—”

“HA, HA...REGIONALLY! So the very BEST YOU CAN DO is to be a TOADY of Doctor Mobasseri, who has been fighting TOOTH AND NAIL to keep the HELL-PIT INSTITUTION open—undoubtedly to hang onto his little FIEFDOM and his BLOATED SALARY—”

“Well, he values meaningful arts, for the people we serve, which makes him OK in my book. But, do you know? The truth is that you’re drunk, toots, and it does not become you. You’re normally a very nice lady. I came in here to relax and shoot pool. I have no desire to discuss work, in a bar, with you or anybody. I’m going home and you, obviously, should too. Good night, Al.”

20 — SORRY

At Jack's request, Dr. Ahm had approved of some of the residents and staff, from nearby community-based homes, to come to the gym to take part in rehearsals of the dance-musical they'd named: *Everything That You Feel!* This was a great asset because Nicholas Nighthawk Romero's real forte was dancing. With the help of his now-steady girlfriend Mayzee, he'd cooked up some simple but effective choreography for most of the musical numbers.

Rickie Rijaro, the hospital's wonderful art lady had, with the help of many of the residents, really outdone herself in the creation of scenery. "This is how we used to pull together to do things around here before all anybody could think about was compliance, compliance, compliance, and our being closed down!" she remarked.

Today, as Nick and others whirled people in wheelchairs to his *New Mexico Waltz*, the scenery reflected an abstract portrayal of the breathtaking mountains surrounding Pecos Bend:

When the wild horses come down the canyon

And the desert is smoky and blue

When the sandhill cranes come home for winter

That's when I'll be dreaming of you

When the red, red wine

Runs through the valley

And the *niños* dance

Under the stars

I'll remember how

We used to be so happy

How we danced to...

These same guitars

When the wild horses come down the canyon

And the desert is smoky and blue

When the chilis are ready for *ristras*

That's when I'll be dreaming of you...

That's when I'll be dreaming of you...

Dreaming of you...

Dreaming of you...

Dreaming of you...

"OK," said Jack, addressing the cast, and the many residents who had been routinely coming in to enjoy the rehearsals. "Great job. It's getting close to dinner time, though...that's it for today." As he was locking up the sound system, he perceived that he was not alone.

"Hello, Mr. Elbon." It was Marnie Fain.

"Oh, hi. Please just call me Jack."

"Did you know that, according to the court order, those former hospital residents, now living at the Vibrance community-based home, are not supposed to be here?"

"Really? Why?"

"There is a concern that returning here could be traumatic for some of them."

"OH, GIVE ME A BREAK! Did they look traumatized? Look—Doctor Mobasseri gave me the OK. He's my boss and if you have a problem with it you're gonna have to take it up with him. Now I'm shutting off the lights and locking up, so—"

"That's not why I came over. Your play is incredible and I came to apologize for the other night. I drank too much without having had dinner and I'm very sorry that I was so rotten to you. I'm not going to say anything to anybody about the Vibrance clients. You're right...they're having a ball being part of your musical. Seeing some of them making music, in your orchestra, made me cry if you want to know the truth. In any case, I'm very sorry and I hope you'll accept my apology."

"Oh...uh, sure. No problem." Jack had noticed that Marnie's eyes and nose were looking puffy. To his alarm, he saw her lower lip trying to pull down, threatening more tears to come. "Hey, now...sometime I'll tell you about some of my epic binges. I'm lucky to be alive and to have never killed anyone—I've warmed the back seat of many a cop car—that's why I try to be so careful, now. I was a very dangerous young man."

“You could never be dangerous...”

“Yeah, well, reckless, anyhow. I’m thankful every day. Hey, I was gonna look for something to eat. Wanna come with me?”

“No thank you...not tonight. Maybe another time.”

“Sure. The main thing is, give yourself a break. I know you’re doing your best for these people, too, and I’ve been finding out myself that it can get pretty stressful.”

“No kiddin’.”

Marnie had not been feeling not too sure of herself, or of anything, since the evening Eric Cardel’s car had been vandalized. After they’d got the damaged top of his convertible to go down, he’d driven them to his apartment. Feeling sorry for him, she’d agreed to come up for a nightcap.

The experience of finding his new car damaged, and his ensuing rage, had caused the attorney to take leave of his polished technique as a seducer. Instead of low lights and romantic music, he’d rashly and blatantly dumped his stash of Peruvian flake onto his glass-top coffee table. “You’re gonna love this stuff,” he’d stated to an alarmed Marnie. “You first!”

“Oh, no, Eric...I really don’t—”

“Don’t be coy...you know you’ll love it...”

“No, Eric. I really don’t...”

“Fine. Be that way, but you’re missin’ out. The bar’s over there...help yourself.”

After he’d had whiffs of his beloved powder, and Marnie had mixed cocktails, he’d pounced with a similar absence of finesse. Following an interval of tussling on the sofa, Marnie broke the clinch and said: “I’m sorry, Eric, but I guess I’m just not in the mood.”

“Well, let’s go then,” he’d replied bluntly, and had sullenly driven her home.

21 — GRANDMA

“I’ve been driving her to appointments for her radiation, but I’m afraid it isn’t doing her any good,” remarked Grandma Flo to Jack, referring to Lindy Wellburn, mother of Arley, resident of the *Sueños* community-based home. “I don’t know why these goddamn doctors don’t just let people alone so they can die in peace.”

“Well, I guess it works on some people’s cancer, but not very often, it seems,” responded Jack. “I’m sorry I haven’t been working much at *Sueños*, lately. I’ve been getting about all the overtime that I can handle at the hospital. I’ve got a great boss—an Iranian—who has me doing a big musical play with people there.”

“How is your mama doing?”

“Oh, she’s fine, but she wants me to go back to college like everybody else seems to think I should. But I still want to get back over to London—next year, maybe.”

“Well, be careful of those English girls, dear-heart. They’re fast...real fast. Our gals found that out at the end of the big war.”

“Don’t worry, Grandma...I’m even faster. None of them has caught me yet.”

“Oh, some little biddy will come along and snare you. Just make sure she has a good heart. Lindy wants me to move into her big house with her, to help her get through things. I said sure, as long as I could bring my dogs.”

“That sounds like a good idea...do you need any help moving?”

“No, dear-heart...I’m not taking all that much.”

“Well, let me know. They’re coming to drill my well on Wednesday, but, other than that, I’m free most evenings. I want you and Elsie, and Arley, and the others from *Sueños* to come and see how our musical play is shaping up. We practice every afternoon in the gym—”

“I don’t think so, dear-heart. Elsie’s happy at the group-home now, and if we take her back to the training school, she might not want to leave.”

“I guess that’s true. At any rate, thanks for helping Lindy...I’ll come and see all of you next week.”

“Take care, dear-heart. I’m glad I met-cha.”

22 — EMERGENCY

Rickie Rijaro, for many years the art teacher at the Hospital and Training School, was a rare, beautiful, bonny blonde woman with a big warm smile and a big warm heart. Without hesitation, she'd jumped right into assisting the literally hundreds of residents who were shuttled through her art room weekly, in the creation of fabulous props for the musical play of which Jack was the director. Much plywood, cardboard, tempera paint, Elmer's glue, tinsel, and glitter had been pressed into service. Late afternoons, she had cheerfully volunteered her time to further assist at the rehearsals. On such an afternoon, a Friday, as the play and its music were being rehearsed up on the stage, she was down on the gym floor, assisting some dozen residents and their attendants in the creation of more of the elaborate scenery which was spread out on several large tables.

Anybody who has been involved in a theatrical production knows that there is a great deal of waiting involved, with few participants being needed on stage at all times. Such was the case that afternoon for Davy Suggs who was slated to play two featured numbers on his echo harmonica. On that afternoon, however, his presence had not yet been required on stage. He was seated with the others, around the big tables bearing the scenery. It had been some time since Davy's volatile alter-persona had exploded. Due to his potential for violence, a one-on-one staffing ratio was required when Davy was away from Cottage Three. The young DD Tech who had been assigned to him that afternoon was a new employee. Had he been more experienced he might have taken heed from a certain sort of grin which Davy had been wearing for the past half-hour. Had she been less involved in assisting others in the creation of the artwork, Rickie, who had known Davy for the six years since he'd come to live at the hospital, might herself have recognized the nature of the grin. She had been kind to the boy, often inviting him (and others) to visit her at her nice home on birthdays or special occasions. Davy adored Rickie, but perhaps the combination of having to wait for his chance to be on stage, his brand of intermittent schizophrenia, and the close presence of the art teacher's rosy, bouncy body, caused something within him to pop. As she leaned close to him, he leaped and snapped at an inviting breast. His primary objective was missed, but he succeeded in sinking his sharp white teeth deeply into the lady's exposed upper chest, some inches beneath her right collar-bone.

Although she did cry out, Rickie Rijaro, a real pro in the field, instantly realized that, in spite of the horrific pain, shrieking or screaming would not contribute to the resolution of the shocking situation. "PLEASE DAVY...PLEASE...DON'T DO THIS TO ME... You know I'm your friend...Somebody, please—NO!—THAT WON'T WORK—(to the young employee who was employing a "Mandt" restraint on Davy from behind, useful in other situations, but useless now)—GOD, PLEASE DAVY...YOU'RE HURTING ME SO..."

Nicholas Nighthawk Romero, from his vantage point, up on stage with Hector, heard the commotion and, with his keen eyes, grasped the situation. Although he leaped down swiftly, it took him several seconds to work his way around the big square of long work tables, and the many wheelchairs, to where Rickie was under attack. All activity on the stage and at the tables

had ceased, and some of the disabled residents had begun to wail or cry—some biting their own wrists, some flailing out at their neighbors, in consternation. Jack Elbon, at first not understanding the situation, followed Nicholas from the stage, but the younger man had blessedly made it around to the location of the appalling attack. With uncommon common sense, Nick managed to pinch Davy's nostrils, blocking the youth's intake of air. Even so, it took many more excruciating seconds before his jaws were disengaged from Rickie's horribly bloodied upper chest.

An alarm had gone out across the campus; now Earl from Cottage Three was assisting in Davy's restraint. Rickie, pale and in shock, was stretched on a mat, with a treatment-room nurse applying compression to her wound, with large gauze pads. Another nurse, with Allan Hoffman in attendance, was doing her best to inject a thrashing Davy with the maximum possible dose of Thorazine from a huge syringe. Dr. Mobasserri came on the run and announced that the day's activities were now at an end.

High up in the gym's bleachers, unobserved by all, a man wrote rapidly in a notebook, then spoke softly and at some length into a mini recording device.

23 — TEXAS TORNADO

“Personnel informs me that this Indian kid—this Nighthawk person—is not even an employee here.” It was the Monday morning following Davy’s Friday afternoon eruption.

“Well,” responded Marnie Fain to assistant administrator Joycelyn Raines, “Mr. Nicholas Nighthawk Romero was employed here last year—”

“—but only in a part-time capacity?”

“Yes, he was considered part-time by State Personnel, but he worked full-time hours and he received all of the same training that all employees here do. Now he works full time for Vibrance...”

“Then what in the freakin’ hell was he doing here on Friday afternoon?”

“He had brought a Vibrance client to participate in the play that Adult Services is putting on.”

“Who in the hell gave the OK for that?”

“Apparently, Doctor Mobasseri gave his approval for a few people from neighboring community-based homes to take part in the play.”

“How in the freakin’ hell could he do that? And where in the fu—freakin’ hell is he? I sent for him half an hour ago.”

“Have you met Doctor Mobasseri?”

“Only briefly, at admin. meetings. What does that have to do with anything? You know that the day programs aren’t normally part of my wheelhouse.”

“Well, Ahm is very independently minded.”

“Well, his independent-minded bullshit has caused us to be written up for non-compliance by a freakin’ state auditor. I want Mobasseri in here, and I want him here now. Sweet shit...where in his training was this Nighthawk taught to constrict a client’s airway? The auditor was very pointed about this and about several other aspects of the incident. Get Nighthawk in here too.”

Marnie was rapidly growing weary of assistant administrator Joycelyn Raines’ tone. It was widely suspected that this Texas hell-bitch, ubiquitously referred to as “Miss Big-Pants”, was opportunistically trying to get a couple of years, in administration, onto her resume before returning to Austin.

“Nicholas Nighthawk Romero, as I just pointed out, is not an employee here, but you may be interested in Ms. Rijaro’s perspective on the efficacy of his actions. I understand she’s home from the hospital now. If you wish to speak with Doctor Mobasseri, I can direct you to his office. Otherwise, I’ll be saying good morning.”

“Wait a minute...what about this music therapist—Elbow, is it? That’s a strange name. Where did he get his degree?” Joycelyn was thinking of the prestigious music therapy program at her alma mater. Perhaps he was an alumnus...

“Mr. Elbon is not a music therapist, but he has produced plays in London and elsewhere.”

“You mean he hasn’t been certified?”

“No. Jack Elbon, I understand, has hitherto made his own way in the real world, trading exclusively upon his own capabilities. Now I have work to do and need to go.”

Sweet-shit, said Joycelyn Raines to herself as Marnie left. Redskins, rag-heads, and ne’er-do-wells. What a state. This would have to blow up with Doctor Elliot away at a conference. Oh, well...just fourteen more months, then back to Austin. Maybe Roy will be back by then too. I’ll restart my diet, six months out.

“This water ain’t bad...Do you want us to keep going?”

“Let’s see...what do I owe you so far?” Jack Elbon asked the man he’d engaged to drill his long-awaited well, on his property in Rio Verde. He’d felt the need to take the Monday off, to see to the all-important operation.

“Well, we’re about fifty feet down. About a thousand bucks.”

“They say the water gets better the deeper you go.”

“That’s usually true, and if the water table goes down you’ll be safer.”

“Well, I’ve got us covered so far...can I pay you off, for the rest, over the next few weeks?”

“I guess so. You’re working steady, right?”

“Yeah, down there at the Hospital and Training School.”

“Oh, you work at the Training School? Then we’ll keep going, I guess...”

“Thanks! I’m hoping this well lasts me a long time.”

“It should, oughtta...”

Following her conversation with Marnie, assistant administrator Joycelyn Raines had stormed across campus and into Adult Services/Special Education headquarters, primed and eager to lock horns with Dr. Ahmad Mobasseri. “I’m sorry,” responded Myra, the department’s imperturbable secretary. “Doctor Ahm has flown to Minneapolis where his mother is gravely ill.”

“How very convenient, fumed Joycelyn. Who’s in charge here?”

“Amanda Berry, our program specialist, is giving an in-service, but she should be available this afternoon.”

“Never mind...get me this Elbow music person.”

“Jack Elbon did not come in today.”

“For what reason?”

“Mr. Elbon is technically classified as a substitute, and has the prerogative to work or not work, although he has been working every day and puts in extra hours, weekday afternoons.”

“Are you kidding me? He’s not even a full-time employee?”

“No, ma’am. He works full time but is not classified as being full-time.”

“Sweet shit. And he’s been filling in for teachers, but holds no degree?”

“Mr. Elbon has many college credits which have been accepted as an associate’s degree.”

“Accepted by who?”

“By Doctor Mobasser, and by Santa Fe, I presume.”

“Well, please communicate to Mr. Elbon that he has been placed on administrative leave until Doctor Elliot returns and we can assess the situation.”

“That’s unfortunate, ma’am. We are short-handed in many of our program areas and in the Special Ed. classes as well, due to the moratorium on new hiring. Mr. Elbon has ably filled in for us in various capacities—”

But Joycelyn Raines had stormed out, her large, denim-clad rump precariously balanced above a pair of very high-heeled cowboy boots.

“Texas bitch,” muttered Myra, to anyone within ear-shot.

Although his frame was twisted and frail, Hector had very good eyes. Like Nick, he had clearly seen, from the stage, Davy’s attack and its bloody aftermath.

“Please, *mijo*...you have to try to eat something,” Rosa pleaded at dinner time at the Esperanza home.

“He won’t eat,” observed Mayzee. He’s been rattled ever since last Friday. Nick says it was horrid. That poor lady.”

“She’s gonna be all right, *mijo*...Rickie’s fine,” ventured Rosa to Hector, hoping to reassure him. “She’s home now and is healing up well, they say.”

Rosa and Mayzee were partly correct; the ugly incident had put Hector off his feed. But just as he’d been starting to regain his appetite, they had received word that rehearsals for the musical had been suspended indefinitely. Perhaps due to this, Hector’s mood had spiraled even more deeply downward. To make matters worse, following communication with Joycelyn Raines, Vibrance owner Meryl Hope-Gurule had placed Nicholas on administrative leave, pending further investigation.

“At the Training School, they call her ‘Miss Big Pants’,” remarked Mayzee to Rosa, referring to Joycelyn. “I know who she is...I’ve seen her around. My God, if my butt was as big as hers, I hope I’d have sense enough to wear skirts or something instead of trying to cram myself into those tight stretch-jeans that she always wears. She must need a crow-bar and axel-grease to get into them.”

“And they say that she ees a *Tejana, también*,” replied Rosa. Why can’t they hire people from New Mexico? Lord knows our own people need the jobs badly.”

“Well,” replied Mayzee, “you know, Governor Martin is really from Texas, too, they say. He could keep them from closing the hospital if he wanted to. All of those Texans can just stay over there, as far as I’m concerned. Nick was getting close to having enough money to buy the truck that he wants so badly. Now, I guess that’ll have to wait, too.”

“Well, it will come out O.K., *hija*, you’ll see. I pray for heem and for all of us every day.”

“He’s taking me to *Zozobra* on Friday night. Or, I’m taking him, I should say. Whoever heard of a boyfriend without wheels?”

Among the many whose lives had been rocked by the Friday biting incident was the talented singer and new training school resident, Ben Rivers. Although he'd been singing along with his beloved radio for years, while living with his mother, he'd never had the thrill of singing into a microphone with a real sound system. His life had been a sheltered one. Maxine Rivers, a divorcee with drug and alcohol problems, knew that her blind son had a great voice, but had kept him at home until that situation had become untenable. With the sudden termination of the regular afternoon rehearsals, Ben had taken to various forms of self-abuse, for which phenobarbital had been readily prescribed by psychologist Allan Hoffman.

24 — ZOZOBRA

Everybody agreed that *Zozobra*, that year, was one of the best ever. The spectacular event which traditionally signals the beginning of the Santa Fe Fiestas—the burning of the gigantic puppet representing “Old Man Gloom”—was neither an invention of the Spanish, the Church, or the people of the pueblos. Feeling a bit left out of the festivities, some of the wonderful Santa Fe artists of the 1920s had dreamed up the erasable titan. They constructed him of wood, cloth, paint, and paper, and set him ablaze to the delight of all! Now his annual immolation comes with the blessed return of cooler weather, the intoxicating smell of fresh green chilis being roasted on every corner, and *piñon* nuts free to be shaken down by anybody with a long stick and a sack.

Mayzee, a young lady of many generations of Hispanic descent, never dreamed that she would be going with an earthy Indian boy of very modest means, regardless of his smooth looks and undeniably stirring arm and leg muscles.

Nick had always dreamed of a maiden with long hair like his, a demure manner, simple clothes, and a soft voice. Mayzee, with her extended fingernails (new color scheme weekly), high heels, teased hair, and catty personality, had seemed as if she’d be way too high maintenance. However, something indefinable about the back of her neck and ears, when she’d swept up her hair at work, had had a good deal to do with his conversion. Little by little, over the course of the summer, she’d come to accept, if not always enjoy, such things as camping, fishing, and heading up arroyos and into the hills instead of to the malls or casinos.

Tonight, as they watched and listened, with hundreds of others, to the moans and groans of the fifty-foot giant as flames slowly engulfed him, Mayzee, her back to Nick’s front, wrapped in his long arms, felt as if she could never imagine being embraced by another. . .

“Get the H-E-DOUBLE HOCKEY STICKS OFF OF LINDY’S SOFA! I’ll get the fly-swatter, so help me!”

“It’s all right, Florence...I don’t mind,” remarked Lindy Wellburn to Grandma Flo who had moved into Lindy’s lovely home to help out during her illness. Flo kept a special fly swatter handy most times, to keep Boo-Boo and Perkins, her two feisty dogs, in line.

“Well, I mind. If I give these hoodlums an inch they will destroy your place, believe me.”

“I’m glad they’re here; and you, Flo...you’ve just been an angel.”

“I’m more than happy to be here. And I’m closer to Elsie, too. It’s a break for me not having to drive all the way in from Blue Lake. My old jalopy’s gonna be needing a new radiator soon...brakes, too.”

“Florence?”

“What, dear-heart?”

“I didn’t tell you at the Doctor’s yesterday, but what I have has gone to my pelvis.”

“YOUR PELVIS?” How could it get there from your lungs?”

“They say that it’s metastasized.”

“Well, we’ll just try another doctor, dear-heart. They don’t know everything, these damn saw-bones. Time and time again, in Korea...”

“No, Florence...this they know. This is why I’ve gotten so that I can’t stand up by myself.”

“Well, we’ll just get you one of those motorized buggies like they have at Wal-Mart. People have them in their homes too...you’ll be in good shape since this is a bungalow. In a trailer like mine, you’d need a long ramp running up. My neighbor had one built, but it’s plywood and starting to sag already. I told those boys who built it to use sawn two by sixes, but would they listen? They—”

“Florence...”

“—I told them to use a real good primer, before they painted it, too, and less nails and more screws—”

“Flo...”

“Yes, dear-heart?”

“Will you come and live here after I’m gone?”

“GONE? Who said anything about you going anywhere?”

“They know this, Florence. This they know.”

“Oh, well, no, Lindy I couldn’t. I’m sure you have relatives who you’d rather have—”

“No, Florence...only Arley. And if you’d just keep an eye on him when you go to see Elsie at the home, it would just ease my mind so much.”

“Me, in a swell house, like this, that I never paid for? No, dear-heart...that wouldn’t be right.”

“You served your country, in the same war that I lost my husband. I’d say you’ve more than earned a few breaks in life. Say you’ll consider it for me, will you Florence? For me? And for Arley? And to be close to Elsie? They could come here for picnics and you’d have such a grand time.”

“Well, I’ll think about it...but only if you stop callin’ me Florence, and stick to Flo!”

“Thank you...Flo.”

25 — OUT OF WORK

“Yeah, Mom...I’m sure my hands are clean.” Jack Elbon was at his mother’s nice assisted living apartment in Santa Fe, helping her hang snow-white lace curtains which had come over with *her* mother, from Scotland, during the Ellis Island days.

Not having to go to work meant that he had more time to help her, but it was worrisome, too. Not knowing that he’d been placed on indefinite leave, he’d paid nearly his entire savings over to the well-drillers and had wound up owing them a lot more.

“It must be wonderful for you, having water there at your house, now,” remarked his mother, who had actually been, with his father, to Rio Verde on a western jaunt, just two short years earlier. How quickly everything had changed! Dad’s death and mom’s blindness had hit hard and fast.

“Yep, it’s pretty nice...sweet water, too. I was good and tired of hauling it from Phil’s.”

“I hope you’ll have indoor plumbing soon, especially if you really want me to come for Christmas.”

“Don’t worry, Mom...I’ll just send you out into the *piñon* trees. Twenty paces, turn and fire.”

“Yes? Well, if that’s how it works, then most of you men are poor shots, I have to tell you.”

“Don’t worry. Just remember to haul in a load of firewood each time you go out there. We’ll have to keep the stove stoked for you to cook on.”

“Not with the rattlesnakes you have, I won’t be goin’ out there, buddy.”

“Oh, don’t worry...I haven’t seen any that were over five feet in length for a long time—a week or two, at least. But seriously, Mom, they’ll be hibernating by then. The scorpions and tarantulas, too. It’s now, in September, that they’re most active. Say, how about riding home with me tonight? I’ll pick up a 30 pack and call some friends and we’ll have a bonfire. You can help me kill a pig...”

Jack was glad to keep his mother’s (and his own) attention steered in other directions than the employment that he was suddenly lacking. Until recently, he’d been reading to her dialogue from the musical and keeping her up on developments...it would be tough if he’d have to tell her that it was all off. Sheeit...even tougher for the people in the play! He’d repeatedly called Myra Leffle, in the office of the training school’s Adult Services/Special Ed. departments, but Dr. Mobaserri’s mother was, apparently, really failing, up in Minneapolis. Myra seemed optimistic about the overall situation, though, assuring him that Ahm would set things straight as soon as he returned. “What makes you so sure?” Jack had asked.

“Because he knows where all the bodies in this place are buried, and I’m not talkin’ about the campus graveyard, out back. Anyway, Santa Fe still has their hiring freeze on, and there’s no one else here who can run this huge department except him. He’s a clever Persian.”

In order to not worry her, Jack had said nothing to his mom about the biting incident or about his having been placed on leave. The idea of having to borrow money from her made his blood run cold. In spite of her blindness, Mom's tentacles of perception were highly developed. Clair had brought her down (then up) to Rio Verde for a visit, soon after her move to New Mexico. Being very interested in Jack's new "career", they'd also visited the *Sueños* home, in Pecos Bend, for a birthday cook-out, one evening when Jack had still been working there more frequently. Vera Elbon had met Elsie, Arley, Jim Gallup, as well as Lindy and Flo, with whom she'd hit it off immediately. She'd established telephone communications with Flo and Lindy, who had, apparently, not yet blabbed to her about Jack's suspension. She did know of Lindy's illness, however, and had been including her in her prayers.

But, reflected Jack, as he climbed down from hanging his mother's curtains, he was gonna have to find work fast. Those well-drillers looked like tough cookies; they were going to be wanting to see more green, real soon. For some strange reason, the office at Vibrance had seemed reticent and evasive when he'd called about subbing for them again. Something was going on, but what?

26 — OOPS

“They’re meeting us here tonight because we need them,” explained Meryl Hope-Gurule to Eric Cardel, as they sipped high-balls at the bar of the Cowgirl BBQ in Santa Fe. “Marnie Fain has been a gold mine of info for us, and remember, fifty new guardianships are coming up for grabs. And Allan Hoffman is easy to get to blabbing about the latest deficiencies at the hospital.”

“What a drip.”

“Well, you’re going to be nice to him, and I don’t imagine that you’ll need any encouragement to be nice to her, too.”

“That little mouse?” Please.”

When Eric had told Meryl that his car had been vandalized, he hadn’t mentioned that he’d been out with Marnie or exactly where in Las Vegas (New Mexico) it had transpired.

“That kind of thing happens over there all the time,” Meryl had commented, with a shrug. “Everybody knows that Las Vegas is the heroin capital of the whole state.”

“Hmmm. I thought junkies were more interested in theft.”

“You’ll just have to be more careful where you park your car.”

Although his visit with his mother had been a good one, he’d gotten into a squabble with the old lady about something silly from the distant past. This and his other concerns led Jack to conclude that a beer, somewhere on the Plaza—or better still, down on Guadalupe Street—would be in order before heading on home.

The last thing he wanted, or expected, was to run into people from the hospital, but upon entering the front patio of the ultra-hip Cowgirl BBQ (bar and pool hall) there they were: Al and Marnie, with two others, seated at a table. What was there to do but be friendly? He’d been hoping to see Marnie again, maybe, after he’d gotten back on his feet some, financially. But he knew that he was scrungy and grungy, and he’d planned on heading straight on back to the excellent pool room where his dusty clothes and unshaven chin might not be noticed.

“Jack!” cried Marnie, jumping up.

“Oh, gosh. Hi. I was just going back to look for a game of pool. Hi, Al.”

“Oh,” begged Marnie, “please sit down, won’t you? What are you doing up here? Jack—this is Meryl and Eric.”

Something about the names rang little bells, far in the back of his mind, but all Jack was really thinking about was extracting himself and choosing a soothingly cold pint of beer. But how could he be rude? “Nice to meet you. Hey, Al...do you shoot pool?”

Marnie would not be distracted. “Oh, never mind that. How’s your play coming along?—Jack’s producing the most wonderful musical, with the clients at the hospital.”

“Well, I got laid off—put on leave, I should say—after the incident in the gym. Didn’t you hear?”

“No! I’ve been in transition meetings for days! We knew the boy from Cottage Three bit poor Rickie—I talked to her, yesterday—she’s still at home. But how was that your fault?”

“Good question, but Ahm’s away ‘cause his mom’s on hospice, and Doctor Elliot’s number two?—the one they call Miss Big Pants?—I’ve never met her, but she’s pulled the plug on the whole play and on my employment, too. Doctor Elliot, I guess, has also been away. To make matters worse, the lady who runs Vibrance?—who by all accounts is another power-crazed hell-bitch—has stupidly fired our super-talented, young choreographer, Nick Nighthawk Romero, who had the presence of mind to get Davy off of poor Rickie when he was biting her. Something tells me that she’s in cahoots with Miss Big Pants—”

“HEY, JACK!—” said Al, suddenly jumping to his feet. “GOOD IDEA—let’s shoot a game...”

“Uh...Sure, Al! I didn’t know you played...”

“COME ON! I’d love a game of eight-ball! LET’S GO!”

“Uh...sure...OK. Um, nice meeting you folks...”

27 — ROMANCE

While Hector's thoughts were mostly composed of impressions, visual memories, and feelings that were independent of conventional words of language upon which to peg them, his emotions were essentially the same as anybody's. Nick had been something like an older, idol of a brother to him; his sudden absence was a separation which, to Hector, was an outrage so abject as to seem unendurable. Did he actually correlate his not eating with the cessation of his own existence? Upon this, we can only speculate, but the bottom line was that intubation was again being considered by his "team" which included his physical therapist, speech-language pathologist, state-appointed guardian, doctor, social worker, psychologist, residential supervisor, and a few more, august personages. For all of the verbiage expended at Hector's Individual Program Plan (IPP) meetings, more insightful input might have been gleaned from big-hearted Rosa or the ditzzy Mayzee, had their perspectives been sought. Regardless, in the absence of known or involved relatives, and because of Hector's inability to verbally communicate, the system's machinery seemingly allowed for no other option than the introduction of a gastronomy (feeding) tube.

Similarly, the system's prescribed response to Davy's injurious assault on Rickie Rijaro offered few alternatives. The cocktail of Thorazine and the latest antipsychotic drugs was adjusted and enhanced. Davy's already limited privileges were curtailed—for a while. Corporal punishment was, of course, not an option. In spite of Davy's "dual diagnosis"—mental retardation in combination with psychosis—in reality, a good old fashion butt-whoopin' might have been an effective measure; he certainly deserved one. But to minimize the potential for horrid mistreatments that have been, until very recently, the sad norm throughout human history, society has—mainly for the best—evolved to a point that such obvious alternatives cannot be officially sanctioned. So, aside from feeling some true regret for having hurt a teacher who had been kind to him (he sincerely apologized, when Rickie was able to return to work), Davy's life, in actuality, changed very little following his cruel attack.

Jack Elbon was aching in muscles he didn't know he had. In order to make a buck, he'd hired on with a crew of pro adobe builders. Using recycled antique adobe bricks to restore his own old house had been fun since he'd been able to work at his own pace with the help of other communal souls. With spirit left over from the sixties (Rio Verde had then been home to a hippie colony) he, in turn, had assisted them with work on their homes. But doing it as a job, using stabilized adobe bricks for new construction, was turning out to be murder. At thirty-six he was one of the older workers, and the tempo of moving the twenty-five-pound bricks, often throwing them straight up to waiting hands, or mixing barrow after barrow of thick adobe mortar, was leaving him completely spent by quitting time. It was in such a condition that he staggered into the Price Chopper grocery store for a six-pack and something for the grill, on a Tuesday evening.

Pecos Bend being a small town, he'd not been surprised to run into Marnie Fain in the check-out line.

"Have they called you to come back to the hospital yet, Jack?"

"No, and I've figured out that they never will. As you know, I really screwed myself, there at the Cowgirl BBQ joint in Santa Fe."

"Well, yeah, you did with Meryl and Vibrance—she was livid. I've never seen her so angry! But that's just with her company..."

"No, I've been blackballed, I'm certain. Oh, well, it was fun while it lasted, but I guess I was meant to stay down in the salt-mines—probably as payment for my past sins. I'd like to get back over to England, though, before I croak, so maybe it's best."

"You look really exhausted. Hey, I'm making Chinese tonight. Why don't you come over and have some?"

"Ah, well, I'm not fit to be around people. And I just bought these chops..."

"You can throw them in my fridge; they'll keep. Come on...I insist."

"Well, I guess so..."

Throughout most of his twenties and his earlier thirties, Jack Elbon had made following attractive girls home a top priority. As an even younger man, he'd experienced the agony of unrequited love. As a result, he had resolved to adopt a "love 'em and 'leave 'em" policy. It has been chronicled elsewhere, how his selfishness and lack of self-control had, shortly before his return to New Mexico, exploded with tragic consequences. His heart had become a mass of scar tissue which could never again, he felt, become what it once had been. He perceived Marnie as being a somewhat vulnerable type, and he had no wish to inflict himself upon her. But, following work, she had changed into shorts and a halter, and Jack's control over his healthy libido was challenged. Besides, it was she who was, seemingly, pursuing him.

It was still hot, for mid-October. Seeking shade for his little Toyota pick-up, he pulled around behind Marnie's house to park beneath some old cottonwoods. Upon entering her cozy bungalow, Jack saw a lovely, small parlor piano with plants in a row on its lid. "Do you play?" he asked.

"Not much...it was my mother's. She played beautifully."

"Well, I'd like to try it, after I wash my hands. Do you still have your mom?"

"No, she and my dad are gone."

"Were they always from New Mexico?"

"Yes, he was a geologist and she taught at Highlands University, over in Las Vegas."

After he had washed up, Jack sat down on Marnie's sofa. A friendly cat promptly found its way into his lap. While scratching the happily purring creature behind its ears, Jack, exhausted, drifted into a deep sleep.

"Dinner-time..."

"Huh?... Oh, boy...it smells really good! How long was I sleeping?"

"About half an hour."

"Jeez...sorry...I was going to ask if I could help you. Adobe building kicks my old butt."

“You aren’t old.”

“Yes, I am...I’m thirty-six.”

“Well, I’m thirty-seven.”

“Wow...you’re youthful!”

“Flattery will get you everywhere. I hope you like shrimp, and ginseng, and bamboo sprouts...”

“I could eat a rhinoceros...”

“We’re all out of those. What do you want to drink?”

“Oh, just one of my beers...maybe you’d like one, too...”

“No, too fattening.”

“Well, that would just mean that there would be more of you to love...”

Jack had been around the block. Actually, he’d been around quite a few blocks. He realized that he was, basically, being seduced—a rare thing for the male of the species—and he loved it. But those many blocks he’d circled had taught him that the ecstasy of lovemaking was never free. One way or another, lovers always paid. But, what a lovely feeling, to be in the home of a pretty woman, in flirtatious anticipation of what was probably going to happen.

“Darn it...I forgot the rice. It’ll only take ten minutes. If you want to help, what you could do would be to play a song on my mom’s piano.”

“Oh, sure! That’s what I was planning to do before I zonked out.”

Since waking up, Jack had been studying Marnie, in her apron, shorts, and sandals, working over the sink and stove. His observations had affected him in a distinctly primal way. He decided to take the leap and to unplug that most powerful of aphrodisiacs (next to a Nat King Cole album)—Rachmaninov!

Jack was not a trained, classical pianist; but the opening chords to the famous Opus 22 were slow, very moving, and easy to fake one’s way through...then he could interject his own, easy for him, improvisations. The little parlor piano was a fine one and a pleasure to play.

Marnie’s chow mein was also fine and a pleasure to eat. Jack’s cold beer was perfect for him; Marnie’s red wine, apparently, was just right for her.

“I have a mini-watermelon. We could have it for dessert, out on the porch...”

“Wow...That sounds incredible. I don’t think I’ve had any watermelon all summer!”

In the purple dusk, on an old porch swing, Jack asked: “So you never wanted to get out of New Mexico? I mean, I love it here, but I HAD to get out of *my* home town or I’d have driven into a street pole long ago.”

“Well, I did want to travel, and I did, some. But now, I have the opportunity to help with freeing so many people from the institution. So I’ve gotta stay until we’ve done it.”

“Well, I guess you know that some of them don’t want to leave.”

“Yes, I know that.”

“And that a hell of a lot of their family members are afraid to have them moved out, especially those with medically fragile relatives in the hospital units.”

“I know that too, Jack. I grew up with a lot of these families...I went to church and school with them. But you know I’m pretty sure that—because of how *you* ’ve lived—you know that freedom comes with lots of risks and that it isn’t easy. But transitions from large facilities to community-based homes are happening all over the country, and it’s happening here now, regardless of who likes it. And if I can help—”

But Jack had decided that the new moon, desert stars, singing crickets, brisk air, and the intoxicating scents of autumn called for something more than mere talk, so at this point, he went ahead and did something other than talking. Marnie replied in the same wordless, but highly communicative language.

After a suitable interval of inspired necking, as each of them was very much wondering whether or not to suggest going inside, the sound of tires on the gravel driveway suddenly intervened. They broke their clinch as headlights swept in. “Oh, it’s Al...I forgot he was going to drop off some papers for tomorrow.”

At the Cowgirl BBQ, Jack had been grateful when he’d realized that the gangly psychologist had saved him from a highly embarrassing situation by insisting that they immediately shoot pool, following his having unwittingly called Meryl Hope-Gurule a “power-crazed hell bitch”.

Now, however, his feelings were not so kind. He was pretty sure that Al’s sudden headlights had revealed Marnie and himself in their hot embrace—why couldn’t the guy have just split? Then again, Jack remembered that he had, earlier, parked his truck around back to be in the shade; of course, Al couldn’t see it back there. Still...

Following a strained exchange, Jack had deferred: “Thanks very much for the nice dinner, Marnie...I’ll be getting up with the roosters tomorrow...time for me to get on home.”

“Oh, Jack—you don’t have to leave—”

“Yeah, I’d better. Thanks again. Later, Al.”

28 — VERY UGLY

As he ascended a shaky scaffold to receive endless heavy pails of adobe mud to be slathered onto successive rows before receiving endless heavy adobe bricks to be laid, Jack Elbon reflected, for the hundredth time, that if he didn't need money to pay off the well-drillers and to start saving for an airplane ticket, he would tell the mean *jefe*, who was ramrodding the adobe crew, to stick it.

HONK, HONK! Jack looked down to see his cousin Phil's old Ford pickup truck.
“What?”

“Call Myra at the hospital.”

“Did she say what for?”

“No, but she said to call her right away.”

This Jack did, at lunchtime, and was very happy to hear her simply say: “Come to work tomorrow.”

“Really?”

“Yes, Ahm is back. It's all straightened out.”

“How's his mother?”

“She passed away last week. But he's been back a couple of days already, catching up. You're good to go.”

“Wow...what a magician!”

“I told you...without him, they're helpless.”

“Well, I really should give some notice here to the guys I've been working with—no—never mind. I'll be there.” Although he'd been getting paid more, working adobe, winter was coming and construction would be winding down. Besides, the boss was a mean SOB and he'd really missed his work and the people at the Hospital and Training School.

At quitting time, he made his apologies—no use burning bridges—and happily hit the Price Chopper where he grabbed some extra good beer and an extra nice steak to celebrate.

As he exited, his eye strayed to the stack of newspapers by the door. Two large photos, above the fold, froze him in his tracks. He knew these faces! Next, the headline jumped out:

Mental Health Workers Arrested and Charged

Jack had instantly recognized the photo on the left as being Ed Nossling, the supervisor who had been in charge of the *Sueños* home, when he'd started as a sub last March—eight months ago—a seeming eternity. But the strange eyes of the man who was the subject of the photo on the right—eyes which seemed to burn directly into the camera's lens and on through the black ink...eyes he'd seen only once, yet here they were, indelible still, and no mistake—the man who'd come in through the window! The eyes that had made Jack's now-dear friends pray and wear crosses and, like guardian saints, volunteer nights at *Esperanza*. They'd known and they'd told him. Yes, they'd put their faith in HIM!—Jack Elbon! But, he'd been blind, but now

he knew—without even reading—how goddamned blind he'd been...so goddamn blind! So GODDAMN BLIND! But he'd left it to his supposed betters...and they'd failed too.

In the trance that came from realizing that everything was now changed, he picked up two of the papers and returned to the counter and paid. Under his truck's dome light he read, intermittently pounding his fists against the steering wheel. Realizing, eventually, that rage or nausea would do nothing to help, he fired up his motor and, instead of heading for Rio Verde and home, pointed it to a nice neighborhood on the other side of Pecos Bend.

"You can't blame yourself for this, dear-heart. I won't let you." Grandma Flo, seated across from Jack at Lindy Wellburn's kitchen table, was kind but full of the same steel she'd employed to prop up those around her who were disintegrating under the shattering stress of heavy bombardment in Korea.

"Are you sure Lindy can't hear us?"

"No, dear-heart. She took her medication an hour ago...she'll sleep hard now."

"Do you really think we can keep her from finding out?"

"She'll find out after they drag my stiff, dead body out of here, which nobody is going to."

"But what about the TV news?"

"Just you leave that to me. I'll set it to Turner Classic Films, then we'll lose the remote."

"I'll do the shopping...I'll bring you all the food you need."

"You'll have to, dear-heart. You'll have to. Soon I'm gonna need dog food..."

"I'll bring you a whole truckload of dog food! But what about the phone?"

"I'll turn off her ringer and take all of the calls in here. And I'll cancel the newspaper, first thing tomorrow. It was just the other day that Lindy said to me, again, that when Arley moved out of the Training School, it was the best day of her life. It would be a hard way for her to go out, knowing that it was actually the worst."

"Well, if my mom calls here, don't tell her either; it would really upset her. But she may have heard it on the news already. I'll call and tell her to keep mum about it. Hey...that gate out front? There's a place on it for a lock...I'll bring one tomorrow. Only you and I will have keys."

"Good idea! But the hospice nurse will have to come in..."

"Well, we'll make sure she shuts up about it too. Do you know, Grandma...I think I'm too tired and rattled to drive up to Rio Verde tonight. Oh! and I forgot to tell you, that I'm supposed to go back to work at the hospital in the morning. Do you think Lindy would mind if I just slept on the couch?"

"No, dear-heart...she wouldn't mind at all. Her hospice medication—Roxanol, they call it, but it's really morphine—has started working. She won't even know you're here. Now, what have you had for dinner?"

"Nothing, but I think I'm too upset to eat."

"You're going to eat, Mister. What was that you threw into the icebox?"

"Steak, Grandma."

“Fine. You’re going to go and take a hot shower, and then you’ll have steak and eggs, and then you’re going to go to bed.”

“Well, I’ll try...”

After she’d forced Jack to eat, and to drink a couple of his beers which she knew would help him sleep, Flo had marched him to the back bedroom—there were three in Lindy’s house. She’d pushed him in, opened the window, turned out the lights, closed the door, and returned to the kitchen. After doing the dishes in the sink—since moving in, she’d made a point of refusing to use the automatic dishwasher—she checked on Lindy who was, as she’d predicted, sleeping deeply.

She’d gotten the gist of the newspaper article, earlier, but Jack had been so terribly upset and full of self-blame and worry about Lindy’s finding out, that she’d been distracted. Now, donning her “readers” from the Dollar General, she sat down to again read the dreadful account:

Acting on a search warrant issued by San Miguel County, District Attorney Jim Grisham, State Highway Patrol officers on Monday arrested two suspects at their home in Blue Lake after reportedly recovering more than one hundred nude photos of male residents of a community-based home administered by Vibrance, Inc., where the suspects had, until recently, been paid employees. Edward Nossling and Carlos Robledo were booked without bond into the county detention facility in Las Vegas where they await arraignment on multiple charges of assault and criminal sexual penetration. Meryl-Hope Gurule, C.E.O. of Vibrance, Inc. was unavailable for comment.

“The dirty, crawling things,” muttered Grandma Flo to herself. “I hope they get the pill-box—no, the gas chamber would be too good for ‘em—the hot-seat would be, too! The goddamned college lawyers have probably gotten them banned anyway. I read somewhere that their shit-for-brains study shows the death penalty isn’t a deterrent. Lord, who needs a study to see that’s not true? All they gotta do is look at how things used to be and how the hell they are now. Goddamn politicians...they’re all lawyers, too. Well, there’ll be no getting around those photos. With any luck, the dirty dogs’ll get croaked in jail. But Jack’s right...Lindy can’t know, and she’s *not* gonna know, either!”

29 — NEW MEXICO CHRISTMAS

“Jack...it’s snowing! We’ll have a white Christmas after all!”

“Then you better get your rump outside and start truckin’ in more wood before it’s soaked.”

“You already have enough in here to last a week.”

“Not with my mom’s hypothermia, it won’t.”

“OK...I’ll go. Where’s the wheelbarrow?”

“I’m just kidding. I have more stashed where it’ll stay dry. I just hope everybody can make it up the road...”

“Well, it’s not really sticking yet. It’s just big fluffy flakes. Oh, Jack...last night was so beautiful...almost every house had *luminarias*...and your neighbors were so sweet, coming around on their *posadas*...”

“Sweet, my ass...they were after my brandy and reefer.”

“Don’t be a Grinch. What do you want me to do?”

“Just sit there and look pretty—no, take off your pajamas and climb up on top of the tree...you can be the angel.”

“Those pine needles look too prickly.”

“Then just take off your pajamas and come here...”

“No, we’ve got way too much to do before everybody gets here. I’ve got water boiling for coffee.”

“Good. I’m savage before I’ve had my coffee.”

“You’re savage, period. It’s nice and toasty in here...you must have gotten up...”

“Yeah, I threw more wood in at about five, I guess it was. Didn’t you hear the coyotes? The dogs were going crazy.”

“No, I slept really well. Mmmm...that cedar smells so good...”

“Well, it’s actually *piñon*, mostly.”

“It’s very pungent—”

RING!

“Damn that phone...I can’t get used to it! It’s destroying my serenity!”

“Well, answer it!”

RING!

“No! I’m gonna have it taken out. Why should—”

“ANSWER IT!”

“Hello, Bah-Humbug—Bobby!”

Marnie correctly surmised that the caller was Jack’s older brother, a highly accomplished musician, calling from New York.

“No, Mom and Clair aren’t here yet...they’ll be coming later if they can make it up through the snow...of course, it’s snowing...it’s winter!...Well, most of New Mexico is way

above sea level and I live in the mountains...it's not like Tucson with the organ cactus, or L.A., or the Sahara desert like most of you honkies envision...Oh, we're all doing pretty well...it's a long story but we're feeling a lot of relief right now...A very nice lady who'd become a close friend of ours, died last week, after several weeks of being on hospice...she was the mother of one of the disabled guys that I work with...We had to struggle to keep her from finding out about some horrific abuse that her son has been through, which recently came to light...It would have broken her heart and we couldn't let her find out as she was dying of cancer...Yeah, it was a bitch, keeping her isolated from all the news media busy-bodies and other officious a-holes...we literally had to stand guard and keep them locked out of her house. At one point this great old lady who was caring for her? She actually had to sic her dogs on one creepy broad who had owned the program where the young man was abused...Yeah, she was trying to have the poor dying woman sign papers to absolve her and her company from culpability, but Flo, who was a WAC in Korea, ran her off with her dogs. I wasn't there, but Perkins and Boo-Boo apparently had a generous taste of the dreadful creature's backside...Yeah, Mom's making lots of friends including Flo who I was just telling you about—she's coming out here today, too—also some of the disabled people and their providers—yeah, it's gonna be a big mob—can I have some more coffee, Marnie?—Oh, she's just my serving wench. She—OUCH!—yeah, I met her at work...I wasn't gonna date chicks from the hospital, but she snared me—*OUCH!! THAT REALLY HURT!!*—She's a saucy tart, but I may keep her around if she plays her cards right...Actually, she's a very respected lady who's done a lot for the disabled people and their families...Yeah, Derrick still wants me in London, but this work that I'm doing here, has sort of gotten into my blood and—You are? Wish I could be there...that's a very famous club...I'm real proud of you and Dad would be too!...Yeah, poor Mom's nearly totally blind, but hey—at least I won't have to dust!...Yeah, it's totally adobe, except for the wooden roof and the windows and doors...It has really high ceilings so I have a twelve-foot tree in the corner which we only got half decorated 'cause people came by last night...it's an old Spanish tradition, where people make the rounds like Mary and Joseph, looking for an inn, but it's really an excuse for everybody to get good and loaded, but the food's great with tamales and *posole*—oh, it's a kind of soup with boiled hominy and meat and red chili—and everybody in town puts out *luminarias*...Well, they are little brown paper lunch bags that we put sand into the bottom of, just to weigh them down, then a candle goes into the sand of each one, and they're spaced up and down the road and along the parapets of the houses; they all get lit at sundown and it's very magical to see...probably it goes back to before there was electricity for Christmas lights, which in Rio Verde wasn't all that long ago...OK...I'd better get my butt in gear too...Marnie says Merry Christmas...she says she wants to meet you...Ya never know...Break a leg, tonight!... Love you too, Bobby..."

The mellow tones of a steel drum band playing Christmas carols floated through the dining room of the Gregory Town Grill, on Eleuthera Island, in the eastern Bahamas. As she picked at her appetizer of Asian Pear and Spiralized Butternut, Meryl Hope-Gurule was feeling less than mellow. The combination of an ugly hangover, brought on by too much Mount Gay rum the

previous evening, and the morning's grim realization that her new monokini by Aqua Bendito ("*Daringly Different and Savvy*") could not cover the still vividly purple results of Perkins' and/or Boo-Boo's assault on her shapely bottom, had befouled her outlook: "I still don't see why we couldn't have had that old biddy jailed for what her dogs did to me."

"Because," patiently explained Eric Cardel, as he had several times previously, "you went over a locked gate, into private property enclosed by a fence. You haven't a leg to stand on, legally. I told you not to do it."

"If I'd gotten Lindy Wellburn to sign the waiver, which I'm sure I could have, then we'd be positive that her estate couldn't touch us."

"I've told you repeatedly that the residency agreement which she signed as her son's guardian when he came to Vibrance, will likely preclude that eventuality and that now that you've sold that company and we're just doing guardianships—"

"Take this away. I don't want it," Meryl instructed their passing waiter.

"Yes, mum. Are you folks ready to order?"

"Yes, please," replied Eric. "I'll have the Junkanoo Wagyu steak, done rare."

"Yes, suh. And for you, mum?"

"What's the 'Catch of the Day'?"

"Red snapper, mum, just come in."

"All right."

"Would ya be havin' it grilled, pan-seared, or fried?"

"Pan-seared—no, cancel that. I'm going to our room, Eric."

"Well, at least eat something. Try some of these rainbow shrimp..."

"No, I'm going to take a Xanax and lie down."

"Well, alright...but stop worrying. I've told you, we're working on that extra insurance policy—"

"I've been hearing about it for weeks, but not seeing anything."

"We can't act on it 'til the court-date, which I'm sure will be early in the new year. Now rest up so we can have fun this evening."

"Mmmff."

Marnie had taken the breaking news about the horrific abuse of the men at the Vibrance home even harder than Jack. Like he, she was of the sort of internal makeup which tends to find reasons to blame one's self whenever possible. On that first awful day, after the grim evening news releases, having heard that Jack had been called back to work, she'd waited for him at 4:00, outside the Adult Services/Special Ed. building. Her eyes told all; Jack knew at once that she had heard, probably along with the whole campus.

They'd walked quietly to a secluded, shady location behind the chapel, where Marnie had completely fallen apart. Her whole frame shook and shook with racking sobs, having dissolved into Jack's arms. He wanted to cry too, but the intensity of Marnie's guilty grief was alarming, seemingly bordering on hysteria, and he knew that he had to stay balanced. He'd passed through

his phase of initial shock and outrage the previous evening at Lindy's, with Flo's help—now he must keep level. Soon his shirt's front was tear-soaked and he realized that he needed to keep talking and talking, saying nearly anything, to bring her down. As he explained the conspiracy that he and Flo had undertaken, to keep Lindy in the dark, Marnie gradually got a hold of herself and started to listen. She was skeptical, at first, but as Jack described Flo's vigilance, Lindy's hospice situation, and the layout of the household, Marnie was at least, blowing her red nose and no longer sobbing. "But Jack, she'll have to be told—"

"No! And she's not going to be told! I don't know how well you know Grandma Flo, but she is literally a warrior, and she worships Lindy. I'm moving in there too, for the duration, and you might be in a perfect position to help stall off whoever in the machine is supposed to inform her—"

"Hmm, that would be Vibrance—"

"Right! You know those people and you're going to impede and dissuade them!"

"I've been disillusioned with them for some time—"

"Well, do what you can..."

"All right, Jack, but there will be others, too..."

"Let 'em try... We'll be ready for them! Now, what have you eaten today?"

"Oh, Jack, I can't eat—"

"Yes, you can! You are going to eat—we both are—and then we're—um—you're going to bed."

"I sort of liked the way you said it the first time..."

Now, several weeks later, on Christmas day, things seemed a good deal happier. Although he was throwing the bash, Jack was fortunate because his cousin Phil, who'd been in Rio Verde since being a part of the back-to-the-land movement of the late sixties, was baking, underground, a pig on a hot bed of cedar and piñon coals—an ancient method of cooking called deep-pit. Phil and other convivial souls, the previous evening, had fired the wood, established the intensely hot coals, then lowered and buried the well-wrapped beast where it would remain for some eighteen or twenty hours until being exhumed late in the afternoon of Christmas Day.

So, as far as the main course went, Jack and Marnie, as hosts, were off the hook. But a million other details had to be addressed to meet the needs of some twenty-odd folks who were expected to be invading the interior of Jack's *casita*, not to mention Phil and his motley rabble who, despite rain, sleet, hail, or snow would be most comfortable proximate to their bonfire, adjacent to the deep-pit barbeque, located in a front sector of Jack's acre. Chairs, tables, tablecloths, extra dishes and cutlery, paper cups, eggnog, firewood, presents, wrapping paper, tamales, *biscochitos*, *piñon nuts*, dips and chips, libations, space for parking, etc., etc., all had to be rounded up and coordinated. Jack had to admit that his new telephone (and girlfriend) were very helpful. Blankets and sleeping bags were spread on the flagstone floor, in front of the woodstove to accommodate any kids or spoiled dogs (such as the famous Perkins and Boo-Boo) who would do well there. Soft chairs were reserved for Jack's mom and for Grandma Flo, also

situated not far from the warm stove, which Jack preferred to burn with its front door open, revealing its gaily dancing flames.

The first arrival was the *Esperanza* home van, driven by re-employed Nick Nighthawk Romero with Mayzee, and Hector who'd started eating again upon Nick's return. Mayzee's fingernails were extra-long and glossy and alternately painted red and green. She was only moderately upset about the lack of cell-phone reception in Rio Verde. Hector seemed very happy to be parked by the Christmas tree, which Marnie had managed to finish decorating that morning.

Next came Flo in her big, old, oil-burning Lincoln. Lindy had willed to her (along with most everything else) her nice, newer car, but the title change had not yet been made. She was closely followed by the van from the *Sueños* home, driven by a young employee who had brought Elsie and the very recently bereaved Arley Wellburn.

Right behind them entered Jack's big sister Clair (on time, for once), with their sightless mom, leading her to a chair situated next to Flo's. Cousin Phil's wife arrived with others, and soon the happy cacophony of mostly female voices led Jack, along with Nick, to seek refuge with the guys outside by the bonfire.

When a neighbor passed around a big jar of special moon-shine, distilled from local grapes, Jack was pleased that Nick declined. When a large, perfumed cigarette came around, soon thereafter, Jack spoke up for the younger man: "He can't...he's working. But he's comin' out for New Year's, or sometime, and we'll go down to the river and tear it up—"

"*Vaya! Vaya! Fuckin'-A!*" remarked the local guys, variously, pleased at the prospect. Jack did allow himself another snort from the jar and a couple of belts of the pungent *mota* (it was Christmas, after all) to better stiffen himself against the prospect of having his mom, sister, girlfriend, cousin by marriage, and sundry others, congregating within his sanctum.

This proved wise—things were worse than he'd feared!: "He was a chicken-hearted little boy...when Lassie and Timmy got into trouble on TV, he'd run into another room to hide. Of course that all changed later when he developed his ornery streak..." his mother was in the very act of saying as he reentered his warm house. The reaction of those assembled was an abundance of hilarity at Jack's expense. Marnie, in the manner of all new sweethearts or wives, had just asked that most dreadful of questions: "What was he like as a child?"

"Well, what I remember about him—" Clair was adding, but this was all Jack heard, having abruptly re-exited to return to the bonfire. Guitars, flutes, and fiddles had materialized:

En las noches de posada,

de posada

La piñata es lo mejor...

La piñata tiene dulces,

tiene dulces...

Cacahuates de a monton...

Dale! Dale! Dale!

No pierdas el tino...

Porque si lo pierdes

Pierdes el camino...

Usted tiene un nariz

De puro pepinillo!

*See appendix for song translation

Having enjoyed the Piñata Song, and partaken of more Christmas cheer, Jack again ventured inside. Clair, with her guitar, was softly singing Christmas songs from Scotland. Again, his mother was speaking, only very differently. Seated between her and Grandma Flo was Arley Wellburn, eyes red from crying. Vera Elbon held one of his hands, Flo, the other. “Arley,” asked Jack’s mother, “can you see the angels on the Christmas tree?”

“Angels? Christmas tree?”

“Yes, can you see them? I can’t, my old eyes don’t work, but I know they’re there...”

“Angels? Christmas tree? Where’s Mom? What’s happened to mom?”

“She’s in heaven now, with the other angels...She’s an angel now, too.”

“Heaven now? Angels? Christmas tree? What’s happened to Mom?”

“Well, you know, she was sick and hurting but she doesn’t hurt anymore. She’s in heaven, but she’s still in your heart, too. Your mama wanted you to have a new grandma, didn’t she? Flo is your grandma now...I can be your grandma, too...”

“Grandma, too?...many grandmas...”

“Yes!” contributed Flo, “Your mama wants you to be happy so she gave you two grandmas.”

“Happy? Many grandmas? What’s happened to Mom?”

“Arley,” continued Jack’s mother, “Do you like books? Stories?”

“Books? Stories?”

“Yes! Flo tells me that Elsie is over there reading a book...a story...”

“Books...stories...What’s happened to Mom? Angels? Heaven? Many grandmas?”

“Now Arley, it’s true that your mother has died. We all will die someday—it’s the Good Lord’s plan for all of us. I believe that you will be together with your mother in heaven after you die. I loved my mother too...Clair is singing a song that she learned from her. I will be happy to be with her again when I die. But now, Arley, I want you to listen to this story...”

“Listen? Story?”

“Yes! Now once upon a time, there were two dogs named Perkins and Boo-boo.” At the mention of his name, Perkins, asleep by the fire, languidly opened an eye and raised a battered ear.

“Perkins? Boo-boo? Many dogs...”

“Yes! Perkins and Boo-boo were, for the most part, good little dogs but sometimes they were tempted to be naughty. Now, one year, at Christmas-time, they had gone shopping to buy a Christmas present for Grandma Flo...”

“Shopping? Many grandmas? Christmas-time?”

“Yes! Now Perkins wanted to buy Grandma Flo a brand new sailboat, but Boo-boo felt that an English sports car would be more appropriate. The problem was that they had only three dimes and a nickel, between them...”

“Many dogs...Three dimes...Perkins? Boo-boo?”

“Well, yes. They gave it a lot of thought and discussion, using dog language, but in the end, what do you think they did?”

“What did they did?”

“Those naughty, naughty dogs decided that they would become pirates and steal a sailboat for Grandma Flo. They knew that it would be a very naughty thing for them to do, but they loved Grandma Flo so very much, that they decided to go ahead with it, even if she got after them with her fly swatter!”

“Naughty dogs! Naughty, naughty dogs! Fly swatter!” echoed Arley. Now Grandma Flo was chortling; Hector, Elsie, and the entire gathering were laughing too. Perkins and Boo-boo jumped to their feet, excitedly barking, adding fuel to the merriment!

Feeling a little misty, Jack went out, yet again. He was glad that Lindy Wellburn had chosen to be simply cremated; seeing his mother in a coffin might have been even more traumatic for poor Arley.

He marveled at his mother’s compassion and natural ability to assuage a troubled mind. She had, as he’d feared, heard of the horrid abuse on the TV news. She’d joined the conspiracy to keep Lindy in the dark, and had focused her great faith via prayer. What a cruel and rotten place the world could be, that an angel of kindness, such as she, should have to know of such things. Then again, Vera and Bob Elbon—Jack’s dad—had, for some years, been volunteer E.M.Ts in the rural interior of Florida. On night runs, they’d coolly dealt with the most shocking of human conditions. She’d also been a librarian in the worst parts of inner-city Cleveland, refusing transfers to safer locations. Like Flo, she’d truly been an in-the-trenches warrior.

Cousin Phil was not Vera Elbon’s favorite nephew. This was a likely factor in his preferring to remain outside, in the cold, with his cronies. The main cause of the friction was an

incident that had occurred many long years earlier at a Sunday school picnic. Members of the Methodist Church of the Cross, back in East Cleveland, repaired annually to Camp Klein, a lovely location in rural Lake County, Ohio. Following a softball game, egg on spoon and sack races, and similar events, the congregation sat down in the large, enclosed pavilion for a big pot-luck dinner. The big, glass windows of the building looked down upon a long, green field that sloped down to the verdant woods. Some of the older members of the M.Y.F. (Methodist Youth Fellowship) had come out, the previous evening, to camp. Phil's shoulder-length hair, and his abundantly endowed, bra-less, Jewish, hippie girlfriend, had not been unnoticed by the Sunday assemblage. Karmel was hard to not notice; she had a wild mop of vivid red hair, a radiant, stoned smile, and an over-developed shape. Following blessings by the minister and the deacon, the multi-generational group began their repast. Soon after, however, an electric murmur, all the more salacious by its whispered nature, coursed among the faithful. Far down at the bottom of the field, yet clearly in view of even the most elderly of eyes, Cousin Phil, in spite of it being daytime, had been clearly perceived to be coaxing Karmel into his sleeping bag. Ensuing ripples within the cloth envelope, however, indicated that sleep was not being pursued. Soon, as the undulations accelerated to spirited humping, the fabric enclosure resembled a very large, highly agitated caterpillar.

Hence, in a few short minutes of innocent passion, Cousin Phil had incurred a life sentence to his Aunt Vera's dog-house.

But, now, it was time to pull up the pig. Phil and others were shoveling down to where they could grasp the looped wire handles so that the noble animal, now very hot, tender, and intoxicatingly aromatic with spices (cumin, garlic, pungent red chili powder, cloves) could be extracted and laid onto a stout trestle-board of a table, to be unwrapped and allowed to cool some, before being brought inside as honored guest of the feast.

Hours later, after everybody had finally departed, Jack and Marnie sprawled, exhausted, on the blankets before the glow of the banked up stove embers. Lights on the tree winked and blinked. Jack had gotten his antique record player to spin, with a classic Tony Bennett Christmas album.

"So, you really think your mom likes me? You're not just saying she does?"

"Oh, I know she likes you—a lot! That's what worries me..."

"Well then, you'll just have to keep on worrying, buddy..."

"Yes, black clouds of doom threaten—OUCH! Do that again and I'll spank you!"

"Promises, promises..."

30 — UNDER GUNS

When Ahm had returned to work, following his mother's demise, he'd spoken to Jack: "Vee are under guns, now, from state auditors and federals, too. Vee must do vell now, and go on to passing through beeg audits coming in March. Thees vee must do or vee all are een soup lines. Vee vill postpone your pa-lay, until spa-reengtimes...Ees not your fault vhat so ever...but I must pull streengs to haf you verking again...this vill be best, please...please to continue vith musical activities in afternoons, een program areas, but I can no longer auterize overtimes in geem, until spa-reengtimes. Then theengs vill be much easier, vith quarterly monies vee can use before new fisical year."

"Uh, sure Ahm...real sorry about your mother. And thanks for getting me working again."

"Ees no problem. Now go.

Coincidentally (or perhaps not) Meryl Hope-Gurule had finalized the sale of Vibrance Special Home Services, Inc. to a new concern, mere days before the news of the (alleged) abuse of Arley and other male residents of the *Sueños* home became public knowledge. The more than one hundred graphic photos, seized by the New Mexico Highway Patrol at the home of Ed Nossling and his roommate Carlos Robledo, would seem to establish beyond all doubt that the outrages had been perpetrated during the period that the two had been employed by Vibrance, at *Sueños*.

The fact that Robledo had been terminated by the Hospital and Training School, prior to being hired by Vibrance, had not been unnoticed by Roberta Calderon and others of the Family and Provider Association. Would their loved ones be vulnerable to similar horrendous abuse, following their transfers from the large facility? Wouldn't monitoring be more effective in a centralized location?

Marnie's views on the absolute necessity for the hospital's total closure had been quite altered. Now she willingly signed a letter, drafted by the association, requesting that the Governor meet with them in Pecos Bend to hear their concerns.

BLOOEY! BLOOEY! Governor Joseph Martin's Benelli Super Black Eagle 3 shotgun roared in the direction of a covey of game birds that had been roused by the dogs. "I think I got one or two at least!" Half an hour earlier, at the Cerro Montosa Game Ranch, hired helpers whose origins were mainly from locations south of the border, had roused sleepy, cage-raised chukar partridges from their enclosures, and skillfully tucked them down into little hollows, beneath tufts of tall grass. When the contingent of expensively outfitted sportsmen marched down into the fields, the dogs were sent forward so that the bewildered birds would be aroused from the brush to be blasted, to the great joy of the mighty hunters! Eric Cardel, who had attended law school with a nephew of the game-ranch owner, had secured an invitation. His actual interest in the shooting

was nil, but he was more than ready to engage in the back-slapping conviviality that followed in the little clubhouse, as bagged birds were counted over tumblers of Glenfiddich.

Governor Martin enjoyed the hearty company. Regarding Eric and his unassuming affability, he thought to himself that he certainly did like the cut of the young man's jib. Eric patiently waited to be asked about himself.

"Well, sir—"

"Please—it's Joe..."

"Yes, sir—um— Joe...I've recently launched a company—a non-profit, actually—whose mission is to provide much-needed guardianships for our many citizens who are without involved family, or who cannot represent or speak for themselves."

"Indeed?"

"Yes, Governor...in spite of the strides made under your administration, with the current move towards deinstitutionalization, and the swelling needs of our veterans, we saw the need and are hoping to do what we are able to defend the interests of the most vulnerable among us..."

"Oh, yes...I've heard about your new corporation. Doesn't (retired state senator) Harry Wilkins sit on your board?"

"Yes, sir—Joe."

"A grand man, Harry Wilkins...a grand old lion!" lauded the Governor, thinking to himself that he'd never encountered a shiftier skunk.

"Of course, 'Compassionate Conservators' is a completely apolitical concern," swiftly noted Eric, remembering that old Wilkins had been a member of the party of opposition to that of Governor Martin.

"Certainly, certainly! As it should—no—*must* be!" enjoined Governor Martin, trying to recall the nature of the cloud under which Harry Wilkins had been compelled to depart from public office—something to do with the race-track commission, hadn't it been?—"Isn't Mike Truesdale from New Mexico Citizens (bank) on your board as well?"

"Yes, we're lucky and honored to have him with us too..."

Governor Martin reflected far more kindly upon the banker, who had made a substantial financial contribution to his campaign, than he had of the slippery ex-senator. Yes, this young attorney/advocate who he, in actuality, had been briefed on, prior to the shoot, could be useful in some way or another. He wasn't sure exactly how yet, but it would come. "Come and see me in the roundhouse, won't you? Next week, say? I'd appreciate hearing your perspective on some issues that we are facing. Would you be free for lunch on Thursday?"

"Yes, Governor...Thursday would be fine."

When the Family and Provider Association finally received a response from Governor Martin, it came in the form of a letter sent by special courier:

While we can certainly appreciate the concern that you feel for your family members and for other hospital residents, the fact remains that a decision has been

made. Transitions, in keeping with the court order, will continue. May I assure you that new regulations, recently adapted by the New Mexico Department of Health, complying with guidelines set by the US Department of Health Education and Welfare, have gone into effect and will be strictly adhered to by all providers of community-based living situations. Further provisions, for comprehensive guardianships, for residents who hitherto have been underserved, are being actualized.

Your cooperation in supporting these transitions will be greatly appreciated by this administration, and, more importantly, by the people we serve.

Yours in service,
Governor Joseph A. Martin

The special courier, who hand-delivered the letter to Roberta Calderon and the association, was Eric Cardel.

31 — COMPLIANCE

As it turned out, head administrator, dithering old Dr. Elliot, who had remained absent for several weeks, never did return. Few asked why; the man had not been much liked. There was, however, consternation, as the grim reality sank in: moving forward into the new year, Joycelyn Raines (universally referred to as “Miss Big-Pants”) had assumed command.

Summoned to her office one day, Jack wondered why. In December, to his stunned disbelief, she’d instructed him to stick to “secular” holiday music (Jingle Bells, Winter Wonderland, etc.: OK; Joy To The World, Silent Night, etc.: No Go) so that they’d be certain of being in “compliance” with some state or federal guideline (which he’d made a point of ignoring). What now?

“Mr. Elbon,” she started, “it has come to our attention that you’ve been using puppets during adult programming. Puppets are not considered to be an ‘age-appropriate’ activity.”

“Well, our play has been put on hold. I can assure you that *it* certainly was an age-appropriate activity—”

“Possibly, but puppets are not. In order to reshape misconceptions regarding the people we serve, we need to be certain that they are treated as the adults they are.”

“Yeah, well, I’m all for that, but adults like silly stuff, too...”

“Possibly, but it’s essential that we pass the coming audits—”

“Why? They’re determined to close this place no matter what. Anyway, Ahm has no problem with the puppets...he thought they were funny as he—”

“Sweet shit! I’m running this freakin’ facility—for now, at least—not Ahm! And we *will* pass those audits! Now, if you want to continue your employment here, you will engage in only age-appropriate activities with our adult consumers!”

Sadly, Ben Rivers, the sightless singer with the magnificent voice, had been without what had always been his best friend—his radio—for many weeks, a seeming eternity. The power cord had been lost or misplaced and the batteries had run down. His overburdened staff (there were seventeen others living in his cottage) had failed to comprehend the radio’s importance to Ben. The supervisor was not an insightful person and figured that the TV and the radio in the common room were probably sufficient to the needs of all. As his despair and loneliness increased, his wrist biting did as well. More and more numbing medication was prescribed. In spite of repeated directives to the contrary, Ben was often left with the others to sit in the direct mid-day sun, bright enough even during the fall and winter months, to combine with the high levels of Thorazine in his system to turn his skin a shocking shade of purple.

Having obtained the OK from Ahm, Jack sought out the young man, whom he’d not seen for several weeks. Shocked by his weight loss, discoloration, bandaged wrists, and highly altered affect, he led the way to the canteen on a chilly afternoon. “What would you like, Ben—a hamburger? A milkshake? A slice of pizza?”

But Ben remained silent, seeming to prefer to engage in a continuous rocking motion. “Well, I’ll tell you what let’s do...we’ll split a big order of Aggie’s French fries, and we’ll each have a coke...is that OK?” Thinking that he heard a faintly murmured assent, he proceeded to place the order. Seating himself at the piano bench, Jack began to play. No amount of coaxing, however, was sufficient to inspire the young man to sing as he so joyfully had, during the previous autumn.

As their order came up, Jack contemplated the situation. In the course of his nearly a year of experience, working directly with over two hundred individuals, he’d come to realize that, too frequently, accepted generalizations about traits which supposedly occurred in most who fell within usual classifications such as microcephaly, Down syndrome, fetal alcohol, or, as in Ben’s case, autism, were misleading and often plain wrong. Elsie, for example, was a woman with Down syndrome who was highly verbal, in fact, able to read. Yet for every person he’d met with traits similar to Elsie’s, he’d come to know several with Down syndrome who showed no evidence whatsoever of such capabilities. Many had no verbal or receptive language capabilities at all. Such variance seemed to be also true of those who fell within the autism “spectrum”. A few were of high or normal intellectual capability. Some, like Ben, or the savants depicted in books or movies, had remarkable tunnel skills in certain areas. Others, sadly, seemed completely incapable of any sort of communicative interfacing at all—even with parents or family members—lacking even the ability to make eye contact. But such traits usually seemed ingrained and pretty stable; the change he was seeing in Ben was alarming.

Having finished the fries (Ben had nibbled only a couple) and his coke, Jack returned to the piano bench. After playing a bit, the canteen’s automatic doors whooshed open. To his chagrin, Jack saw a man with a clipboard enter, along with Joycelyn Raines. Was there no avoiding this harridan?

The door whooshed again—Oh, no! It was some of the same light-hearted contingent who, until recently, had been enjoying the uproarious puppet theatrics. Seeing Jack, a few rushed over. “Where’s Mr. Sneezy? Where’s Mrs. Goozle?” came queries about the now-forbidden paper maché personalities.

“Um, er...they couldn’t be here today...they had to be...um...somewhere else!...You see?” explained Jack lamely.

Jack had made some good progress in paying off his water well, but he still owed a good deal. Although it was irksome, the pragmatic side of his nature urged him to keep his cool; he needed this job.

“I wanna hear the eetnsy-weetnsie spider!” Marsha, an emphatic imp of some three feet in height, whose voice was far louder than one would expect from one of her truncated stature, was requesting her favorite song.

“Well, Marsha, you see...um...we’re going to try another number instead...one we’ve practiced before—in fact, I’m hoping Ben Rivers will help us sing—”

“I WANNA HEAR THE EETNSY-WEENTSY SPIDER!!”

“Well, ya see, Marsha, we were just getting ready to—”

“I WANNA HEAR THE EENTSY-WEENTSY SPIDER!!!”

“Alright, Marsha...you win. You win. But we’re going to do it a little bit differently today—OK?”

“Why?”

“Because we are, Marsha. Because we just are. Here goes!” Jack sat for a few moments, marshaling his thoughts. The canteen was quiet. Joycelyn Raines and the man with the clipboard looked on, wearing severe expressions.

Following an introductory arpeggio, Jack began singing new lyrics, to the familiar tune:

Well, the minuscule, diminutive arachnid,

Ascended the H₂O effluence

Downward descended the precipitation

To sluice the arachnid elsewhere

Then emerged the largest and only star in the solar system

Which evaporated the precipitation

And the minuscule, diminutive arachnid,

Ascended the H₂O effluence, in recursion!

With a flourish of ending chords, Jack’s rendition seemed to have given nearly universal satisfaction—even the man with the clipboard was smiling and clapping! Joycelyn Raines was rolling her eyes and clapping, half-heartedly, but, incredibly, Jack had heard laughter bubble up from deep within Ben Rivers. Seizing the opportunity, he launched on into the music to the first song he’d written, for the people from the group homes, last spring.

“OK, Ben, everybody, I’m gonna sing a line and you’re all gonna sing that same line...are ya ready?... Are ya REALLY READY? OK!”

If you can’t run

Keep on walkin’

If you can’t roll

Keep on rockin’

If you can't sing

Then keep on squawkin'

But you gotta keep on...

You gotta keep on...

The music was over. Jack and Ben were now alone in the canteen except for Aggie and the girls who were getting ready to close up.

"Mr. Jack..."

"Yes!"

"Mr. Jack..."

"Yes, Ben!" Jack answered, overjoyed that Ben was speaking (in addition to singing) again.

"My radio..."

"Your radio?"

"My radio..."

"What about it?"

"Can you fix it?"

"Can I fix it?"

"Yeah, it needs batteries and a cord..."

"Of course I can fix it. We'll do it right now! Why didn't you ask me before?"

"Because you haven't seen me since before Christmas..."

"Well, of course—that's true! I'm real sorry! I've been trying to help my mom, some...she's blind like you..."

"What's her name?"

"Vera...I'll bet you'll meet her...I want you to!"

"My mom's not here..."

"No, I guess she's not. Hey, I'll fix your radio, but will you promise me something? Will you try to stop biting your wrists?... Ben?...Will you try to stop biting your wrists?"

But Ben had become silent again.

32 — EXCESS

Judge Giles was in a damn box and he knew it. Times like these, he wondered why he'd ever wanted to be a judge! This could have been so easy—should have been so easy—except for this strutting punk of a defense attorney who had emerged to defend Nossling and Robledo. He knew they couldn't afford him; some S.O.B. or another had clearly engaged him to challenge the search warrant that had been executed. The public defender he'd figured on, never would have challenged it—the warrant which had resulted in the arrest of those two pieces of human excrement who should be on a fast track to the State Pen! The hundred-plus sickening photos, which would have convinced any jury, he was now going to be forced to disallow due to a technicality. And who would the press and the citizenry and the cops, and likely his own friends and family blame? Him!—Judge Giles. It was always the judges who got blamed for being soft, even in instances like this, where there was no alternative. Could he step down on some pretext? Probably, but somebody else would just have to swallow the same bitter pill and preside over the new case that would, now, have to be somehow built by the overworked D.A. who wanted these two bestial creatures to be convicted as badly as he—hell—as badly as everybody in the whole damn county did! To think that he could have retired a year ago! Well, he reflected, as he put on his robe and prepared to face the ugly music, maybe they could still make it hot for the bastards...but it was gonna take time and plenty of the tax payer's moolah. And it could have been—should have been—so easy! What a hard goddess was Justice to worship.

At Dolly's, that evening, the mood was not happy. "Well, at least they'll be spending more time in the county joint," observed Nicholas. "My cousin Arturo was in there, and according to him it's pretty *feo*..."

"Nothin's too ugly for those two," responded Mayzee. "What was Arturo in for?"

"Well, believe it or not, he got drunk with some guys, and they tried to steal an outhouse...one of those big plastic porta-things? But there was somebody in it at the time, and they were too *borracho* to know..."

"Of course he was too drunk," snorted Mayzee. "He's always too drunk."

"Well, the small person had to spend most of the night in it, in the back of their pickup truck, 'cause they'd roped it in real good—but fast—just after they grabbed it—and their stereo was going real loud, and there was no muffler on the truck, so I guess they couldn't hear him. He was real mad and he pressed charges."

"If it was a crime to be stupid, your cousin would get the death penalty. But no one could be as stupid as that damn judge, tossing out those photos as evidence," Mayzee railed, fulfilling Judge Giles' prediction of how public sentiment would break.

"He had to, he said, because the search warrant did not include the name of the informant, as required by law," responded Marnie.

"Who do you suppose that informant was?" asked Jack. "Maybe they'll come forward..."

“If he or she doesn’t, I guess the D.A. will have to build the case in other ways. With all of the difficult to substantiate allegations of abuse that we constantly have to deal with, for once this seemed like an irrefutable case, with all of those photos. I could have just strangled that smug little attorney who was defending them! Where did he come from?”

At that very moment, over drinks at La Fonda, Meryl addressed Eric: “I could have hugged your brilliant little law school colleague... What are we paying him?”

“Nothing! He goes after flaws in search warrants like an infant goes for his mama’s teats! Speaking of which, I’m so glad you changed into that particular gown... maybe we should go out to the parking lot... I’d love to go after your lovely pair of—”

“Stop it! We’ll play, later. But you can’t mean he’s doing this pro-bono?”

“Oh, we’ll do him a favor in the future. But you can see, Ruggles is a useful sort of cur to keep handy.”

“So, this was the insurance policy you were speaking so highly of?”

“Yes... this’ll throw things into such a tizzy that no one’s likely to be thinking about Vibrance. And now that you’ve sold it...”

“—I can resign from the board of Compassionate Conservators and move over to the executive side...”

“Um, well—”

“Eric!”

“Well, I’m just not sure the time is right—”

“Oh, yes! The time is definitely right and if you think—”

“I’m just saying—that the board members—”

“Oh, don’t worry about them... I had Harry over for my risotto last week. Do you know, I think he’s a little sweet on me?”

“Well, who wouldn’t be, my darling, darling! Let’s order! The ‘Barrel Cut 1855 Ribeye’ looks good...”

A good while later that evening, Eric followed Meryl up the long driveway which wound to her spacious home. He hadn’t liked the idea of them going there, but Meryl had been insistent: “Of course I’m sure Howard’s away for the whole weekend! I told you, this is his dream chance to golf at Pebble Beach. And of course, Marcella and Andrew have started their spring terms at school.”

“We can stay right here!” he’d tried to convince her back at La Fonda. “It’s a necessary expense. The corporation will cover it—and I think I can safely say that the board members won’t bitch!” responded Eric, his hand getting friendly with Meryl’s warm thigh, beneath the table.

“No, Eric... we’ve smoked all the weed we had with us, and Babootchka has to have her medicine. Doctor Phaedra (Santa Fe’s most expensive veterinarian) was very emphatic about that!”

Eric had a fleeting, lovely vision of Babootchka, Meryl's obese Russian Donskoy hairless cat, down-field at the Cerro Montosa Game refuge. He'd far rather have at it, with his Stevens Model 555 over/under shotgun, than those poor cage-raised birds. What slobbs those big tough hunters had been—the Governor included! Once was enough for that shit. Golfing was dull, but one could medicate, and there was no chance of one of those boobs maiming you with an ill-handled shotgun. Still...Meryl and Howard's place? Pretty creepy...and risky, too. "Hey—we can just score some weed from Mario! He's five minutes away and he'll deliver! Then we can just stay here—"

"No, Eric...we're going to my house. *Come on...* I'll give you one of my '*specials*'...I'm just in the mood!" cooed Meryl, her hands, like Eric's, getting busy, south of the table cloth.

But now, as Meryl mollycoddled the grotesque Babootchka, whose long feline claws she had had painted pink, earlier in the week, at the groomers (how can you groom a hairless cat?) Eric re-questioned himself about his having agreed to be there. Still, Howard kept really superior scotch on hand and, after some treatments, he might regain the rosy mood he'd felt at La Fonda.

"Use my bathroom, sweetness...sorry, it's a mess, but you know where it is...I'll roll us a spliff—no—we'll use my new bong! I got this stuff from Phaedra's connect...it's called 'Heavenly Dreams'..."

"Well, don't get too dreamy...I've got '*plans*' for *you*..."

"And I, for you, my dream rabbit...hurry!"

"I need that little mirror...you know the one I like?"

"It's in there, angel-one..."

"Where?"

"Just look...with all my other stuff..."

Eric peered across the prodigious assortment of cosmetics that Meryl had piled over every square inch of the counters of her double bathroom sinks.

"It's not here..."

"In a drawer, maybe? Try there..."

Here it was...in a likewise, overladen drawer...on top of nail polishes of every hue of the magenta bands in the spectrum—amaranth through garnet. He'd have to clean it up some, though, before it could be put into service. Eric's eye was lazily drawn to an especially long, sharp-looking nail file wedged between the bottles. Its business end poked up some and, he idly noticed, without it really registering, the contrasting blue color that was worked deeply into its point and ridges...so different from all the reds. Funny...for all of her bad taste in cats and some other things, he'd never known Meryl to go in for blue nail polish, thank God...no, she...she—this blue—*BLUE-GRAY, ACTUALLY*—one might say—was *NOT* a color he'd ever seen her use...it was just not her style at all, one might, indeed, be inclined to say...but it *WAS* a color which he was now sure that he knew quite well—in fact, the *VERY SAME* unique, custom color of his vandalized BMW! Slipping the file into his inner jacket pocket, he slowly returned the mirror to the drawer.

"I've got a headache—I'm gonna split."

“A headache? You were alright a minute ago...smoke some of this. You know where the bar is...fix us a couple of drinkies...”

“No, I’m outta here. Later.”

“ERIC! HEY! WHAT THE F—”

33 — TRAGIC INCIDENT

Despite heated national controversies about Facilitative Communication, whose representatives Dr. Elliot had permitted to make their presentation of assisted, hand-over-hand spelling, a small number of the speech-language pathologists, occupational therapists, and special education teachers, who were employed by the Hospital and Training School, had bought into its supposed benefits.

“Who een right minds would t’ink that theese poor souls who lack cause and effects enough to moof spoon to mouth to eat, ven hungary, can spell complex thoughts on letterboard? Ees clearly coming from inner minds of these fa-cilitators, so-called, who are directing their hands.” Dr. Ahmad Mobasseri emphatically communicated this logical line of reasoning to acting administrator Joycelyn Raines, to the New Mexico Secretary of Health, to department heads at the facility, as well as to any and all within listening range of his deeply resonant voice.

Joycelyn, due to her previous differences with Ahm, and swayed by the fact that the Facilitated Communication lead-presenter had been an alumnus of the University of Texas at Austin—her own beloved alma mater!—chose to champion F.C. and to encourage the implementation of its methodology.

The Secretary of Health who, as usual, was up to his eyeballs battling the ravages of the state-administered brands of socialism inflicted upon the large Native American population living on the vast, increasingly barren reservations in the western part of the state, had more urgent imperatives. Unlike Ahm, the other department heads at the hospital were not keen on clashing with Miss Big Pants, AKA the “Texas Twister”.

“Why did they have to switch to artificial turf at the Dallas Cowboy’s stadium?” Jack asked, at an Adult Services pot-luck lunch. “Give up? Because whenever the Dallas Cowgirls were on the field, they had a tendency to stop cheer-leading so that they could graze!” Such is the (usually) good-natured joshing that New Mexicans indulge in, regarding their neighbors to the east.

Ahm and Marnie’s feelings toward Joycelyn, however, were less than good-natured. Marnie was no longer an all-out advocate for the total closure of the hospital. The horrid abuse at the *Sueños* home was not all that was altering her views.

The young DD tech, who had been on duty in the gym on the afternoon that Davy had bitten poor Rickie Rijaro, had resigned the following week to go to work for his cousin’s carpet cleaning company.

Davy had shown contrition and, partly due to ever-increasing dosages of Thorazine and other anti-psychotic meds, had remained docile through the holiday season and into the new year. When not upset, he was usually imbued with a pleasant and engaging personality. Staff turnover rates, especially in cottages with challenging “behavior” residents, were as high as ever. The cottage supervisor, or lead-tech Earl, could not always be on hand.

Thus, it had transpired that when two green staff members took Davy on an off-campus shopping trip one afternoon in March, the final, short chapter of his life had been written. During his waking hours, he was often in a sort of dream state due to the cocktail of meds combined with his psychiatric illness and developmental disability. That afternoon, Davy had been suddenly reminded of his cruelly abusive father by the sight of a retired, black gentleman and Air-Force veteran. Months of calmness snapped. Mr. George Collins, who'd seen tough times himself growing up in South Chicago, had carried a compact, light-weight .25 automatic pistol in his right pants pocket for the past half-century. His response to having a short but burly young man, with seemingly steel jaws, suddenly sink his teeth through his thin pants, the thin skin of the front of his left lower leg, and right on into his shin-bone, was swift. Scant moments after either tech realized that there was a problem, Davy lay deceased on the sidewalk in front of the Price Chopper grocery store.

This tragic incident, well covered by the news media throughout the state and beyond, added a new dimension that fueled growing opposition to the hospital's closure. Would it be safe for the public to have mentally disabled and disturbed people, with violent histories, living among them? Was it compassionate or safe for disturbed individuals to be away from the safety of the hospital campus? Inarguably, it had not been safe for Davy or for Mr. Collins.

The Family and Provider Association, which now included Marnie, Jack, Rickie Rijaro, and many other hospital workers, suddenly and unexpectedly, had new wind in their sail—the press, TV news, and talk-radio stations were now interested. Ahm, officially part of hospital administration, could not be an overt participant, but he was able to turn some wheels within wheels.

When the Association voted to undertake Marnie's suggestion that they band together to walk the many miles from Pecos Bend to the State Capitol building to insist on a meeting with the Governor, acting administrator Joycelyn Raines was ultra-peeved. "Who in the freakin' crap do they think they are, pullin' this?" she stormed at Eric Cardel, her pipe-line to Santa Fe. He had made it clear that the Governor wanted an unobstructed path to closure, and that she could rise, inestimably, in rank and power within state government, if this goal could be accomplished. "I'll shit-can 'em all!"

"Well, no, you don't want to do that. The union would get more involved and you can't keep workers from walking up there if they're on their own time." Eric's interest in mentoring Joycelyn was two-fold. She'd likely continue to steer more guardianships his way; and if closure could be smoothly effected, the Governor would be very pleased. His approval of Eric's abilities had already yielded a nice block of V.A. guardianships, and there were all of those many Navajos out west. These and other promising yields would be forthcoming.

This ill-tempered heifer from Texas was the only real sticking point that Eric could see. He'd just have to keep her calm. He only hoped he wouldn't have to ball her. He didn't mind a girl with a little "junk in the trunk" but this babe's can was simply too big. Why did she have to wear those spandex pants? He'd had to sneak her in and out of restaurants. He'd discovered that she sure liked to eat...what other cravings might she have?

34 — RABBLE ROUSER

“Well, you always were a rabble-rouser...”

Jack had just read, to his mother, a draft of a rather goading letter that he had written to Governor Joseph Martin, which he intended to also send to the *Santa Fe New Mexican*, the *Albuquerque Journal*, and to the Associated Press exhorting him to come to Pecos Bend to meet with members of the Family and Provider Association. “Do you know, Mom, I can see that closing the place is probably inevitable...it’s happening all across the country. A lot of people will suffer, and some will die, but it’s probably part of the painful evolution, in the progress of humanity, that these people are being integrated into the mainstream of society. It just really gets my goat that an elected person like Governor Big-Stuff can’t have the decency to at least meet with these legitimately concerned family members. I used to be dead-wrong in pompously thinking that anyone who would allow their son or daughter to be placed in an institution, or a parent in a nursing home, must be awful and heartless; but many of them are right there at the hospital every day, or as often as possible, humbly trying to help out, to help provide for their loved ones, and to try to make the place better for everyone. I’d have to say that most of these people are just about the finest I’ve ever met and I can’t stand to see them simply ignored!”

“Well, you know, Jack, many of them were likely pressured by their family doctors into placing their baby or child into the institution as soon as they were deemed to be defective. Do you remember the Milners from our church? With little Kenny who wasn’t right?”

“Oh yeah...I forgot all about them...”

“Well, they were convinced that it would be best—for Kenny and for the family—that he be sent to the State Hospital in Columbus (Ohio), which truly was a horrid place back then. They were later told that if they took him out of the institution, he could never return. Stan and Janet Milner started drinking to excess, out of guilt, and it nearly destroyed the family...remember when the other kids, Charlie and Francis came to stay with us one summer?”

“Yes, I do...”

“Well, that was the reason that we had them.”

Jack, yet again, realized the depths of his parent’s qualities, which he’d usually been too bone-headed to recognize when he was younger.

“Yeah, Mom, I’ll tell ya another story you probably never heard. That one summer—or fall, it was—the year, that I was a Boy Scout? We camped at the Geauga County Fair and built a rope bridge for people to walk over—or the other guys did—I’m bad at knots...”

“Well, yes, I think I remember you going. What a pity you only stuck with the scouts for a year, after you’d dreamed of being one for so long...all through grade school...”

Jack reflected that his Mom was right. As a teen, he’d been a dreadful quitter...cross-country, football, track, pony league—even band and orchestra—but he just replied: “Oh well, you know Mom, many of those boy scouts were really just vandals and thugs (actually true) who did swinish things in the tents at night (also actually true). You’d have quit too. I recall, though,

at that county fair, I did play reveille and taps for them on my trombone ‘cause I didn’t have the lip for the bugle—”

“What a pity, you never kept up with the trombone. All those lessons—”

“—IN ANY CASE, MOM,” broke in Jack, hoping to head her off regarding this topic, too (try sticking with the trombone in the sixties, after hearing Sam Cooke, and the Rolling Stones)—“in any case, one evening, we slipped away and went out on the midway. We rode some rides and saw the sword swallower and a ‘posing show’—”

“A POSING SHOW? WHO WAS THE SCOUTMASTER?”

“Never mind, Mom...it wasn’t even a hoochie-coochie tent...”

“I should hope not!”

“Nah, they wouldn’t let us in there, with our scout uniforms...”

“I SHOULD HOPE NOT!!”

“Although we did try—JUST KIDDING, MOM—anyway, out on the midway, we were enticed by a brightly painted sign depicting a happy little guy, named ‘Jo-Jo the Frog Boy’, gaily hopping from lily pad to lily pad. But after we paid and went into a flimsy structure, under a glaring bulb we saw only a very small colored man with a sadly twisted spine and with what they call “windswept” limbs. I know, now, that he had the same type of affliction that so many of our people at the hospital do. In any case, the point I’m trying to make is that this was about the same period that the Milners, you say, had Kenny committed. So maybe society has, overall, evolved—here in America, at least—within even my short, sweet lifetime.”

“We can hope so, anyway.”

“But on the way home from the fair, when we told Dad about it he said: ‘Do, you know, boys, people like us do not pay to see unfortunate ones like those exhibited. That sort of thing is for the lower classes, and I know you’ll pass it up the next time.’ He didn’t upbraid us or anything—he just appealed to our better selves.”

“A lot of your dad is in you, Jack, even though it’s hard for you to see.”

“Well, Doctor Mobasseri has given us the go-ahead to start rehearsing our play again...it should be ready by sometime this spring—May or June, maybe.”

Jack inwardly reflected that *many* things had, indeed, changed within his lifetime. It was hard to imagine that his first participation in a dramatic production had been in a miniature black-face minstrel show, staged by his Eisenhower-era kindergarten class at Caledonia Elementary School in East Cleveland. The tots had been compelled to work for weeks in preparing painted costumes which included brightly striped trousers and jackets for the little boys and similarly gaudy frocks for the girls. Polka dotted hair-bows, bow-ties, as well as outrageous top hats and bonnets served as head-gear, with the finishing “blacking-up” completing the effect. Jeez, between this sort of thing and having to periodically dive under their desks in anticipation of H-bombs from the Ruskies, was it any wonder that his generation was so neurotic? Such thoughts, however, he decided would be best to not delve into with his mother. Instead, taking his leave with a hug and a kiss, he set out, once again, upon his journey to Rio Verde and home.

As he traveled along I-25, in its generally south-eastward direction, he contemplated the long walk that he would likely be taking soon along this same route in the opposite direction—towards Santa Fe and the State Capitol roundhouse—with Mrs. Calderon and Marnie and their band of those opposing the hospital's closure.

Here was Glorieta pass, site of one of the least known, yet most pivotal battles of the entire American civil war. It was right over there, in those brooding rocks, that the Confederate invasion of the West had had its high-water mark. Although relatively small in terms of the size of the armies and the number of casualties, historians rank it as being at level one, with regard to its impact upon the war's outcome, along with Gettysburg and a few other battles.

Might Marnie, Mrs. Calderon, and their small but stalwart band of committed souls similarly derail a different sort of history? Perhaps not, but Jack was betting that they could at least remind the Santa Fe fatsos who they were workin' for.

35 — FLACK

Governor Martin:

We the undersigned caregivers, friends, and family members of residents of the state-administered Hospital and Training School at Pecos Bend feel that you owe us the respect of coming here personally to discuss the future of these most vulnerable citizens of New Mexico. We are concerned about the safety and lack of services being offered to the people who have been fast-tracked into privately run agencies. Recent incidents of tragic abuse and neglect make it seem apparent that the severely disabled people in question might be more safely monitored and provided for within the centralized location.

We wonder whether the setting at the hospital campus, so-designated many decades ago is not, in fact, the least restrictive, safest, and most enriching environment for many—not all—such has never been our assertion—of those residing there.

We are advised that it is within your power to cause the court-ordered mandate for closure to be reexamined.

You and Mrs. Martin were here at election time; it seems to us that we, and the most marginalized of the state's citizens, have not deserved your attention since then.

Beneath the appeal were three hundred and thirty-four signatures, topped by those of Jack and Marnie who had composed it. Copies were also distributed to all outlets of the news media.

Governor Martin, reading the letter, was not overly bothered. He was used to flack. Now in his second term, and with Presidential aspirations, he knew that posturing himself as an unequivocal social reformer would go much further than attempting to be a thoughtful compromiser. He was very aware that Pecos Bend was a small town, even by New Mexico standards, and that a total of three hundred-some signatures was, in actuality, quite a small number. But the real bottom line was that the Department of Health was way over budget as usual. Shifting much of the money drain of maintaining the old hospital/training school campus, with its extensive grounds, trees and buildings, over to the private sector should yield savings that he could later crow about. Plus, he had young Eric Cardel, seemingly a talented fixer, keeping a lid on the situation over there. No, he'd just fly low, stay the course, and continue to prep for the New Hampshire and Iowa primaries next year. He would, however, send the Secretary of Health over there. Let him earn his salt by facing these yapping jackals.

Joycelyn Raines had none of Governor Martin's talent for remaining unruffled. Upon reading the letter, which now embellished the editorial page of the morning newspaper, she'd been so

incensed that she'd smashed her cherished University of Texas at Austin coffee cup. Fortunately, Eric, who'd also seen the letter, had come immediately, knowing there'd be trouble.

"I'm ordering drug tests for every freakin' employee who signed that petition!" she raved, so incensed that she shook.

"That would be a really bad move, Joycelyn..."

"I don't care! I'll nail the piss-ants so hard and so fast that they'll curse the whores who gave them birth! I'll—"

"Yeah, suppose it backfires somehow, and *you're* compelled to take a drug test?"

"I don't do drugs."

"What about that big reefer we blew on Sunday night?"

"No one can force *me* to take a test...*I'm* the administrator here, although no one seems to know it. I...I..."

To Eric's alarm, Joycelyn, her face now blue in coloration, rapidly beat at her forehead with clenched fists, then burst into tears.

He deftly rose, then nimbly cracked open the door of the office. Thank God, the secretary was elsewhere.

"Come on Joycelyn, calm down. The Governor is *very* impressed with your capabilities—"

"He is?"

"Yes, he told me so himself, just last week. And do you know what else?" he asked, circling behind her and beginning to rub the back of her neck.

"What?"

"You're really very pretty when you're angry."

"Oh, bull-shit, Eric," responded Joycelyn, with a simpering little laugh.

"Here...take these Xanax," he ordered, "and we'll get out of here."

"But I can't just leave..."

"Of course you can! Remember, you're the boss!"

"Oh, Eric! Thank you so much for reminding me!"

36 — COUNTY COURTHOUSE

After a seeming eternity a jury had finally been seated, and the county prosecutor had set about his difficult task of proving Ed Nossling and Carlos Robledo to be guilty of the charges against them: assault and criminal sexual penetration perpetrated against intellectually challenged residents, while they'd been employees at the *Sueños* home. The flashy defense attorney who'd emerged from nowhere to represent the defendants at the pretrial, had handed the case back over to the County, citing previous obligations. He had, however, forced Judge Giles to rule that due to a flaw in the search warrant as it had been drawn up (failing to include the name of the informant) the hundred-plus sickening photos that had been confiscated by the State Highway Patrol from Nossling's Blue Lake home, were inadmissible as evidence. Due to the limited verbal capabilities of the men who had been victimized, it was now likely going to be quite difficult to obtain convictions.

Jack, Marnie, Grandma Flo, Nick, and Mayzee were among the many who had packed the very old adobe courthouse which, during the late nineteenth century, had tried some of the most notorious miscreants of the old West. Roger Henderson, the new owner and director of Vibrance, was in attendance. He'd proven to be a very concerned and involved boss, often coming around the homes on weekends and evenings, rolling up his sleeves and helping out when necessary. Notably absent were Meryl Hope-Gurule and Eric Cardel.

Jack (and others) observed with keen interest how the defendants appeared today. Ed Nossling, as Jack's supervisor, had seemed to be a pretty typical healthcare worker, fortyish with the beginnings of gray hair, usually dressed in scrubs while on the job. Jack recalled that, at the time, it had registered in the back of his mind that the guy was likely gay. But he'd known, and known of, so many who were righteously hard-working people, some of great genius and creativity (Tchaikovsky, W. Somerset Maugham, Tennessee Williams—Little Richard, for God's sake!—heros all), that he'd thought nothing of it. Today this defendant looked bad—in fact, really bad. Prison life was clearly wearing on him hard. His whole aspect sagged, stooped and drooped. His face was drawn and ashen. Jack could not but help feeling a wisp of pity. Carlos Robledo, however, had undergone a remarkable outward transformation. Gone was the long wavy hair and the roguish cavalier's beard and sweeping mustache. His skull, now bearing only very short-cropped hair and a pencil-thin mustache, was undeniably sleek, yet somehow feral. His eyes, for the most part, remained closed, or, at the most, opened only as slits shaded by long lashes. His basic aspect was one of resigned, rather bored, patience.

Multiple witnesses, including Rosa from the *Esperanza* home, and Nick's mother, testified that Carlos Robledo had explicitly represented himself as being a *Brujo*, or sorcerer, with demonic powers.

"When I reported that I had seen him smash one of the patients at the Hospital and Training School, he hexed me with a goat-curse," stated a former state employee who had worked with Robledo in Cottage Four, before the accused man had been terminated. "After that,

my wife ran off on me, and my kids left too. I got diabetes, then a tumor, and I would be dead now if I hadn't walked to Chimayo for my dirt." The man was referring to the old *Santuario de Chimayo*, a shrine located near the high road to Taos, which is said to have been built in the eighteen-hundreds over the site of a miraculous, buried crucifix. Since that time, pilgrims have trekked to the "Lourdes of America", on Good Friday or other days, to gather holy earth said to have healing properties.

"Is the man you are speaking of, in the courtroom today?" asked the county prosecutor.

"Yes, sir..."

"Will you please point to him?"

"Well, no sir...I don't think I'd better. He will curse me again and—"

"ORDER! ORDER!" roared Judge Giles, pounding his gavel as the courtroom exploded. Carlos Robledo's eyes remained closed and he appeared to be more bored than ever.

Following vigorous objections from the public defender, as to the questionable veracity of testimony from such obviously superstitious witnesses, the judge instructed the prosecutor to please move ahead.

As its next witness, the prosecution called Arley Wellburn. By special arrangement, and after an agreement pounded out with much difficulty between the defense, prosecution, and the bench, Arley and another purported victim would be accompanied by expert witness SLP (speech-language pathologist) Corrine Stepson, in order to attempt to add a professional's insights to the men's testimony. She was also to be given the opportunity to assist, but not coach, the two men in their testimonies.

In an address, which Jack and Marnie felt to be an erudite and professional statement, Miss Stepson explained that Arley, due to an ingrained trait of his disability, had a tendency to respond to most questions by repeating the question and to then persevere, repeating the words of the question over and over. She also cautioned that leading questions, of the yes or no variety, would invariably result in Max, who was to testify after Arley, agreeing with the questioner. "For example, for a person with such a disability, a question such as: 'You like chocolate and pickles on your fish, don't you?' Max will always answer yes. Conversely, to a question such as: 'You don't want a candy bar, do you?' the answer will always be no. Sadly, throughout the ages, people like Max or Arley have, too often, confessed to and been punished for crimes which they did not commit, paying dreadful consequences—"

"OBJECTION!" hollered the prosecutor. We are not interested in this expert's views on human history—"

"OVERRULED!" barked Judge Giles, "But do sum things up, Miss Stepson..."

"Thank you, judge. I only wish to emphasize that, due to the nature of their congenital disabilities, these gentlemen, who are about to testify, are completely without guile."

"Thank you Miss Stepson. Now, due to the very sensitive and potentially traumatic nature of the questions that the witnesses will be asked, this courtroom, with the exception of council, the jury, the witnesses, the expert witness, myself, the court recorder, the guard and bailiffs, and the defendants, will now be cleared."

“But, Your Honor—!” yelled members of the press, aghast at the directive.

“You, too. Out.” The defendants will sit over there, to the side, *keeping their eyes, at all times averted from the witnesses.*”

“Well,” opined Grandma Flo, outside on the sidewalk, “all I can say is, that in a sane country, the dirty dogs would’ve been danglin’ from the nearest lamp post months ago.”

37 — THE SECRETARY

Acting administrator, Joycelyn Raines, was a success-hungry gal. She craved accomplishment and advancement so that she could shine like a diamond in the eyes of her family and her old alma mater. Members of both the former and latter groups were quite content with her just being elsewhere. As a willing hatchet wielder, however, she was very well suited to her task of terminating many jobs and relocating many people. Eric Cardel, who had convinced her that he was a cornerstone of the Governor's administration, wanted to milk her for more guardianship referrals. If he could keep a lid on her explosive temperament until the facility closed, Governor Martin (after several bourbons, following nine holes at Quail Run), had hinted that he would be needing his help in Washington.

Although Eric had advised her to simply be away on the day that the New Mexico Secretary of Health was scheduled to visit, Joycelyn had convinced herself that everything depended upon her impressing the man. Dr. Edwin Pedregon was a fine epidemiologist, scholar, and teacher—a true intellect. His talents, however, as a politician or administrator were negligible. It was likely due to these failings that he'd been given his cabinet post. He was, however, an old friend and former colleague of Dr. Ahmad Mobasseri, whom he held in high regard. When the Governor strongly suggested that he spend a day at the Hospital and Training School at Pecos Bend, he visualized stimulating conversations with Ahm. He'd read Ahm's letter, attacking the validity of—what was it called?—augmented communication?—but he'd been besieged with other, seemingly greater urgencies such as an epidemic of death-dealing hantavirus (spread in rural counties by deer mice), infant mortality and alcoholism on the western reservations, undelivered supplies of essential vaccines and other medicines, and, even, recent emergences of bubonic plague in Rio Arriba County! In his rather woolly scholar's mind, he'd visualized himself in pleasant conference with Ahm, comparing theories, and reminiscing over times they'd served together at a large children's hospital.

Driving through the gate at 9:00 AM, he'd been stunned to see a small mob of folks with signs indicating that they'd been waiting for *him*, of all people! He knew, of course, that the residents were being transitioned into community-based homes, but the Governor had said only a little about the growing opposition, and he rarely looked at TV or read newspapers other than medical journals.

Dr. Pedregon directly sought refuge in Ahm's office. Apprised of this, Joycelyn Raines was livid! She steamed over to the Adult Services/Special Ed. building but the stalwart Myra thwarted her interference: "Doctor Mobasseri and the Secretary are in conference and cannot be disturbed. They have, however, asked me to inform you, and any employees who are not engaged in essential direct care, that a question and answer session will be held at two o'clock this afternoon in the P.E. room in this building. This invitation has been sent to all cottages and departments, and to the Family and Provider group—"

“Screw that! I’ve arranged brunch and a tour for the secretary and what in the hell is going on, him coming over here first, anyway?”

“I’m certain that you’ll have an opportunity to ask him at two o’clock this afternoon—”

But Joycelyn had already launched herself towards the door to Ahm’s sanctum; she gave one rap and entered. Over tiny cups of Turkish coffee, Dr. Pedregon had been showing Ahm a photo of his brand new grandson.

Joycelyn, now wearing a cheese-eating smile, addressed the Secretary: “Doctor Pedregon! What an honor! Do you know, we’ve been expecting you over at Admin., and I just wanted to make sure that you—”

Dr. Pedregon, with old-world courtesy, rose at once. “Miss Raines! I’m afraid I must ask you to please forgive me. Ahm and I go way back, and I knew that I could depend on him for an objective overview.”

“Well, we just wanted you to know that despite the accelerated transitions, which, by the way, are right on schedule, we continue to offer our clients the very best of not only direct care but professional and ancillary services—”

“Er, yes, Ahm told me about the musical that you are staging...”

“The musical?—oh that—um, yes. But some of our professionals are eager to show you some of the ground-breaking advancements which we have integrated into our programming. We are excited about our pilot program, utilizing cutting edge advances in ‘Facilitated Communication’, which opens incredible frontiers of articulation for individuals who hitherto had been thought to have no expressive language capabilities...”

“Yes, this is on the list of topics I am intending to review with you this afternoon. I am, however, more concerned with the Family and Provider Association’s perspectives on closure. Governor Martin indicated to me that there has been some opposition and I look forward to meeting with their representatives and with employees, this afternoon.”

“Well, to be honest, Secretary, these are people who are impossible to placate. You don’t need to feel obligated to subject yourself to their—”

“No, I will be meeting with all who wish to be present at two o’clock. When that meeting is over, I assure you I shall be entirely at your disposal.”

“Thank you, Secretary! As far as lunch—”

“I’m afraid that I’m engaged.”

As Joycelyn exited, the Secretary noted that her visit had not elicited a single utterance from Ahm, who sat, as inscrutable as Xerxes, gazing eastward towards Hellas.

Roberta Calderon, Marnie Fain, Union Rep. Joey Naples, the Mayor of Pecos Bend, and many others were ready to spew their bile toward Secretary of Health Dr. Pedregon at the 2:00 meeting. Something, however, in his aura, which was that of a genuinely dedicated healer, gave them just enough pause to give him a chance: “I am here to listen to your concerns and views, and I will endeavor to respond as best I am able to all of them, but first, I believe that I have news of a development that will be of interest to you. With Doctor Mobasseri’s assistance, I was this morning given a fair accounting of the situation here. Like Ahm and yourselves, I am

concerned about the ongoing health and safety of the people we serve. I can also appreciate the concerns of Mayor Upton and Mr. Naples, regarding job losses that closure might bring about. To these ends, I spoke for nearly an hour with Governor Martin whom, I might add, was kind enough to skip lunch. He asked me to please remind you that the closure of this facility was the result of a court-ordered mandate and that he, himself, was not—”

“Yes, but he could order a postponement and a review,” interjected Mrs. Calderon, “We know this—”

“Please...hear me out. I expressed my belief that there should be a safety net for those for whom suitable residential and habilitating needs cannot be readily met. I suggested that the Department of Health establish and administer community-based homes in this county, to be staffed—whenever possible—with presently employed caregivers, maintaining the continuity of care and services being provided by already established, familiar and trusted personnel. Governor Martin enthusiastically agreed to this proposal; it has been decided that a program shall be established with the capacity of accommodating between fifty and one hundred individuals in homes located off this campus...”

The crowded room erupted in a cacophony of excited voices. Far too many comments and questions flew at once for Dr. Pedregon to even begin to respond. Somehow a reporter from the regional newspaper had gotten in and his camera was flashing. All (especially Joycelyn Raines and Eric Cardel) were awed by the potency of a cabinet member’s sway with the mighty Governor. The union leader and the mayor were beaming! Many employees were relieved to hear that they might still have positions.

Others expressed outrage: “He (the Governor) wants this valuable land!”

“This campus belongs to these people! It was given to them in the nineteen-twenties!”

“Violent people will be loose in the community!”

“He (Governor Martin) wants to put a prison here!”

“It’s genocide!”

Others, like Jack, Marnie, and Mrs. Calderon, wore expressions of somewhat more measured skepticism. This announcement altered things. It had to be true, but what would it mean? Wouldn’t monitoring be more difficult with the people scattered? Couldn’t the existing hospital wing be used as the “safety net?” What about the gym, greenhouse, gazebo, wheelchair clinic, and warm therapy pool? Could they be still accessed by the people for whom they’d been constructed?

It took fully two hours for the belabored Secretary to patiently attempt to respond to the many voices. Yes, much would still have to be worked out, but no, ultimately there would be no more people living at the hospital campus.

Finally, Ahm, who most had come to respect during his eight-year tenure, put it into simple terms: “Vee haf, forever, been making the Model T’s and the Edsels. But the world has changed. Regardless of how vee feel, world ees no longer buying our cars, so ve must roll out a new automobile. Personally, I vish eet vere oterwise, but thees good man has gotten for us, the best deal vitch he vas able. Now go.”

“Where in the freakin’ hell is Tamara Keys?” fumed Jocelyn Raines to lead SLP Corrine Stepson, at 4:15 in the Speech-Language Pathology clinic. “She was who I wanted for this presentation!”

“Her little girl had an emergency at school and she had to leave.”

“And you let her?”

“Of course!”

“Well, sweet shit; that’s just fine. You knew full well that I needed her to demonstrate our Facilitated Communication pilot program to the secretary!”

“We haven’t got a pilot program. Just a tiny handful of very young, idealistic teachers and therapists who are convinced that there might be something to it, which I am not. The Secretary has had a long day; you must have noticed that he looked exhausted after being subjected to that inquisition for two hours. I suggest that you just let the poor man go home—”

“Screw that! He’ll be here any second. You’ll have to demonstrate.”

“Wrong number. But Amie, who also thinks there might be something to it, is here with Daniel from Cottage One—”

“He isn’t the client that Tamara was working with the other day! Christ on a crutch! How do we know that he—Oh!... *Hello Doctor Pedregon*,” oozed Jocelyn as the secretary entered with Ahm. “Please! Please sit down! We’re so excited about the cutting edge work that we’ve been pioneering here, that we knew you’d want a demonstration. The methodology of Facilitated Communication was brought to us by a graduate of The University of Texas at Austin—*my* alma mater, by the way—who told us about the new horizons of hope that it has generated for innumerable individuals, many with profound autism, who lack expressive language capabilities, and for their parents or providers who have finally been offered an avenue of communication—”

“Yes, I have acquainted myself with its purported benefits. May we please proceed? I’m afraid that I have a meeting in Santa Fe this evening—”

“Of course, Secretary! Now, Ms. Stepson has told me that we’ll just be heading right through this door and into an observation room where we’ll see one of our therapists using the newest interactive letter board with a non-verbal consumer from Cottage One.” From behind a one-way glass window that had been designed so that observers could be present without compromising therapies that were being administered, the small group gazed. A very young SLP was seated with her hand upon the hand of a young man who wore dark sunglasses. He displayed traits usually associated with debilitating autism; he rocked forward and backward, and at times would pivot his head rapidly from side to side. An oversized, brightly lit letter board, bearing the letters of the alphabet, was mounted on a stand before them. “Corrine,” Joycelyn requested, “will you please tell us what is happening here?—Corrine—?” Receiving no answer, she realized that the department head had stayed behind. She, Secretary Pedregon, and Ahm (who had remained silent as a stuffed owl) were the only observers. Making a mental note to upbraid the lead SLP later, Joycelyn plunged forward: “For individuals who are nonverbal, A.A.C. (Augmentative/Alternative Communication) devices can provide a way to communicate his or

her wants and needs. In some cases, these devices will help foster oral speech and language development. Facilitated Communication involves another person, called a facilitator. The facilitator, in this case, the young lady, holds the client's hand while he looks for letters and moves his hand around a keyboard or letter board. The facilitator does not type or guide the hand, but provides physical support for the forearm, wrist, or fingers, and provides positive feedback for correct responses. Eventually, the client will learn to move his hand on his own and will no longer need feedback or support. Let's see...there should be a switch here, somewhere, so that we can hear what she's asking him...ah, yes...this is it, I think..."

Joycelyn clicked a button and the therapist's voice, along with humming articulations which the man was eliciting, now came in over a speaker: "Do you like music Daniel?" The pretty, rather over made-up, young SLP, whose name was Amie, held Daniel's forearm and wrist, helping him to keep his fingers extended, as his hand moved from letter to letter. The letter board was a sophisticated electronic type; as the large letters were touched by Daniel's fingers, the letters appeared on a display above.

"Do you like music?"

Y-E-S-I-D-O

"What kind of music do you like best?"

I-L-I-K-E-C-L-A-S-S-I-C-A-L-A-N-D-O-P-E-R-A

"Is there anything that you wish you had or could do?"

I-D-L-I-K-E-T-O-B-E-I-N-T-H-E-S-P-E-C-I-A-L-O-L-Y-M-P-I-C-S

"Oh! Well, that's wonderful, Daniel! I'll talk to your supervisor...maybe you can be. What else?"

I-L-I-K-E-T-H-E-S-E-X-Y-S-T-O-C-K-I-N-G-S-Y-O-U-A-R-E-W-E-A-R-I-N-G

"Um...well, let's see...what is your favorite TV show?"

I-L-I-K-E-T-H-E-S-E-X-Y-S-T-O-C-K-I-N-G-S-Y-O-U-A-R-E-W-E-A-R-I-N-G

"Yes, but Daniel—I asked you—do you like TV? What is your favorite TV show?"

I-L-I-K-E-T-H-E-S-E-X-Y-S-T-O-C-K-I-N-G-S-Y-O-U-A-R-E-W-E-A-R—CLICK—

Joycelyn swiftly shut off the speaker. "So you see, Secretary, we are able to gain great insights using this methodology. While Daniel was clearly getting a little off-track, it would seem, we can now see about getting him enrolled with the Special Olympics, and see that he can access his favorite types of music."

"With all of his rocking and the turnings of his head, one has to wonder how Daniel was able to focus on the location of the letters..."

"Yes, well, that was all explained by the presenters. Some on the autism spectrum possess highly focused memories which allow them to recall locations of the letters even when they seem to be looking away. These capabilities are perhaps akin to the seemingly miraculous capabilities of those who are sometimes referred to as savants, who are able to tap into fonts of perception which most of us lack, enabling them to perform seemingly impossible feats of mathematical calculation, or to give exact date and details of thousands upon thousands of historical or other events."

Joycelyn, the secretary, and Dr. Mobasseri emerged from the observation chamber, rejoining Corrine Stepson.

“Theese are marvelous therapies, indeed,” remarked Ahm, speaking for the first time. “Lacking eyes to see, young man recalls locations of symbols on letter board.”

“Well,” countered Joycelyn, warming to her theme, “behind what might seem to be blindness to us, some on the autism spectrum may, in fact, have selective visual capabilities which enable them to, at times, clearly see—”

“You meesunderstand me. Ven I tell you zat Daniel is vithout eyes, I speak literally. He vas born vithout eyes. Is in his charts.”

Corrine Stepson allowed Jocelyn to open and close her mouth a few times, noting that her expression was similar to that of a newly caught fish gaping up from the bottom of a boat. Then, with a warm smile, the accomplished department head graciously addressed the esteemed visitor: “Thank you so much, Secretary, for giving us your time. This demonstration was a very small facet of what we do here. Please come again when you are able.”

38 — CHEATED HANGMAN

“Nossling is DEAD!?”

“Yes, Judge. He was found hanging in his cell early this morning,” replied the obviously rattled young public defender. He had found Judge Giles within his chambers during noon recess.

“Did he leave a note?”

“No, Your Honor—”

“DAMN! But, according to what you told me last week, you were under the impression that he was going to spill everything he could about Robledo, this afternoon?”

“Yes, Your Honor; he wanted a plea badly.”

“Did he make a statement to you?”

“Um, no, not in detail. He just told me he was ready to plead guilty and sing...he was, uh, not doing well in jail...”

“DAMN!!!” Why didn’t you inform me this morning?”

“Well, Your Honor, I’ve been at the autopsy ‘til now...it just finished up. I thought you’d want the results...”

“Suicide?”

“Well, no, Your Honor...not exactly...”

“NOT - - - - - EXACTLY?” (Judge Giles was now embellishing his remarks with florid, unjudge-like adjectives.)

“No, sir. The coroner found neck fractures, which he felt certain were not consistent with death from the torn sheets that had been used. And the height of the ceiling was really too low, and—”

Judge Giles pushed a button beneath his desk and his bailiff entered. “Call the D.A.’s office and let him know that court for this afternoon has been canceled, but that I want him in here stat. Then get the sheriff on the line for me, and then, the head of the detention center.

“DAMN!” he again thundered at the pale young public defender. “NOW THE MOST I’LL BE ABLE TO GIVE THE OTHER COCKROACH, WHO WAS OBVIOUSLY THE CHIEF VILLAIN, IS GONNA BE JUST EIGHTEEN MONTHS!—Unless *he* murdered Nossling?”

“Well, Your Honor, Robledo’s cell was in a different building, so—”

“DAMN!!!”

After Secretary Pedregon had announced the Governor’s new plan for a state-run program that would administer off-campus, community-based homes within the county, the Family and Provider Association had reconsidered whether they should go ahead with making their march to Santa Fe, as planned. But when, as Judge Giles had predicted, Carlos Robledo received a

sentence of only eighteen months of incarceration, it was decided to go ahead with the march, the main objective being to insist that the Governor reexamine the hospital's closure.

They were additionally upset to learn that, in keeping with the court order, the state had agreed that the former residents would no longer be able to access resources on the campus such as the swimming complex with its warm therapy pool, the gym, the greenhouse, the gardens, the gazebo, or the lovely chapel. The Protection and Advocacy attorneys (which, at the time, had included Eric Cardel) who had engineered the settlement, had stipulated that returning to the institution might be "traumatic" for those who had lived there. The wheelchair clinic, S.L.P. lab, and many other resources would have to be relocated as well. "I suppose they'll want to dig up all the poor souls who are buried in the cemetery and move them out, too!" fumed Mrs. Calderon who had a great knowledge of the hospital's history.

"Well," mused Marnie, "now that you mention it, lots of the people have relatives in that graveyard. I'd like to see them ban them from visiting *it*, to lay flowers, or to pay their respects. Maybe we can use that as a wedge to gain access to the other resources. Let's try to force them to at least make these concessions!"

"Like hell, it's too far for me!" declared Grandma Flo when Jack and Marnie expressed their concern that the march would be too much for the venerable woman. "It's just walkin'."

"Yeah Grandma, but a lot of those miles are gonna be right alongside I-25. We're going to have to be really careful that nobody gets hurt."

"You just try stoppin' me, buster," she responded to Jack.

"Well, we're gonna need people driving support vehicles, too, with drinking water, and in case of emergencies. Maybe you could do that?"

"With my cataracts, dear-heart, it'll be safer for everyone if I just walk, believe me."

"Well, if *any* of us get fatigued, we can just ride some of the way, Grandma—I might have to, myself," commented Marnie.

"You just do that, tootsie, but don't worry about me. I'll be walkin' for Lindy...and for Arley, and Elsie, and poor little Davy. I'll be walkin' all right!"

39 — LONDON CALLING

“Oll roight, moi son?”

“Derrick!” Where are you?” Jack Elbon asked his former band-mate whose voice, over a crackly line, jumped from his telephone like a page from a Charles Dickens novel. This, in itself, was no surprise; the terrier-sized cockney singer with the bulldog’s growl of a singing voice, as a young man had played the “Artful Dodger” opposite Davy Jones (later a Monkee) in the West End production of *Oliver*.

“Camden Town, laddie. Old Camden Town, and me ‘n Justin wuz just soiyin’ that you, yerself, ought to be ‘ovah ‘ere, as well. We’re puttin’ together a new cahst, to stage the play aftah we re’earse the music around the clubs, and we’ve found our othah principals, and we reckon we need yer.”

“Um, well, you know I’ve been doing something very different, for the last year, and—”

“Whot’s ‘er noim?”

“Ha, ha...well—”

“Come along—‘oos the bird?”

“Oh, well, actually, I *do* have a regular girlfriend, these days...”

‘Regulah’? You? Nevah!... Well, no ma’tah...bring ‘er along!...”

“Ha, ha...She’s very committed to her work here, right now...”

“Well, she can come la’tah.”

“Um, well, you know, me and Justin clashed pretty hard when we did *A Done Deal*—” remarked Jack, referring to a rock and roll musical he’d written and produced with his friend and collaborator, Justin Brumfield, prior to his returning to Rio Verde. It was this play that Derrick was suggesting they revive in London.

“‘Oinchent ‘istory, laddie... ‘Oinchent ‘istory! ‘Ee’s apologoized and you’ve apologoized, and we’ll ‘ave moi to keep the poice!”

“And how about you, Derrick?” asked Jack, without needing to be specific, referring to Derrick’s old proclivity for being one to go in for the sauce in a very big way.

“Oi ‘aven’t ‘ad a drop since O’ve lahst seen yer, laddie...Don’t miss it none, neither! Evah since the bloke in that home town ‘o yer’n ‘ad at me wit ‘is special, which passed roight beneath me most precious possessions, as you recall, Oi’ve remained scared sobah—word ‘o ‘onah! O’cose we don’t se’tle our differences, ovah ‘ere, with ‘ot lead, loik ovah there in Yankee-land...”

“No, you just stomp each other with hobnail boots. I think I’d rather be shot!”

“Ha, ha!” Derrick had referred to a drunken fracas in Cleveland which had resulted in a bullet passing through his jeans, miraculously missing his critical regions.

“You know, my mother’s here in New Mexico, now, too...”

“Roilly? Give Miss Vera a kiss from ‘er li’tle Derrick, and regards to the old Gov’nah as well...”

“Dad died, over a year ago, Derrick...”

“Roilly? Sorry to ‘ear it, oi am, truly, Jack...Me ‘n ‘im got along well, you recall...”

“Yeah, you had similar interests...bourbon and scotch!”

“Ha, ha! Oi suppose that wuz true enough. But what ya soi about comin’ ovah, Jack? Justin sez ‘e’ll send a ticket...”

“Do you know, I’m actually doing a play here, in a week, Derrick...It’s a very different sort of play...” As briefly as he could, Jack sketched the unique nature of the musical, and it’s participants, to his limey buddy. “I assume Justin wants us to do *A Done Deal* over there?”

“Roiht, mate, that’s ‘is basic oidear...”

“Fine, but from what I’ve told you, would you help me pitch, to him, the idea of us following up with this play? It’s really a blast and he could add a lot to it I know, and—”

“If it’s all yer music—”

“It is, though I’ve had help with some lyrics...and you can have your pick of juicy parts, but you’d be singing on nearly everything...”

“Then Oim yer boy, laddie...If Justin don’t fancy it, we’ll put ‘t on ourselves! Aftah the oth-ah one, o’ cose. Moinwoil, we’ll be re’earsin’ ALL ‘o our music in the clubs...that’s all se’ up a-ready...”

“Well, let me talk to Mom and Clair and Marnie...”

“Tell ‘em they can’t keep yer all to themselves...they’ll ‘ave to share ya’ around a bit some, too!” And that we’ll come to San’a Fe on our US tour!”

“Well, I have some pretty incredible new friends over in Pecos Bend...we’ll have to do a show, there too...”

“Whot evah ya’ say, Guv! We’ll perform in Pago Pago if ya’ wish! Just come on ovah, Jack...We’re all a li’tle old-ah, and hopefully, a li’tle wise-ah, now, too, and we can do even be’tah than we done before, Oi know it!”

“OK, Derrick...I’ll let you know soon...and tell Justin thanks...”

“Oll roight, moi sunshoin! Don’t let-cher meat-loaf, hee-hee!”

Putting down the phone, Jack’s eye fell on the “RIF” (Reduction In Force) notice he’d received the previous week. Having never been classified as a full-time employee, the new, state-administered, community-based homes offered no position for him; he’d be out of work at the end of the month.

40 — GLORIETA

Jack and Nicholas Nighthawk Romero were among the few who were able to actually walk all of the many miles from the Hospital and Training School in Pecos Bend to Santa Fe, but many others covered long stretches of road, as best as they were able. During daylight hours, there was a good-sized group moving along at all times, attracting much TV and news coverage. Nick had evolved into a good guitarist, with a great rhythmic sense, and the varied troupe stayed in mostly good spirits, although the weather was hot. Like marchers of all sorts, from the pious to the military, they sang—many of them more than they had sung in years. They were suddenly in touch with epochs of their genetic histories when music had to be played and not accessed through a device. Nick and Jack led them in oldies, hymns, and old folk songs like “Blowin’ in the Wind” and “If I Had a Hammer”. But at times, Nicholas was joined by others from his own Kewa pueblo and other proximate Rio Grande indigenous villages. The guitar was inverted, its back served as a drum, and their voices rang out with lusty, unison singing. Jack remembered hearing that Igor Stravinsky, composer of the *Firebird* and *Rite of Spring*, when visiting Santo Domingo pueblo (the Spanish name for Kewa) had been moved to tears by what he heard.

Jack’s cousin Phil had sympathetic hippie friends with a big house and large shady yard in a venerable town located next to the route of the journey. They’d invited the weary walkers and their motorized supporters to rest awhile. It was there, late on the first afternoon, that “The Second Battle of Glorieta” was fought!

The town of Glorieta sits close to the site of the battle of Glorieta Pass where Jefferson Davis’ bid to conquer the western states, clear to the Pacific, was foiled. Crazy as the plan seems today, if the Confederacy had taken control of the then-thriving gold and silver mines of Colorado, Arizona, and California, its war machine might have been vastly better funded. Fort Union, not far to the east, with vastly needed supplies and armaments, seemed an imminently achievable objective for the mad, frequently drunken, Confederate General Sibley. By a fluke of war, a hopelessly lost union division stumbled upon the rebel army’s nearly unguarded supply depot with its herds of cattle and horses, tents, and ordinance. Once it was destroyed, Sibley’s army, which consisted largely of Texans, was forced to crawl clear back south to San Antonio, enduring great privations passing through *El Jornada del Muerto*—lower New Mexico’s “valley of death”.

Grandma Flo, with her dogs, had walked bravely for many miles. But, as the journey wore on, Perkins had developed a limp. Using this as a reason to avoid affronting the old lady’s pride, Marnie had coaxed them into joining her in the relief car. Mere moments after they’d pulled into the shady haven of cousin Phil’s friends’ property in Glorieta, Boo-Boo met the emu.

Depraved Roman emperors could have hardly matched two more game and combative animals. Boo-Boo was a rangy flea-bag consisting mostly of ribs, teeth, battered ears, and long, long legs. The emu, who had slipped out of a neighbor’s neglected gate, was charcoal-gray, with red eyes that radiated hate. By no measure a lady, she was a neighborhood bully who had never

been bested. Her tiny, ridiculous wings were useless, but her dagger-like beak and massive talons were capable of awful damage. Hunched down low, she made the mistake of stealing up behind Grandma Flo. Extending herself to her full height of five and a half feet, she made ready to make a cowardly strike towards the old lady's back. A brown blur shot off of the back seat of Marnie's car and sailed into the powerful bird. The result was a cyclone of animal violence that exploded in the midst of the gathering, careening and bouncing like a pinball off of many people and objects. Refreshments and sandwiches, on a nicely laid table, flew in every direction. Nick's guitar, leaned against a tree, was smashed, perhaps irreparably. A TV camera was sent crashing. Women screamed and children cried; men seemed helpless—the maelstrom of the battle moved too quickly! Only at the beckoning of the hell-bird's owner, who'd become aware of the fracas, did "Princess"—now missing much of her plumage—retreat to her home up the road. Beneficiaries of the battle included Perkins and other neighborhood curs, several chickens, and a cat, all of whom swiftly devoured the remains of the lovely repast. It was unanimously decided that the day's march was over; they would resume from that location, early the next morning.

The pilgrimage took two and a half days. Early Monday afternoon, the procession wound its way up St. Francis Drive, east across Guadalupe Street, then right on into the rotunda of the State Capitol Roundhouse. Its number had swollen to nearly a hundred people! Chants rang through the historic building, demanding that Governor Martin come down to face the assembly. Obtaining no response, some of the more unruly spirits outflanked the capitol guards and ran up the many stairs to the Governor's aerie—an office on the top floor—above the legislative chamber. Some of them were large, angry men of the pueblos who had been refreshing themselves along the way with more than water or Gatorade. As a result, the diminutive secretary, alone in the office, was quite alarmed by their sudden presence: "I told you," she repeated, "the Governor is not here today—"

"Well, where is he?"

Somewhat shaken, the woman replied: "He's down in Stanley, I believe—"

"—Stanley? Down by Moriarty? What the hell is in Stanley? There's nothing there—" At that point, the Capitol guards stormed up and the unwelcome contingent was ejected from the building.

Meanwhile, down in the rotunda, Jack, Marnie, Mrs. Calderon, and others took turns at the lectern, reading statements detailing why, in their view, the hospital should remain open.

Of all the media coverage that the march received, however, no aspect received more attention than did Boo-Boo's battle with Princess the emu, dubbed "The Second Battle of Glorieta".

41 — EVERYTHING THAT YOU FEEL!

After all of the months of delays, the feverishly anticipated evening had finally arrived for the debut performance of the dance musical: *Everything That You Feel!* The plot and dialogue had evolved with input from all of the play's participants, some, like Davy, now departed. Rickie Rijaro had outdone herself with the imaginative scenery, and Nicholas Nighthawk Romero's choreography involved ambulatory and wheelchair seated participants alike. The new owner of Vibrance, a warm man named Roger Henderson, was from an entirely different mold than had been Meryl Hope-Gurule; he'd encouraged and aided his staff and residents in being regular attendees at the weeks of afternoon rehearsals. Grandma Flo's daily involvement at the *Sueños* home had convinced Elsie that her situation there was now happily secure. She, Hector, Arley Wellburn, Jim Gallup, Laura Yazzie, and even Che-Che joined Ben Rivers and others from the Hospital and Training School as actors, dancers, or as musicians in the special orchestra. The mayor of Pecos Bend had made the town's event center, with its superior stage and seating capacity, available for the performance. Most of the town and also people from as far away as Santa Fe, Las Vegas (New Mexico), the Rio Grande Pueblos, and Albuquerque were in attendance. Not surprisingly, Governor Martin was not present.

In specially reserved front row seats sat the mayor, Grandma Flo, Vera and Clair Elbon, Jack's niece Lucy who had flown in from Ohio, Nick's mom Erlinda, and Dr. Mobasseri with his wife and daughters. A very proud and only slightly tipsy Maxine Rivers, Ben's mom, had come over from Topeka, Kansas. In the back of the hall, also somewhat lubricated but lending highly enthusiastic support, sat Nick's cousin Arturo and his fellow blithe spirits. Jack's cousin Phil and fellow rustics, from up-river at Rio Verde, were additionally effective clagues.

The colorful event program had been designed and hand-printed by participants of Rickie's wonderful art programs:

EVERYTHING THAT YOU FEEL!

A Dance-Musical for people of all abilities.

Music and Dialogue: Jack Elbon with play participants.

Choreography: Nicholas Nighthawk Romero with play participants.

Scenery: Rickie Rijaro with play participants.

Adaptive prompts and verbalizations: Corrine Stepson, SLP.

Lighting: Earl Cordova and Frank Tafoya.

Cast of Characters:

Hector Marquez, *himself*
Mayzee Flores, *herself*
Rockin' Benny, *Ben Rivers*
Mr. Fuzzywhistle, *Jack Elbon*
Rosa, *Tilda Castillo*
Elsie Giron, *herself*
Arley Wellburn, *himself*

Following a few words from the mayor (up for re-election in the fall) the lights dimmed, the crowd grew hushed, the band played, and the curtain rose!

I DON'T SPEAK (*sang the singers and dancers*)

With the same words, you do...

But everything that you feel....

I can feel too...

I can feel it, feel it, feel it, feel it too!

Yeah, I can feel it, feel it, feel it, feel it too!

I can't hear....all you're saying to me

But we're the same...

We want to be happy and free...

Wanna be, wanna be, wanna be, happy and free!

We Wanna be, wanna be, wanna be, happy and free!

And if you'll look into my soul's window, look into my smile

I can tell you all about me, you can learn to read my style

And everything...

That you feel...

I can feel too...

I can feel too...

I can feel too!

I don't ride...

In a fat limousine

I'm not on the cover...

Of a glossy magazine

I don't live...

In the south part of France

I don't pose for photos....

Wearin' just my underpants!

What do I have?

Just this! Just this! Just this!

What do I have?

Just this! Just this! Just this!

I've got a voice and I can sing

I have hands and I can play

I have feet and I can dance

I've got something you might need

If you just give it a chance

I've got a heart...

And I can love...

I've got soul...

And I can feel...

Everything that you feel....

I can feel too...

I can feel too...

I can feel too!

Earl's rainbow of lights dimmed; the scenery shifted, revealing a hum-drum kitchen with stove and fridge. Hector, in his wheelchair, perceived a red light, remotely activated from off-stage by SLP Corrine Stepson. This was his cue to press an adaptive switch that activated a recorded voice which put into words some thoughts that he may have had: "After I came *here* to live—the place that I came to after I lost darling person—I became one of the ones who make the music. It was the only time that I was ever able to *give something* to other people...something that the world loves and needs, instead of always having others doing everything for me. It saved my life...I had decided to die.

Mayzee (who, as an actress had proven to be a fine ham), was happy to caricature herself, with incredibly high hair and heels, and chrome-plated fingernails. She shook her head sadly, regarding Hector: "This one—he don't wanna eat *nothing!* And he is losing weight fast! The doctors don't know *what* to do with him. They'll probably tube him. At least with the stomach tubes, they're easier to feed..."

Rosa had no inclination to be on stage, but a talented lady named Tilda had been found to assume her kind persona: "Well, eet has to be a beeg change for Hector, coming here all of a sudden to live with new people in a whole new setting. He is now apart from someone who was very dear to heem...it has to be hard. The way these poor keedos get bounced around, from place to place, eet ees a pity!"

And so, the premise was set for Hector's story, borrowed largely from reality, which comprised the main theme of the play. As Hector expressed his abject loneliness, the music agreed:

It's a beautiful day...

Outside the sky is blue

Spring's love is in the air

No one should have a right to feel unhappy

But I do...

It's a beautiful day

Clouds are drifting by

And birds are singing too

But somehow I can't hear them,

'Cause there isn't any you...

Perhaps Ben Rivers knew that his mother was in the audience; his plaintive singing had never been more heartfelt.

As Hector expressed his dislike of being left by the television, huge marionettes with grotesque likenesses of Jerry Springer and Dr. Phil appeared within a large screen and proceeded to batter each other à la Punch and Judy.

Part of the play was a show within a show, borrowing a technique often used in old MGM musicals. Jack, as the director of a spring concert, assumed the persona of the pompous, stuffy "Mr. Fuzzywhistle", complete with a black frock coat, white shirt, and pince-nez spectacles with a ribbon attached.

As the special-needs band (which had been augmented through the drafting of some local, talented pros) was wailing on a soulful sort of R&B jam prior to rehearsing, the outraged Mr. Fuzzywhistle stormed onto the stage, furiously waving his baton: "Cease! Cease! Immediately! We'll have absolutely no more of this DREADFUL ROCK AND ROLL MUSIC! We must commence rehearsal for our Spring Gala musicale—"

Ben Rivers had to protest: "But, Rockin' Benny's in the house—"

“Impossible! Impossible! At our Spring Gala, we will be performing compositions by Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, Maurice Ravel, Claude Debussy, and contemporary selections—”

Mayzee’s cell phone, at this point, ripped out with a dreadfully obnoxious pop-song serving as ring tone:

WORSHIP ME SLAVE-BOY...

COME BE MY BOY-TOY—

“—Come on now, Tiffany... spill! Who else was there? You’ve, like, *got* to tell me...I haven’t been this bored since Chuck’s sister cornered me with details of her college curriculum—no, I am *not* kidding you—her *college curriculum!*—”

“HERE, HERE! Young woman! Turn off that mobile device at once!”

“Call me right back, Tiffany...Really! Can someone please tell me where the lady’s room is? Thank you very much!” (exit, Mayzee, stage-right).

“And now,” Mr. Fuzzywhistle resumed his directions to the orchestra, “the adagio from Swan Lake, giving careful attention to the pizzicato, counterpoint, and pianissimo...a-one, and a-two and—”

Audio, from off stage-right, of loud, rude, plumbing noises swirling over Mayzee’s ring-tone:

WORSHIP ME SLAVE-BOY (*GURGLE, GURGLE, SPLOOSH, SLOOSH*)

COME BE MY BOY-TOY (*GURGLE, GURGLE, SPLOOSH, SLOOSH*)

Mayzee, still off-stage, gave forth with the long scream of a tortured soul: “MY PHONE! MY PHONE! I dropped it! It’s been flushed! I’ll get it!” (More gurgling noises and struggles—much laughter from the audience—“I’ll get it!” (*Gurgle, Gurgle, Plunge, Plunge, Sploosh, Sloosh*)—copious water showered in from off stage-right—a toilet seat lid and plunger followed, causing Mr. Fuzzywhistle to leap in avoidance. A bedraggled but triumphant Mayzee appeared with a toilet seat around her neck, waving her recovered phone: “I’VE GOT IT! I’VE GOT IT!” (into phone) “Now, what was she wearing—Tiffany?—TIFFANY!?” (Wailing in anguish) “OH MY GOD—I’VE DROPPED MY SIGNAL!”

And so went the play, with lots of music and dance interspersed— appropriate to various situations—some serious, some absurd.

Eventually, after the intermission, the time came for Hector to activate the switch again, which gave him his “voice” which announced: “After weeks of practice, Mr. Fuzzywhistle has us ready for the Spring Show!”

The curtain went up on Rickie’s dazzling, flowery set.

Mayzee, with one arm in a sling, wearing a neck brace, and with an improved attitude, assisted members of the orchestra (including an enthusiastic Hector), with playing instruments.

After a pretty instrumental piece, Mr. Fuzzywhistle, beaming under the applause, turned to address the audience. “Thank you so much for being here for our Spring Gala Musicale! Our next selection, I’m sure you will agree, is ephemeral, yet ethereal; transcendent, yet resplendent; salubrious, yet salacious; contrapuntal, yet effluvial—”

Ben Rivers: (loudly, from the upper, far end of the theatre) “Rockin’ Benny is IN THE HOUSE!”

Mr. Fuzzywhistle: “Impossible! I shan’t hear of it! My Gala—”

Ben Rivers: (coming down the theater aisle in a rock-star outfit, with a sexy chick on each arm) “ROCKIN’ BENNY IS IN THE HOUSE!”

Now the entire cast, band, and audience were clapping and chanting: “Rockin’ Benny! Rockin’ Benny! Rockin’ Benny! Rockin’ Benny!”

Hector again pressed the adapted switch, causing his “voice” to remark: “Here comes Rockin’ Benny, and he’s *draped in babes!*”

“Cease! Desist!” demanded Mr. Fuzzywhistle, to no avail, as Benny swept onto the stage to perform his most rockin’ number yet.

Mr. Fuzzywhistle (in anguish): “*My Spring Gala—Oh!!—*”

And so, the laughs and buffoonery continued, with occasional poignant interludes. At the end of the play, Hector, via his pre-recorded voice, expressed a desire to remain in the world, in spite of all of its struggles, heartbreaks, and separations. In reflection of these emotions, Ben Rivers, Elsie, and the entire chorus sang:

It’s not too late

I promise you

There’s a rain that can

Wash all away

A spark remains

A spring is here

It’s not too late...

We are still here

It's not too late

The past can die

We can't buy back

Those tears we cried

Except to know

That all the while

The only truth

Is in a smile

It's not too late

We're gonna see

The birds come back

Again, you'll see!

And those we've lost

They still are here

In us to live

Another year

It's not too late

I promise you

There's a rain that can

Wash all away

A spark remains

A spring is here

It's not too late

We are still here...

It's not too late

We are still here...

It's not too late!

We are still here

The title song was reprised, the curtain fell, and the applause and bravos from the standing audience thundered and thundered, threatening to collapse the old hall, as curtain call after curtain call was demanded!

Perhaps the most sublime, liberating, and rarest of atmospheres experienced by lovers of the theater arts is the cast party. Lowly stagehands may flirt with divas. Producers must be chummy with directors. Many force their poor doomed spouses or significant lovers to attend; they, in turn, feeling resentful, drink too much and become more bohemian than the bohemians, adding to the merriment and intrigue. The cast party, held at the large home of Corrine Stepson, following the performance of *Everything That You Feel!* was all of this and much more. Nick Nighthawk Romero and Mayzee announced their engagement! Allan Hoffman and Rickie Rijaro, scandalously disappeared into a locked bedroom for an hour.

Jack had already told Marnie that he was returning to England; tears had been shed. His mom, sister, and niece were already resigned, having long known the roaming nature of both of the Elbon brothers. For Jack, and for many of the others, his announcement of his impending parting was a painful thing. But he'd figured that it would be easier to tell everybody at once, rather than stringing it out by letting them know one at a time; the cast party seemed like a good opportunity:

"...and it seems as if there's a chance—just a chance, mind you—of a production of our play being done in London. I'm gonna try my best, I promise, and maybe someday the rest of the world will know about what we've been able to do here. In any case, knowing and working with

you all has been the greatest honor of my life! I will never forget this moment or a single one of you.”

42 — EXPATRIATE

Mother Earth, un-vexed by the joys and anguishes of her innumerable, sentient passengers, had recently completed her annual pilgrimage around her star.

Having once again awakened from dreams of vast open skies over palisades of cerulean mountains, Jack Elbon shuddered deeply as he peered out of his window into the typically besotted London road. But an envelope beneath the door-slot, with a familiar appearance, gave his heart a bump—it was a letter from Marnie! A clipping from a major New Mexico newspaper fluttered out. He'd thought he would first savor Marnie's epistle, but the article's headline so arrested him that he fell back into his chair to read it at once, postponing even his life-giving cup of coffee.

Federal Marshals Seize Guardianship Firm

A multi-agency federal task force on Tuesday seized several computers and financial records which reportedly detail millions in misspent funds belonging to disabled veterans and special-needs New Mexicans. According to the US Attorney's Office, lavish spending by the co-founders of nonprofit guardianship firm Compassionate Conservators, Inc. was financed out of the accounts of their clients which included hundreds of the state's most vulnerable citizens. With the indictment and arrest of owners Eric Cardel and Meryl Hope-Gurule, federal marshals moved to put a stop to the alleged embezzlement scheme which paid for multiple homes, Mercedes Benz automobiles and a Caribbean-docked sailboat. The pair faces criminal charges including conspiracy, mail fraud, aggravated identity theft and money laundering. According to the indictment, Compassionate Conservators, Inc. receives government benefit payments from the US Social Security Administration and US Department of Veterans Affairs on behalf of many of its clients and acts as a fiduciary or representative payee for these clients by paying their expenses and maintaining the balances for their benefit. As part of the alleged scheme, which federal prosecutors described as "sophisticated", fraudulent documents were mailed to the VA which falsely represented client account balances. The company's publicly available 990 tax form describes the company as providing guardian and conservator services to the elderly, veterans, the disabled and the homeless. Cardel, 29, and Hope-Gurule, 32, were taken into custody Tuesday, and are both to appear at detention hearings today at 9:30 AM in US District Court in Albuquerque. Sources close to this newspaper allege that the Marshals were put onto the trail of the scheme by Hope-Gurule's estranged husband, well-known realtor Howard ("Howie") Gurule and that Cardel has been a frequent associate of Governor

Martin, acting as an assistant in various capacities. The Governor, currently vacationing in Cape Cod, was unavailable for comment.

Although not by nature a vindictive person, Jack Elbon, having read the clipping, felt a warm glow well up from deep within. His gut feelings about the two grifters had been proven correct, and, as he put the kettle on for coffee, he congratulated himself on his astuteness. Justice, perhaps the most precious of all commodities, did exist after all, although its distribution seemed capricious, to say the least. Now, twelve months later and a third of the way around the globe, he realized that his experiences, with those most deprived of anything in the way of a fair shake in life, had become a part of him that he'd carry forever.

Armed with coffee, he fell back into his best chair to read Marnie's letter:

Dear Jack,

Hope you are doing well. It seems as if every day someone asks about you.

There are now fewer than fifty residents remaining at the hospital. While I was, admittedly, stupid enough to drink their Kool-Aid at one time, I am glad to say that those of us who have been managing the ongoing transitions, got hip to "Compassionate (my ass!) Conservators" a good while ago, and have not exposed any more of our people to their "services". Happily, "Miss Big-Pants" (Joycelyn Raines) was kicked upstairs to murky upper-mid-level reaches of the D.O.H., very soon after your departure, so Eric and Meryl were unable to continue to dupe her. She was replaced by Dr. Peter Hooper who has been the sort of chief we have never had. He will continue as the administrator of the new state-run community-based homes—there are nearly twenty of them so far—to which many of our people have been transferred. In addition to these homes (none of which house more than three clients), Pete has implemented a program that has made possible the placement of several of our folks into quality family-living situations.

I am pleased to say that, as of last month, Hector has been living with Nick and Mayzee, who as you know were married nearly a year ago. I was the bridesmaid, and Nick told me that he wished you'd been there as his best man.

I have not let on, in my letters to you, how badly and for how long I ached and ached after you left. I was too proud to let you know, and what good would it have done? But now I hope you will be happy for me when I tell you that romance has come back into my life. Pete, to whom I have been referring, and I are planning to be married next year. He's a wonderful guy and I look forward to your meeting him one day.

In any case, while we all miss you very much, everybody is glad that you are having the opportunity of pursuing your dreams. Please try to write more often, so I'll know what to report to your many friends and fans.

Fondly,
Marnie

Jack, rather more slowly, reread the clipping and Marnie's letter. He then sat for some period of time and, without seeing, stared out at the traffic in the gray London road.

43 — PERFECT FAMILY

“So, you’re sure you’ll be OK, while I go to my meeting? I’ll be back in less than two hours.”

“Yes, Mom, I’ll be OK.”

“You remember how to just push the special button, with the raised bump on it, on your phone, if you need to call me, right?”

“Yes, Mom.”

“You know Ben, you can come with me if you like...”

“No, Mom, I’d rather just listen to my radio...”

“OK, darling...I wouldn’t go, but you know how important it is that I do...”

“I’ll be fine, Mom, while you go to your A.A. meeting.”

“I’m so glad you’re back home with me, son.”

“Me, too, Mom. My radio always works here.”

Maxine Rivers breathed a prayer of thanks for God’s help in restoring her sobriety, making possible Ben’s returning home to again live with her in Topeka—a perfectly sized family of two.

44 — INTO THE MAELSTROM

Thirty-two hours after his sister's phone call, Jack Elbon, in a rattled, sleepless, unshaved, and (he feared) less than well-washed condition, finally disintegrated into his assigned seat on the crowded British Airways jet. Alas, he'd never been able to sleep much while sitting up, and he doubted that he would be able to, even now, in his deeply exhausted state—not for quite a while, anyway. Of course, in the hysteria of his unplanned departure from London, he'd not even latched onto a fat novel, his indispensable weapon against the rigors of travel. So now he just sat and wondered how much they'd soak him for a double scotch on ice if such a thing was even attainable.

Finally aloft, he reflected that if Mom was going to have a life-threatening stroke, from his perspective, her timing was good. The final scheduled performance of *A Done Deal*—the musical he'd co-written with Justin Brumfield—had occurred a week ago. Its flexible structure, with its musical arrangement for a rock and roll band whose members served as actors, too, had allowed it to be performed in large or small venues, from pubs to its final, most elaborate performance at the George Bernard Shaw Theatre at King's Cross. The play had been well received. A yet to be released album had been recorded, and Justin was angling for a movie deal. In the past year, they had managed to write another play, but there had been some recent friction because Jack could not let go of the idea of a UK production of *Everything That You Feel!*. Derrick, their star singer, was enthusiastic; he felt that a singing role of a character inspired by Hector or Ben Rivers would be a fine challenge, but Justin was doubtful. So things had sat when Clair phoned.

Vera Elbon had suffered a massive stroke and, apparently, she had also hit her head on her bathroom sink as she fell. She'd been placed in the intensive care unit, and Clair had communicated that her odds of survival were shaky. Booking a flight had not been easy, and tying up loose ends in London had been a nightmare. What to take? What to leave? When might he return? How about the rent? How about the cat? *Would* he return?

Typically, his British Airlines flight's departure was greatly delayed. When he finally staggered off of the plane in Chicago, his connecting flight to Albuquerque was long gone. The airline sprang for a hotel room, but a big block of rooms on his floor had been occupied by a fraternity and sorority of obstreperous college kids. Their high level partying made rest, once again, nearly impossible. When he finally reeled off of a Southwest Airlines jet in Albuquerque, he was in something akin to a zombie's state of consciousness. Waiting for his luggage, he reflected that if Mom had died while he traveled, he would have at least tried his best to get here beforehand.

Clair had driven the sixty-odd miles down to meet him. In something more than an hour they were approaching the Santa Fe hospital. "Mom was let out of the I.C.U. the day before yesterday," Clair had explained during the drive. "But they're talking about moving her to a skilled nursing unit for rehab."

“So she’s out of the woods?”

“Oh, no. She’s barely conscious. It’s just that all of the hospitals are so swamped beyond their capacities anymore, they don’t keep anyone for very long.”

“So they’re just schlepping her into a nursing home?”

“Well, not yet, but they will be, for rehab—”

“Not if I have anything to say about it! When they sent Grandma Flo to one of those places, she fell and she lay for hours, waiting for someone to come pick her up!”

“Well, we’ll have to spend a lot of time there to help her. She’s barely even able to eat.”

But, when they arrived at what had been their mother’s hospital room, Vera Elbon was not there; she’d already been moved. “Yes,” they were informed at the nurse’s station, “they took her to the DeVargas Senior Care facility. It’s that really big building over by the I-25 exit.”

“I can’t believe you moved her without informing me!” angrily responded the normally placid Clair.

“Well, the Doctors, here, needed her room, and it was best to move her before the administrative staff, over there, went off duty so that she could get checked in...”

But when Clair and Jack got to DeVargas, they were stunned to find their mother in a wheelchair, alone, in a corner of a large, common room. She was dressed in a flimsy hospital gown; a blanket that had covered her had slipped to the floor. Next to it was a large plastic garbage bag, apparently containing her clothing and personal effects. Her forehead was heavily bandaged. She was shaking and rocking and murmuring something incomprehensible. The cannula, terminating the clear plastic tube from an oxygen tank, hung uselessly around her neck. Jack flew to her, fell to his knees and took her cold hands in his. “Mom, mom, I’m here...I’m so sorry...I got here as soon as I could!”

“Jack? Is it you?” whispered the blind woman, gazing unseeingly towards him. “I thought I’d never hear your voice again.”

As Jack wrapped her with the blanket, Clair, now really mad, assailed the desk. “Of course she was without her Medicare and insurance card...her purse was with me!”

“Well, you should have left it with her, so we’d be able to access it...”

“I was not informed that she was being moved today, and that’s no reason that she should be neglected this way! I need to speak with the ombudsman! Is that person here?”

“Excuse me,” intervened Jack, “but my mother needs to get into a warm bed at once. Is this possible? If not, she’s going to my house and your director will hear from my attorney tomorrow.”

After more wrangling and tedious processing, Vera had been installed in a room with a hospital-style bed. “Dinner will be in a few minutes,” an aide informed them. “She’ll need to get dressed.”

“She’s *obviously* not in any shape to go to the dining room,” spat Clair. “She was in intensive care, just two days ago. Can’t she have her dinner in here?”

The aide, a girl with many unflattering tattoos, looked dubious. “Well, they like them to be up in their chairs and to eat in the dining room—”

“Who in the hell is 'they'?” responded Jack angrily. “And this lady is not a ‘them’—she’s an individual who is in a critical condition. We are requesting that a dinner tray, with hot tea and warm broth, be brought to this room. We will take care of feeding her if she is able to eat at all.”

“Well,” shrugged the aide, “I can check with Dietary...”

“Never mind,” said Clair. “I’ll go and speak to them.”

It had become clear to Jack that his older sister had been going through variations of this wringer for days; she’d spent the last three or four nights at the hospital. As fatigued as he was, she was, perhaps, in even worse shape. “Leave me your cell phone, would you?” he asked. “I’m gonna make some calls.”

By 11:00 that evening, things had finally settled down. Vera’s complex med orders had, at last, arrived from the hospital, and she was sleeping very soundly. Clair had arranged with the dietary department, that meals would be sent to the room. It was agreed upon that bed-rest might, for some time, be the best course of treatment. It being Friday, the physical therapists would be off until Monday, anyway. The gal with the tattoos had been replaced by a much more empathetic, older woman.

Cousin Phil, with Nicholas Nighthawk Romero following, had delivered Jack’s pickup truck along with hamburgers and a blessed quart of beer. Having enjoyed this brief parking lot reunion, Jack returned to his Mom’s room. He’d never seen Clair so frazzled. “I’ll stay here, tonight—no problem,” he said to his sister. “Please go on home now, and rest up.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course. I’m fine now. I’ll probably zonk out, right in this chair, or I can rest in my truck, some.”

“Well, OK. They’re going to send her breakfast tray in here.”

“That’s fine—I’ll help her if she’s able to eat anything. You’ve done a great job, Clair. Now please go and get some sleep.”

Having watched the room’s TV set long enough to recall that American television was at least as insipid as that in England, he switched it off and dozed. He was awakened some hours later, by a night nurse making her rounds.

“How is she doing?”

“She’s doing well; her oxygen count is better and her other vitals are good too. She indicated that she does not need the bathroom, but we have her in a ‘Depend’ (undergarment) just in case.”

Jack held his mother’s hand for some time then dozed again. A sharp pain in his lower back jerked him awake. He checked his watch; it was 4:30 AM. He reflected that if he could just curl up on the front seat of his good old pickup truck for, even, two or three hours, his poor rump and lumbar regions might benefit greatly; he’d been sitting a lot, for days. His mom had been a good bit sedated and was softly snoring.

Anticipating such a need, he'd parked his faithful little Toyota 4X4 in a dark patch of the parking lot, away from the lights. Soon, in an embryonic posture dictated by the shortness of the truck's front seat, he, too, was deep in an exhausted slumber.

A roadrunner's chuckle penetrated complex dreams. The sun was well up...7:45! Jeez, he'd only meant to lie down for a couple of hours! What time was breakfast served in this facility? Jack hoped his mom's tray was not getting cold if she was even awake and wanting to eat. With a groan, he rolled out of the little cab. Stretching and twisting, he tried to regain some circulation. Too many nights of bad or no sleep was producing an awful ringing in his ears. His vision had a flickering aspect to it. Surely he'd be able to cage a cup of coffee somewhere in this big place. More and different vehicles in the lot indicated that a shift change had taken place.

Through the heavy front doors, through the nearly deserted front room, past the unoccupied front desk, past the big nurse's station, then down his mom's long hallway Jack progressed. Large laundry bins emanated sad odors. Well, he'd be getting Mom out of here as soon as possible. Approaching her room, he reflected that maybe he could even take her to—he abruptly stopped—his mom was NOT IN HER BED! She must be in the bathroom—NO!!—Well, let's not panic...the nurses must have taken her for some treatment or something, he tried to reason as he hastened back down the hallway. “My mom—Vera Elbon, room 306—is not in her room,” he told a rotund nurse at the station.

“Oh, they've all gone to breakfast,” responded the woman, showing little interest.

“BUT SHE WAS SUPPOSED TO HAVE A TRAY SENT TO HER ROOM!”

“Well, they like them to get up...”

“I WISH SOMEBODY WOULD PLEASE TELL ME WHO in the heck is ‘they’?” Jack reiterated the eternal question, moderating his volume towards the end, realizing that hollering would probably not help.

“Well, the therapists like to see them up...”

“I want to talk to one of them, then, please, after I find my mom—”

“Oh, they aren't here on weekends.”

“OK, then can you please help me find my mother?”

“Well, I don't work on that hall. You'll have to ask her nurse or her attendant. But I'm sure you can find her in the cafeteria or the solarium.”

“All right. But meanwhile, please contact the director of this facility—”

“Oh, he isn't here. It's Saturday—”

But Jack had rapidly departed. He located the large cafeteria which he rapidly moved through, examining each of the many tables, without success. Pushing into the steamy kitchen, he accosted a startled worker: “Hey, my mom was supposed to have a tray sent to her room. Her name is—”

“Un momento, por favor...no inglés—”

“Uh, donde esta su jefe?”

Another worker intervened: “The boss is not here, today. It's—”

“Yeah, I know. It’s Saturday. Never mind, but I can’t find my mom.”

“Try the solarium. It’s that way—across the hall.” Jack made his way through yet another large room, with bright skylights, which let harsh sun down on the many ancient assembled men and women, some of whom were being fed by bored or gossiping attendants. Still not seeing his mother, he exited and went around a corner, actually wondering if he was simply asleep, trapped in an endlessly frustrating dream. He closed his eyes and vigorously shook his head. But, no...he was, unfortunately, really awake. His gaze fell upon another room, with a thick glass window in its heavy door. More elderly souls were seated, mainly in wheelchairs, around a long dining table.

The same hefty nurse he’d spoken to at the nurses’ station, came chugging along, pushing a large med cart which carried a prodigious number of pills and med cups, along with bandages, adhesive tape, nebulizers, hemostats, and sundry apparatus. “I forgot to tell you about this smaller dining room,” she remarked. “Did you try in here? Come on, I’m going in too.” Jack held open the heavy door so that she could enter with a smaller tray of meds, leaving the big cart parked in the hall, along the wall. Perhaps a dozen old people sat, some staring at nothing, others dozing, apparently waiting for breakfast trays to be brought in. With a start, Jack realized that a frail form, slumped forward, with her head cradled in her arms on the table, was his mother—fully dressed in a blouse and stretch slacks which she had been stuffed into, along with the puffy, synthetic, adult undergarment.

“Come on Mom, I’m taking you out of here,” Jack said as he backed her out of the room and into the hallway. We’ll get your things. I’ll call Grandma Flo. I’m sure you can stay with her ‘til I get my place ready—”

“She needs to eat.” A large man, dressed in scrubs, stood in the hallway. He wore dark glasses and had a shaved head.

“She was supposed to have a tray sent to her room.”

“I just got her dressed. She needs to eat.”

“I’m not sure she *can* eat.”

“We’ll feed her.”

“You will *not* feed her. Anyway, you had no business getting her up. Didn’t they tell you she was just in intensive care?”

“Don’t worry about it. I know how to do my job.”

Don’t worry about it? DON’T WORRY ABOUT IT? A sickening spasm wrenched Jack’s gut. Where?...When?...had he heard that voice? Those words? That inflection?—Suddenly, *he knew!*

“Come on Robledo. You’re finished working here.”

“My name’s not Robledo.”

“Come on Carlos Robledo. You’re finished working here. I’m sure you used a different name to get hired, but when I tell the directors who you are, you’ll be through. Did you escape from jail? No...probably not you. You gave somebody your filthy goat eye, and you slithered

out, like the vermin you are, without doing your lousy eighteen months. Right now, though, we're going down the road to the sheriff's if I have to kick your ass all the way there—"

As quickly as a cat, Carlos Robledo sprang for the med. cart, from which he snatched a glittering object—a long-bladed surgical scalpel! With a fluid, following motion, the more than razor-sharp implement whickered across Jack's cheekbone, barely missing his eye. In a trice, the attacker had opened a door, designated as being a fire exit, and leaped outside, to the clanging of an alarm bell.

"Take her back to her room—call my sister!—" Jack shouted at the no longer complacent nurse, before exiting in pursuit, his red blood spattering the gray pavement.

45 — CRESCENDO

But Carlos Robledo had vanished. Jack first ran frantically to the parking lot, peering into the vehicles, then all around the large building, literally beating the bushes and shaking the shrubbery. He was about to give up when, from the far end of the parking area, a loud engine, which sounded like a motorcycle, coughed into life. Realizing that he was adjacent to the long, curving driveway which led to the road, Jack felt beneath a pyracantha for a rock. Sure enough, around the corner roared a black and silver machine bearing his nemesis! Jack took aim and let fly the projectile, but Robledo lowered his huge, bald head, dodging the stone. Safely past, he skid the bike to a sideways halt, several yards beyond. Raising his shades he shot a gloating, triumphant squint, the bestial yellow eyes gleaming with naked weirdness in the morning sun—the loathsome eyes of a feral, skulking night-thing, oddly exposed. He made a sign which appeared to be that of an inverted cross, then gunned the machine to a deafening, throaty howl! Rubber burned, the front wheel rose, as he engaged and fired towards the busy main road which fronted the facility.

Jack turned and began, again, to repair to the building. But, from the road, there came the too-loud, shrieking whistle of air brakes suddenly applied, followed by the sound of a grinding crash—so horrific in aspect that his insides nearly dissolved. It caused him to freeze, then to advance with revulsion towards the hell-born sounds—onward, again, through the limitless nightmare that his life had become.

46 — HOME

“No, I am *not* getting stitches!” Jack railed at his sister. “It’s not all that deep, and the butterfly bandages will hold it together fine. All stitches would do, would be to give it little holes on either side which would make me look like Frankenstein!”

“Quiet down, dear-heart,” Grandma Flo remonstrated. “Your mama is resting well, now, and I don’t want you to worry her. She’s been through too much already.”

“*I* think a little scar there, would make you look romantic and Byronesque,” commented Marnie, whom busybody Mayzee had blabbed to regarding Jack’s return. The women, Nicholas Nighthawk Romero, along with Arley, Hector, Perkins and Boo-Boo—all radiating joy at Jack’s presence, and mirth at his ravings—were, with Jack, gathered that evening in Lindy Wellburn’s (now Grandma Flo’s) lovely home.

Mayzee had also let Jack know, in unsubtle fashion, that Marnie was now unattached—her intended having absconded to parts unknown with a way-too-young DD Tech from the state program.

Jack was, in fact, now quite closely curled with Marnie on one of the soft sofas, with a soothing scotch on ice close at hand.

“Well, thank God nobody but Robledo was killed or injured in the accident,” observed Nick. “But the world will be better off without him.”

“*Our* world would be better off if *you* were here to stay, dear-heart,” remarked Grandma Flo to Jack.

“Something tells me that *my* world would be better, right here, too,” Jack responded, quite earnestly.

“World better, too?—Better too?—Better too!— Better too!” echoed Arley Wellburn emphatically, causing Boo-Boo, to the outrage of Flo, to leap onto the sofa in an effort to lick Jack’s face.

“Get the Hades off of Lindy’s couch, you hoodlum! I’ll get the fly swatter, so help me!”

47 — DESTINY COAXED

In the cafeteria of the correctional facility which was to be his home for the next eight years, disbarred attorney Eric Cardel pushed away the remainder of his powdered eggs. He took another sip of his watery coffee, then gave up on it, too.

Ah, well, with good behavior, he'd still be in his late thirties when he was released; he'd obtained a position in the library and had recently been giving informal legal advice to the assistant warden. How stupid Meryl had been, to skip out on their day of sentencing, thinking she could slip away on the boat—with Babootchka, no less! It had only taken days before she'd been picked up, under-way from Turks and Caicos to what she'd supposed would be her refuge in Trinidad. Now she'd be doing thirty years, solid.

Poking through a limp stack of the previous week's newspapers, he was drawn to an article entitled: **Nursing Home Worker Killed In Collision**

The piece detailed how convicted felon Carlos Robledo, apparently having been employed under a false identity by a large senior care facility, had taken his final, short motorcycle ride. The article reprised the deceased man's unsavory past, questioned his early release from incarceration, and his subsequent ability to easily find work again with vulnerable citizens.

In the yard, as he lit a half-cigarette he'd saved from the previous day, Eric pondered the ultimately efficacious results of his anonymous tip, which had precipitated the search warrant, arrest, and eventual demise of Robledo and the other wretch. Destiny, it seemed, although certainly capricious, might occasionally be coaxed.

THE END

APPENDIX — SONG QUOTES AND TRANSLATION

Chapters 7, 31: “Keep On” © Gair Linhart; All Rights Reserved
Chapter 12: “No Pesos, No Besos” © Gair Linhart; All Rights Reserved
Chapters 15, 41: “Beautiful Day” © Gair Linhart; All Rights Reserved
Chapter 15: “Bring It On Home To Me” (Sam Cooke)
Chapter 17: “Perfect Heaven” © Gair Linhart; All Rights Reserved
Chapter 19: “Hot Joint” © Gair Linhart; All Rights Reserved
Chapter 20: “New Mexico Waltz” © Gair Linhart; All Rights Reserved
Chapter 29: “Piñata Song” Traditional
Chapter 41: “Everything That You Feel!” © Gair Linhart; All Rights Reserved
Chapter 41: “Worship Me Slave Boy” © Gair Linhart; All Rights Reserved
Chapter 41: “Not Too Late” © Gair Linhart; All Rights Reserved

PIÑATA SONG – *English Translation

In the nights of posada, of posada

The piñata is the best

The piñata, it has candies, it has candies

Lots of peanuts too

Hit it! Hit it! Hit it!

Do not lose your focus

Because if you lose it

You’ll lose your direction

You will have a nose that is

Exactly like a pickle!

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