

“The Oceleot the Way He Is”

-01-

The Pharisee?

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

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

“Quom?”

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

Luis understood. “They” would make an example of this millstone.

-02-

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

“I can’t give you more than 30 days of your meds this time,” the doctor said. “You have to go to the heart specialist. He might want you do to be open to surgery.”

“You mentioned a pacemaker.”

“It could be bypass. You’re a walking time bomb.”

“Mother went into hospice yesterday. Maybe it will get better when all this is over. I wish I could make 70 first before they do me.”

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

-03-

Nolan finished a set up flies, and sat up on the work bench. No partner from the Community today, no one to spot. He liked the simplicity of the place, just free weights, nothing fancy. No need for the fancy stuff. He stood up and looked at himself in the tall mirror. He liked the way his shoulders had finally filled in, toward the top of his 80 inches. He didn’t mind the idea of fitting a Scandanavian stereotype. He’d be “legal” very soon.

Lounging on the bench, he brought up his iPad. As so often the case, he actually got a better signal here than at his grandfather’s cabin two miles down the dirt road, on the main highway. And it was still easier to browse tuff on a tablet than a phone. That was always strange because most residents of the Communion didn’t have computers, which were discouraged. This time, Bill’s Main Blog came up OK, and Nolan quickly navigated through the archives to a posting about a sermon they had both heard,

“What we need rules for.” He recalled his own comment, “It gets very personal.” He checked the second comment, from some lab unknown named Luis. “Especially if you have to start over.”

Nolan turned off the iPad, and finished a set of leg lifts and one more set of flies. He glanced at the changing and rubdown room. Such a convenient hideaway did not demand on technology. He closed the door. To shower, he would ride his old mountain bike back to grandpa’s house. He enjoyed these invitations to house-sit.

Once back, everything in his video studio was running. Today, the WiFi signal was strong again. Maybe not forever.

He thought about the pistol locked away in a bedroom safe. He had practiced with it twice. He thought, in a normal world he would never use it again.

-04-

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

LaShawn moved toward her and motioned to Bill, who held up the glass of water with a straw.

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

“They sometimes rally a little,” he said.

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

“It’s a little early to wonder about that.”

Bill and LaShanna sat a few minutes in the living room, looking out through a bay window on a residential street and 40s-era brick homes, basking in warm fall sunshine.

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

“What do you mean, we? I’ll have to find another job soon, and I’m already behind in this month’s rent, with two boys in middle school.”

-05-

That Friday evening, Bill attended a concert over at a local community college, for which he had purchased tickets the day before his mother went into the hospice.

The first half of the program consisted of a “recomposed” Mozart piano concerto, the Coronation, with all the polytonality in the piano bass part invented by a friend of his, but played by a local pianist, Nolan. Nolan played an encore, a favorite from Bill’s own teen years, the last Prelude from Rachmaninoff’s Op. 32, in glorious D-flat Major. He seemed dressed a bit informally, in a kind of soft corduroy and soft pastel blue shirt.

Bill enjoyed his coke and brownie, enough to make him gulp, during the intermission, and thrilled in the main event for the second half, the Schumann Symphony #2 in C.

He stood for all the applause, snapped a couple of pix, and left slowly, spotting Nolan towering above the crowd. Bill decide he would wait for him. Oh, fifty years ago, that would have been no-no.

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

"I'll break the ice, Bill. It's cool that you came."

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

"Well, Bill, the Lady says I can help you."

"I've got my music from my own college days to get produced. You know how to do everything."

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

"In the works."

"I saw another comment on your blog. Following mine. Rather uncool."

"I'll check."

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

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

-06-

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

Bill would need to drive to the "Bull Run Mountains", behind Manassas, maybe about fifty miles, and get there by about 3. The location rang a bell. Six months before, after he had started bringing in caregivers for his mom every day, he had visited an "intentional community", called "Up the Stream". He didn't remember the brook very well, but recalled sitting in a meeting, forty minutes after, listening to the guide, a man about his age, Wizard, explaining about trading work credits instead of money. In less than an hour, he had felt he had been there his whole alternate life. But, three hours later, after touring a furniture factory, tofu warehouse, common mess hall, and various simple rooms and quarters, he had driven home back to his own space. He had seen how people lived less individually, and simply.

The email had an attachment, a pdf with the driving directions. No problem, his Webroot scanner accepted it.

Still in pajamas, unmatched, he checked the weather websites. Severe thunderstorms might come up from the south today, maybe even a late season tornado watch. And he saw a sidebar story,

that experts expected a coronal mass ejection to reach the Earth tonight. No worry, just a glancing blow, this time.

Bill packed. It seemed appropriate to take some of his old hand music composition drafts, and flash drives of his music. He had tried to make an optical CD copy once, and somehow the computer had refused to format the disc. He didn't have time this morning to try again. It sounded as though this could run late. He put toothpaste, medication, and a change of jeans and shirt, for an overnighter. An odd command had appeared on the PDF. "Come in your shorts." Oh, that's a JK or LOL. He went into his laundry room, and pulled some gray gym shorts, his own set, out of a bag. He put the item on over his usual loose undergarment. He was no temple Mormon.

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

He opened the boy. He saw a young Polynesian man, short, in black suit and tie. But he didn't question his presence until he had jarred the loose screen door.

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

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

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

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

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

"Not now. Please leave."

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

"Leave." And Luis did.

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

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

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

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

He had put together what he needed. Keep the flash drive in the glove compartment. Camera. Macbook laptop with his own copies of Sibelius and Final Cut. So what if they were starter versions. And the paper copies.

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

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

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

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

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

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

He left, arming the security system and locking the Medeco. He made his way out I-66, under clear skies, with a vague darkness toward the west. He rehearsed his own message, things he probably would not say, but suspected Nolan had figured out..

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

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

-07-

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

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

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

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

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

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

According to the directions, he had two more turns. He hoped he had written them down right. He could try to bring up his email, but the service might be spotty out here. But Nolan was supposed to be all set up, right?

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

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

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

-08-

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

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

He felt Nolan’s embrace before he had a chance to notice anything with his beady eyes. His bald head fit just against Nolan’s tender chin. All lean.

Bill actually spied the living room or ashram (or whatever) before he looked back at Nolan, maybe for a moment of anticipation. He spotted a Yamaha electric piano, mounted properly in original

kit shelving, a Macbook, a professional video cam, a workspace—all to his left and center. A gunmetal gray shelf, apparently fastened to the wall by one of those 800-number gadgets, held some technical books and papers. To the right, below an open picture window, a full sized sofa, covered with a white sheet. Behind Nolan's head, directly, and the last thing Bill's eyes picked up from the setting, as a surreal "Life of Pi" poster, complete with the Bengal tiger and majestic boy.

He looked up at Nolan, who smiled. There were no surprises. Blond, bowl cut, fitted shirt, buttons close, only the top open, sockless feet, sandals, thick hairs.

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

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

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

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

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

"Hope the storms hold off."

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

**

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

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

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

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

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

"We'll make the backup optical, a CD", Nolan said.

"That you probably did read in my blogs."

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

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

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

The sunlight was diminishing, and the rumbles of thunder were coming back. Bill heard a scratching on the door, and a huge cat pranced in and jumped up on the sofa.

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

“And probably very attached to you, as Bill walked over to the sofa. Jenny made room. Nolan followed. Bill sat on the left side, and Jenny climbed into Bill’s lap.

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

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

“So you know about it.”

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

Bill nodded. Indeed it will.

“It’s so coincidental.”

“Well, this is grandpa’s place. We can have the big cat here, and it’s just about a hundred fifty miles to William and Mary. Three hours.”

“You get what happened.”

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

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

“We’re all different.”

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

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

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

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

Jenny started climbing up in Bill’s lap, needing. “You know, in that movie, Pi had to make his whole life on the boat on meeting Richard Parker’s real needs,” Bill said. “He even set Richard free. That’s the greatest gift to a healthy animal, it’s freedom.”

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

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

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

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

**

Ok, the potty place was simple and clean enough, and unremarkable. Bill emerged back into the living room, computers off, and empty. But in twenty seconds or so, he heard pops like the crack of a bat, not quite fireworks. Bill thought to tap the gray shelf, and it clanked, like metal.

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

“It’s not out,” Bill said. As he approached, he felt a surge below from eye-copying the shaggy legs. The shirt hadn’t changed, but the sleeves were rolled up.

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

-09-

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

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

“Let’s go. It may work farther away,” Noan said.

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

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

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

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

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

"No words now," Nolan said. "Come here, and turn around. I'm going to make this fairer."

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

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

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

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

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

Bill looked up.

"Go!"

Bill went into the little dressing area, and saw a door ajar, half, to another area, dark, where there appeared to be a cot and some little electronics, parked like drain flies. Below him he saw a pair of gray Bermuda shorts on a bench. They were a little more substantial than the trunks he had worn "lying beneath". He thought, he had unwittingly come prepared to help in a locker room, LOL. The cat wandered in and rubbed his bare, bald legs. Oh, nothing to be ashamed of.

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

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

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

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

-10-

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

“Bill, this is, shall I still call you Wizard,” Nolan said. *Men* shake hands. They did so firmly. A middle-aged woman, tall, bowl cut normally befitting a young man, walked in through the front, and lassoed Wizard by the waist. “And this is Beatrice,” Wizard said. c

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

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

“Well, not until we bunk him down,” Beatrice said.

“Yeah, we need an inquisition.”

Nolan intervened, with a degree of protectionism. “Bill, why don’t you play a little of your Sonata on a real piano.”

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

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

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

“I’ve got to check on the food.”

Wizard set up a chess clock, and some pieces.

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

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

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

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

**

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

"I don't think ..."

"I did just one," Nolan said.

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

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

"We only have Internet two hours a day here," Wizard said, "but I looked at some of your postings, Bill. Yeah, you would have had to destroy them to live here."

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

"One thing is puzzling," Wizard said, "really disturbing. "You seem to take delight in this whole thing about your own experience with the Army. You flunked a lot of kids when you were teaching algebra at college, sending some of them to Vietnam, and then when you went in, as pathetic as you were in training, according to your own account, you used your education to manipulate the system so you wouldn't have to go to Nam yourself and risk getting maimed and then expecting someone to love you anyway when you came back. You present yourself as a coward and brag about it!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

-11-

Nolan led the way, as the sun was setting, and the skies had pretty much cleared. The dusk was not chilly, and that might prove convenient. The cat actually foraged ahead, as if she got what should happen.

They went back into the gym building.

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

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

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

Nolan lay beside him, and Bill finished opening Nolan's shirt. He could make out a wad in the middle, the calyx, and some fuzz toward the nipples. Nolan handed him a bot.

The Ocelot would not longer stay the way he was.

Enjoy those fifteen minutes of pleasure.

-12-

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

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

Bill walked back. "I've got to go back, too, see what happened at my house. I'll take you to your mom first," Nolan said. "It should take an hour and a half. Hope no road blocks. Maybe we need to do US 29.

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

**

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

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

"You've done your homework. You'd get 100 on my free response test," Bill said.

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

"I have a feeling you'll never disappoint me or anyone, Nolan."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

-13-

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

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

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

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

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

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

-14-

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

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

The security guard greeted them.

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

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

Bill's Jamaican caregiver, Meliisam followed by two pre-teen boys, followed, wheeling mother forward. Mother waved.

**

Nolan put mother in the front seat, safely strapped in. Bill, Melissa, and the family had to ride in the truck.

**

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

He claimed his shower privileges once that evening, and looked at himself in the mirror for the first time at home in months. He looked down below, too, and saw less reason for shame.

