

20 Year Class (P)Reunion

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This novel was written for NaNoWriMo 2009. All characters, events, and geography are fictional. All resemblance to real people is purely coincidental.

Dedication

This is for the Stow-Munroe Falls Class of 1990, whether you have rosy memories of high school as a carefree era or you'd just rather forget that it ever happened. Twenty years later, we're all older, wiser, and much better company. Wishing you all the best.

An Invitation and a Plan

The motor started with a snort and began chugging in fits and starts. Jessica crossed her toes and made a wish, hoping that this time it would work. She stopped holding her breath when she saw the bags starting to flutter and fill with air. A loud honk made her jump and she saw that a car had pulled into her driveway.

“I’ve got some more of your mail again.” A woman was waving a handful of envelopes out the car window. “I don’t know why they had to have a Willow street, avenue, circle, and place all in this neighborhood.”

Other than the constantly mis-delivered mail, Jessica had no complaints about her new place. Unlike the last apartment, the front yard was big enough to test out some of her sculptures. With relief, Jessica remembered the woman’s name from all the L.L. Bean catalogues and museum newsletters that had been mistakenly delivered in the last month. She hated forgetting peoples’ names, because it seemed like admitting that you just didn’t care.

“Hey Wendy. Thanks for bringing it over.” Jessica accepted the sheaf of mail that Wendy was still dangling out the car window. “How have you been?”

“Not much new,” Wendy said, shrugging. “Getting ready for a trip out to---what is that thing? That’s crazy!” The woman had her head, shoulders, and both arms out the window, pointing at Jessica’s latest piece of art.

With a certain satisfaction, Jessica looked at the mound starting to take shape. Assuming that the motor didn’t conk out, the shapeless mass would eventually inflate to become 30-foot tall tower of twisting tubes. She had been collecting plastic bags for years and it had taken over a month to cut and seal most of the bags together into irregular tubes that wound together in loose spirals. It had taken another month to shape the rest of the bags into lumpy beige gargoyles to adorn the tower.

“That’s what I’ve been working on lately,” Jessica said. “If I’ve got it welded together tight enough so it holds together overnight, I’m going to deploy it next week on the Greenway.”

“But what is it? Some kind of balloon?” Wendy had gotten out of the car and was walking towards the sculpture. “Those are grocery store bags! Don’t you recycle?”

“I think this counts more as re-use,” Jessica replied, successfully suppressing a sigh and associated eye-roll gesture. “Careful, that motor’s going to get hot. Anyhow, you can see the shape better if you don’t get too close.” The top half of the structure was still drooping limply, but the gargoyles on the bottom half stood out nicely. One of them was sticking out his tongue and another was frozen in the classic grade-school boy pose for making armpit farts. “If the weather’s good next weekend, you can come see it on the Greenway near South Station. The whole park is

going to have temporary art installations and they're going to have cotton candy and popcorn."

"Well, maybe I'll take the kids over to walk around, if they get over the flu we've all had. Oh shoot, I'm going to be late if I don't get a move on. Good luck with that thing." Wendy got back into her car, waved, and honked again before pulling out of the driveway.

Great. This mail is probably marinated in germs. Jessica tossed the junk mail into her recycling bin on the way into the house. *Only two things worth opening in this batch.* Jessica sat down near the window so she could keep an eye on the sculpture as it finished inflating, and opened the smaller envelope first.

Powell High School, Class of 1990

It's our 20th Reunion!

August 14, 2010

Our theme will be "The More Things Change."

Our song from Senior Prom will be "Forever Young"

Jessica let out her previously suppressed eye-roll. *We had a Senior Prom song? Was I supposed to devote neurons to remembering that? As if I didn't have anything better to do.* Then she turned the card over and noticed a handwritten note.

Jess, I really hope you'll come. Been wondering what you've been up to. Did you ever go to Italy? I'm sorry we didn't get to go together. Are you in touch with any of our old Latin club friends? Drop me a line, I'm on Facebook! Love, Melanie.

She looked out the window. The tower was nearly inflated. A seagull was sitting on the perky gargoyle who was doing a handstand. Jessica looked at the large envelope, which was obviously a wedding invitation, and deliberately didn't think about Italy. The return address on the envelope was in Powell, Ohio but she didn't recognize the name. *Must be the bride's family.* Jessica tried to guess which of her high school friends would have married a hometown girl and came up blank. She had a hard time trying to imagine most of them at all. *When you haven't seen someone since high school, it's hard to think of them as anything other than perpetual teenagers. Would anyone even recognize me these days?*

Jessica ripped open the envelope. A thick, navy-blue card fell out. Jessica saw golden calligraphy lettering, flowering vine borders, compass roses in the corners and a line of polar bears across the bottom of the page.

Colonel Richard Johnson, Sr.

Requests the pleasure of your company

At the wedding celebration of his son

Richard Kelly Johnson, Jr.

to

Matthew Donnerstrom

August 15, 2010

Powell Country Club

So, not exactly the bride's family. Jessica stared at the invitation. Goofy and laid-back, Matt had been one of her best friends, but she couldn't remember anyone named Richard Johnson at all. Then again, she hadn't exactly known all five hundred of their classmates, and hardly even knew a handful of the kids who were in the years ahead or behind them. In any case, the non-traditional stationery suggested that Richard had a certain flair for the dramatic. Jessica walked back outside to turn off the inflator motor and tried to figure out if she could afford plane tickets to Ohio and whether the managers at both her jobs would give her the time off. *There's no way I'm going to miss Matt's wedding, even if I have to hitchhike halfway across the country.* Her phone rang, interrupting her thoughts with a ringtone that sounded like a flock of pissed-off geese.

"Jess! Can you believe that Matt's getting married?"

"Hey Cara. Yeah, I just got the invitation. Looks like it'll be our 20th reunion weekend, too."

"I wonder who will show up. I think you're the only one from our class that I've seen much in the last ten years."

Jessica tried to remember whether she'd run into anyone else, because she certainly hadn't been keeping in touch with many people. She was a haphazard correspondent at best, and had barely managed to send Matt a postcard each time she moved house. Usually, Cara was the one who phoned up and asked her to meet for dinner, or invited her to parties. Jessica's place was always full of junk she was saving for her next

art project, which made it awkward to have guests. She'd finally gotten her own little rental apartment after her fourth roommate in two years got tired of tripping over Styrofoam blocks and disgusted by finding a jar of ants frozen into individual ice cubes.

“Did I tell you I actually ran into Andrew last time I was apartment hunting? He was just coming out of the Starbucks near Central Square.”

“No way! That’s where I am right now.” Cara laughed. “I used to have such a crush on that kid. He was the class golden boy. Soccer captain, math wiz, poetry magazine editor. I wonder what he ended up doing?”

“Guess you’ll find out if he shows up for the reunion. I was planning to skip it, actually, but since it looks like Melanie’s on the committee, she’ll probably manage to guilt me into going.”

“If I’m going, you’re going! You know you’re the secret ingredient for a good party.”

Jessica rolled her eyes again. “Yeah, everyone needs me to come hold up the wall or the party disintegrates. Look, I just have to figure out if I can manage the plane tickets and the time off. You’ve got a million frequent flyer miles, but the rest of us have to pay money to get on those planes.”



After promising to drop by next week to help Jessica pack up her inflatable sculpture for the festival, Cara wrote the dates for the wedding and the reunion in her calendar before getting up from the table. August was shaping up to be a busy month for work, since she was doing a big convention in Dallas one week, a small show in Rhode Island the next, and then two events in New England. Luckily, she hadn't committed to anything else on the weekend of the wedding. Although she hadn't been as close to Matt as Jessica was, they'd all spent a lot of evenings watching Monty Python while working on math homework, and Cara was looking forward to seeing him again.

Walking out of the Starbucks back to her office, Cara considered offering to just give Jessica the tickets as a gift. Since her job was to design and set up extravagant custom booths for trade shows or vendor expositions, she racked up a few cross-country flights each month and had more frequent flyer miles than she needed. Cara knew that no matter how many extra shifts Jessica picked up, working the cash register at Walgreens and waiting tables at the Rainforest Cafe in the mall, she usually spent most of her paycheck on tools or art materials. During their senior year of high school, Jessica had joined everyone else in applying to a bunch of colleges, but after getting accepted into every place she'd applied, she'd surprised everyone by deciding that she'd had enough school. Then, she'd moved to Boston and dropped off everyone's radar until Cara looked her up.

Cara's phone beeped with a message about some urgent problem that had come up with the graphics designs that she'd finalized just before lunch. All thoughts of high school reunions and related ancient

history scattered, she hustled to track down the company's graphics and signage specialist.

"So what's all this about a problem with the TriTech booth graphics? I thought we were all set with the 'human face of innovation' theme."

"Surprise. TriTech just called. Apparently Verizon has finalized acquiring their company, and the new corporate overlords want to start rebranding immediately. For the show next month, their signs need to stick to a red and black palette, and any graphics should be more on the abstract side."

"That's going to mean a total revision before 5pm tomorrow, in order to make the printing deadline. And that includes giving them enough time to approve the new signs," Cara complained. "I can't believe they didn't give us a hint about the Verizon thing during the last two weeks when we sent them half a dozen designs to choose from."

"I think I can get the printers to give us until noon the day after tomorrow, if we bribe them with your death by chocolate brownies again. And I'm really sorry, Cara, but I can't come in tomorrow at all. I'm chaperoning my daughter's class fieldtrip to the zoo."

Cara dramatically swooned and held her hand to her head, even though no one could see her. "Well, it'll be tough surviving without you, but someone's got to keep those second graders from falling into the gorilla exhibit. I'm going to call TriTech and find out what the heck 'more on the abstract side' means before I knock myself out changing everything around. At least we started including a contract clause about a 25% surcharge for graphics redesign after final approvals."

One long phone call, three cups of coffee, and one order of Sichuan pork and pickles later, Cara had a decent set of new designs for TriTech done in time to catch the last subway home. She plunked down onto a seat on the train and tried not to fall asleep before her stop. Unfortunately, the coffee wore off and she woke up at Alewife, to find a familiar face looking at her.

“Andrew! Do you live here?” she asked.

“Live around Boston, yes. Here in this train, no. I noticed you falling asleep around Harvard and thought I’d wait around to say hi.” Cara noticed that Andrew had gained a lot of weight since high school, but still had a great smile.

“You could have woken me up to say hi,” Cara pointed out. “Now we’re stuck at the end of the line on the last train.”

“Not to worry, milady. My place is down the street and I’m happy to drive you home.”

“Thanks, I appreciate it. I can’t believe you live here and I didn’t even know. I’m too wiped out tonight, but do you want to get together another time? Jessica said she ran into you last month.”

“I’ve only been in town for a few months, so you’ll forgive me for not crossing paths with you earlier. You look like it’s been a long day, so let’s get you home now and we’ll meet again later.” Andrew handed her a business card. “At your convenience. I’m between jobs at the moment, new in town, and thus almost completely unscheduled.”

After Andrew dropped her off, Cara realized that she’d left her bag of leftover Chinese food in his car. *I hope he finds the bag before the food gets smelly. I’d better tell him tomorrow.*



As Andrew parked his car, he mentally replayed his late-night encounter with Cara. *Why didn't I wake her up before we got to Alevife? She probably thinks I'm a creepy guy who likes to watch women sleeping.* He stumbled over a box in his front hallway, probably the tenth time he'd tripped on that same box since he moved in. The apartment was convenient and not overly decrepit, but like many older houses around town, it had a deplorable lack of closet space. Andrew hadn't gotten around to sorting through all his boxes and deciding what to banish to the basement storage area.

An hour later, Andrew was still staring at the ceiling in his bedroom. The room was dimly lit by his digital alarm clock even though he'd turned its face to the wall. *At least I didn't quite manage to spill my coffee on Jessica the other week. Is Boston really such a small place that I'm going to be running into the few people I know all the time? I could have just stayed in Powell and done that.* By 8 a.m., Andrew was finally asleep, only to be woken up by his neighbors arguing about whose turn it was to take out the trash. He tried putting his pillow over his ears and pulling the covers up, but it was a lost cause. He sat up in bed and turned on the television.

Andrew was still in bed, eating saltines and licking a finger to pick up the crumbs from his sheets, when his phone rang.

“Andrew Langer speaking. How may I help you?”

“Andrew? This is Cara. I wanted to thank you for driving me home last night. And look, I’m sorry about this, but I left some Chinese

food in your car, and it might have rolled under the seat. So I just wanted to make sure that you found it before it went bad in there.”

“Not a problem at all. I have never been defeated by General Gao’s Chicken, and I am confident that with your tip-off, I will remain victorious.”

“Ha. Well, this stuff is pork, not chicken, but I’m sure you can handle it. I have to go nag some people right now, but when do you want to get together? Maybe you and Jessica could come to my house for dinner a week from Friday?”

“I’d be delighted. I did see Jess around town earlier, but didn’t have a chance to do much more than wave hello.”

“No, not the scarlet. It needs to be crimson to match the main logo. Sorry Andrew. Not you. So if Friday’s good, I’ll send you directions. See you later.”

It was past noon. Andrew thought about getting dressed and dealing with Cara’s leftovers, but ended up watching the end of a PBS documentary about dolphins. There was really no hurry about the food. He had previously determined empirically that it took at least 24 hours for cooked food in a car to become a genuinely objectionable substance.



Cara rang the doorbell again. She had told Jessica that she’d be over at 6 a.m. to help get the inflatable sculpture packed up, and it was already five minutes past.

“Hey Cara. You’re on time as usual. I had to change one of the gargoyles because someone thought it looked too much like the President, but I’m almost ready to start rolling all the air out. Do you want a muffin?”

“Actually, if you’re not quite ready, I could go for a quick run and be back here in half an hour. It’s been crazy trying to get in enough exercise lately.”

Jessica twisted her hair up into a messy bun. “Sure, if you want to go running for a while, better you than me. I should be ready for another pair of hands by the time you get back. I’ll save you some breakfast.”

Cara set her stopwatch and jogged down the street. *I love being awake before things get crowded. The worst thing about the city is that everyone is always trying to get places at the same time, so we just get in each other’s way.* She got over being annoyed that Jessica was running late yet again as she watched the squirrels chasing each other up and down the trees. *I have to remember to check with that new booth construction contractor on Monday, to make sure they have things planned out for the American Chemical Society conference next week. They sounded a little disorganized.* Cara got back to Jessica’s place, made a note to call the booth contractor, and recorded her running time in her exercise log.

“How was your run? Any squirrels throw nuts at you?” asked Jessica.

“You and I are the only nuts I’ve seen so far. I can’t believe we’re folding up a tower made from over ten thousand plastic grocery bags. Do you realize that no one else in the world is probably doing that today? Maybe no one else has ever done that in the history of mankind.” Cara

gestured broadly. “You’re an art pioneer! I doubt that I’ll ever do something at work that is historically unique.”

“That’s just your day job, though. I mean, I’m not exactly breaking any new ground working at the Rainforest Cafe or Walgreens either.”

The two women folded as they talked, being careful not to tear the plastic skin as they walked along the length of the deflated sculpture. As they’d learned while moving the still-unfinished piece from Jessica’s last apartment, scrupulous deflation was necessary. Unless almost all the air was rolled out, the mass of bags would completely overflow the bed of Jessica’s pickup truck.

“So what kind of food should I make when you and Andrew come over next week?” Cara asked. “I doubt he’s become vegetarian or Kosher.”

“Well, you could stick with Midwestern favorites, like Shake ‘n’ Bake chicken and green bean casserole. It would be kind of retro-ironic, a bunch of cosmopolitan yuppies revisiting the food of their youth.”

“That could be fun. We could have a glass of milk and Oreos for dessert.”

“I wonder what Andrew’s been doing since high school. Didn’t he go to MIT or something?” Jessica tightened the straps that kept the rolled-up sculpture a tight mass. “Can you imagine how static-y this kind of installation would be in the winter? Good thing the summer humidity keeps it under control. Having a bunch of grounding wires attached here and there would break visual immersion.”

“No idea about Andrew. I don’t think I heard from him after his freshman year in college. I think you’re right about MIT, though. But he said he had just moved here, so I guess he’s been kicking around somewhere else in the meantime.” They heaved the bundle into the truck.

Jessica looked at her watch and shook it. “This thing stopped again. What time is it?”

“I’ve got just past 8, so you should be able to get to the park before 9. How long does it take to inflate?” answered Cara.

“Depends how many times the motor conks out, but I think I’ve finally got the set-up right. Maybe fifteen minutes or half an hour. So it’ll be erected by the time the party gets started.” Jessica pulled out of the driveway, keeping an eye on the rearview mirror to make sure nothing came loose. “I want to give this to Matt for his wedding.”

“Give what to Matt?”

“This sculpture. He’d love the gargoyles.”

“Wow. You wouldn’t be offended if they don’t display it in their yard, will you? Because I love your gargoyles too, but the whole tower thing is pretty darn gigantic.”

“I just think he’d get a kick out of having it for the wedding. Better than ice swans. You know Matt was the only one who didn’t try to talk me into going to college. He actually thought that making art was important.”

“I’m sorry I tried to make you change your mind, Jess. I know it’s a pain, but I’m just a font of unnecessary advice sometimes.”

Jessica waved off the apology. “It was just that everyone said the same thing, and I got tired of hearing it.”

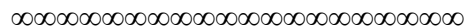
Cara changed the subject. “So how do artists ship big sculptures? Piano movers? Art movement specialists?”

“Depends on their budget and how fragile the piece is. I was thinking I might have to drive down to Powell anyways. I wouldn’t want to take this pickup on the highway with that sculpture in the back, but I could rent a U-Haul.”

“Do you think you could also make a mini-version? Like cake topper sized, so they could keep it on their mantle.”

“It would be quite the phallic cake topper, but yeah, a mini giant tower would be fun. It could be solid melted bags instead of inflatable.” Jessica was struck by the idea. “Or maybe a wax version, like a big unity candle.”

As they set up the tower on the Greenway and positioned the motor for inflation, Cara mentally walked through her pantry. She’d need to pick up some Shake ‘n’ Bake, Oreos and Campbell’s Cream of Mushroom soup for the dinner, and she wanted to get some fresh flowers for the table. *I should probably offer to drive to Ohio with Jess, but I don’t know if I can take that much time off work in August. Plus I hate car trips. She’ll never agree to accept plane tickets now that she’s planning to bring the art. Jess is not going to want to let some shipping company take custody of her sculpture, especially one that’s going to be a wedding gift.*



Andrew sat in bed and flipped through his high school yearbook. *I never did understand how those girls got their bangs to stand up so high. I'm glad guys don't have to do so much in the way of hair styling.* He looked at Cara's senior portrait, and the candid of Jessica and Cara dressed up as California Raisins for some Latin Club skit. There was an action shot of Matt doing gymnastics, and one of Andrew giving a campaign speech when he was running for class president. *Probably a good thing I lost that election, otherwise I'd be stuck helping to organize our reunions, like Melanie's doing.*

He checked himself in the mirror one last time before leaving for Cara's get-together. *More gray hair, but that's better than no hair.* He grabbed a bottle of wine out of the refrigerator and walked out to the driveway.

As soon as Andrew got into his car, the odor made him realize that he'd never dealt with the leftovers. Luckily, the container was still in one piece, and there hadn't been any sauce leakage. He tossed the food into his trashcan, put down all the windows, and hoped that he wouldn't be called upon to give Jessica a ride home.

"Hey Andrew. Good to see you again." Jessica greeted him at the door. It was obvious that she'd spent enough time at Cara's house to stop feeling like a guest. "Oh thanks for the wine. It'll be a bit sophisticated compared to the dinner menu, but we'll enjoy it."

"Greetings and salutations. I hope you've been well." They looked at each other for an awkward moment, then Jessica went for a hug at the same time that Andrew extended his arm. Jessica adroitly managed to pull off a credible handshaking, shoulder-patting hybrid welcome.

Cara took a baking sheet out of the oven, and transferred all the chicken into a bowl. The table already held the green bean casserole, macaroni and cheese, and a pitcher of lemonade. “I figured we’d indulge in a little Midwestern nostalgia tonight, so I made the food to match.”

“Do you remember when going out to Friendly’s was the height of cool?” Andrew asked with a laugh. “Your cooking looks absolutely delicious.”

“Not like that time in Home Ec when our group almost blew up the stove,” Jessica recalled. “Those were some sad French fries we turned out.”

“Thank Trader Joe’s that frozen meals are so much better now-a-days,” Cara said. “Back in college, I ate so much instant ramen that my friends started making jokes about scurvy.”

“Heck, I’m still eating instant ramen when I’ve got a big project going on,” said Jessica. “I guess even if you don’t go to college, you can still eat like a student.”

“Ah, but do you also drop by seminars for free pizza? The true foundation of the student food pyramid,” Andrew said, raising an eyebrow. “Have you been in Boston for a long time?”

“I moved here right after high school, and then Cara turned up after doing her MBA in Chicago. Both of our parents live in Florida now, so we haven’t been back to Powell for ages. How about you?”

Andrew shrugged. “I’ve been to a number of places for short amounts of time. Nowhere other than Powell has become particularly home. If you can believe it, my parents still live in the same house where I grew up. I usually visit once a year or so.”

“Do you know many people in Boston yet? I know it took me over a year to start making friends out here. I’m afraid I probably bothered Jessica way too often. More green bean casserole?” asked Cara.

“You know I mostly like how you bother me. Except when I don’t,” said Jessica, taking another serving of the casserole.

“Mmmm, I haven’t fully settled into the Boston environment. Although I have been in touch occasionally with Buzz Fields-Chester, who’s around the corner in Providence.”

“The name sounds familiar, but I’m not sure I remember him.” Cara looked at Jessica, who shrugged. “Was he in our year?”

“You may have heard his name because he was Mr. Chester’s stepson. He’s two years younger than us. I only know him because we were both lab assistants at the medical center one summer.”

“I was totally jealous that you’d gotten a research job. I had to work at the mall again,” Cara remarked. “But Mr. Chester was upfront that he’d only be able to get a job for his one top student that year.”

“Though I don’t remember him saying that it would be his top student plus his own kid. But I guess you have to help your own family,” Jessica said. “How was it working with the son? Must have been strange to have your dad in the school system.”

“As I recall, Mr. Chester had only married Buzz’s mom earlier that year. Buzz ended up going to the Catholic high school in order to avoid being the teacher’s kid.” Andrew topped off everyone’s wine glass. “I don’t know whether you heard that Mr. Chester passed away last October.”

“Oh no, what happened? He was one of the best teachers I ever had.” Jessica knocked over her glass and Cara jumped back to avoid the spreading pool of wine.

“Don’t worry about the glass, I’ll take care of it,” said Cara reassured her, mopping up the spill with a couple of crochet potholders. “Looking back, I can’t believe how much extra effort he put into all our weekend field trips. What other math teacher would ever take students out to do water quality sampling or to study life expectancy by surveying cemetery headstones?”

“From the obituary, it sounds like he had lung cancer. One of those rare and unlucky people who never smoked a cigarette, never worked with asbestos, did everything right. Do you remember the crickets?”

“Andrew, I doubt anyone will ever forget the crickets,” Jessica said, shaking her head. “Coming back from spring break and finding bugs in our lockers, in the bathrooms, under the desks, in the cafeteria. And poor Mr. Chester, trying to convince all the janitors that they should try to release all the crickets outside instead of killing them.”

Having cleaned up the wine, Cara cleared off the rest of the table and set up the milk and Oreos on a coffee table. The party moved into her living room. Jessica was telling Andrew about her inflatable tower with gargoyles and the plan to haul the whole thing to Powell for Matt’s wedding.

“It occurs to me that you may want to team up with Buzz for the trip,” Andrew mentioned. “His current specialty is driving vehicles cross-country for special deliveries, and he may well be heading past Powell on

one of these trips. If it works out, it might save you having to rent a moving truck.”

“Sure, I wasn’t looking forward to doing that much driving by myself anyways. A gal can only drink so much coffee,” Jessica said.

Andrew swirled the Oreo sludge at the bottom of his glass of milk. “Frankly, being *sans* income myself, I’d be glad to share the driving and contribute to the kitty for gasoline. I’ll just check with Buzz about his scheduling, and let him know that you’ve got a large piece of art to bring along.”

“Cara...you should come too. You need a nice vacation one of these day,” Jessica urged.

“I can’t imagine that fitting the four of us into the front seat of a sixteen wheeler would make for a nice vacation,” Cara pointed out. “Plus, August won’t be a very good time for me to be away from work very long. I’ve got a bunch of specialty booth set-ups scheduled, and the rest of the office tends to take vacations before school starts for their kids.”

“I doubt it would be your standard big-rig,” Andrew replied. “Buzz’s special talent is coordinating one customer who wants a van or other large vehicle moved from point A to point B with other customers who want fragile items shepherded from point A prime to point B prime. Stacking the jobs together makes it possible for him to offer a very competitively priced service.”

Cara nodded but changed the subject. “If either of you would be interested in a free ticket to a fancy shindig at the Aquarium in exchange for helping set up some corporate displays, let me know. My

company is doing the displays for some big biotech firm's 25th anniversary party next Saturday. We've got to put up a giant hourglass filled with faux pills, provide someone to run around in a pill costume, and run a carnival-style ball-toss booth where people can throw pills into large mouths on the wall."

"You've got to be kidding. That sounds like some kind of avant-garde protest art, not corporate sponsored fun for the family," Jessica said with a snicker. "Count me in. You know I would never miss an opportunity to gawk at unintentional theater of the absurd."

"I am also at your service. Though I must draw the line at dressing up as a pharmaceutical."

"Thanks, you two. Don't worry, we've got the people to work the ball-toss and wear the costume already hired. I just need a bit of help with the set-up part, knock on wood."

As the party broke up, Andrew was relieved that Jessica decided to walk home. He'd left the windows open in his car, but expected that the odor might not have dissipated. *Cara would think that I'm completely incompetent, leaving food to spoil after she'd specially called to alert me. But other than the car issue, this whole get-together went a lot better than I'd expected. They actually seemed to like me. And no one asked too many questions about what I've been doing all these years, or why I'm unemployed.*

When he got home, Andrew sent Buzz a quick email about getting a ride to Powell for a couple extra people and a really large bundle of plastic bags. Then he played online poker for a couple hours, coming out exactly \$20 in the hole.

Cara was relieved to see Jessica and Andrew arrive at the Aquarium. Her two profession set-up people had already called in sick and the performers she'd hired to staff the event still hadn't shown up.

"Hey Cara. Another exciting day at the Walgreens!" Jessica exclaimed. "We had two separate people try to steal dental floss. It was like periodontal care day at shoplifters anonymous."

"Where should we get started first?" asked Andrew. "I've never set up for a corporate event before."

"I am super glad to see you guys," Cara said. "My set-up crew just came down with the plague and I'm running around like a headless chicken. I've already press-ganged some of the Aquarium staff into assembling the ball-toss area. Let me show you the floor plan and here are the set-up instructions for the giant hourglass. If the two of you can tackle the hourglass, I'll be over helping with the ball-toss station." She pointed out the planned location for the hourglass and then handed Jessica several laminated sheets of instructions. "Oh, and the instruction are a little vague about which side is up. Just remember that the felt-covered side is supposed to go on the floor."

"This is like furniture from Ikea, but the directions are only in English," said Jessica.

"Here are the two packing crates with pieces of the hourglass. Ah, and this large box labeled 'fake medicine' must be for filling the hourglass," noted Andrew.

Jessica read out the instructions, one step at a time. She and Andrew worked quickly and were soon dwarfed by the eight-foot tall hourglass.

“Hmm. ‘Pour ping-pong balls, novelty items, or other hourglass filling into the top of the structure before attaching top surface.’ Andrew, you don’t see a step ladder anywhere around here, do you?”

After fifteen minutes of concerted searching and a quick conference with Cara, who was looking more anxious by the minute, Jessica decided they would have to improvise. “We could nail the lid back onto that wooden crate and I could probably climb up on it,” she said. “Or we could tip the thing partly to the side and pour the stuff in while holding it at a forty-five degree angle.” She looked appraisingly at Andrew and the hourglass. “Or, I could sit on your shoulders and probably reach the top.”

“Of those options, I believe that number two, the forty-five degree angle pour, has the least risk of catastrophic failure. Let’s try that first.”

As Andrew braced the hourglass, Jessica dumped the pills in. She only spilled a few handfuls and they were able to attach the top surface before tipping the structure upright. Jessica was able to sweep up the pills from the floor using some cardboard spacers that had been in the box.

“Gosh, you two got that done fast. Must be some kind of record,” Cara said, smiling nervously.

“Cara, I’ve seen that expression before. What do you want?” Jessica asked, grinning evilly.

“Well, the performer who was going to work the crowd in the pill costume got into a car accident on the way here and is in the hospital for observation after a mild concussion. Thank goodness he wasn’t seriously hurt. But I’m really glad that the staff weren’t car-pooling, so I’ve at least got people here to deal with the ball-toss, but they’re both too tall for the costume.”

“What a pain,” Jessica sympathized. “But there is no way you’re getting me into a pill costume. I had enough of that temp job as the Easter Bunny last year. Why don’t you do it?”

“I have to work the door and greet all the high muckity-mucks. I’ve been memorizing flashcards with VIP names and faces all week. There’s no way anyone would be able to cram that stuff in the next thirty minutes.” Cara turned to Andrew hopefully. “Unless you happen to have a secret super power for memorizing names and faces?”

“Alas, no. My secret super power is perfect pitch.”

“Okay, then do either of you know any medium height people who live within thirty minutes of the Aquarium who would be willing to dress up as giant pill but aren’t so crazy that they’re going to offend a guest at the event?”

Andrew bowed. “You need not resort to hustling vagrants off the street. I’ll suffer the indignities of the evening.”

“My God, I totally owe you a big favor. Thank you so much.” Cara hugged Andrew quickly then starting dragging him along by the elbow. “Take a break every hour and get out of the costume; it’ll get hot. You aren’t expected to make conversation, and you definitely shouldn’t offer opinions about any particular medicines, but you can engage in

small talk if you feel like it. If anyone asks you which pill you are, or whether you're good for high blood pressure, just smile and nod. Try to avoid answering questions and people will stop asking."

I should certainly be an expert at question avoidance. Andrew put on the costume and assured Cara that he would be fine. *I'll just walk around being conspicuous yet invisible at the same time. It's as easy to hide behind a costume as it is to hide behind a persona. Cara and Jess are so funny together. I wonder if I'll ever be so completely comfortable with another person?*

The guests started arriving and Cara greeted all the special attendees without a trace of visible anxiety. Jessica blended in with the crowd and watched the sea turtles and sharks swimming around the big tank. Andrew circulated slowly, trying not to get overheated. The ball-toss was a success, with people lining up for a chance to chuck pills into paper-mache mouths. Once everyone sat down to dinner, Andrew was released from costume duty.

"Andrew, you saved me tonight. I really appreciate it; I know those costumes aren't much fun," Cara said. "But the three of us are finished working now; I've got a really dependable take-down crew. Let's go get some dinner."

Jessica punched Andrew in the shoulder. "You do realize that Cara's going to have your number on speed-dial for whenever she needs a last-minute pill, don't you?" She grinned. "I'm just relieved that it won't just be me anymore! And hey, you should start making a list of what she needs to do for payback."

“That was...interesting. But I believe I need a drink now,” Andrew said, weakly. He felt a lot better after a pitcher of ice-water, some steak and foie gras, and a dish of chocolate mousse.



Just as she'd planned, the Crate and Barrel at the mall was nearly empty when Cara arrived. She only had thirty minutes allotted to the task of buying a wedding gift, and it was always easier to get shopping done with the aisles clear of slowpoke browsers. Cara had already tried doing it all online, but for some reason nearly all the items that Matt and Richard had registered for were 'only available in stores.'

Here are those cobalt blue dishes they wanted. And it was this pattern of champagne flutes. Since Jessica is giving them something so epically original, I'll just stick with the registry. Cara piled the boxes onto the counter and asked to have them shipped directly. She was just congratulating herself on checking one more item off her todo list when she heard a familiar throat-clearing sound.

Cara turned around, and just as she had dreaded, saw her least favorite ex-fiancé. “Hi Teddy. I was just finishing up here.”

“Finished making up your wedding wish list?” he asked. “Guess we never got around to that step.”

Cara shrugged. “Okay, bye now.”

Teddy followed her out of the store. “So when's the wedding? Did you find a nice super-achiever to settle down with?”

“Teddy, I get the message. You hate me, I ruined your life, and you’re still never going to forgive me. I’ve got it. You can go now.”

“Oh yeah, you’re probably already late for an important meeting with important people for your important job. Don’t waste time talking to me or anything.”

Cara turned and walked into the Apple store, which was filled with helpful looking staff-people. One staffer walked over immediately, and Cara waved at him. “Excuse me. This man is following me around and bothering me. Would you call mall security, please?”

The staffer looked startled, but beckoned over another two colleagues. “Becky, call security and have them send someone over. This lady says that this fellow is harassing her. Mark, you and I are going to stay here and keep these two folks company until security shows up.”

“Everything is always such a big deal to you, isn’t it? Except getting engaged. I guess you didn’t think that mattered much.” Andrew ignored the Apple store staff and started raising his voice. “And what I wanted didn’t matter either, compared to being a good corporate doobee.”

Cara turned to the two salespeople. “So while we’re waiting, I do have a few questions about the latest iPhone.”

“I can’t believe you! You can keep ignoring me, but one day you’ll wake up old and alone after your husband gets sick of putting up with all your nagging. Just remember that when that finally happens, I’m going to be laughing at you, Cara. I’m going to be laughing when you’re alone and crying because nobody loves you.” Andrew knocked over two

As Andrew performed the introductions, Cara noticed that Buzz was wearing a Powell High School baseball cap and red high-top sneakers. He also had a slight Southern accent.

Jessica rushed in, waving. “Sorry I’m late! My truck needs a new battery, and the bus took forever.”

“I just got here a minute ago, too. Andrew was just telling Buzz that all three of us had Mr. Chester for algebra and geometry back in high school,” Cara said.

“It’s so funny hearing y’all call him Mr. Chester,” Buzz remarked. “At home, I called him ‘Ches’ while I was in high school. By the time I’d graduated from college, I was calling him Pop, though.”

A waitress seated their party at a table near the window. Everyone ordered the fresh orange juice, except Buzz who got diet caffeine-free Coke.

“I’m sorry he passed away. He was one of my all-time favorite teachers,” Jessica said.

“He made even algebra seem so interesting,” Cara added.

Buzz nodded. “I don’t think I realized how much his students liked him until we got so many sympathy cards talking about how he’d made a real difference.”

“Is there a memorial scholarship fund or anything? I’d like to chip in, even if it’s just a little bit,” Jessica said.

“Yup, Mom and Pop talked about it when he was in the hospital near the end, and they decided to set up a fund to cover the costs of field trips for hands-on learning. I guess Pop had been paying for any of the

kids who didn't have the money to come on his field trips, and he thought it would be better if the trips were just free for all students. That way, no one would have to admit that they couldn't afford it, and everyone could just go."

"That's a great idea. We'll have to make sure to publicize it at our 20th reunion. I'm sure tons of people will want to help," Cara said.

"Speaking of the reunion and wedding stuff, just how big is your sculpture?" Buzz asked.

"Fully deployed, it's over thirty feet tall and about ten feet in diameter at the bottom. But, once it's deflated and rolled up, it fits in the bed of a small pickup truck," Jessica answered.

"Just barely fits," Cara added.

"No problem. We'll be driving a converted school bus, and so far the only other cargo is a half-dozen grandfather clocks. They'll be crated up and should stack three across the width of the bus and two deep," Buzz said.

"What has this former school bus been converted into?" asked Andrew. "Have all the seats been removed?"

"It's basically a generic mobile space. Schools sometimes buy them and park them near the building as an extra mini-classroom. I think they also get used as temporary headquarters for coordinating large public events, like big sports meets or walk-a-thons."

"We won't be able to trade off driving, then. Don't you need a special license to drive a school bus?" Jessica asked.

“Since it’s converted so that it’s not actually an operational school bus, you only need to pay a fee and take a written exam to upgrade your license to a commercial one. Crazy, huh? Anyone you see out there driving around a converted school bus may not have taken a road test with anything larger than a Honda Civic. And I’ll say, it took me hours of calling people at the RMV to get that clarified. No one knew nothin’ ‘bout no converted school buses,” Buzz said. “But I actually make anyone who’ll be driving a job with me go through ten hours on a bus and truck driving simulator. I’ve got a buddy who can get us free simulator time outside of normal business hours.”

“Cool! Thanks for giving me and the art a ride to Powell,” Jessica said.

“Just one small question, Buzz. If all the seats were removed, where will the non-drivers sit during the trip?” Andrew asked, raising an eyebrow.

“There are fastening points to tie the cargo down in the back half of the bus. I’ll put down some air mattresses, lean some big pieces of foam against the walls, and it’ll be fine,” Buzz said.

“Ha, that sounds fun. Too bad Cara can’t come too,” Jessica said, looking meaningfully at Andrew. She kicked him under the chair. That morning, she’d convinced him to call in the favor Cara owed him for the pill stunt to pressure her into coming on the road trip. Since Andrew hadn’t been comfortable with the idea of ever really asking Cara to do a favor for him, he’d readily agreed to further Jessica’s plans.

“Actually, Cara, I was wondering if you’d do me the very large favor of accompanying us on this journey,” Andrew said. “I hear that you’re quite good reading maps.”

“Jess, you put him up to this, I know it!” Cara said. *I can’t say no, not after he saved me from looking incompetent with that party at the Aquarium. And vacationing in a former school bus with Jess actually sounds a lot more fun than the last time I took a week off. Going around London by myself got kind of boring after a few days.*

“I never reveal my sources,” Andrew said with a wink. “So is that a deal, then?”

“I’ll tell my company that I’m taking the time off. Assuming there isn’t a serious objection, I’ll come along,” Cara promised. “I suppose it would really only be a day or two drive?”

“Better count on three days. I need to make a few stops,” Buzz said. “I’m still firming up the itinerary, but it definitely won’t be a straight shot from here to Ohio.”

“That reminds me, I still need to get my bosses to sign off on me being away those days,” Jessica sighed. “Having two jobs means twice as many dumb managers.”

Cara’s phone rang. This time, it sounded like police sirens. “Uh oh, excuse me. This has got to be a work emergency.” She stepped out of the restaurant for a minute. “Got to run. Look, I promise to my company about the vacation plan when I get back, but I have to go catch a plane to Orlando right now.”

Work and Wheels

*T*ime to make the donuts. Jessica turned off her alarm clock. She figured that if she skipped breakfast and the T was running normally, she'd just make it to Walgreens in time for her shift. She dashed out the door, remembering to grab a clean Rainforest Cafe polo shirt so that she could go straight to her other job later.

The T was running slow so she got to the store ten minutes late. "Tena, thanks for covering for me. Sorry about that." Jessica was out of breath from hurrying, and her hair had come out of its ponytail.

"That's ok, I'm still waiting for Kristin to swing by. She said she needed to talk to me about something."

"That reminds me, I have to tell her that I need a few days off." Jessica swapped out with Tena at the cash register. "Would you let her know that I need to talk to her on my break?"

The afternoon was busier than usual. Although the serious back-to-school ads hadn't started running yet, the store already had a good supply of backpacks, notebooks, and plastic lunch boxes.

“Excuse me, I think the price rang up wrong on this one,” said a woman who had two toddlers in a large stroller. She held out a Sponge Bob backpack. “The tag says \$18.99, and there was a sign saying that all backpacks were 15% off. So it should only be \$16.14, not \$17.10.”

Jessica looked at the receipt and the tag. “Sorry about that, looks like you’re right. But I need to call a manager over to approve the price correction and get it fixed in the computers. Do you mind waiting a minute?”

The woman shrugged. “As long as these two stay asleep and don’t wake up and see the candy display, that’s fine.”

Kristin responded to Jessica’s page right away, smiling at the customer. “Hello ma’am. What can I do for you today?”

“This backpack rang up with the wrong sales price,” the woman repeated.

“She saw a sign about backpacks being 15% off, but it’s coming up at 10% off,” Jessica added.

Kristin nodded. “Oh, I’m sorry. That one isn’t a backpack. It’s a children’s cartoon character novelty item. They’re 10% off today.”

“Well, that’s pretty stupid, but I guess I’ll take it anyways,” the woman replied. “Sure looks like a backpack.” She paid for her items and sniffed loudly as she left the store.

Jessica glanced at Kristin. “You think we should change the sale sign to say that the 15% off doesn’t apply to cartoon character backpacks?”

“I think you just had the one customer in the universe who’s going to ask about it. But if anyone else is confused, you can just tell them what I just explained to that woman.”

“Sure, whatever. While you’re here, I needed to tell you that I can’t work from Wednesday August 11 through the next Wednesday. I’ll fill out the schedule form later today.”

“We’ll have to see how that works with everyone else’s schedule,” said Kristin.

“I can work extra shifts the weeks before and after, if that helps,” Jessica offered.

“Check back with me before you leave.”

During the rest of the afternoon, five more customers complained about the cartoon character backpack confusion. Three of them accepted Jessica’s explanation, one stomped back to the aisle to put the bag back, and another refused to believe a mere cashier. Among the other customers, Jessica got one man who wanted to pay for his cookies and soda with about 10,000 pennies and a woman who wanted a refund on some SPF 50 sunscreen because she’d still gotten a sunburn.

When she went to find Kristin, Jessica could tell by the way her boss was yelling at one of the stockers that this would probably be a bad time to talk. *She’s always getting in a snit about something. But I still have to talk to her right now, so I can get going to the Rainforest Cafe.*

Kristin turned to glare at Jessica. “Did you deface that sign after I told you not to?”

“I didn’t do anything to any signs.”

“Look at this!” Kristin waved the offending sign. “Who wrote on this sign?”

The sign now advertised ‘Back-to-School. 15% off all backpacks, Except Backpacks for Kids,’ with the addendum written in a sloppy scrawl of black marker.

Jessica shrugged. “I’ve been at the cash register all afternoon, except when I went to the backroom during break. There was one customer who got pretty pissed off about the backpack thing. I guess he could have gone back into the store and written on the sign.”

“I keep telling you people that the most important part of your job is customer relations. Why didn’t you explain things in a way that wouldn’t get the customer upset?”

“I tried,” said Jessica. “He was complaining about how we had misleading signs, and how we should have put the cartoon backpacks farther away from the others.”

“You know that all seasonal items have to be displayed in the same aisle. I think that if you’d been respectful yet firm, I wouldn’t have had to come over and talk to that other customer who wanted to see a manager.”

This conversation is so not going anywhere good. Maybe it’s time to just smile and nod and lie through my teeth. “Yes, Kristin. I know you have too much stuff to do to come running over for every little thing. I’m sorry.”

Kristen shook her head. “No, I’m sorry, Jessica. I think it would be better if you moved on. I don’t think you’re quite at a point in your personal trajectory where you’ll be successful at Walgreens.”

“You’re serious,” Jessica said, staring at her now former boss.
Personal trajectory? What’s that supposed to mean?

“I appreciate the work you’ve done for us, but this is just not working out. You don’t have to worry about the rest of the shifts you’re scheduled for. There’s another location that is being renovated so we’ll have most of their staff for the next month or so.”

This place is going to have extra staff for the next month, but she was still going to make me beg for a week off? I so don’t need this. “Alright, I can see that. I’ll just say good-bye, then.” *Good-bye, good riddance, and I hope your eyebrows never grow back the next time you overpluck.*

Jessica walked to the bus stop in a daze. *Now I’m going to have to come up with a way to explain getting fired from Walgreens so I can find another job. I guess me and Andrew can join forces or something. Hub, I guess he’d be looking for high-tech science type jobs, though, not this kind of cashier junk.*



As usual, there was a fleet of strollers parked outside the Rainforest Cafe. Jessica frowned as she tried to remember if she’d seen any help wanted signs recently. Despite the sinking feeling in her stomach, Jessica still waved at her favorite animatronics crocodile, whom she’d nicknamed Horsey. As she headed past the restrooms, she heard a child screaming.

Jessica burst into the Men’s Room and saw two boys kicking a third smaller boy, who was on the floor screaming. She grabbed both of

the attackers by a shoulder and pulled them back. “Whoa, guys. What’s going on here?”

None of the kids said anything. The one on the floor had stopped screaming and was now just crying. Jessica gave the two boys a quick shake. “Don’t you want to tell me why you were kicking him just now?” They both shook their heads.

“You here with your parents?” They nodded. “Okay, how about you go back and sit with your parents.” The two boys quickly disappeared out the door.

Jessica knelt down by the remaining boy. “Are you hurt? Do you want to tell me anything?”

“They’re mean!” he said, getting to his feet. “I hate them!”

“Yeah, I saw them kicking you. Are you okay?”

The boy nodded. “Maybe I should walk you back to your parents,” Jessica suggested, pushing the door open. The boy wiped his nose on his sleeve and walked out of the restroom. Jessica followed him to a table where several adults sat with five kids, including the two boys she’d just seen in the restroom.

“Hi, I’m Jessica, I’m one of the waitresses here. I just found this child being beat up in the restroom by those two, and I was concerned.”

One of the women at the table stood up. “Thank you for stepping in. I’m their mother,” she said, nodding her head towards the guilty-looking boys. “Don’t worry, I’ll make sure these two won’t be fighting again any time soon.”

“I’ll just leave you all to your dinner,” Jessica said. She patted the smaller boy on the back.

Jessica was soon busy handling her own tables and didn’t see the group leaving. At the end of her shift, she was tallying up tips when her manager came by.

“We’ve got a problem, Jessica,” he said. “Someone complained that you shook their kids.”

“My God, Peter. I saw two kids kicking a smaller kid who was curled up on the floor screaming. I just grabbed the two by their shoulders to make them stop,” Jessica explained. “I met the mother, and told her what the kids were doing. She seemed pretty sane. I can’t believe she made a complaint.”

“It was actually their father, who wasn’t here today. He heard from the kids when they got home later.”

“What? He didn’t talk to the mother? Those kids were clearly guilty of ganging up on their little friend, and it sounded like she was going to be punishing them.”

“I don’t know, it sounds like the parents are divorced or something. Anyhow, it’s against the rules to have physical contact with any children here, and especially if their parent or guardian isn’t in the room.”

“But Peter,” Jessica objected.

“Jess, I agree with you. Honestly, I would probably have done the same thing. But the problem is that we now have a complaint, and I have to follow the policy.”

“So I was supposed to just leave the kids beating on each other? Then we’d just have the parents of the kid who got beat up complaining about how we let their son get hurt on our property.”

“You’re right. It’s a no-win situation, and you’re getting the short end of the stick when it’s not your fault. All I can tell you is that I’ll give you a great recommendation.”

Unbelievable. How in the world did I manage to lose two jobs in a single day? “Thanks for that, at least. I’m not mad at you. It’s not your fault,” she said.

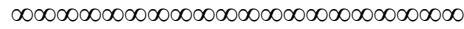
“The best I can do for you is put you on suspension for the max of two weeks, which will get you half-salary. But then you’ll be fired. Supposedly, there is an internal investigation, but the way it works is really a joke. They never clear anyone. So I don’t want you to expect a fair shake.” Peter frowned. “And I hope you won’t be embarrassed, but I told a few of the staff here tonight about how you were getting screwed, and we passed the hat around for a good-bye gift.” He handed her an envelope.

“Tell everyone thanks for me. And I’ll put you down as a reference, if that’s really okay,” Jessica said, accepting the gift.

“Come by and say hi to Horsey anytime you’re in the area,” Peter said. “We’ll miss you.”

I guess at least I have as much time off for our road-trip as I need. This is like some weird monkey’s paw thing. Jessica sighed, and wished that Cara wasn’t off in Orlando. *Maybe this is all a sign that I need some changes in my life.*

Her phone rang. *Cara must be reading my mind about wanting to talk. I just hope she doesn't need to spout off too much good advice. Maybe she'll be able to help me fantasize some other good jinxes for Kristin instead.*



Buzz started up the former school bus. The motor shook the driver's seat, making his teeth chatter, until it finally smoothed out. *It was cool of Jessica to volunteer to help me get this painted. This is the first time one of my transport jobs came with an artistic pre-requisite.*

When he pulled into the abandoned lot, he saw Jessica waving from back near a chain-link fence. "Hey, nice wheels," she shouted. "Hop into my truck and we can go pick out the paint. I figured you might have some color preferences."

"According to the contract, I can use any color except yellow. The buyers said they aren't picky. They just want to make sure it doesn't get mistaken for an operational school bus," Buzz said. "I'm partial to turquoise, myself."

"It can be hard to make a single-color paint job look nice, because all the irregularities in brushwork or layering show up. What would you think of something like turquoise and purple polka-dots? Then we could even leave the base yellow color intact," Jessica suggested. "Saves trouble if you don't have to cover up all the yellow, and I'm pretty sure that no one will mistake it for a regulation school bus by the time we're done."

“Ha, that sounds good to me. I’ll take easier over harder whenever I can get it. But I’ll tell you that I have no artistic talent. You’ll have to outline where you want all the dots, but I can help color them in.”

Jessica waved off his concern. “I’ll tell you, a lot of artists don’t have any artistic talent either. But I’ll sketch out all the dots if you want. Though with spray paint, maybe it would be better to just make a couple of stencils and move them around.”

They arrived at the hardware and paint store. The selection of outdoor automotive spray paint included several shades of blue and purples.

“They don’t have any real turquoise,” Bud observed. “Navy blue, sky blue, peacock blue. How can there not be turquoise?”

“Don’t ask me. I’ve never understood why there’s so much stuff painted navy blue. Except naval ships. Have you noticed that none of them are painted navy blue?” Jessica looked through the color options. “If we were doing normal paints, I’d say we could just mix up our own turquoise, but blending spray paint colors doesn’t work very well.” She held up a green can. “This one’s teal green. Does that work for you?”

“I guess it’ll have to do. We don’t really have time to special order paint colors,” Buzz said.

“And honestly, we’ll be on the inside of the bus most of the time. You won’t really spend that much time looking at the paint color when we’re on the road,” Jessica pointed out. “Let’s see, we better get ten cans of each.”

Buzz looked at the fine print on the cans. “It says each can is supposed to cover 10 square feet, though.”

“I know, but I once used an entire can of spray paint on a sculpture about the size of a large turkey. Plus, if we don’t get enough now, I can almost guarantee you that when we come back here this afternoon to get another can, they’ll have run out of the color and we’ll be driving all over town trying to get more.” Jessica shrugged. “Murphy’s law. This has been a serious bad luck week for me already.”

“You mentioned that you’re out of work now?” Buzz asked.

“That’s a nice way of putting it. I got thrown out on my butt at both my jobs last weekend.”

“What happened?”

“It boils down to my boss at one place was a nut-job who needs to project power over her little kingdom, and at the other place, well, some guy who hadn’t even been in the restaurant made a complaint partly to get back at his ex-wife. Does that make any sense to you, because I sure don’t get it.”

“Dang. You sure get some bad hassles when you have to deal with people,” Buzz sympathized. “Lucky for me, I only see most of my customers when I pick up or drop off. The rest of the arrangements are all by email or phone.”

Jessica slammed on the brakes. “What are you doing?” Buzz yelled.

“Sorry about that. There was a squirrel running across the road,” Jessica said.

“Look, I like the rodents as much as anyone else, but when you’re driving the bus, do not brake for squirrels. Or chipmunks. Or paper bags blowing in the wind.” Buzz said. “For one thing, you can’t stop a bus that fast, so you’d probably hit the thing even if you brake. For another thing, you don’t want to eject your passengers out the window, do you?”

“Guess I’m twitchy about things running out into the road,” Jessica mumbled. “Hey, if we get your bus polka-dotted up fast, maybe you can take me out to the bus driving simulator thing while it’s drying.”

Buzz nodded. “Yeah, Andrew finished his ten hours already, and Cara said that she just doesn’t want to do any of the driving. But three drivers should be plenty, so that’s fine with me.” *And me just keeping an eye on two new drivers in one trip will be plenty, too. I probably should have gotten one of my regular partners signed up for the trip, but I didn’t want to explain the pilgrimage part to any of those guys. They never even met Pop. At least these three all remember him.*

When they got back to the abandoned lot where the bus was parked, Jessica got to work marking out the polka-dot scheme. She made up some stencils for the different sized dots out of a few large cardboard boxes. “I always keep a few flattened boxes in the back of my truck,” she said. “You never know when you’ll need to put together a quick mock-up.”

Buzz listened absently. “Jessica, I’ve been thinking about your class reunion, and how Pop used to love it when his old students dropped by. So I wanted to see if y’all would want to go in on something with me. I had this kind of half-baked notion that I’d like to make a few

stops on the way to Powell to do some stuff as a kind of personal memorial.”

“Tell me about your ideas,” she encouraged.

“It’s okay if you and the others don’t want to get involved or anything. You hardly know me, even Andrew.” Buzz avoided looking at Jessica and stood on one leg, rolling a can of paint back and forth with his other foot.

“Buzz, we haven’t known you very long, but I bet by the end of the trip we’ll all be like old friends. And we’ve all been big fans of your father since we were in high school. So what kind of thing did you have in mind? Come on, I won’t laugh. I’m the one hauling an inflatable tower full of gargoyles across the country for a wedding gift,” Jessica said.

“It’s kind of around Pop’s name. When he and my Mom first got married, I didn’t want anything to do with it. I didn’t change my last name, and I called him ‘Ches.’ He was cool with all that; never tried to push being a new family or anything.”

Jessica had taped the stencils to the bus. She nodded at Buzz. “Go ahead, you can fill in the teal ones and I’ll do the purple. So you were thinking of doing something based on Mr. Chester’s name?”

“See, you probably knew his first name was Jon?” They sprayed steadily, filling in the circles. Buzz watched Jessica carefully evening out the paint coverage on her circle and started doing the same. “I was thinking that we could make three stops on the way. One at Jeochester in Ohio, one at Noonchester in Connecticut, and one at some O-chester place somewhere in between.”

“J.O.N. Chester. That’s neat. Did you also have some ideas about what to do in each place?” Jessica asked.

“I thought we could just go there and then walk around until we figured out something to do that reminded us of him, or something that he would have enjoyed doing, or um, anything that just seemed to fit. I know that’s really vague.”

“Oh, but a loose plan is the best, especially for a road trip. Kind of like how some people can’t name their baby until the kid is born and they meet face-to-face,” Jessica enthused. “I like your idea. Now that I’m out of work, money’s going to be extra tight, so I’m not going to be able to chip in much to the field trip fund. But doing some things together to kind of pay tribute to your dad? I want to do that.”

Buzz half-smiled and started painting another circle. “I was worried y’all would think it’s goofy.”

“Did I tell you that Cara got Andrew to dress up in a giant blue pill costume? You don’t know what goofy is until you see something like that.” Jessica said with a laugh. “I’m pretty sure Cara will go for it. Except you have to be ready to fend her off, if she starts to over-plan.”

“Some extra planning would be ok by me. Do you think she’d be up for getting a cooler and stocking the bus with lunch foods? See, I don’t want to spend too much time stopping for long meals, because doing the three Chester stops will already slow us down,” Buzz said.

“Cara hates it when she thinks men are asking her to handle refreshments. But, if you talk about how we need to organize stocking the food, and then talk like you’re intending to do it yourself and are going to buy a bunch of junk food, she’ll probably volunteer to take the

job off your hands. Since she won't be driving, she'll want to have something that she's in charge of."

Buzz shook his head. "People are so funny. But let's do it your way, I don't want her to get mad because I'm trying to send her out for coffee and donuts."

"So what's Andrew doing today? I would have thought he'd want to help paint," Jessica asked. She moved the stencils to the next set of dots. "This is coming out pretty good. I wish I had my own house. I'd totally paint it polka-dotted."

"Hell if I know. We're not best buddies like you and Cara. I think we probably emailed about two times in the last year, before this whole road trip idea came up."

"Andrew was the wonder kid in our year," Jessica reminisced. "Smart, athletic, talented writer, math whiz. It was like you never had to wonder who was going to get the best grade on something. Everyone just assumed it would be Andrew, but that was fine, because that was just the way things were."

"That's kind of funny, because I mostly knew him from a summer job washing bottles and glassware in a lab. And he was always dropping and breaking flasks and things. I mean, we both did, but he was way worse," Buzz said. "I think having us there cost them more in glassware than in salary."

Jessica's second can of paint ran out, and she grabbed a third. "I guess we'd use paper plates for a road trip, so we won't have to worry about glassware. And it's only ten days 'til we head out. It's a surprise that Cara hasn't gotten us together for brunch and a pre-trip briefing yet."

On cue, Buzz's phone rang. It was indeed Cara, offering to host a brunch on Saturday, so they could get together and finalize plans for the trip.



“I’m sorry, Jess. I can’t take a long lunch today. Just too many meetings already scheduled, and then I have that networking thing in the evening. But why don’t you ask Andrew if he can drive you over?” Cara recommended.

“I feel like I barely know the guy,” Jessica objected. “Sure, we were all on the math team back in high school, but then I didn’t see him for almost twenty years, and we’ve what, gotten together a few times over the last month? I don’t want to bother him.”

“But I’m sure he won’t mind. He deliberately let me miss my stop that night on the T so he could offer to drive me home. And come on, he put on a big pill costume and entertained blasé pharmaceutical workers to save my butt. Poor Andrew is probably a little lonely since he’s new to the area and he’s obviously still a really nice guy.”

“You’re just better at asking people for favors,” Jessica said. “I hate asking for things.” She rolled her eyes. “At least I’m never going to have to make-nice with Kristin to get a day off again.”

“Think of her as another example. Sure she made people feel like dirt when they asked her for anything. But she liked it. She might have liked you better if you’d given her a more chances to lord it over you by

asking for favors. Now I'm not saying Andrew's like that, just that all sorts of people actually like it when you ask them for help," Cara said. "Anyhow, I'm sorry I can't do it today, but with trying to get everything organized before our road trip, I'm just too swamped."

"That's ok. Not like I'd need to drive Mr. Bear while we're on the road," Jessica replied.

"Give Andrew a call. Think of it as giving him permission to ask you for help somewhere down the line."

Jessica could never understand why Cara was so blithe about asking people to lend a hand. *Maybe it's because she wouldn't really care if they said 'no'. Well, maybe I'll try it her way this time.*



About an hour later, Andrew was ringing her doorbell. "Good morning, Jessica. It occurred to me on the way over here that we could also try jump-starting your vehicle, and then driving it to get a new battery installed," Andrew mentioned. "In case you'd rather not do the installation yourself."

"Nah, that's okay. And I've already got the old battery out. If I take it into the Sears, they'll get rid of the old one if I buy a new one. But thanks for helping out with this. I need to get serious about applying for new jobs when we get back from this trip, and it'll be a lot easier with Mr. Bear running."

“Ah, so today we will be buying a new battery for Mr. Bear?” Andrew asked. “How did he get that particular moniker?”

“I bought him used, and the engine used to growl pretty loud before I got it fixed,” Jessica replied. “And he’s black, like a bear.”

Andrew nodded. “That’s probably rather more justification than most of us have for our own names.” They got into Andrew’s car, and he was glad that the rotten food odor had completely dissipated. “What sort of position are you seeking this time?”

“That’s a good question. I mean, waitressing, working retail, whatever I can get. Not a lot of full-time jobs for contemporary artists, so I usually have at least one day job.” Jessica sighed. “Though if I could ever get something that paid more, that would be great. How about you?”

“I thought the Boston area would be a better place to look for a job, since there are more companies here than in Maine,” Andrew said. He paid strict attention to a tricky merge and left turn. “My specialty is customizing and deploying web pages for non-materiel purchases.”

“Like what? I’m not sure I’ve ever bought something ‘non-materiel.’”

“Oh, anything from payment for event registrations to service plans or subscriptions. The needs are just a bit different than for online site that sell physical items,” Andrew explained.

“I guess having a specialty probably means you can get a decent job. I wonder if it’s too late for me to do something.”

“I haven’t had the pleasure of seeing any of your larger works, but surely that sort of creation counts as doing something?” Andrew said. “Cara mentioned that you were recently recognized as one of New England’s most intriguing contemporary sculptors.”

“I mean, sometimes I wonder if I could get a better day job. We all had these dead-end jobs when we were in high school, but I just kept doing it,” Jessica said. “But I’m not sure what else I could do at this point.”

“Mmm. I’ve heard a prediction that the workers of our generation will have two career changes each, on average. Perhaps you’re due for one of yours.”

“I always thought that eventually I’d do the art full-time, but that’s not looking very likely,” Jessica said. “Lately, I catch myself paying attention to those ads that say you can learn to be an insurance reimbursement coder or dental hygienist or something.”

“There’s nothing wrong with examining alternatives. I may have to change what I’m doing as well. These days there are more off-the-shelf packages that companies can use to set up these sorts of web sites, so it’s becoming rarer for them to hire someone to do it.” Andrew parked carefully near the Sears automotive. “Shall we go pick out a battery for Mr. Bear?”

“Andrew, you’re way too entertained by my truck’s name. I think that means that you need a name for your own car. Wouldn’t want him to get jealous,” Jessica said.

After dropping off the old battery and buying a new one, Jessica was still thinking about good names for Andrew’s car. “And, I think we

need a name for Buzz's bus, too. If we're at a rest stop, I don't want to say 'Meet you back at Buzz's bus.' That sounds stupid."

"You cannot call my car Mr. Bird," Andrew warned. "Or for that matter, not mister anything."

"I think your car looks like a Jericho. But it probably wouldn't be fair to name the bus by ourselves. We can wait until Cara's brunch thing and put the bus naming on her agenda."

"I'm not promising that I'll start referring to my car as Jericho, but you are certainly welcome to do so," Andrew said. "I'm bad enough remembering people's names. I don't need to start also feeling embarrassed about forgetting what someone's car is named."

Jessica patted the car's headlight. "Don't you mind Andrew, Jericho. He'll get the hang of it."



Cara had a whiteboard leaning up against the wall of her dining room. A lengthy checklist, color-coded, covered the board. "I made fruit salad and waffles and quiche, so let's eat first." She waved at the whiteboard. "I started making some notes but Buzz is really the expert on cross-country hauling, so consider all of this tentative."

"It's not really something you have to plan very much," Buzz said. "Not like a camping trip where you're going to be away from civilization for a week. I usually take a cooler and load it up with some Cool Whip and cheesecake and caffeine-free diet Coke, toss in some beef

jerky and potato chips, and I'm all set." He and Jessica exchanged glances. "Y'all like beef jerky, right?"

Cara tried not to look horrified. "Um, I haven't really had it much lately." Then she brightened. "Since I'm not going to help with any of the driving, maybe my job could be to pack and stock the provisions."

"As long as I have my Coke, I'm good to go," Buzz replied. "You can do whatever you want with the food." He looked at the dishes covering the table. "This stuff sure looks tasty to me."

Jessica smiled as they all sat down and served themselves. "I managed to do all my driving simulator hours and upgraded my driver's license, and so did Andrew. So that's all set. But I don't think the rest of you have heard about Buzz's idea about memorializing Mr. Chester."

Andrew raised his hand. "Buzz explained to me on the way over. I'm all for it."

Cara looked around. "So who wants to explain it to me? Buzz, I guess it was your idea?"

"Don't get me wrong, I'm real glad that my Mom has put together the field trip fund and I'm grateful that everyone's been donating. But I kind of think that celebrating Pop's life and how much he affected me, well, it makes more sense to have a little adventure in his memory," Buzz said. "And I was a real pain-in-the-butt teenager. It's almost embarrassing how self-absorbed I was."

"A nearly inevitable phase for us all. I'm sure your parents understood that you didn't mean to be difficult," Andrew said.

“I know, but it’s still embarrassing,” Buzz admitted, shaking his head. “The time I really started bonding with Pop was when he drove me out to visit colleges. So us making this road trip got me thinking. What if we stopped in three towns and just did something in each place that reminded us of him?”

Jessica interrupted. “And, Buzz had this nifty idea for which towns to stop in. We’d go to a J-chester, O-chester, and N-chester. Like Mr. Chester’s first and last name.”

“That’s cool,” Cara said. “But do you still think we can make it to Powell in three days?”

“Yep. Turns out I don’t have any work stops along the way. I’ll drop all of you off in Powell for the wedding and reunion, and then I’ll go another hour or so to deliver the grandfather clocks. After that, I’ve got just a quick drive to drop off the bus and pick up a converted mini-van.”

“Is a converted mini-van something like a converted school bus?” Jessica asked.

“Nah. The mini-van’s been tricked out to be able to hold a bunch of big advertisements on the top and sides. The interior hasn’t been changed,” Buzz replied.

“I forgot we wouldn’t be coming back in the same vehicle,” Cara said. “But of course we can’t, since you’re delivering it. So where are J, O, and N-chester?”

“Jeocheater is in Ohio, Nooncheater is in Connecticut, and I haven’t found an O-chester yet.”

“But Buzz, how are we going to stop there if we don’t know where it is?” Cara asked. “We’ve got to look up an O-chester right away.”

Andrew looked at the whiteboard. “Maybe it’s time to review your list of notes now, Cara. I believe we’ve all eaten our fill of your excellent cooking.”

She nodded. “Right, so I’ll take care of stocking up on food. I assume we’ll be bringing most of our meals for three days, but that we can stop for groceries if necessary. The next question is where we’ll be sleeping. Buzz, you mentioned air mattresses?”

“Check. I’ve got four twin air mattresses. I figure we can catch a shower at a YMCA, or we can even rent a single room and rotate through the bathroom,” Buzz said.

“I don’t mind springing for decent hotel rooms for us all,” Cara offered. “Since the road trip is saving me the airfare.”

“That’s real nice of you. How about we try the low budget approach, but if anyone feels like they aren’t getting a good night’s sleep, we’ll take you up on the hotel rooms,” Buzz said.

“Personally, I have trouble sleeping in hotel rooms, so it may not make much difference,” Andrew said.

“I’ve never camped out in a bus, so I definitely want to try that,” said Jessica. “Which reminds me, we need to figure out a name for the bus.”

Buzz laughed. “You won’t believe it, but she’s got a name already. The sellers told me to take good care of Mathilda.”

Cara nodded. “Since that’s taken care of, the next big question is visits. I know we don’t want to take too long, but should we tell friends that we’ll be passing through their neighborhood, in case folks want to get together?”

“My vote is that for anyone who’s going to be at the reunion or wedding, there’s no point in dropping by on the way over,” Jessica said.

“I’m driving around so often that there’s no one I’d need to see on this trip,” Buzz said. “But we’ll be stopping each night, plus at the three chesters, so if you have friends who want to come out and meet us, or if we’ll be passing right near them already, a quick stop’s fine with me.”

“Andrew, what do you think?” Cara asked. “I already told Jess this, but I was thinking of calling Susanna in upstate New York. She and Matt weren’t really friends, so she wouldn’t be going to the wedding. And she’s not going to be able to go to the reunion, because she’s got four kids and expecting a fifth one any day now.”

“I concur with Buzz,” Andrew said. “I would certainly enjoy catching up with Susanna after all these years. If her place is on our route, we could drop in and provide her with a bit of adult company. It’s difficult to imagine having five children. I was an only child, myself.”

“I’m the oldest of three, but I still can’t imagine having five kids,” Cara said.

“Heck, I can see how some people would figure that if you’re gonna do something, go whole hog,” said Buzz. “More efficient to have a bunch at once. Or something.”

“I’ll let Susanna know that we’ll probably be passing through, and might call her if the timing works out.” Cara crossed that item off the list. “Buzz, what about maps and route planning?”

“I’ve got a box of maps and road atlases, and a good GPS system. I know how to get from here to Noonchester, and from Jeochester to Powell, but I’m not sure yet how O-chester affects the route.”

“Other than agreeing ahead of time that we should stop at least every three hours for a bathroom break and driver change, I think the mysterious O-chester is the last thing we have to settle,” Cara said. “And I also wanted to ask Buzz if he has any ground rules or procedures that the rest of us need to know about.”

“No smoking, no alcohol, no hitting the driver,” Buzz listed. “Keep track of your own stuff, bring ear-plugs if you don’t like my snoring, and at least one passenger has to stay awake with the driver at all times. No radio, drivers do not answer their cell phones, we stop at railroad crossings, bring your own pillow if you’re fussy.” He ticked off each rule on his fingers. “Wait, there’s one more. Ah, no pets.”

“Roger that,” Andrew said, nodding. He raised his eyebrows. “Those all sound very sensible. And I shall volunteer to locate an appropriate O-chester before we set forth.”

Everyone Needs Proof

The four travelers met at Jessica's place at 9 a.m. to help load the sculpture. Buzz had recommended leaving no earlier than 9:30, in order to avoid rush-hour traffic.

"Outstanding paint job," Andrew complimented. "Surely Mathilda likes this new look."

"I like polka-dots," Cara said. "And we should have no trouble with look-alike vehicles in parking lots. I remember this time when Teddy actually got into the wrong car and drove it home before noticing that it had someone else's stuff in the front seat. Apparently the two cars had the same key pattern."

"That big dorkhead. What's he up to these days?" Jessica asked, wrinkling her nose.

"Another old classmate?" Buzz inquired.

"Nah, Teddy's my least favorite ex-fiancé. I ran into him at the mall last month, and Jess is right about the dorkhead part."

The group tied the sculpture down on top of the crates of clocks, loaded their luggage, and clambered into the bus. Buzz would be the first driver as they headed to Noonchester.

“How many ex-fiancés do you have?” Andrew asked.

“Teddy would be my least favorite no matter how many I had, but it’s just the two,” Cara answered. “Not so much to show for being almost forty, eh?”

Andrew sat on the edge of the front mattress, near the driver’s seat. Cara and Jessica reclined on the next mattress, propped up on pillows.

“I thought Oliver was a lot more fun,” Jessica offered.

“He was a good guy. But I just couldn’t deal with moving to Singapore,” Cara said. “He sends me a Christmas card each year. Married, with twins.”

“Your ex ended up marrying twins? Is that legal in Singapore?” Buzz teased.

“You know what I mean. He and his wife have twin girls. I think they’re about four years old.”

“How about you, Jess? Any engagements and dis-engagements?” Buzz asked. “Please pass me a Coke.”

Jessica rolled over to the cooler, opened a can, and gave it to Andrew to pass over to Buzz. “Just the one ex-husband,” she replied.

“Oh, I haven’t thought about Wen for years,” Cara said. “You ever hear from him?”

“I think he and Tom moved to Georgia,” Jessica answered. “No kids, as far as I know.”

“You have a gay ex-husband? That must be a good story,” Buzz remarked.

“Oh, we got married on a dare. He needed to get a green card to stay in the country, but we got divorced after he got his citizenship.”

“How unusual. I thought that sort of thing was just in the movies. Did you set up household and everything?” Andrew asked. *Just how does someone get married on a dare? And then stay married for seven years?*

“Oh yeah. He was a great roommate. Actually, we’d been sharing an apartment even before we got married.” Jessica shook her head. “Wen was the last awesome roommate I had before a long string of bad matches. I finally had to get my own place even though it’s more expensive. Romance-wise, I’ve dated a few straight guys, but none of them turned out to be keepers. Now, what about you, Buzz? A wife in every port?”

“Never been married, never gotten engaged. My girlfriend’s been hinting, though. I’m just not sure I’m ready to settle down.”

“Not sure you want to settle down, or not sure you want to settle down with her?” Cara asked, crunching on an apple. She’d stocked the cooler with a lot of healthy snacks and some token junk food. They would run out of beef jerky and Hostess Cupcakes before reaching Noonchester.

“She’s great. I can’t imagine being with anyone else. But, she’s sick of me being gone on these multi-day hauls, and I’m not sure I’d be happy at a desk job,” Buzz said.

“A desk job is better than a lab job,” Andrew said. “You could probably still drink Coke and eat beef jerky at a desk job. Remember all that bottle-washing back at our old summer job?”

“I had perma-prunes on my fingers that summer,” Buzz replied.

“That’s why we were supposed to wear the gloves.”

“Wearing gloves is why you dropped half the glassware.”

Andrew threw up his hands in mock concession. “Point to you. I admit that you were much, much better at washing glassware than I was.”

“I’ve been trying to figure out how to get a desk job instead of doing more waitressing or working the cash register,” Jessica said. “Did you have any ideas about how to break into that sort of work?”

“Oh Jess, that’s great. You’re smart, there’s got to be a place that would pay better and not involve a boss like Kristin,” Cara said. “You could come with me to some of those networking events, hit a couple of job fairs, maybe even talk to a career coach.”

Jessica shrugged. “We’ll see. But hey, we didn’t hear about Andrew’s love life yet.”

“Almost nothing to tell,” Andrew said. “There was a special woman I met after college, but she eventually moved on.”

“Hey, maybe I should introduce you to some of my single friends,” Jessica offered. “How would you feel about dating a starving artist?”

“Oh, I doubt any of your artistic friends would be interested in an overweight, out-of-work web developer. I’m much too boring.”

Cara eyed him critically. “Honestly, I wouldn’t be surprised if a half dozen women at our reunion don’t throw themselves at you, if word gets out that you’re available. It’s a lot more okay for guys to be carrying some extra weight, but it’s doom for a woman’s dating prospects.”

Andrew cleared his throat. “So Buzz, did you want me to drive for a while?”

“Oops, I think he wants us to change the subject,” Jessica said.

“We’ll be getting to Noonchester soon, but if you want to drive for while, I’ll pull over at the next rest stop. I could use some coffee,” Buzz answered.

Jessica started singing the song ‘Interjection’ song from School House Rock, and Cara lay back and closed her eyes. Andrew looked out the window, relieved that the women hadn’t continued pursuing the topic of his potential romantic involvements. From their angle on the floor, he heard the hum of traffic, but could only see the sky and a few trees. *Funny to be on a highway but not see any other cars. Is that similar to being alone while surrounded by other people? Why am I going to a wedding and a reunion so I can spend the whole time avoiding questions and hoping no one’s talking about me?*

They spilled out of the bus at the rest stop. Buzz instructed everyone to meet back at Mathilda in fifteen minutes, and the group split up. Cara headed to the convenience store to restock the snack supply, Buzz lingered near the bus to call his girlfriend, and Jessica did yoga stretches by the picnic tables. Andrew made a beeline to the restrooms and hoped that he wasn’t blushing.



“Hey Cara, what does Google say about Noonchester?” Jessica asked.

Cara looked through some papers on her clipboard and skimmed some information on her phone. “I looked this up last night. Alright, so the biggest thing that Noonchester is famous for is being in the Guinness Book of World Record for...dun dun duh!...the largest pair of hand-knitted socks.”

“I had no idea that we were within a few hours drive of such a phenomenon,” Andrew said.

“Pop wore socks, but I dunno that he ever had any that were hand-knitted,” Buzz said. “But how about if we stop and see the socks first. Maybe we can figure out some ideas for what to do next after we hang out in town for a while.”

Andrew slowed to let a group of high school students run across the street. They were playing keep-away with someone’s baseball cap. One guy waved at the bus as he went past.

“This place definitely has enough dumb pedestrians,” Buzz said. “That’s about the third bunch of people whose parents didn’t teach them how to cross the road.”

“There’s a parking lot over there,” Cara pointed out. “I think we’re just about at the center of town now.” Andrew pulled into the parking lot as Cara checked their location on her phone. “The knitting shop with the socks is a few blocks that way.”

Jessica got out her camera and snapped a picture of the others standing next to Mathilda. “I see a Starbucks, too, if anyone needs more coffee,” she said. As they walked towards the knitting shop, Jessica took more pictures of the storefronts along the street.

“Mr. Chester and our other teachers weren’t much older than we are now,” Cara said. “I wonder if any of them were knitters or what their hobbies were.”

“Remember how one Christmas Mrs. Shah gave everyone little plants that she’d started from cuttings? I still have mine.” Jessica said.

“I brought mine to college with me, but I killed it by overwatering,” Andrew said. “Brown thumb, I’m afraid.”

“I can start another cutting for you, if you want,” Jessica offered. “So you can try again.”

Andrew looked at her and half-smiled. “I’d like that, as long as you won’t be too upset if I drown it.”

“Don’t worry, I’m on my fifth plant,” Cara said. “Jess just keeps hoping that I’ll do better next time.”

Buzz walked a few steps ahead of the others and peered into the windows of the knitting shop. “I’d believe that’s a record setting pair of socks.” A set of bells on the door tinkled to announce their entrance. Mounted against the far wall were the famous socks. They were a cable-knit pattern, forest green, with red and gold flecks.

“Go stand next to the socks,” Jessica ordered. “We need a picture of this.”

“These socks are taller than I am,” Cara observed. “This is really wild.”

Buzz bent over to look at the toes and the heels. “Huh, it’s a little sloppy in the tricky areas.”

A saleswoman appeared at the back of the store. “Hello, welcome to our store. Let me know if I can help you with anything.” She was wearing an orange knitted vest and a long yellow skirt.

“Who made the socks?” Buzz asked.

“Actually, it was a group effort. We run a couple knitting classes, and one of the groups had the idea of going for the world record. They all took turns working on it, and ended up enlisting most of the knitters in town to help,” the saleswoman explained. “So the gauge isn’t completely consistent and there are a couple rough spots, but we thought it was important not to exclude any of the novice knitters.”

“How hard is it to learn how to knit?” Cara asked. “I mean, how long would you have to practice before you could make socks or something useful?”

The saleswoman tapped her fingers together. “Some people do pick it up more quickly than others, but I might not recommend socks as a first effort. Though we do have this new DVD in, ‘Jump into Knitting,’ which takes you through the basics by starting with some fairly complicated projects.”

“Sounds like fun, but I’m not sure I could get the hang of it from watching a video,” Cara hesitated. “Jess, you don’t knit, do you?”

“Basket-weaving, I can show you. But not knitting,” Jessica replied.

“Maybe another time,” Cara told the saleswoman.

“I can probably get you started in less than half an hour. But I don’t know how to do anything except cast on, knit, and perl,” Buzz offered.

“Well there you go!” the saleswoman enthused. “I’m sure if you have someone to coach you through the first things, you’ll be able to follow along with the DVD. It’s been highly recommended by our London branch.”

Cara made the purchase, and the group headed out of the shop. “That rest stop coffee was nasty. Let’s hit the Starbucks,” Buzz suggested.

They got their drinks and sat on couches near the window. Andrew looked over the fliers posted on a bulletin board. “Book sale at the library. Folk music performance at the high school. Psychic readings, babysitter wanted, historic fiction bookclub.” He looked at the others. “Does any of that remind you of something Mr. Chester would have done?”

Cara shook her head. Buzz stirred his coffee and put his feet up on the table. “One thing I can tell you, Pop hated Starbucks. He was more of a Dunkin Donuts coffee drinker.”

“Can you guys hang here a few minutes? I forgot that I’m out of toothpaste. I’m just going to run over to the CVS,” Jessica said. “Glad it’s not a Walgreens.” She set her iced coffee on the table and walked briskly out the door.

“Let’s talk about Mr. Chester and see if that gives anyone a good idea,” Cara suggested.

“I remember that day Tony Marlono tried to pierce his own ear with a compass,” Andrew said. “When Mr. Chester returned from escorting him to the school nurse, he just looked around the room and said ‘New rule, please. No one is to leave this room with more holes in their head than they came in with.’”

“He had that bulletin board with a collection of special rules like that,” Cara said. “What were some of the others...wasn’t there something like ‘Never eat anything bigger than your head’ and ‘Erasers are for external error correction only.’ I never heard the story behind the eraser rule.”

“I think there was a kid who got a nosebleed during a test, and decided to try to plug it with his eraser. The way Pop told the story, the kid got an A on the test, but ended up having to visit the emergency room to get the eraser removed,” Buzz said.

“You wouldn’t have thought that math class would involve so many injuries,” Cara said with a laugh. “It’s not exactly a contact sport. But nothing seemed to faze Mr. Chester. Not even when that ceiling tile fell on his head.”

“I heard that the city finally renovated all the classrooms a few years after we graduated,” Andrew said. He pursed his lips. “If only we could demonstrate unimpeachable presence of mind during an unexpected crisis, that would certainly be a tribute to Mr. Chester. But that sort of thing is difficult to schedule for an afternoon.”

Buzz leaned back on the couch. “Yeah, I was a worried that I wouldn’t be able to come up with the right sorts of deeds to do for my tour of chesters. But I figured that four heads would be better than one, at least.”

“I’m back, did you miss me?” Jessica walked over to the others. She was carrying a large white rabbit in her arms.

“Uh, Jess? What’s with the rabbit?” Cara asked.

“I was coming out of the CVS when I saw a kid throwing rocks at a bush. He said he was trying to hunt the rabbit,” Jessica explained. “The kid ran off when his mother called, and I thought he was just playing imaginary rabbit hunt. But then this guy hopped out. So I picked him up.”

“I believe that one of Buzz’s rules was no pets,” Andrew reminded her gently.

“And I’m allergic to rabbits,” Cara said. “And we are hauling a giant inflatable sculpture and rabbits have sharp pointy teeth, remember?”

Buzz reached out and rubbed the rabbit’s forehead. “Aww. I think Jessica’s just figured out our deed for Noonchester. Don’t you remember the rabbit Pop had in his classroom?”

“His name was Proof,” Cara said. “Or her name. I couldn’t tell.”

“Oh yes, that’s right. That rabbit rather resembles our old friend Proof,” Andrew agreed.

“My Mom actually found Proof in our garage one day. But she was allergic to rabbits too, so Proof had to live at school with Pop,” Buzz said.

“And when kids had detention, he’d tell them to spend the time telling Proof about their troubles, and he’d leave them alone in the room with the rabbit,” Cara said. “That rabbit must have been sick to death of hearing high school angst.”

“Cara, I’m sorry about the allergies. I did go back into the store and load up on Claritins for you,” Jessica said. “And I think that if we can get a cage, we should be able to keep Proof Junior here away from my sculpture.” She sat down next to Buzz and put the rabbit on his lap.

“I bet this Proof will be just as good at being everyone’s counselor as the original was,” Buzz said, looking at the rabbit. “Proof, buddy, welcome to our road trip.”



Cara pulled the cooler out of the bus and set it under a tree next to the parking lot. The group had decided to picnic for a late lunch instead of eating in the bus. Luckily, they’d found a small pet store in Noonchester. Although Jessica offered to be financially responsible for the new arrival, Cara had insisted that rabbit supplies fell under the category of provisions, so she’d be happy to pay for the cage and rabbit pellets.

“But we have to do something different at O-chester and Jeochester,” Cara said. “I don’t want this trip to turn into Dr. Dolittle’s caravan.”

“Roger that,” Buzz agreed. “Something different at each chester stop. And since we took care of Noonchester pretty fast, did you want to call your friend and see if she wants us to stop by? We’ll be crossing into New York once we get going again.” He poked a baby carrot into Proof’s cage and the rabbit tugged it out of his fingers.

Andrew and Jessica agreed that Cara should do the phoning, so she was soon chatting with Susanna. “She says she’d love to see us all, and if we want to park at her place tonight, we’re welcome to use their showers in the morning,” she reported. “Jess, you better talk with her about directions, if you’re going to be the one driving.”

Buzz watched the three classmates passing the phone back and forth. *N-chester down, O-chester next. Glad Andrew was able to hunt up Otterchester, finally.* Proof had made quick work of the carrot and was now ripping up newspapers and pushing the pieces around. *I remember how Pops cried when Proof died. He was never embarrassed to be emotional. My Dad would have called him a wimp, but then again, Dad was wrong about a lot more things than he was right about.*

While Jessica and Andrew tied down Proof’s cage inside the bus and Cara repacked the cooler, Buzz walked around Mathilda. It was his habit when on long trips to inspect a vehicle each time before getting back inside. *Everything looks fine out here. Time to get on the road.*

With Jessica driving and Andrew keeping her company, Buzz sat next to Cara. He cast on a row of stitches, explaining that she should

start by learning the basic knitting stitch. “Now, I’m left-handed, but my Grandma taught me to knit right-handed, so lucky for you. Watch me do a row, then it’ll be your turn.” *That was sure a bad month when I had pneumonia. Once I was sitting up and awake at least half the time, I was bored out of my skull until Grandma got me knitting. I ended up making six scarves.*

Once Cara got the idea, she was absorbed. She slowly worked through a couple of rows before looking up. “This isn’t so hard,” she said. “But I can see that it’s going to take a long time before I can...uh oh. Buzz, now what do I do?”

“That there is a dropped stitch. You done good to notice it right away. If you catch it first thing, it’s not hard to fix, but if you kept going for a while before seeing the problem, then you’d have to unravel back to where you first dropped it.” He showed her how to fix the pattern. “Okay, I’m going to take a little nap, but you go ahead and wake me up if you get into trouble.”

Buzz wasn’t sleepy, after having gone through two cups of coffee before lunch, but he did want to think a few things over. *Gloria’s been wanting to get a pet. Dunno if Jess was intending to keep Proof, but if she doesn’t, maybe I should bring him home.* He half-opened his eyes to see how Cara was doing. She was still concentrating on the knitting. *Gloria’s been hoping I’d apply for that city job with her brother, too. A normal 9 to 5 kind of job. And he says that he likes being part of local government because he’s making things work for people. But it’s got to be soul-sucking to be tied down to a desk all day.*

Jessica was carefully staying just below the speed limit. “So Andrew,” she said. “What do you do for fun when you’re not driving a polka-dot bus?”

“Just typical activities. A little TV, some computer games, reading,” he answered. “I used to sail a bit when I was in college, but there wasn’t really anyplace to sail where I’ve been living since then. Perhaps I should get back into it, now that I’m in Boston. I could probably do with the exercise.”

“I know what you mean,” Jessica said. “Cara’s been after me to start running with her, but it’s not really my thing. Though it has the big advantage of being cheap to do.”

Andrew agreed. “I certainly can’t join a boat club until I have a reliable income.” He stretched out his legs. “I suppose that your sculpture probably takes most of your leisure time?”

“Yeah, that’s one reason that I’ve been thinking about trying to get a better job, because if I only need to work for pay 40 hours a week, then I’d probably be able to have more of a life. Get back into roller-blading, or get a community garden plot.”

“Roller-blading always looked fun, but I’ve never tried it,” Andrew said. “I wonder if I’d be too old to learn.”

Buzz opened his eyes at that. “I know you guys are two years older than me, but come on. Don’t talk like you’re a senior citizen already.”

“Forty is the new thirty, right?” Cara chimed in. “What’s the coolest thing that you’ve done since you turned thirty? Oh shoot, I dropped another one. Buzz, just so you know, I’m getting better at fixing dropped stitches.”

“I know, I’ve been watching you do it,” he said. “Since I turned thirty, I’ve driven in all fifty states. And yeah, there’s a whole lot of nothing in some of them, but at least now I’ve been there.”

“Probably the coolest think I’ve done is a giant mural on a water tower out in Western Mass. They let me do a combination of painting and pseudo-mosaic with some pieces of Mylar. It’s an Olympic torch motif, but more psychedelic than classical,” Jessica said.

“I can’t take credit for the whole thing, because my tech team was just amazing, but I’m still pleased about a Winter Wonderland display I set up for a snack food company at this giant trade show. We were giving out hot chocolate, and people could pluck these pastel colored marshmallows off a tree, and there was a little skating pond that was surfaced so that people wearing normal shoes could slide around.” Cara grinned. “And, it was stiff but sort of padded in some wacky way, so that anyone who fell over didn’t break an arm. That’s the part that got me a promotion---the snack food CEO was skating, fell over, and kind of bounced. He was so happy that we’d come up with that built in safety scheme that he signed a five year contract.”

“Your work is so bizarre,” Jessica said. “I always used to think that doing commercial graphic work would be selling out, but the stuff you do is so over-the-top crazy consumerism that it’s surreal art.”

Cara shrugged. “It’s a strange job, but someone’s got to do it.” She set down her knitting. “Speaking of work, I don’t suppose we can hit a rest stop soon? I think most of the stops on this highway have wireless, and I need to download a couple of big graphics files so I can sign off on the designs.”

“We just passed a sign that said there would be a rest stop in ten miles,” Andrew said.

“Right, I’ll pull over when we get there. So what cool thing have you done in the last decade, Andrew?” Jessica asked.

“I can’t think of anything off-hand,” he said. “Well, probably the most scenic thing was that I went on a bicycling vacation in England.”

“Okay Cara, here’s your wireless hotspot,” Jessica said, pulling into the parking lot. “Meet you all back at Mathilda in fifteen minutes.”



“So what’s up with O-chester?” Cara asked. “I’m assuming that since we’re heading to Susanna’s for the evening, it’ll be on the route for tomorrow?”

“Yep. We’ve got some time to think up something good for Otterchester,” Buzz said.

Jessica started humming the “Oh Susannah” song. “Or we could think up baby names for Susanna’s imminent arrival. Do you remember her husband’s name, or the names of the other kids?”

Looking at her phone, Cara said, “The husband’s name is Julius. Their kids are, from oldest to youngest, Ella, Hannah, Otto, and Lily.”

“Susanna always joked that she was going to name her kids Una, Dua, and Therese,” Andrew said. “Maybe this next one will be Therese.”

Buzz snorted. “Everyone should have a couple of goldfish before they have kids. Then more people would get the dumb names out of their system in time.”

“Remember Justin Tiyum?” Cara asked. “And Hope Pope?”

Jessica slowed down. “Looks like a traffic jam up here. I can’t see what happened, but it’s good that we’re not in a rush.”

“Andrew, thanks for locating an O-chester,” Cara said. “I was getting worried that we wouldn’t be able to find one.”

“Yeah, turns out to be hard trying to Google for a town when you only know the first letter and ending,” Buzz said. “I only found N-chester and J-chester by asking around on geography trivia bulletin boards.”

“There’s a hobby for everyone on the Internet,” Cara observed. “So how’d you track down O-chester, Andrew?”

“I’d heard of it before, actually. So no ingenuity involved.”

“What’s Otterchester famous for?” Jessica asked. “Giant mittens? The annual otter festival?”

“It’s not really famous. I spent a few months out this way when I was younger.” Andrew knelt on the mattress so that he could look out at the traffic. *I was afraid they’d starting asking about Otterchester. But I just couldn’t find another O-chester.*

“Do those look like phone books scattered all over the road to you?” Jessica slowed down even more. Traffic was creeping along, and some of the other drivers around them started honking.

“Surprised to see that they’re still printing telephone books these days. I’d think that most people look everything up online,” Andrew commented. “But I suppose there is the advertising revenue.” *The great thing about Jess and Cara is that they seem to know when to change the subject. But I don’t know how long that will last.*

“So getting back to the names thing...I knew a girl once who sort of dated this guy for like six months, but never found out his real name,” Jessica said. “I’m afraid we’re going to end up driving across the country with you and not knowing your real name, either, Buzz.”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“Isn’t Buzz a nickname?”

“Nope. My Dad came up with my first name, but he let my Mom pick my middle name.”

“So what’s your middle name?” Jessica asked.

Buzz shook his head. “I never drink when I might be driving, and I never give out my middle name unless I’m tipsy.”

Cara and Jessica both laughed at that, and Andrew smiled. “Alrighty then, I’ll remember to ask you another time,” Jessica promised. “This traffic is so not moving.”

“Do you mind if I get out and run along-side Mathilda?” Cara asked. “I’m pretty sure I can keep up in this traffic, and it would be great to get in some exercise today.”

“Keep up? You’re going to whiz past Mathilda. Just try to turn around before you reach clear traffic,” Jessica said.

Cara quickly rummaged through her bag for some exercise clothes. “And if you guys wouldn’t mind facing forward while I change...okay, thanks. See you later.” She bounced out the door. As Jessica had predicted, she soon pulled ahead of the bus.

“I don’t recall Cara running track or cross-country when we were in high school,” Andrew mentioned. “But she looks like quite a serious runner now.”

“Yeah, she’s done some half-marathons and a bunch of benefit runs. She says that with traveling so much, she’s got to stick to low-equipment do-it-anywhere sorts of hobbies. I guess knitting is reasonably portable, so that should be good.”

“Buzz, you must have some of the same restrictions, spending so much of your time on the road,” Andrew said.

“I guess so. Though I don’t worry too much about having a bunch of hobbies. When I have free time, I just enjoy it.”

“You’ve probably noticed that Cara isn’t very good at loafing around. She’s got a fixation about being productive,” Jessica said. “I’m glad she agreed to come on this trip, though.”

“If she wants to learn how to laze around, I’m happy to share the secrets of my success,” Buzz said.

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When they pulled over to pick up Cara, Andrew took over at the wheel. Jessica passed along the directions to Susanna and Julius's place, and then opened the top of the cage so she could pet Proof.

"Thanks, Jess. It was kind of funny running along a highway and passing cars."

"Did a lot of people wave?"

"Some kids in the backs of station wagons, I guess. Most people probably didn't see me until I'd already passed by." Cara sneezed three times. "Excuse me."

"I'm sorry about the rabbit. But he is incredibly soft and furry," Jessica said. She frowned. "I'm going to have a problem with my landlord. They're really anti-pets. The last tenant had a pair of tame squirrels who had the run of the apartment and chewed up most of the windowsills."

"I can deal during this trip, but I really can't keep Proof at my place," Cara said. "I'd sneeze my head off when I'm home, and then I'd be gone half the time anyhow."

"I'll take Proof home with me, if you can't have him," Buzz said. "My girlfriend's been wanting a pet anyways."

"Oh that's great, then. I'd love to keep him, but since I can't, I know you'd be nice and responsible."

Buzz snorted. "Gloria says my whole problem is that I'm afraid to be responsible."

“But you do make all these deliveries to people,” Jessica said. “So that’s being responsible. You don’t lose their stuff or wreck their vehicles.”

“She says that I’m avoiding any long-term responsibilities. This job is a bunch of short contracts and no permanent obligations. See, if I want to take a few weeks off, all I need to do is not schedule deliveries for that time. And if I want to just chuck the whole business, as long as I finish the jobs I’ve started, no one would get upset.”

“I think you must be better at freedom than I am,” Andrew said. “I miss feeling needed at a job. I’d like to be doing something that people depend on, so that people would care if I disappeared.”

“One of the reasons I came on this trip was to remind myself that work really can get along without me,” Cara said. “I love feeling indispensable, but it also gets me stressed out if I start believing it too much.”

Jessica looked around frantically. “Buzz! I spaced out and Proof got out of his cage.”

“Andrew, you’d better pull over while we hunt for the bunny,” Buzz advised. Andrew brought Mathilda to a stop on the shoulder of the highway and watched over his shoulder as Buzz and Jessica shifted bags around. Cara sat to the side and scanned the entire interior.

“I saw him stick his nose out by the back of the clock-crates on the left side of the bus,” she said. “If Jess goes to the back and Buzz waits by the front, I think you can trap him.”

“But I can’t get to the back of the crates without going outside and coming in the back door, and I’m afraid to open the door in case he

runs out of the bus,” Jessica said. “Oh wait, I can just barely squeeze between the crates.”

“Got you!” Buzz announced. He held Proof firmly in his arms. “Well, no harm done.”

Andrew got the bus back underway.

“Andrew, I’ve been meaning to ask you, I don’t suppose you’d be interested in applying for a job with my company?” Cara said. “It wouldn’t be software work, but we are looking for people.” *Jess would be perfect, but I don’t think she’d want to work for me. And honestly, she might be right. What if we just drove each other crazy?*

“I appreciate the vote of confidence, Cara. But I’d like to stay in software, if I can. Perhaps you wouldn’t mind if I brought this up again later, should my other inquiries keep coming up dry?”

“Sure, anytime.” Cara looked in the cooler. “I’m going to cut up an apple. Anyone want some?”

“Just another Coke for me,” Buzz said.

“If you don’t mind me asking, what’s the deal with drinking caffeine-free Coke but getting coffee all the time?” Jessica asked.

Buzz laughed. “That does seem pretty silly, doesn’t it. The thing is, Gloria always gets this kind of Coke, and I guess I’m just used to it now. I don’t want to tempt her too much by having the other kind around.”

“Oh, it’s like being vegetarian,” Jessica said. “Sometimes it’s an STD.”

“Pardon me?” Andrew asked.

“You know. Like, you start dating someone who’s a vegetarian, and then you end up doing it too, because you’re really into them.”

Cara grinned. She’d heard this joke before, but it still amused her. Not least because of her brief episode of vegetarianism when she first dated her favorite ex-fiancé. *Now, why couldn’t it be Charles who turns up unexpectedly at malls, instead of Teddy?*

Looking For Palindromes

When they got to Susanna's place, Buzz whistled. "This is pretty spiffy," he said, looking at the large Victorian house, ornamental duck pond, neatly trimmed lawn, and tree-lined driveway.

Cara shrugged. "I think she and Julius are both patent attorneys. And maybe his family was pretty well-off too." She pointed toward the spur of driveway at the side of the house. "We better put Mathilda over there so we don't park them into their garage."

Julius greeted them at the door. "Hello everyone! Come on in. I made chili for dinner and it's been keeping hot on the stove." They had a quick round of introductions as the four travelers took off their shoes in the entranceway.

"Oh Julius, you didn't wait for us to have dinner, did you?" Cara asked. "We got into an incredible traffic jam."

He shook his head and smiled. "Nah, we got the kids all fed at their normal dinner time. But since Susanna can only eat tiny meals these days, she's probably ready for dinner part two by now." He took them into the kitchen where Susanna was sitting with her feet up on a chair.

She waved at them. “I’m so glad you could drop in. I’m in no condition to get out to the reunion, as you can see. Oh, and you must be Buzz.”

As they sat down, Julius brought over a pot of chili and passed around some rolls. “I don’t know if you’d heard, but we’re expecting twins this time!”

“Wow, that’s great,” Jessica said. “Congrats!”

A girl’s voice came from the living room. “Dad! Otto took the remote control!”

“You know the rules, Hannah. If you and Otto can’t share the TV, then it’s time to go to bed.” Julius rubbed his bald head with a smile. “Kids. They’d turn my hair gray if I had any.”

“You two are amazing,” Cara said. “And you’ve been working full-time?”

“Up until last week, when I went out on disability,” Susanna said. “But normally, we have an au pair, so that helps a lot. Unfortunately, she had a family emergency so she had to fly back to France for the week.”

“My compliments to the chef,” Andrew said. “And thank you for having us over.”

“So tell me what you’ve all been doing,” Susanna said. “I’ve been terrible at keeping in touch.”

“Cara and I have been living in Boston for a while. She’s a VP at this company that does custom booths for conventions, and she’s a runner, and now she’s learning to knit,” said Jessica.

“Jess has been making unbelievable sculptures. She got interviewed in the Boston Globe last year,” Cara said.

“I’ve just moved to Boston and started associating with these two ladies,” Andrew said. “Job-hunting, unsuccessfully so far.”

“Buzz, you want to come watch the game with me while those four do their catching up?” Julius asked. “I’ve got half an hour before it’s time to get the kids ready for bed.”

The others gossiped for a while about other classmates. Susanna seemed somewhat distracted and finally sighed. “I’m sorry to break up the party, folks, but it’s time to head to the hospital. The twins have been thinking about making their debut all day, but they seem to be really serious about it now.” She raised her voice. “Julius, it’s time to go.”

Cara’s eyebrows went up. “What can we do to help, Susanna? Should we stay here with the kids, or would it be easier for you if we headed out?”

“Oh, either way, really. If everything goes well, Julius and I will be back tomorrow, but you don’t have to stick around. We’ll just call one of the neighbors who’s going to stay with the kids, and then we’ll be off.”

Julius came in with a backpack and small suitcase. “I’ve got your things, but Margaret isn’t answering her phone. I looked outside and her lights are off. Maybe she got held up at work or something.”

“We’re happy to baby-sit until she gets here,” Jessica offered. “We were planning to park here tonight anyways.”

“That would be super,” Susanna said, handing her a sheet of paper. “We made up instructions for Margaret already. Julius will call you later.”

“Kids, come here for a minute,” Julius said. Two girls, age eight and six popped up. “Where’s Otto?”

“He fell asleep by the TV,” said the younger girl.

“Okay, Ella and Hannah,” he said, putting his hand on each girl’s head, “you two help as much as you can. Cara and Jessica and Andrew and Buzz are going to stay with you while Mommy and Daddy go to the hospital.” Buzz and Andrew looked at each other.

Julius and Susanna left with a cheery wave. “Um, so what now?” Buzz asked.

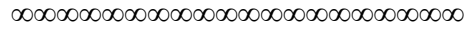
“Perhaps we could clean up after dinner,” Andrew suggested. He looked at Cara. “If you want to oversee the bedtime process?”

Jessica looked at the instructions. “Well, Lily is already in bed, so that’s one down. And if we can get Otto up to bed without waking him up too much, that’ll probably save trouble.”

“Why don’t you try that, and I’ll do the bedtime stories with Ella and Hannah,” Cara volunteered, skimming the list. She turned to the girls. “Do you want to pick out a story and get your pajamas on?”

The two women left the kitchen. “Good one, Andrew. That was pretty slick how you got us out of kiddie duty,” Buzz said. “Kids terrify me.”

“As we’ve already established that you’re the superior dishwasher, maybe I’ll put the food away and wipe up while you tackle the dishes,” Andrew said, smiling.



Up in Ella and Hannah’s room, Cara sat on a bed. “Did you finish brushing your teeth?” she asked the girls.

“Hannah spit on the mirror,” Ella complained. “And she squeezed the toothpaste out onto the counter. She’s still a baby.”

“You’re a big booger,” Hannah replied.

“Alright, you can each pick a story, and I’ll read them to you,” Cara said, ignoring the interchange. The girls both grabbed books and then each tried to be the first one to hand her book to Cara. “Hop up here, one of you can sit on each side.”

She took both books and held them behind her back. “Ella, you can pick my right or left hand, and I’ll read that book first.”

“Right, right!”

“Cat’s Cradle? Kurt Vonnegut? Your parents read to you from this book?” Cara asked. Ella nodded. “Okay, well we can’t read the whole book tonight. What chapter are you on?”

Ella and Hannah both listened raptly as Cara read about ice-nine. *This is really weird. I really think these kids are too young for Vonnegut. But I guess Susanna and Julius have a lot more experience with children than I do.*

“Alright, now for Hannah’s book. Oh good, Tales of Beedle the Bard. Which story do you want to hear tonight?” *Now that’s more what I was expecting. Geez, kids these days.*

“So that’s what happened to the hopping pot,” she finished. “Now scoot into bed and I’ll turn out the lights.”

“Why do Mommy and Daddy want more kids?” Ella asked. “I don’t want any more brothers or sisters.”

I don’t think this was in the instructions. “I haven’t asked your parents about that,” Cara said. “Did you ask them already?”

Ella nodded. “Mommy said that she loved us all so much that she wanted more kids. But that doesn’t make any sense. I love Mommy and Daddy, but I’m not getting more Mommies and Daddies.”

Good point, kid. “Hmm. Well, all I know is that your parents love all of you, and they’ll love the new babies too.”

“I think it’s because there’s something wrong with Otto. I think they wanted another boy who’s normal.”

I knew it was a bad idea to read them Vonnegut. That kind of thing just leads to disturbing thoughts. “Are you worried about having new brothers or sisters?”

“Yes. Lily chewed up my book and Otto flushed one of my giraffes,” Ella explained. “Hannah’s better, but I have to share more with her.” Hannah was almost asleep, but managed to mutter a little when she heard her name.

“Well, Ella, when the others get older like you and Hannah, they’ll probably be more fun too. I’m sorry sometimes the younger kids mess up your things. It can be hard being the oldest.”

“Will you read more tomorrow?”

“Me and Jessica and Andrew and Buzz are just stopping here tonight. We’ll be leaving in the morning.”

“Are you all brothers and sisters?”

“Nope. We’re friends. When you get older, you’ll probably spend more time with friends too.” Cara stood up. “Okay, goodnight now.”

“Goodnight.”

Cara made her escape before Ella could ask anymore difficult questions. *Luckily, kids have a pretty short attention span. I should have made Andrew do the bedtime stories, since he missed out having younger siblings himself. I wonder how Jessica is doing with Otto.*

Jessica collided with Cara in the hallway. “I can’t find him!” she whispered loudly. “I’ve looked everywhere!”

“I thought he was supposed to be asleep by the TV,” Cara said.

“Well he wasn’t there, so I looked around that room, then searched the rest of the downstairs, and I’ve just finished looking in all the bedrooms up here. Except the one you just came out of,” she said. “Lily’s asleep in her crib, thank goodness.”

“Did you get the men to help?”

“They’re searching the basement.”

All four travelers regrouped in the kitchen. “How old does a kid have to be before he can open doors?” Buzz asked.

“Three or four years old is going to be old enough. It varies; I don’t know about Otto,” Jessica said. “But surely a toddler wouldn’t have closed the door behind him on the way out?”

“And the front and back doors are still locked. There’s no way a four year old would have used a key to lock the doors,” Cara said, relieved. “Okay, so we know he’s still in the house somewhere.”

“Unless he made an escape before Susannah and Julius left,” Andrew pointed out. “They might not have noticed that a door was ajar and would have locked up as they left.”

“Should we call Susanna?” Jessica said. “Or the police?”

“I imagine Susanna may be pretty busy at this point, and I hate to bother her with news that we’ve lost one of her children,” Andrew said. “You might think that four adults could manage to watch four children.”

“I just got Ella and Hannah to go to sleep, but I think the first thing we should do is wake them up and have them help look for Otto. If he has a regular hiding place, his sisters probably know where it is,” Cara decided. “Jess, why don’t you stay here by the phone in case Julius calls, or in case Margaret shows up. I’ll go wake up the girls, and Andrew and Buzz can take flashlights outside for a quick look. Just in case.”

As Buzz and Andrew headed out to the bus to get their flashlights, Buzz chuckled. “She’s kinda bossy, but I have to admit those two gals keep things lively.”

“Indeed. If it’s not a rabbit misplaced in a bus, it’s a toddler misplaced in a house,” Andrew said. “But seriously, I am a bit worried. There’s that duck pond.”

“Why would a little kid like that sneak out of the house and run into a pond?” Buzz asked. “He’s got to be in the house somewhere.”

Andrew shrugged. “People are unpredictable. Why do any of us do anything?”

Flashlights out, they walked around the pond, looked under Mathilda, and checked under the shrubs. “People aren’t unpredictable once you know them. I’m starting to get a pretty good read on Jess and Cara,” Buzz said. “And you, too.”

“Then maybe I’m just inadequate at knowing people.”

Buzz was silent for a minute, then spoke slowly. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but I do think you could use a few tips on that.” He looked at Andrew, who seemed surprised.

“I’m not offended. Just didn’t expect you to agree with me,” he said.

“How would you feel about it if I gave you an occasional tip? Maybe just one thing at a time, you know,” Buzz offered. “You wouldn’t have to do it if you thought it was stupid.”

“Let’s head back inside. I think we’ve done a reasonably thorough preliminary search,” Andrew said. As they walked towards the house, he kept his eyes on the patch of light in front of his feet. “Would you tell me one suggestion tonight?”

“You got it. Item one is: ‘Don’t be so nervous about telling people stuff about you.’ If you make too many things a big secret, it’s hard to get friendly,” Buzz said.

“Hmm. And is ‘Secret’ your middle name?”

“I didn’t say it was secret, just that I don’t tell people while I’m stone sober. Plus, that’s advanced tip 1A: ‘One or two moderately embarrassing facts can be held back as a way to create some mystery.’ Don’t try the advanced stuff until you get the hang of the basics.”

Andrew nodded. “Well, let’s see if Otto turned up.”

When they walked into the house, they saw both Cara and Jessica sitting at the kitchen table. “Want some tea or hot chocolate?” Jessica offered.

“So you located the little wanderer?” Andrew said, accepting a cup of hot chocolate.

“Yeah, Ella led us straight to his favorite kitchen cabinet. I guess Susanna keeps it pretty empty so that it’s easier for him to squeeze in,” Cara said.

“Embarrassingly enough, it was even documented in a footnote in the instruction sheet. But I didn’t actually read the whole thing,” Jessica admitted. “Sorry we didn’t come outside and get you right away. We had to get the girls back into bed, and then Lily had a little accident and needed to be cleaned up.”

Buzz held up his hand. “Not a problem. We had a good time checking out the bushes and around the pond. We can rest assured that there are no lost kiddies lurking in the bushes around this house.”

There was a knock at the door, and then it opened. A woman stepped inside. “Hello, hello. I’m Margaret, and you must be Susanna’s emergency babysitting crew. I saw some of you out there with flashlights as I was heading over here. Did you find Otto in the kitchen cabinet already?”

Jessica nodded. “We were just having some tea and hot chocolate, if you’d like anything.”

Margaret poured herself some tea and sat down. “I just talked to Julius on the phone. Sounds like they timed it pretty close and barely got settled into the hospital before the twins arrived. Everyone’s doing fine, though. They named the girl Miriam and the boy Robert. But they’ll call him Bob.”

“I guess they’ve been going for the near palindrome thing with the children’s names,” Cara said. “Kind of subtle, and definitely better than all starting with the same letter of the alphabet.”

Margaret nodded and lowered her voice. “I think they were a little nervous about the birth, after the surprise with Otto. But both the babies are healthy. Anyhow, I’ll stay here tonight, and get the girls off to school in the morning.”

“Do you think we should visit Susanna in the morning before we leave town?” Cara asked. “Or would that be too tiring for her?”

“Go ahead and call her in the morning and check. Now, Julius tells me that you’re all set to sleep in the bus, but don’t hesitate to come by in the morning if you want to wash up in the bathrooms. I’ll have breakfast ready around 7:30.”

“Margaret, how about if we show up and cook breakfast for everyone,” Buzz suggested.

She smiled. “That’s a great idea; I’ll take you up on it. Well, if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to go up to the guest room and get a head start on some sleep. Usually, at least one of the kids will need to come wake me up about something. I’m kind of the backup babysitter for when their au pair has the night off and both parents are busy, so I’m here once a month or so.”



Back in the bus, everyone claimed a mattress. As promised, Buzz was soon snoring loudly. Jessica and Cara whispered to each other.

“I’d forgotten that Otto has Down’s Syndrome,” Cara said. “Ella was telling me her theory that her parents wanted another boy who was normal.”

“I know at first it was his heart condition that they were really worried about. But now that he’s almost old enough for kindergarten, they notice the mental differences more.”

“He’s a cute little boy.”

“Yeah. But it gets harder as he gets older,” Jessica said. “When I think about how everyone in grade school picked on Johnny Tiller...”

“Well, it wasn’t everyone. But you know, thinking about that stuff, half the time it was Susanna who’d start everyone hassling him,” Cara recalled. “She must feel terrible about that now.”

“I’m sure everyone’s done enough stuff they regret. I wonder what the statute of limitations for feeling bad should be for different mistakes. Like, for being mean when you were in grade school, you get to stop beating yourself up about it by the time you’re 30, but if you were an asshole during college, you have to be embarrassed until you’re 40.”

Andrew didn’t join into the conversation, but he listened and thought about Buzz’s advice. *So Jessica thinks you can’t stop being embarrassed about college-aged and more recent happenings until you’re older than we are now. Combine that with Buzz’s opinion that I should be more willing to tell people about personal matters, and the conclusion is that I must talk more about events that still make me cringe.*

“I don’t know about that. I mean, there’s a different between being embarrassed and being ashamed, you know?” Cara objected.

“Sure, but do you think they’d have a different statute of limitations?” Jessica asked.

“Maybe it’s some combination of how long ago it happened, how many people already know, and how bad it was. I sort of think that if a lot of people know, it’s harder to maintain mortification. It kind of gets diluted,” Cara yawned. “I’ve probably stopped making sense already. I’d better get to sleep.”

Jessica yawned too. “Do you think Buzz was volunteering himself to cook breakfast, or was that more of a volunteering the who group?” When Cara didn’t reply, Jessica fluffed her pillow and rolled over. “Goodnight, Proof.”

I’d guess that Buzz was volunteering himself. He seems like the sort of fellow who can make pancakes. Well, I’ll soon find out if I read him correctly on this

Buzz switched to tickling and pretended to stalk Otto around the table. “Fee Fie Foe Fum! I’m coming to get you.”

Margaret returned and took charge of cleaning breakfast off Lily. She wished everyone happy travels, and the group loaded up Mathilda and hit the road.

“Hey Buzz, do you have any younger siblings?” Jessica asked.

“I don’t know if any of you remember, but Pop and Mom adopted a toddler when I was in high school,” he replied. “So I probably did more babysitting than your average guy.”

“That’s right, I remember the little girl from China,” Cara said. “I guess your sister must be in college or something by now.”

“Taiya graduated last year from Ohio State. She’s living near Powell, so I’ll get to see her and Mom while y’all are doing reunion stuff.”

Buzz pulled into the visitor parking at the hospital. “Maybe we should have brought them something,” he said.

“Hold on, I might have something,” Cara said, rummaging in her bag. “What do you think?” She held up a stuffed lobster.

“You normally travel with that?” Buzz asked.

“I got it at that first rest stop. The convenience store guy threw it in for free because I bought so many Hostess products.”

“Let’s bring the lobster for the babies and some fruit for Susanna,” Jessica suggested, grabbing some apples from the cooler.

They trooped up to Susanna’s room and Cara peeked in the door.

“Come meet the twins,” Julius said proudly. “They just nursed, so we’re at the stage where we pass around the babies until someone gets burped up on.”

Cara and Jessica entered the room and were each issued a twin. “Hey Susanna, these do look exactly like newborn babies,” Jessica said. “You weren’t faking about that giving birth thing just to escape from an evening with the four of us.”

“Oh, by now I’ve got the hang of it and can almost induce contractions on demand,” she joked. “Though carrying around twins was sort of an ordeal.”

“Your wife is a saint,” Cara told Julius. “And here, we brought the twins a lobster.”

“Thanks, this will be their first crustacean,” he said, accepting the plush toy. “Did Margaret tell you? You’re holding Bobby and Jessica has Miriam.”

“Not Eve? Or Aviva?”

“Oh, she looked a lot more like a Miriam. Don’t you think?”

Bobby started wiggling and Susanna took him back. She smiled. “I’m so glad they’re finally here.”

“I feel like we should all bestow some kind of special fairy godmother wish,” Jessica said. “Okay, Miriam. I’ll start. May you be as brilliant as your Mother and as good a cook as your Father.” Miriam kicked and gurgled.

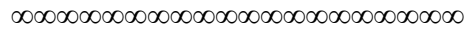
“And Bobby,” Cara said. “I hope you’ll have a great sense of humor, like your Father, and be a beautiful singer, like your Mother.”

“May you be each other’s best buddy, and may you be good friends with all your other brothers and sisters,” Buzz contributed.

“Health and a long life,” Andrew said. “Good luck with everything.”

Cara looked at Julius, who had his eyes half-closed. “Thank you both so much for letting us come visit. We’ll let you get some sleep now.”

“Let me get a picture so we can show everyone at the reunion. Buzz, would you do the honors?” Jessica handed him the camera. “Gather ‘round, people. Say ‘twins.’”



The gang was quiet as Buzz drove down the highway. Cara had finished her practice square and was watching a video about knitting socks. Jessica was taking a nap.

“So Andrew,” Buzz said. “Tell me more about biking in England. I didn’t know you were into bicycles.”

“Er, it was something of an accident,” Andrew began. “I was clicking through some Web ads that came up after I’d bought some shoes, and I must have entered a vacation sweepstakes.”

“Crazy. But you decided to go?”

“One of my coworkers had traveled with the tour company previously, and mentioned that he’d lost twenty pounds during a tour of

French countryside cuisine. I thought that the trip might be a way to force myself into trying a more active lifestyle.”

Cara looked up from her computer. “That sounds like the premise for a reality TV show.”

“Mmm. Well, it wasn’t that dramatic. I did become interested enough in bicycling to buy my own bike when I got home, but then after the first year, I petered out. I am most impressed at your ability to keep up a running regime.”

“It’s easier once you get into the habit. There’s a theory that if you do almost anything new regularly for six weeks, you can change your life.”

“Did running change your life?” Buzz asked. “I’m not sure I’ve ever purposely set out to do something life-changing.”

Cara considered the question. “It’s a little bit of built-in time for thinking things over each day. Sometimes I get completely wrapped up in one little crisis after another, but when I’m running, I try to look at the larger picture. This morning I was thinking about how I used to just assume that I’d have kids someday, but now I don’t feel like that’s what I want to do with my life.”

“Huh, I can see how it would be good to stop and look at where things are going and whether that’s where you want to be,” Buzz said. “Here I am driving to Otterchester and I don’t know why and I don’t have a plan for what to do there. That could be the story of my life.”

Cara sat back and sighed. “I’ve always had a plan, and usually I’ve followed the plan pretty well, but it’s hard to know if I’ve had the right plans or not.” She kicked her heels against the mattress. “So for me,

showing up in Otterchester without any preconceived notions of what to do there? This is my chance to try living on the edge.”

Buzz laughed. “We’d better really go for broke, then. Want to make sure to give you the full devil-may-care, freedom of the open road, unlimited horizons experience.”

She shook her knitting needles at him. “And so far, what you’ve done is introduce me to knitting. I’m not sure I can stand the excitement of hanging out with such a bad boy. What’s next, origami?”

“I’ll have you know that origami is extremely exciting,” Andrew said, smiling. “Risking paper cuts, pushing the limits of long fiber rag paper, deciding whether to use the blue or the green paper. There’s a group of French anarchist origami artists who are refuting the entire notion of folding.”

“Seriously, Buzz, I’m looking forward to Otterchester. Thanks for bringing us into this scheme,” Cara said. “We should have gotten matching bracelets with ‘What Would Mr. Chester Do?’ to prepare for the quest. Except yours would say WWPD instead.”

She hesitated for a minute, looking at Buzz. “I guess the three of us probably have an idealized image of Mr. Chester, since we only knew him as a teacher. But you have a more complete perspective. Does it ever bother you how his old students kind of idolize him?”

Buzz didn’t reply for a while, and Cara started to worry that she’d offended him. “Well, Pop was human and everything. He sometimes got mad for no good reason, or burned the oatmeal, or lost his car keys. But I think his students were pretty much right that he was a real stand-out, admirable man.” He glanced at the others in the rear view

“It seems really immature to get envious of your friends,” she said. “I suppose Susanna’s probably has moments when she wishes she was single, unencumbered, and trying to make it as a singer.”

“I’m sometimes envious of anyone who isn’t alone,” Andrew admitted. *At least Jess and Cara have that ‘best friends’ connection. And Buzz has a girlfriend who wants to get serious.*

“I like having my own space and everything, but it would be a lot nicer to wake up and see somebody who was happy to see me.”

“That certainly does sound appealing,” Andrew said. “I haven’t the slightest idea how to achieve that state of domestic joy.” *Sometimes I wish I lived in an arranged marriage culture.*

“So what are you looking for in a prospective partner?”

“I’m not sure I have a coherent description or list.” *I don’t even know what it was about Karene. Being with her was like having the world suddenly turn from black and white into full color.* “What are you looking for?”

Jessica snickered. “If you don’t have a checklist, that must mean you haven’t done much Internet dating. Seems like everyone wants to boil it down to a questionnaire so you don’t actually have to talk to other people.”

“You’re right, I haven’t.” *Unemployed overweight man with low self-confidence seeking magical woman to bring meaning into his life. That’ll have them lining up at the door.* “But you sound like you’ve tried it?”

“Yeah. Full of guys slightly older than us who want to date women who are younger than us.” She sniffed. “And, if you can believe

in this day and age, quite a few people who apparently can't use a spell-checker."

"I supposed that each generation's grasp of grammar is worse than the last."

"I shouldn't be all negative about it, but sometimes you have to pretend there's something wrong with everyone else so that you don't get too worried that there's something wrong with you," she said.

"Mmmm." *Now that's a strategy I haven't employed. Pretty sure that it's me and not everyone else.*

"You know I can tell there's a lot of stuff that you're thinking but not saying," Jessica said. "You can say it if you want."

"I'm not really used to talking to anyone. It's nice, but I don't quite have the hang of it yet. I hope it hasn't been too annoying."

"Oh, I'm not complaining or anything. I just wanted to let you know it would be okay if you wanted to blurt more, instead of being so careful."

Andrew looked at the road in front of him and slowed down. "Jessica, I think we have a problem here. Did I turn off the main highway?" The pavement got rougher. "Would you keep an eye out for road signs?"

After a few minutes, the pavement ended altogether. Andrew continued down a dirt road. The road was surrounded by a thicket of trees. He drove slower.

"That's weird," Jessica said. "I thought we were on the highway, and then we ended up here."

The road came to an end. There was a metal gate with a 'No Trespassing' sign, and a narrower path continued beyond it. "I think it's time to wake up the others," Andrew said. *And admit that I can't even drive straight down a highway without getting lost.*

Jessica shook the others. "Hey Buzz, hey Cara. We have a bit of a problem here."

Buzz sat up. "Why are we stopped? We can't be out of gas."

"We had to stop because the road ended," Jessica said. "Um, I guess we took a wrong turn somewhere. The strange thing is that it didn't seem that we turned off the highway. The road just got smaller and less paved, and now here we are."

"We're not getting any signal out here," Cara said, looking at the GPS and her phone. "Guess it's time to get out the road atlas."

"The other difficulty is that the road is so narrow and the trees are so close to the road that we won't be able to turn around," Andrew observed.

"So you'll have to back up until we get back to a place with a shoulder on the road, or an intersection," Buzz said. "Just take it nice and slow."

Andrew sat down on the mattress next to Buzz. "I really don't think I can. I'm terrible at parallel parking." *Oh please, don't make back this thing into a tree. These are substantial looking trees.*

"You were great on the driving simulator. It'll be fine."

"I'd really rather not make the attempt. Would you mind taking over?" *I could probably get Jess to drive. She seems like a can-do sort of person.*

“You got it, partner. Why don’t the rest of you try to figure out where we might be. Hopefully when we get back to an intersection, at least one of the roads will have a sign.” Buzz started up the bus and slowly steered Mathilda backwards through the woods.

“We might be here.” Cara pointed to a spot on the map.

Jessica pored over the map and pointed to a different spot. “Or maybe over here.”

Andrew lay on his stomach and watched Buzz drive. “I could always do well with written tests or computers, but real life is a lot more complicated. If only I could stop at the point of theory and skip any actual practice.”

“Could be worse,” Buzz said. “This road could be winding up a hill or something. Or it could be a dark and stormy night.”

“It was a dark and stormy night. Suddenly, the road petered out,” Jessica said.

“The trees are thinning out a little, but there’s a deep ditch running alongside the road,” Andrew said. “There still isn’t any room to turn around.”

“I’m sorry I wasn’t a better navigator,” Jessica said. “I wasn’t paying attention because we were just supposed to stay on the highway for a while.”

“No harm, no foul,” Buzz said. He continued driving backwards for miles, until they got back onto the poorly paved asphalt portion of the road.

Cara checked her phone. “Still no signal. We’ll have to keep hoping for a street sign.”

“Somewhere around here, we started looking for street signs, but I didn’t see any,” Jessica said.

“I’ve never driven a bus backwards this far before,” Buzz said.

“Guess this isn’t a very popular road,” Jessica said.

After another several miles, the road widened back to two narrow lanes. A car came toward the bus and honked. Andrew stopped the bus in the middle of the road where he’d been driving. He leaned out the window. “Can you tell us what road we’re on, or how far back we need to go before there’s somewhere to turn around?”

A young woman answered. “You can probably turn around at the fork. It’s about another mile back. Dunno what road this is. We just come out here to do a little target practice.”

“What kind of guns are you shooting?” Buzz asked.

“Oh, not guns. You ever heard of an atlatl?”

“Nope. What’s that?”

“Spear-thrower. Pretty fun stuff. You want to try it out?”

Buzz looked at the others. Jessica shrugged and Andrew shook his head. Cara gave him the thumbs down.

“Thanks, but I’ll pass. Have a good time.”

The car edged around Mathilda carefully and headed towards the end of the road. Buzz continued backing up. “Normally, I’d say what the heck, but y’all didn’t seem too interested.”

“There’s actually a group around Boston that has regular atlatl practices,” Cara said. “I went once or twice, but it didn’t really float my boat. But if you want to try sometime, they’re always open to sharing the fun. My non-psycho ex-fiance, Charles, is a regular.”

“I failed archery PE,” Andrew said. “Had to fall back to playing soccer.” *Cara was engaged to a guy whose hobby is spear-throwing? How do people come up with these hobbies? Maybe they just want to be different.*

Jessica got up and looked out the window. “That looks like the fork they were talking about.”

“Well, if the other fork is the road we want, I won’t have to turn the bus around. I’ll just back up past the fork and then go the other way.”

Cara looked at the map again. “If we’re really here, that’s where we want to go because it’ll lead back to the highway. But if we’re actually here, then the fork just goes to a dead-end too.”

“In the first case, we’d see an intersection to go toward the highway in about two miles. In the second case, it’s a dead end in three miles,” Andrew said.

Buzz took the other fork. “Well, we’ll know soon enough either way.” The road stayed well paved, but there was no intersection. “Dang, it’s the other dead end.” Buzz parked Mathilda and got himself a Coke.

Sitting down next to Andrew, he put his hands on his hips. “Okay, Andrew. You saw me do it. Now it’s your turn.”

Andrew sighed. *I just don’t want to look even more stupid than I already do. But he’s going to insist.*

“If you avoid doing things you think you can’t do, you just guarantee that you won’t be able to do them,” Buzz said. “Duh. So get up there. Backwards isn’t so different than forwards.”

“I’ll drive, if you want,” Jessica offered.

“Nope. We have to let Andrew do it,” Buzz said. “This kind of thing builds character.”

“I appreciate all of you letting me shirk driving duty,” Cara said.

“I’m enough of a sexist to think that guys should do more than their share of any heavy lifting, dealing with bad weather, and driving,” Buzz said. “So sue me.”

“But does that mean we’re stuck with diapers, organizing social events, and laundry?” Cara asked.

“I do laundry,” Buzz insisted. “Dunno about the diapers part yet, but I’m guessing that Gloria will have a strong opinion if the question comes up. Enough dilly dallying. Let’s get this show on the road.”

Andrew got into the driver’s seat reluctantly and started backing up. *Don’t think. Just concentrate on doing it.*

The others kept quiet and tried not to make Andrew self-conscious. Cara ate an apple and bit off a piece for Proof. Jessica closed her eyes and Buzz looked out the back windows.

The bus crept backwards slowly, then slightly faster as Andrew started to get the hang of it. *Keep going. Keep going.*

“You’ve got it. Doing fine,” Buzz said.

After about fifteen minutes, Andrew got back to the fork in the road. He sighed with relief.

“You win, Andrew. That was great,” Jessica said. “And by process of elimination, I guess we now have a leading theory about where we are.”

Andrew executed a seven-point turn and managed to get Mathilda pointing back towards the main road. *I was sure this bus was going to end up in a ditch. I hope I don't ever have to do that again.*

“We’re just an hour away from Otterchester,” Cara said. “We can finish up the sandwich stuff for lunch and then get some groceries for dinner.”

“Sounds good,” Buzz said. “Now if y’all have the directions under control, I’m going to close my eyes for a while.”

Andrew and the women agreed that they were back on course. He drove on, glad to be driving forward instead of backwards. *Otterchester. Never thought I'd be going back voluntarily.*



Once they got near Otterchester, Cara had phone signal again. “There’s a Wegmans at the next exit, and it’s near a recreation area. Want to stop there for lunch and resupply?”

Andrew stopped in a gravel parking area. There were only a few other cars. A recreation area bulletin board had a map that showed a walking path around a small pond, a playground, and some fitness stations. Jessica jumped out of the bus first and made a beeline to the nearest fitness station.

"Look, they've got chin-up bars." She swung from the bar and then flipped over to hang by her knees. "Now you're all upside-down."

"If we get stuck on one side of a cliff over a raging river, I nominate Jess to be the one who has to swing across on a vine and go for help," Cara said.

"Or perhaps we can tie a note to Proof and ask him to hop out to civilization," Andrew suggested.

"He'd probably just eat it," Buzz pointed out. "Nope, it's going to have to be Jess to the rescue."

Cara set out the cooler, pulling out the fruit, cheese, and sandwich spreads. "No one's eaten any of the FlufferNutter. I thought I remembered somebody specially requesting that goop."

"I was kidding," Buzz said. "No one really eats FlufferNutter."

"Hey, I figured maybe it goes with beef jerky or something," Cara said. "They wouldn't sell it if no one eats it."

Jessica jumped off the playground equipment. "When you've hung out with Cara for a while, you'll start catching yourself saying stuff like 'Wow, I've always wanted to take a bath in a giant bowl of fruit loops. Uh, you know I'm just kidding, right?' Because otherwise, before you know it, you're up to your armpits in fruit loops."

"Not a bad idea," Cara said, grinning. "I'll have to see if any of my sugar cereal customers want to put on a memorable display at the next breakfast products show." She started eating baby carrots and hummus. "Alright, any suggestions for dinner provisions? Serious suggestions?"

"Normally, I'm all about the diet caffeine-free Coke," Buzz said. "But, since we're going to Wegmans, how about some of their gingery ginger ale?"

"We should do the party bus thing tonight. Once we're parked somewhere for the night, let's break out the alcohol and find out all of Buzz's middle names," Jessica said. "And popcorn and Prego is a pretty good pre-party dinner food."

"I'm waiting for the 'Uh, just kidding' part," Andrew said.

Jessica made herself a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. "No, really. Popcorn, Prego, some sharp cheddar, and you've got a no-cook complete dinner."

"I'm up for the party bus idea," Cara said. "But I might have to insist on lettuce rolls to add a vegetable."

"What do you put inside a lettuce roll?" Andrew asked. "Not FlufferNutter?"

"Nothing, it's just lettuce. A more portable way to eat pseudo-salad. You can dip them into the spaghetti sauce."

Buzz raised his eyebrows and looked at Andrew. "Sound like these two have done this before. I was always curious about what happened at girls' slumber parties. But I wouldn't have guessed that it required lettuce." He stretched his legs out and finished his potato chips. "As long as there's ginger ale, I'm okay with whatever else you want to get."

Jessica held up the bread bag. "Just the ends left here. Want to go feed the ducks?"

Exceeds Expectations

The group didn't find any ducks at the pond, but a gaggle of Canadian geese were happy to help dispose of the unwanted bread. Jessica took the wheel and they made a quick stop at the grocery store. Cara and Buzz kneeled on the mattresses, watching for their first look at Otterchester.

"2002 Junior Cheerleading State Champions," Cara read. "Elk's Club meetings on Wednesday mornings."

As they drove through the town, the clouds opened up and heavy rain beat onto the windshield. "I forget where the wiper controls are," Jessica said.

"On the left," Buzz said. "I changed the wiper blades before we left, so they should be in good shape."

Jessica turned on the wipers. "I remember watching the wipers on the schoolbus when I was in grade school," she said. "One of them always seemed just on the verge of catching up to the other one."

"It's gonna be hard to see much of the town when it's raining this hard," Buzz said. "Let's find a place to wait it out."

"I miss these summer thunderstorms," Cara said. "The Midwest has much better lightning than Boston."

Jessica turned suddenly, and Cara fell over. "Sorry about that. I just saw a sign for the library." She parked Mathilda near the entrance. "It looks open. If we make a dash for it, we'll only get a little soaked." *I probably should have brought another pair of shoes. Wet sneakers are such a drag.*

They ran up to the doors and then slowed to walk through the doors. "No running! Spit out your gum. Keep your hands to yourself," Jessica said. "Those two years I was an assistant day-camp counselor, I must have said that a couple hundred times."

The foyer had two large bulletin boards. Everyone looked over the posters while they tried to shake off some of the rain.

"Aha! We're in luck, there's an afterschool fundraiser at the Otter-Roller today," Buzz announced.

"Oh, I remember you came along on that roller skating field trip," Jessica said. "We were all curious to see Mr. Chester's son."

"But everyone was also trying to act too cool to talk to a middle-school kid," Buzz said. "And I was too cool to hang around with Pop, so I just skated around trying not to get caught looking at anyone." He glanced at Cara. "But I still remember you came over and said hi after you'd finished taking measurements."

Cara looked surprised. "I don't remember that part. I do remember getting into an argument with Melanie about converting between feet and meters."

Jessica looked at her fondly. *Cara always hates it if someone's getting left out. I think she'd like it if she could just assign everyone a friend or two.* "I think Andrew was the one who won the contest to estimate the number of wheel rotations on Mr. Chester's skates that day," Jessica said.

"I probably had the most time to calculate, since I couldn't do any skating. I had that sprained knee from getting knocked over at a soccer game."

"Well this time, we all get to skate, and no one's going to ignore Buzz," Jessica said. She moved towards the inner doors. "Since the Ochester plan is set, we can spend the rest of the afternoon here in the library." *Maybe this library has a copy of 'Dr. Dolittle and the Secret Lake.' Or 'Skating Shoes'. I never realized when I was a kid that so many of the books in the library were out of print hardbacks that it's just about impossible to buy a copy of.*

They split up as everyone headed to a different section. Jessica noticed a group of parents and toddlers in the community room. *Must be storytime. That's a win for me—it'll be less embarrassing lurking around the children's room if it's mostly emptied out.*

A librarian walked over to Buzz as he strode past the lobby. "Good, you're finally here. It's a good sized audience today so you'll have to speak up." She handed him a slim book. "We've got the projector set up so just click for each page to show the illustrations. A much better system than trying to hold the book up while peering over the top to read upside-down." She smiled at him and bustled off.

"Excuse me..." Buzz said urgently, but the librarian had already turned away and was out of earshot. He looked at the book. Glancing around the library, he couldn't see any of his fellow travelers. He walked

towards the sound of people talking and found the community room. A young boy saw him and started jumping up and down. "He's here! Yay! I'm a pirate! I'm a pirate!" The boy ran in a circle around Buzz, waving his hat.

Buzz noticed that he had a plastic hat with a skull and crossbones. Some of the other kids had T-shirts with pictures of pirates, and a few were wearing eye-patches. A parent came over and pointed towards the front of the room. "You'd better go sit down before you get mobbed by the kids."

As Jessica walked between the rows of children's books, she noticed the noise level increasing. *I wonder what book they're reading today. Sounds popular.*

Trapped, Buzz walked into the room full of people. The parents were mostly trying to get their kids to sit down, with some success. There didn't seem to be anyone in charge that he could talk to. He shrugged and accepted his fate. When he sat down on a tall stool at the front of the room, a wave of relative silence passed through the room. He picked up the wireless mouse controller and cleared his throat.

"Marian and the Pirates," he began. "Marian woke up when the sun had just come up. Today was very important. Today she would go fishing with her grandfather." Buzz clicked the controller and an illustration of a small girl jumping on her bed appeared. "Marian was ready to go fishing. She had a sun hat. She had a fishing pole. And she had her lucky penny." The children listened raptly. Buzz started to ham it up for the audience, reading in different voices for Marian, her grandfather, and the two pirates.

When the story ended, some of the parents left with their children, but others came up to the front of the room to thank Buzz for reading. "So you're a new storytime volunteer?" a woman asked. "You were great."

Buzz rubbed his head. "I'm just passing through, but glad to help out."

Another librarian hurried up, looking concerned. "Dr. Preston just called to apologize that he'd forgotten to come in. I do appreciate you filling in, but who are you?"

"Hi, I'm Buzz Fields-Chester. I ducked in to get out of the rain and someone handed me this book, so I read it for the kids. Great program you have here." Buzz shook her hand and smiled broadly.

"Mr. Fields-Chester, I'm so sorry. Ms. Long must have mistaken you for Dr. Preston."

"Glad to help out. Hey, that was fun. I'd sign up to volunteer, but I live all the way out in Providence."

"Well, anytime you're in town, we'd be delighted to see you again."

Jessica stuck her head into the room. "Oh there you are, Buzz. Did you listen to storytime?" *I wouldn't have thought he'd want to hang out with a crowd of kids for an hour. I really shouldn't stereotype men as being uninterested in children. After all, he does know how to knit and make pancakes.*

He laughed. "Sort of. How's the storm?"

"We're down to a light drizzle, so we could drive around town and see the sights before going over to the Otter-Roller."

"Let's round up the crew, then."

They walked through the library slowly, finding Andrew reading the paper and Cara working on her laptop.

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As they got back into Mathilda, Cara frowned.

"Hey, is everything ok?" Jessica asked.

Cara sighed and pulled on her hair. "I think my assistant is about ready to quit. I'm going to be completely buried with work when I get back."

"Isn't that your new assistant, after the old one left last year?"

"I'm going through them faster than I go through fiancés. You know, I've decided I don't need a man at home, but I'm not afraid to admit that I am completely dependent on having a good right-hand man. Or woman. At work."

Jessica started Mathilda and drove slowly down the main street. She circled around the small downtown area. The three others had stacked two mattresses so that they could see out the window without having to get up.

Cara lay back and blew her bangs out of her eyes. "You guys, I need you to tell me something honestly. Do you think I'm too hard to work with?"

"You're clearly highly motivated, focused, and capable," Andrew ventured.

"But?"

"I didn't say 'but.'" *I never thought I'd see Cara worrying that people didn't like her. She seems like she just sails through life, confident that people will react positively to her.*

"I couldn't tell you, Cara. I think I'd kind of hate working for anyone. I'm used to being mostly a one-man shop, with a few sometimes drivers that I can hire by the day when I need help," Buzz said.

"You'd definitely be a better boss than Kristin," Jessica said.

"Jess, a toddler might be a better boss than Kristin."

"What can I say? You can't tell what it would be like working with someone just because you're best friends with them. And why are you all wigged out all of a sudden? Did your assistant say something?"

Cara sighed again. "It's just that one time is a fluke, two times is a pattern, and three is a habit. So I'm just trying to figure out if there's a pattern."

"Not to regress to being a middle-schooler. But if you want, I'm happy to try talking to your former assistant and ask her if she liked working with you," Jessica offered. "Or you could be professional, and have your HR folks do a real exit interview."

Cara made a non-committal humphing sound as Jessica parked the bus.

"I see they've got the Otter-Roller decked out for the occasion," Buzz said. "That's a lot of balloons."

They got into the skate rental line. Looking around, Cara noticed some parents sitting at the tables near the snack bar, but most of the people out on the rink were teenagers or younger kids. *Has it already been two decades since I've skated? I hope it's like riding a bike. But since we'll already be the old uncool people at this event, maybe it doesn't matter if we're also the ones falling all over the place. Thank goodness you don't have to be as self-conscious as you were at age eighteen for the rest of your life.*

"Honestly, I'm not sure if rollerskates or blades are easiest for starting out," Jessica told Andrew. "Maybe skates?"

"I'm getting skates. It'll be more retro," Cara said.

"Me too," added Buzz. "It'll be just like being back in high school, except for the fact that I never skated much back in high school."

Cara and Buzz got laced up and wobbled over to the rink surface. Buzz started skating. "Here goes nothing. Hey, tell the ambulance that I'm type O positive if it comes up." He flailed his arms and stayed upright.

Cara cautiously slid her feet forward. *This is a little more alarming than I remembered. Okay, I guess my feet remember how it works.* She tried lengthening her strides. *Oh, this is definitely fun.* Cara smiled as she got halfway around the rink and looked to see how Andrew was doing.

Andrew was on the rink, standing still and looking intently at his feet. Jessica held out her hands and skated backwards, towing him along. He stood stiffly with his legs apart and allowed her to pull him forwards. *Looks like Jessica's helping him out. It's been surprising getting back in touch with Andrew lately. Maybe I never noticed when we were in school together, since we weren't really close, but sometimes he seems like he's not sure what to say.*

She skated up to Buzz, who was spinning with his arms out. A group of teenagers giggled as they watched him. "Looks like you do remember how to skate," she said.

"I just performed storytime this afternoon for a crowd of little kids," he said, skating along. "It was weird getting pushed into the spotlight, but I had fun. And now I feel like I could do anything."

The music changed, making Cara smile more. "I think music was more fun when the rock stars were all older than us. I used to listen to this album all the time." The two of them glided past Jessica and Andrew, who was still being towed but looking more relaxed. "Hi, Jess!"

"You mean you were reading a book to kids at the library?" Cara asked. *I hope he wasn't reading Kurt Vonnegut to kindergarteners.* "How did that happen?"

"I'm not sure. You know how sometimes you just find yourself in a bit of a pickle and things just happen?"

Cara considered. "Yeah, when you put it that way, I know exactly what you mean." She tried swinging around to do some backwards skating. "Don't let me slow you down if you want to zip around while it's not too crowded."

Buzz nodded and waved. "Catch you later, then."

After almost an hour, Cara was still skating but her mind was starting to wander. She wondered how long it would take to find a new assistant, and whether she should be looking for an older candidate instead of the usual mob of eager new college graduates who tended to apply for this kind of position.

"Hey Cara," Jessica waved. "Andrew's fallen over three times and getting tired. We're going to hit the snack bar. Want to come over?"

The two of them found Buzz and then made their way over to the table where Andrew was waiting.

"So are you glad you tried it now?" Buzz asked. "Or would it have been more fun if you'd been able to skate for the first time at Pop's field trip back in the day?"

Andrew rubbed his elbow. "Jessica was very patient, which was great. Though I think it might have been easier to learn if I'd started twenty years ago."

Cara wagged her eyebrows. "Plus, if you'd been a novice skater at that field trip, there would have been a whole crowd of girls eager to volunteer to go around with you."

"Was Andrew a big hit with the girls?" Buzz asked.

"Oh, I don't think so," Andrew answered. "I've always been a fish out of water."

Jessica ate some of his French fries. "He's being modest. I can assure you that there were lots of girls writing his name in their notebooks and acting silly anytime he was in the room."

"You must be joking," Andrew said. "My mother had to arrange my prom date. I would certainly have noticed if there had been a high level of feminine interest."

"Melanie never mentioned that your mother was involved," Cara said. "She was actually just a tiny bit obnoxious about having you as her

date." *She totally acted like she'd won some sort of popularity contest. No wonder she didn't tell us the whole story.*

Andrew shrugged. "My mother was good friends with her mother. When her mom mentioned that Melanie wasn't sure she'd have a date, my mother volunteered me."

"That's so funny," Jessica said. "So if I call your mother and tell her I don't have a date for something, you'll get signed up?"

"Err, well," Andrew considered. "Yes, as a matter of fact, I probably would."

"Because I don't have a date for Matt and Richard's wedding."

Buzz laughed. "Good thing none of us knows your mother's phone number."

Andrew looked at Jessica. "No need to involve my mother. It would be my pleasure to accompany you. After all, I was planning to attend already."

Buzz shook his head and punched Andrew in the shoulder. "No, man. That first part, that was reasonably romantic. That second part, you shudda kept it to yourself."

"Well sure, leave me as the only person who's going to show up alone," Cara teased.

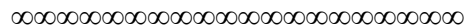
Jessica took the last French fry. "You won't be left out. I still need you to help with the sculpture set up."

Cara listened to the music for a while. "So Buzz, what's the idea behind your no radio rule on the bus?"

"That's just because some of the other drivers I've had along liked really terrible music. Cuts down on the arguments and pouting if everyone just agrees not to listen to the radio."

"Well, I'm liking the mix they have playing here. If you want to skate more, I was thinking of just hanging out and getting a little work done," Cara said. "Since this evening is going to be the party bus, I won't get anything done then."

"I think I can stumble along myself now, so if you want to get in some real skating, go ahead," Andrew told Jessica. They and Buzz went back to the floor while Cara found a spot near an electrical outlet. Cara watched them start skating, thinking how each person's personality manifested in their style. Jessica smoothly wove between other people, sometimes speeding forwards and sometimes going into the center area to do spins. Buzz was all arms and legs. He looked reckless but never actually crashed into anything. *Though I'm not sure if Andrew fits with that theory, since he's just learning to skate. Maybe the fact that he was willing to keep trying after falling over a couple times means that he's got some moxy.*



The travelers left the Otter-Roller around dinner time. Cara had asked around for hotel recommendations and found out about a slightly seedy establishment which seemed unlikely to object to a polka-dotted party bus in their parking lot.

"A Motel 2? Is that going to be one-fourth as nice as a Motel 8?" Jessica asked.

"I think it's supposed to be the kind of place that two people can go to in the middle of the day. Most of the rooms are supposed to have hot tubs. Anyhow, as long as they have an ice machine, a couple of outlets so we can recharge our phones, and the shower isn't too scary, it should do," Cara said.

"That must be it," Buzz said. "Neon signs and everything." He parked Mathilda around the back. "Probably best to be out of sight of the lobby, if we're going to be whooping it up half the night." *Maybe we should send Cara and Andrew in to register for the room. They look the most reputable. But if this place is really some kind of love-nest dive, maybe reputable isn't what we need.*

"I'm too old to stay up all night, but we've got a bottle of white, a bottle of red, a six-pack of hard cider, and two liters of ginger ale. Plus, fruit and cheese for dessert," Cara said.

"Does white or red go with popcorn and Prego?" Andrew asked.

"That's one of the things we'll find out tonight," Cara answered. "See, we used to have popcorn and Prego all the time at slumber parties, but back then, no wine."

"Who wants to go check in with me?" Jessica asked. "I'm kind of curious about this Motel 2 thing."

"I volunteer Andrew. Cara's going to set up the party bus, and I'm going to do a quick check on Mathilda's oil levels to make sure everything's going alright. The folks that sold her to me said that they hardly ever drove her," Buzz said.

"Should I be worrying that we're going cross-country in a converted bus that isn't used to being driven?" Cara said. "Not that I'm

doubting your mechanic skills or anything, but just so you know, I myself definitely can't do engine repairs."

"We're not crossing the Sahara. And my Triple A membership is up-to-date," Buzz said, shrugging. "Dunno. If you want to do some recreational worrying, I won't be offended." *It's never any use telling Gloria not to worry about something, but sometimes giving her permission to worry about it seems to do the trick. Anyhow, Cara might go into worry withdrawal if there wasn't something that might go wrong.*

There was elevator music playing in the lobby when Andrew and Jessica walked in. The front desk was orange Formica and the walls were covered with faux wood paneling. A middle-aged man wearing a velvet and tasseled hat greeted them.

"Is this your first stay with us, or do you have a frequent customer card?"

Jessica looked at the hat. Andrew glanced at Jessica and said, "Oh, we're just passing through Otterchester and heard that this was a nice place to stay." He kept a straight face, even after Jessica kicked his ankle.

"Welcome, and we hope you'll enjoy your room." He looked at Andrew. "The ice machine is around the corner there and there are several restaurants that deliver. You'll find menus in the room." He cleared his throat. "We must also inform all our guests that it is absolutely not okay to let condoms go down the drain in the hot tub."

Andrew nodded and took the keys. "I understand," he said solemnly. Jessica stepped on his foot and giggled all the way back to the bus.

“That hat! And all that fake paneling. This place has atmosphere,” she said.

“Probably best that we’ll be sleeping in the bus. This seems like the sort of place that would probably have rather thin walls,” Andrew commented.

Buzz was wiping off his hands when they walked over. Andrew handed the keys over to Cara. “Ice machine around the corner,” he said.

“Good, because warm ginger ale is a drag,” Buzz said. “So what’s it like in there?”

“We didn’t go see the room yet. But, the guy at the desk did strongly caution us about letting condoms go down the drain,” Andrew replied.

“Great. Well, good thing we’re not actually staying in the room, then,” Cara said. “I’ll just plug in my phone and computer, grab some ice, wash the fruit, and be back to mix up the popcorn. Anyone else have electronics I should take in to get charged?”

The others got back into the bus and arranged the mattresses in stacks to make a squishy table and bench. Jessica pulled out a flattened large cardboard box for the table top. Buzz set out a couple of battery powered lights. They were about the size of a soup bowl and made a soft glow.

“Mood lighting! Perfect,” Cara exclaimed. “I thought about candles, but it seemed like a bad idea. Jessica, you want to set the table? Andrew, you can cut up some fruit and cheese.” Each of them had a large bowl of popcorn, a small bowl of spaghetti sauce, and a glass of

wine. “I’m thinking we should start with the white and then switch to red, unless you want to use paper cups so we can do both at once.”

The others agreed that it would be better to stick with the glassware. They sat down on the makeshift bench and Jessica proposed a toast. “To journeys and friends!”

“Old friends and new friends,” Cara added.

“To Mr. Chester,” Andrew said.

“To memories and destinations,” Buzz finished.

Jessica and Cara started eating piece by piece, dipping their popcorn into the sauce. Buzz watched them for a minute and then followed suit.

“What happens if you just pour some sauce on the popcorn?” Andrew asked.

Cara grimaced and shook her head. “You don’t want to do that. It gets really soggy.” He nodded and dipped a piece of popcorn.

“Oddly compelling,” he pronounced. “Now, is it better with fresh popped popcorn, or does this bagged popcorn work better?”

“I like fresh popped, but the bagged kind usually has cheese flavoring, which is nice,” Jessica answered.

Buzz refilled his glass of wine. “There’s just Jeochester tomorrow, and then we’ll be in Powell.” *And it’s been fun talking about Pop with all of you, but I’m not sure that I’ve really gotten any closer to whatever I was looking for when I started this little quest.*

“Hey Buzz, is that enough wine that you’re ready to tell us about your middle name?” Jessica asked.

He looked at Andrew meaningfully. *Remember how I told you that a bit of mystery catches people's attention? Especially women.*

"Ah, okay, if we're going to be talking secrets and all tonight. I'll start us off," Buzz said. "So I told you how my Dad picked out my first name. I'm not sure what he was thinking, or if he really thought too much about it, but there it is. Then my Mom picked my middle name. Maybe she was overcompensating for the first name, but she picked 'Byron.'"

"My middle name is Merrill," Andrew said. "It was my mother's maiden name."

"Nothing so exotic for me," Jessica said. "Just Anne."

"Patricia," said Cara. "Well, I think that makes it Buzz's turn to ask a question."

"So that's how it works, huh? You pick someone to ask but then everyone else chimes in too?" he said.

Jessica and Cara nodded.

"Cara, tell us something you've never told anyone before," Buzz said with a smile. "As important or not important as you want."

She pulled on her hair and ate more popcorn, looking up at the ceiling. "Ah, I've got something," she said. "When I was in high school and took the SATs, I cried when I got the results back because I'd really wanted to get a perfect score."

"You never said that, but I guessed that you were disappointed," Jessica said. She put down her glass. "So, I've never told anyone that I think I know who set all the crickets loose that time in school. I couldn't

be sure, and I know that person would deny it, but as soon as I saw crickets jumping out of the lockers that day, I suspected a particular person.”

Cara blinked a few times. “Wow, that was just about the biggest unsolved mystery of our time. So you’re not going to actually tell us who you suspect?”

“Nope. It would be completely unfair to start a rumor. Now, if I ever got a chance to confront this person, and they buckled under the pressure and confessed, that would be a different matter.”

Buzz thought about the cricket episode. *Those crickets probably bothered a lot of the teachers. But Pop was really upset, since he had that thing about not killing insects. I’ve sometimes wondered if there was someone at the school who did that just to get at him for some reason.*

Andrew finished his popcorn. “Something that I haven’t told anyone. Mmm. I’m not sure what to say.” He put his hands together and crossed his fingers. “When I was really young, I used to go to Sunday school. One time, the teacher told us about how we should always be ready for Jesus to come back at anytime. She meant that we should be on our best behavior, but the idea that Jesus might show up at anytime got me so nervous that I couldn’t go to the bathroom all day. My parents never knew it, but the last time I wet the bed, it was because I was too embarrassed to use the toilet in case of the Second Coming.”

“Religious education for little kids is kind of dangerous that way,” Cara said. “Good thing you got over it.”

“Yes, I can assure you that it soon became clear to me that the potential embarrassment of being undressed when Jesus appeared was

greatly outweighed by the definite embarrassment of having an accident during the night.”

“That reminds me of something I did more recently. I was at home waiting for the plumber to show up to fix a radiator. This was after a mix-up where Gloria stayed home to wait for him in the morning, and gotten mad because he didn’t show up, and then he’d come over in the afternoon and gotten mad because no one was home. So I didn’t want to miss him, and left just the screen door closed, so that he’d know someone was home. Well, he finally showed up and walked right in and started looking for the broken radiator, and opened the bathroom door to find me sitting on the can. Not sure who screamed louder, me or him,” Buzz said. *Good thing it wasn’t Gloria that he walked in on. She would have decked him first and asked questions later.*

Everyone laughed. “He should have just shouted or rang the doorbell or something,” Jessica said. “Maybe he was just pretending to be surprised, and he just gets a kick out of making people jump. Adds a little pep to a boring day.”

“I’ve had a few boring days at work, but that approach toward relieving the monotony never occurred to me,” Andrew said.

“Now, is it Cara’s turn to ask a question, because I picked her first, or does Andrew go because he had the funniest answer?” Buzz asked. *I have to admit that these girls’ slumber party games seem darned entertaining so far. Though maybe the drinking helps.*

“Oh, it’s too hard to pick the best answer each time. It’s my turn,” Cara said. “And, I’m asking Jessica. Jess, what’s something that you forgot to do, which had some sort of consequences?”

“Oh, I probably have about a million of those,” she said. “One that sticks in my head is the time that my entire extended family was coming over for Thanksgiving. I was on a conservation kick that year, so I turned off the oven to save energy when I pulled the turkey out to turn it around. Then I forgot to turn the oven back on, so the bird ended up being three hours late. Everyone had already filled up on side dishes and pie by the time the turkey was ready. Let me tell you, my mother was so mad, but she couldn’t even yell at me because all the relatives were around.”

“How about your father?” Andrew asked.

“He’d thought that the whole gigantic family dinner idea was too much hassle, so I think he was kind of glad that things went wrong, just to make sure that we didn’t have to do it again next year.”

“Maybe you should have gone with the popcorn and toast, like the Peanuts Thanksgiving approach,” Cara said.

“Turkey is over-rated,” Jessica said. “Honestly, I think all the relatives loved getting to the pies before they got too full.”

Cara opened the bottle of red wine and passed around the cheese plate. Everyone sat around the same mattress with their feet up in the middle. Buzz considered situations when he’d forgotten things, trying to pick one where the consequence was funny rather than just painful. *Forgetting Gloria’s birthday last year was a major mistake. Had to plan something really romantic for Valentine’s Day to make up some lost boyfriend points.* He thought for a minute, waiting to see if anyone else would jump in first.

“Last year, I was taking a dugout canoe from Oregon to Florida. I’d gotten about half an hour away from the first rest stop when my

phone rang. Darned if it hadn't completely slipped my mind that I had a relief driver with me that trip. I'd left him at the rest stop, and when he finished his hamburger and tried to find me, the bus was gone," Buzz said.

"Another school bus?" Jessica asked.

"No, that time it was a passenger bus that needed to end up on the East Coast. Anyhow, that guy would not believe that I didn't leave him there on purpose as some kind of joke, and refused to talk to me the rest of the trip." *That was the last time I hired him to come along on a delivery. Some people just have a stick up their butts all the time.*

"So, we should remember to have one person keep an eye on you at all times during rest stops?" Andrew asked.

Buzz snorted. "Couldn't forget any of you people. As soon as I got back into the bus, I'd see your stuff all over the place. The thing about that guy, he was so neat, uptight, and boring that his being along just didn't stick in my mind."

"Proof would remind you, wouldn't he," Jessica said, passing the rabbit a piece of popcorn. "You're a good bunny."

Andrew looked at Cara. "I may as well confess. After you called to alert me to the Chinese leftovers in my car, I still forgot to throw them out. Until there was an odor."

"I actually considered calling you again to remind you later that day, but thought it would be too much nagging."

Buzz smiled at her and reached for the ginger ale. "That was wise of you. Most people would rather end up with a stinky car than get the

feeling that their friends think they're incapable of basic common sense.”
Even if Andrew could use a few common sense tips now and then, I'm sure he wouldn't want to be pestered to death.

“But really, most people fail at common sense at least some of the time. Last Christmas, I forgot that one of my colleagues is allergic to nuts,” Cara said. “So I brought peanut butter cookies to the potluck dinner. I'd made those fork tine hash marks on the top and everything, but she ended up eating one. And, she didn't notice that they were peanut butter, so she had another one. Well, the party broke up early because someone had to rush her to the ER.”

“Maybe she didn't recognize the fork tine pattern because she'd never had peanut butter cookies,” Andrew said. “Though that would certainly be useful symbology to know, if one was trying to avoid peanuts.”

“I guess I was horrified that I'd forgotten about the allergy and didn't warn her off the cookies. But at the same time, since she ended up just fine, it still cracks me up that she liked them so much that she had a second serving,” Cara said, giggling.

Jessica got the hard cider out of the cooler. “Now, that wasn't your assistant who's maybe quitting, was it?”

“No way. For my assistant, I keep a list on my phone of her favorite flavor of donuts, what kind of pizza she likes, her typical Chinese food order, and any food aversions. That kind of information is too important to take a chance on forgetting.”

“Okay, working for you isn't sounding so bad,” Buzz said. “And by the way, the popcorn and spaghetti sauce thing was just fine. I think

it's better with the white wine, though." He wondered if the women were going to intensify the interrogation. *This kind of thing isn't a bad way to get to know someone better, but I bet it used to get mean with a crowd of teenage girls.*

"I agree," said Andrew. "Though possibly that is because upstate New York vineyards do better with their whites."

"Now I have a question for Andrew," Jessica said. "Tell us about an opinion or impression that some people have about you, but they're actually wrong about it."

"I haven't had that much to drink, Jess, but you're going to need to say that again. I don't get the question," Buzz said.

"I mean, tell us about a common mis-impression that people have about you. Like, for example, if people usually think that you can't cook, but it turns out you do a mean barbeque."

Andrew nodded. "I see what you're asking."

Buzz was still dubious. *How the heck am I supposed to know if someone has a mistaken opinion about me?*

"Well," Andrew began. "I suppose the first thing that comes to mind is that my parents have always thought that if I worked harder and paid more attention, I could be the most best at everything and anything."

"And what do you think the truth is?" Cara asked.

Andrew frowned and looked away. "The real truth is that there have been some important things that I've tried hard and still failed to do. Maybe they're half right, because there are other things that I've been afraid to put a great deal of effort into, in case I still failed."

“I can understand that. When I do a half-assed job because I didn’t work hard enough, it feels like less of a failure than when I tried my best but couldn’t measure up,” Buzz said. *And is that what I’m really afraid of with getting a desk job? That if I try to have a professional career, I’ll find out that I can’t cut it?*

“But surely you’d always get better results when you put in the effort?” Cara asked. “I don’t exactly get why achieving less feels better if you tried less.”

“Oh Cara. What you’re not getting is that people can feel more incompetent when they half-succeed after great effort than when they completely fail after no effort. Because then there’s always the possibility that you’d be really great, if you put your mind to it,” Jessica explained.

Cara poured herself some ginger ale. “I guess I can sort of see that. But personally, if I don’t put in the effort and something doesn’t turn out very well, then I feel like more of a failure because I didn’t do everything I could to make it work.”

“And when you do put in the work but don’t succeed?” Jessica asked.

Cara tipped her head and thought about the question. “I usually figure either it was a no-win situation or I just wasn’t the right person to deal with it. I mean, there’s a ton of skills and talents that I don’t happen to have.”

“That sounds like a remarkably well-adjusted attitude,” Andrew said. “Maybe I should pal around with you until it rubs off.”

Cara laughed. “I thought I was the designated worry-wart here.”

“You do fret about stuff that could happen, or not having a good plan, but I guess that might be partly because your job seems to be a constant stream of logistical nightmares and last-minute emergencies,” Jessica said. “Maybe if you weren’t so well adjusted, you couldn’t be in that line of work.”

“Hmm. So, a lot of people think that I’m obsessed with work,” Cara said. “Jess knows how Teddy used to rant and rave about it. But really, it’s more that I like coming up with ideas and making things.” She looked around at the others. “And I’m thinking about cutting back to four days a week, so I can do more non-work projects.”

“What sorts of projects do you have in mind?” Andrew asked.

Cara looked slightly embarrassed. “I want to write mysteries.”

“That’s cool!” Jessica said. “You should do it.”

“I’m still in the thinking it over stage, but thanks for the encouragement.”

Jessica opened the last bottle of cider. “Now, what I run into the most is that people think I’m dumb because I’m a waitress or a cashier. Especially at the Rainforest Cafe, sometimes people would talk to me like I was a slow first grader.” She rolled her eyes.

“I’m still not sure I grok this mistaken opinion question,” Buzz said. “But I’ll give it a shot. So, sometimes when I tell people that I’m on the road a lot, they think I must be going out to strip clubs or cruising the red light districts in every city. But actually, if I’m not driving, I’m sleeping.” He stretched and smiled at the others. “Having you folks along to talk to, this has been way more fun than a regular trip.” *It’s making me realize how parts of this job are boring and lonely.*

Andrew looked out the windows. The motel lights were bright on one side of the buss, but he could see stars through the windows on the other side. "Shall we make this the last question? It's getting towards late."

The others agreed that he should ask the final question of the evening. Buzz nodded to Cara. "And I also want to propose a final toast, to our master of provisions and party bus organizer." Cara took a bow and then sat down again to hear Andrew's question.

"I'll ask Buzz," he said. "What has been the most best time of your life?"

"No contest," Buzz answered. "These last two years, living with Gloria. Having someone who cares how my day went, or what I'm thinking about." *I'll have to call her tonight and tell her about Otterchester and the twins.*

Jessica nodded. "It's funny, because even though being married for immigration purposes wasn't anything like really being married, those years were still special. Living with my gay best buddy sounds like a sitcom, but I really liked it." She sighed. "I hope that whole platonic marriage experience hasn't spoiled me for having a relationship with a straight guy."

"It's an odd sort of ex to have to live up to," Andrew said.

"My pick is probably the equivalent to hitting yourself in the head with a hammer because it feels so good when you stop," Cara said.

"Are you talking about finishing grad school or breaking up with Teddy?" Jessica asked.

“Both. I did both within a month, and then for the next six months, I was just walking on air. Instead of having to spend most of the evenings after work doing homework, I could read or hang out with friends. And instead of having to worry about how Teddy was going to take anything I said or did, I could just please myself.”

“Did the elation just wear off eventually?” Buzz asked.

“Yeah, I think my baseline happiness expectation probably went up. So everything re-normed. But that’s fine, because getting used to being miserable is still pretty miserable. And getting used to happy is still pretty good.”

Andrew looked at the others. “For a while, I thought that high school was actually going to be the best years of my life. I was doing great in classes and soccer, and I had friends, and the world was full of possibilities.” He sat back and looked at the ceiling. “Then everything went downhill for a long time. I had a lot of problems, things didn’t work out with the woman I thought was the one for me. I guess I’ve just been in sort of a rut for years, pretty disconnected with anyone.”

Jessica patted him on the knee. “But you’re not in a rut now. You’re in a bus on your way to Jeochester.”

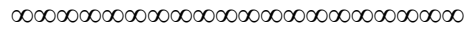
“Indeed. I’ve been reminded of how much being with friends makes a difference. Thank you for helping me find my way back to being in the best time of my life again.”

Buzz announced, “Sound like group hug time to me.” Jessica giggled, but she and Cara both leaned over to put their arms around Andrew, and Buzz piled on top.

“Hey Buzz, you surprised me. I didn’t think you’d be the type,” Jessica said.

“Jess, come on. I spent the afternoon amusing a room full of kindergarteners. I barely escaped turning into a big purple dinosaur. Y’all are getting off easy if I don’t start singing Kumbaya.”

Andrew didn’t say much more, but he was smiling as he helped shake pieces of cheese off the mattress. After a desultory amount of clean-up, Cara and Jessica went to sleep. Buzz went into the hotel room to call Gloria. When the women were sound asleep and snoring, Andrew was thinking over the evening’s conversation and realizing that he’d stopped worrying about the reunion.



In the morning, Andrew woke up first. The alcohol had worn off and the warm feeling of acceptance had ebbed with it. He wondered whether the others really considered him a friend now and what that would even mean. Andrew watched Proof sniff around his cage seeking any overlooked pieces of popcorn.

Cara woke up next and grabbed her running clothes. She noticed that Andrew was also awake. “I’m just going into the hotel to change,” she said. “Then I’ll be out running for about half an hour. I doubt the others will be awake and ready to go before I get back.”

Andrew got off the bus with her. “I’m not sure I like the look of this neighborhood so much,” he said. “Maybe I should come with you.”

“That’s sweet of you to offer,” she replied. “But, uh, do you run much these days?”

“Hardly at all, but I can keep up for at least a mile,” he insisted. “Then I could rest while you went on a bit, and you could pick me up again as you came back.”

Cara was doubtful. *But really, getting into the exercise habit wouldn’t hurt him, and maybe he’s right about the neighborhood. Plus, I wouldn’t want him to think that I didn’t want him along.* “Sounds good. We can take a jogging tour of the scenic outskirts of Otterchester.”

They set off at an easy pace. Cara kept looking back to make sure Andrew hadn’t collapsed. She jogged back after getting a block ahead of him. *He’s not doing too bad, actually. I guess it’s mind over matter sometimes.*

“So what did you think of our party last night? Do you think the reunion will be that much fun?” she asked.

Andrew puffed a bit. “Last night was probably the best time I’ve had in ages,” he said. “I suppose I’ve been nervous that you and all our old classmates would think that I hadn’t accomplished much of anything in the last twenty years.” He stopped and leaned over with his hands on his knees, catching his breath.

Cara jogged in place to wait for him. “Oh, I think everyone still thinks of you as the smartest kid in the class.” He straightened up and they set off again. *After all, people really don’t think about us nearly as much as we might worry they might. That’s something I’m sure of.*

“I used to believe I was,” he said. “But where am I now?”

She slapped him on the back. “You’re jogging with a friend in scenic Otterchester. What more could a guy ask for?”

He smiled and breathed hard, trying to keep up the pace. They passed by a large grassy hill with a winding road. Cara ran partway up the hill and then back down to meet Andrew again. “This place is kind of nice,” she commented.

Andrew glanced around them. “Nice to run past, I guess.” He was sweating profusely; his lungs were protesting; and his heart pounded in his ears. He swallowed and plunged ahead. “I didn’t tell you before, but last time I was in Otterchester, it was three months at the DeVille.” Andrew felt like he’d jumped off a cliff and the surface of the river was speeding towards him.

“It must be kind of weird being back in town, then,” Cara said. “Have you been thinking about it a lot?” She slowed to a fast walk to let him catch his breath again.

“Not while skating,” he said with a gasping laugh. “Funny how trying to keep upright can take so much attention. But it’s been on my mind since Buzz told us about the three chester plan.”

“We can turn around now, if you want,” she offered. *Three months is a pretty long time. I wonder what was wrong.*

Andrew nodded gratefully. They jogged slowly back towards the Motel 2. “If you don’t mind, I don’t think I want the others to know about my stint in an institution.”

“I definitely won’t say anything if you don’t want,” Cara said. “But you know we’re all friends now. Finding out that you’ve had some tough times wouldn’t make Jess or Buzz not like you.”

“I think it’s easier for you to trust people, Cara. Maybe it’s because you’re successful and don’t have so many mistakes to admit to. I think it would make people uncomfortable if they thought I was on the brink of a nervous breakdown all the time.”

“Real friends will stick with you, and you’re stuck with us now,” Cara said.

Andrew panted. “I wish I could have as much faith as you do.”

Cara ran ahead. She looked back and started to reply, but was knocked to the ground by an SUV abruptly pulling out of a driveway. As she lay on the lawn, the car drove off with a squeal of tires. Andrew shouted and ran over immediately.

“Cara! Are you hurt?” He knelt down but was afraid to touch her. She lay with her eyes closed but was obviously breathing.

“What was that?” she said weakly.

“That SUV just backed right into you,” he said. “Thank goodness you didn’t fall under the wheels. I’m going to call 911.”

“Good idea. I’ll just lie here,” she agreed. “Oh, and call Jessica and ask her to bring me a change of clothes, but try not to make this whole getting hit by a car thing sound too alarming.” *Although I have to admit that having done it once, I’d put this towards the bottom of my list of things to do before breakfast. My leg is really starting to hurt.*

An ambulance quickly arrived and paramedics checked Cara’s vital signs. “Okay, ma’am. We’ll transport you to the ER now to get that leg looked at, but it looks like you could have done a lot worse in a car

versus pedestrian encounter.” The paramedic asked Andrew, “Did you want to come in the ambulance or meet us at the hospital?”

“Cara, I think I’d better come along, unless you disagree?”

She nodded. “Yeah, this is probably one of those ‘don’t split the party’ situations.” *Now, how would cell phones change your tactics in a Dungeons and Dragons campaign? Oh, right, you’d probably get no reception once you were twenty levels down into a dungeon.* She winced as they loaded her into the ambulance. *I don’t even play D&D. Why am I thinking about that now?*

“I don’t think getting run over is something that I associate with Mr. Chester,” Cara commented. “Although I guess we should ask Buzz to make sure.”

“It’s certainly not something that he would have enjoyed doing, nor does it particularly remind me of him. But I think he would have approved of the party last night,” Andrew said.

They arrived at Otterchester General Hospital and Cara was wheeled away for examination. Andrew stayed in the waiting area with about ten other people in various states of boredom and distress. He decided that it was time to inform the others.

“Good morning, Jessica. Did I wake you?” he began. “I thought I’d better call to tell you and Buzz that we’re going to be delayed starting out this morning. Ah, there’s been a small accident, and Cara looks like she’ll be fine, but we’re at the emergency room at Otterchester General. Perhaps you should pack up all the electronics and check out of the hotel and meet us here? No, we’re not sure yet if anything’s broken, but she’s in reasonably good spirits. I’m afraid I don’t know how long they’ll need to keep her. Alright, see you soon.”

Andrew sat down to wait. His clothes were unpleasantly sweaty from all the exertion and he felt conspicuous. He started feeling guilty about having distracted Cara at the pivotal moment. Lost in his thoughts, he was surprised when two police officers came over to him. Apparently, they'd arrived on the scene to investigate the hit-and-run and followed the ambulance. He described what he could remember about the SUV but was unable to remember the license plate. After taking his statement, the police debated whether they should wait to talk to Cara or come back later, and ended up leaving.

By the time Jessica and Buzz arrived, none of the other people in the waiting area had left. Jessica sat down next to Andrew and handed him a granola bar. "Hey, what happened?" She looked at his clothes. "Did you go running with her?"

Andrew described the accident quietly.

"I can't believe that car," Buzz said angrily. "What kind of person doesn't stop when they've hit somebody?"

Jessica stared at Andrew and her eyes teared up. She blinked and blew her nose. "That's just terrible. Have you talked to the police?"

"Since it seemed like the car had been parked in that driveway, even though I didn't get a license plate number, at least they'll be able to speak with the residents. It may well have been their car."

Buzz looked at Andrew. "If you want to go back to the bus and change, Jess and I can wait here." As Andrew walked out of the room, Jessica went up to the desk to hand over Cara's change of clothes and a bag of snacks.

Andrew paced back and forth outside the hospital. Even though the air was tainted with cigarette smoke from employees huddled near the door, it seemed less suffocating to be outdoors than in the waiting room. Through the glass doors, he could see Buzz playing a game on his phone and Jessica chewing her fingernails. She came out to join him.

“Hey. I checked with a nurse and they’re waiting for someone to read the x-ray or MRI or something. Might be any minute now, or it could be an hour,” she said. “Since none of us are relatives, we’re banished to the waiting room until they release her.”

“I feel terrible about this accident,” he said. “I’d insisted on tagging along because I was worried about her running alone in a seedy neighborhood, but then I ended up simply being a dangerous distraction. We were having a bit of a disagreement and she turned around to say something just as she reached that driveway.”

“Oh Andrew, it’s not your fault. That sounds like a freak accident. Plus, I’m sure if you two were having any sort of argument, it must have been because Cara was giving you too much advice,” Jessica said. “She’s my best friend, but even I have to admit that she has a tendency to assume that people should do or see things her way.” She put her hand on his shoulder and made him meet her eyes. “I’m sure she would never blame you. She may have a sharp word or two for the driver, but that’s completely different.”

Andrew looked at Jessica and smiled a little. “I do envy the two of you, knowing each other well enough to be so certain of what the other would think or feel.”

“Not that she doesn’t still surprise me sometimes,” Jessica said. “Keeps things interesting.”

“I just have a ridiculous feeling that I’m such an incompetent friend that as soon as I start feeling comfortable with someone, I jinx them and they get hit by a car.”

Jessica raised one eyebrow. “If you had that kind of power, you could use it on purpose to attract bad karma to mean people.”

“No, if I have bad luck, I won’t be able to direct it towards targets,” he said, shaking his head. “You don’t ever worry about crazy things like being a jinx?”

Jessica didn’t answer for a while. Then she pulled a lock of hair into her mouth and sucked on the end.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to...”

Jessica waved her hand. “No, don’t worry about it.” She shifted her weight from one leg to the other. “Not that many people know, but when I was backpacking in Italy, I stayed in this little village about thirty miles away from a lake. I kept hearing about how scenic it was at the lake, so one day I paid someone to borrow their car, and drove out. It was beautiful; I spent the day in the sun; and I was a little tired driving back.” Jessica took a deep breath and continued. “A dog ran out into the road and I swerved. I didn’t see it happen, but I heard a thump and a scream, and I stopped. Well, I’d clipped a little kid. He ended up with a broken arm and some bruises, but I felt terrible. I could have killed him.”

Andrew reached his hand out tentatively and patted her arm. “I’m so sorry,” he said. Jessica blew her nose.

“I ended up staying there for another few weeks, going by his house and bringing snacks or little toys, helping his parents with a few chores. They were unbelievably nice people. I mean, I’d almost run over their son, and they were so concerned about how I was doing.” She looked at Andrew and sighed. “I kept in touch a bit once I got back home. About a year later, they wrote and told me that Peter had been killed when a car ran off the road and into their yard. It was like I’d set some kind of bad luck pattern going, and even though I knew I had nothing to do with the second accident, I felt responsible.”

“I don’t know what to say, Jessica. That’s so terribly sad,” Andrew said.

“It’s not like I think about it all the time, but when I heard that Cara had gotten hit by a car, it all felt like it had just happened yesterday.”

Andrew patted her arm again, then nervously hugged her. “I’d offer to go for a walk, but frankly, I’d be too worried that you’d get run over by an SUV. Should we go back inside, do you think?”

“Why don’t you go head. I’ll just go back to Mathilda to feed Proof, get a Coke out of the cooler for Buzz and fetch my sketchpad.”

Andrew looked around the waiting room and noticed that two people had left but several more had come in. He sat down next to Buzz. “Do you have any stories about Mr. Chester and waiting in emergency rooms?”

Looking up from the screen, Buzz grinned. “Well sure. I was clearing out some brush in the backyard one summer and got the worst

case of poison oak. I swelled up like a balloon and Pop had to take me to the ER for some shots.”

“This is my first time waiting for someone at a hospital,” Andrew said.

Buzz nodded. “And there was the time that Taiya caught her hair on fire at a Girl Scouts arts and crafts weekend. Pop and I were both home, so we rushed over to the hospital, but they’d gotten her bandaged up and eating lollipops by the time we got there.”

Jessica came back with a Coke, her sketchpad, and Cara’s knitting. “I figured even if they wouldn’t let us back there with her, maybe someone would take this in.” She went to consult with a nurse and came back with news.

“They said she should be ready pretty soon, but she’s not supposed to leave before talking to the police.”

“We know the address of the house. It wouldn’t be too hard to track down who lives there and ask them what they know about the car,” Buzz said.

Andrew thought that was a bad idea. “Dispensing vigilante justice from a polka dotted former school bus?” he said. “The police I talked to earlier seemed quite eager to contact the resident. Let’s wait and see if they’ve already identified the driver.”

“Thanks for the knitting,” Cara said, as she was wheeled over, holding a pair of crutches. “But wouldn’t you know, as soon as I started the next row, they were ready to get rid of me.”

“How do you feel? I’m very sorry that you were injured,” Andrew said, hovering.

“Mostly just scraped up and bruised. One sprained ankle. So it’s a good thing that no one was counting on me to do any driving!” she said cheerfully. “Well I’m sick of this place, even if you aren’t. Let’s go to Jeochester.”

Before Jessica could tell her that they had to wait for the police, two uniformed officers arrived. By this time, the waiting room had partially cleared out, and the travelers were the largest cluster of people left.

“Ma’am, if you wouldn’t mind, we’d like to ask you some questions about the accident,” said the younger man. “Could you describe the vehicle involved?”

Cara shrugged. “What I know is that I was jogging, and then all of a sudden, something pretty big knocked me over. I have a vague impression that it was dark blue, but I didn’t get much of a look.”

“And is one of you Andrew Langer?” Andrew raised his hand. “You said that you saw the vehicle?”

“I did. I can’t remember the license plate, but it was a dark blue SUV with several red bumper stickers and the passenger side rear window was taped plastic sheeting,” he said.

“Yep, we have your statement from this morning,” the younger man said. “And we’ve talked to someone who happened to be staying at that house last night and who happens to have a car matching that description.”

“We’ll just need your full name, address, and contact information,” the older officer told Cara. “We have the medical assessment and will probably be bringing charges against the driver.” He shook his head. “He’s got a long record of driving violations, but this is the first time he’s hit a pedestrian.”

They quickly took down Cara’s information and then the travelers were free to go. Andrew walked slowly by Cara’s side as they returned to the bus. Cara looked at him. “You can stop feeling guilty, Andrew. This was totally not your fault.” He shrugged.

“Since I’ve started running, I’ve gotten bowled over by a bicyclist, a double-wide jog stroller, a rollerblader, and now an SUV. It seems to come with the territory,” she said. “The stroller was actually the worst, because not only did the lady run me off the sidewalk and into a gigantic puddle, she actually flipped me off as she went past.”

“I hate to be relieved that you’ve encountered idiots on the road previously,” Andrew said. “But it is kind of you to put to rest my silly concerns.”

Cara had some trouble getting up the bus’s stairs, but was soon settled on a mattress. “This mattress seating is a pretty good set-up for elevating my ankle,” she said. “Would someone pass me a yogurt?”



It was another hot summer day as they passed through Jeochester. It seemed to be a small bedroom community, with no real

commercial center. As Buzz drove under a small overpass, Jessica called out. “Hey Buzz! Pull over if you can. I think I saw something and I want to go take a look.”

Buzz slowed down and looked for a place to park. The shoulder was too narrow to completely pull off of the road, so he had to stop with Mathilda half-blocking the lane. “Why don’t you just run over and take a look,” he said. “The rest of us can stay with Mathilda for now.”

She grabbed her camera and scooted down the road. Andrew stood up to watch her out of the back window. “Jessica must have found something interesting. She’s crossing the street to take some pictures.” *Maybe pigeons? What else would there be underneath an overpass?* “Now it looks like she’s counting paces to measure the length of the walls.”

“Huh. I guess we’ll get a report soon enough,” Buzz said.

Jessica bounded up the steps, grinning. “When you add one plus one and you start getting three...”

“You need to go back to the beginning or run off with your winnings,” Cara finished. “I have to admit that I never totally got what Mr. Chester meant with that particular proverb.”

“I assumed he meant that when something seemed off, you needed to determine whether you had made a mistake and needed to correct it, or someone else had made a mistake in your favor and you shouldn’t look a gift horse in the mouth,” Andrew volunteered. “For example, if you asked an attractive woman out on a date, even though you thought she’d turn you down, if she did say yes, you shouldn’t ask her why. Even if you were curious.” *Not that I’m likely to find myself in such a situation. But if it happens, I’ll have a proverb all ready.*

Buzz snorted. “At first, I just ignored those sayings that Pop kept repeating. But I’ll admit that now I find them popping out of my mouth all the time. Even when I’m not really sure what he was getting at.”

“So, did you find something that seemed odd about the bridge?” Cara asked. “Counted up the left wall and the right wall and got a total of three walls?”

“Nope. More literal than that. Here, take a look at these pictures,” Jessica said, handing the camera to Cara. “There’s a huge piece of graffiti on one of the walls and it says ‘1+1=3.’ Seeing that made me think that it would be cool to do a mural that illustrated some of Mr. Chester’s favorite sayings.”

“I like the idea of a mural, but I dunno if we have the time to do something big,” Buzz said. “I don’t think we could even buy a can of paint in this town, and I know y’all want to get to Powell in time for Matt and Richard’s rehearsal dinner.”

Andrew tapped his fingers together. He didn’t want to object to Jessica’s idea, but the idea of vandalizing a public surface made him nervous. *We’re grown adults. It would be ridiculous to get hauled into jail for spray painting under a bridge.*

“I do have the cans of spray paint left over from painting Mathilda’s polka dots,” Jessica said. “Though you’re right, that wouldn’t be enough for anything very big.”

“Could we come up with something easy? Like maybe we’d just write some of his personal proverbs, instead of illustrating them?” Cara suggested.

Buzz nodded. “Definitely got to include ‘Never eat anything bigger than your head’ and ‘Don’t spin all your wheels in the same direction.’”

“I always liked ‘Your cat doesn’t think you’re any smarter in the morning’” Jessica said.

“How about ‘Go fishing when the water’s low, but make sure you’re not fishing in a swimming pool,’” Cara said.

“But do you think your father had any strong feeling against graffiti?” Andrew asked. “I mean, it’s hard for me to imagine a teacher writing on the bathroom walls or defacing public property.”

“Ha! Actually, he told me that they used to have a running contest in the teachers’ bathrooms. They’d all try to come up with wittier things to out do each other. I don’t remember any of the actual things he wrote, but I do remember that Pop would sometimes tell us about new graffiti if it cracked him up.”

Buzz started up the bus and drove slowly around the block. “Cara, I’m going to drop you off right on the spot. Maybe Jess too, so she can have a little time to think about how to write stuff artistically. Andrew, if you don’t mind a bit of a walk, you can come with me to help remember where we parked.”

After they’d dropped off the women, Buzz cleared his throat. “I’m guessing you’re not thrilled with the graffiti plan. It’s okay if you want to skip this. Driving backwards when you didn’t think you could do it, that was important. But spray-painting? Nah.”

“I really don’t want to be a stick-in-the-mud. But you’re right, the whole idea makes me nervous.”

“Well, sometimes it’s not a terrible thing if there’s another person around who won’t get picked up and who can bail you out of jail, if it comes to that,” Buzz said with a laugh. “Or you could be the lookout while we do the spraying.”

“Thanks, Buzz. It’s sometimes hard for me to know when I should do something I don’t want to do, because it’ll end up being a good experience, and when it’ll just make me stressed out for no particular gain.” *And I certainly don’t want any more excitement after the close call this morning. I wonder how long it took Jess to be willing to drive again after hitting that boy.*

Buzz parked Mathilda at the end of a small cul-de-sac. The polka-dotted bus was out of place among the neatly clipped lawns and small, sensible cars. A few of the lawns had small signs promoting candidates for mayor. They dodged spray from a lawn sprinkler as they made their way back to the overpass.

“I think we should post a lookout,” Buzz suggested. “Not that we won’t look awfully suspicious if someone catches us loitering in an area with freshly painted proverbs. But under suspicion is better than getting caught in the act.”

“I’m happy to be the lookout. I could never really get lettering to come out straight on posters, so I’d probably just get to the end of the wall and have to squeeze the last few words in,” Andrew said. *Not that I’ve hand-lettered very many posters since running for class president back in high school. But I doubt that I’ve gotten any more skilled at the task since those days.*

Andrew walked down the road so he could see better around a curve. They’d only been passed by one car while they walked from the

cul-de-sac, so he hoped that the likelihood of a patrol car cruising by was low. Jessica pointed her toe and started sketching a plan in the dirt.

“I’ll do the long saying about one plus one in the center, right under the existing graffiti equation,” she said. “Let’s have the other proverbs written at an angle, as if they were all emanating out of a central point near the ground.”

Buzz and Jessica started spray painting with two cans. “Funny how this teal color has really grown on me,” Buzz said.

“Can you make the letters any thicker?” Cara asked. “It would be nice if they were all readable from a moving car.”

“Do you want to write one, Cara? We’ve got another can of paint,” Buzz offered.

“Ooh, sure. I’m going to do the cat one over here.”

The work went quickly and soon the wall was covered in a collection of Mr. Chester’s idiosyncratic sayings. As they were admiring their handiwork and Jessica was taking pictures, Andrew called out. “Heads up! Company on the way.”

A policewoman on a motorcycle pulled up next to them. “Are you folks okay? Did your car break down somewhere?”

“No, we’re fine,” Cara said. “Well, except that I got knocked over by a car this morning. But thank you for asking.”

The policewoman looked at the wall, glanced over at the cans of spray paint on the ground, and noted that their fingers had quite a bit of teal and purple paint. She stood for a moment and read all the proverbs.

“Never eat anything bigger than your head, eh? That’s some interesting advice.”

“They reminded us a lot of my late father, so we had to stop for a closer look,” Buzz said.

“Actually, would you be able to do us a huge favor? Could you take a picture of us together by the wall?” Jessica asked. “His father was one of our favorite teachers from high school, and we’re on our way to the class reunion.”

The officer smiled at them. “Funny how these sorts of things pop up on the walls occasionally.” She raised an eyebrow. “I can see how you’d want a closer look. Sure, give me your camera.”

Jessica turned on the camera and made sure it was no longer in picture review mode before handing it over. She was sure that the police officer knew exactly who had been painting the wall, but it seemed that as long as they maintained plausible deniability, they weren’t going to feel the wrath of the law. After a few pictures, they thanked the policewoman profusely.

“And if you want to do me a favor, why don’t you take those empty spray paint cans with you and dispose of them properly,” she said. “Roadside litter makes a place look sort of run-down, don’t you think?”

Carrying the paint cans, they headed back to the bus slowly, since Cara hadn’t had much practice with the crutches. Andrew caught up with them after a few blocks.

“Did I see you convince a policewoman to help you take pictures next to the graffiti?”

The others all laughed. “Oh, she knew it was us, but she was really nice about it,” Cara said. “As far as I’m concerned, Jeochester is a lovely little town.”

Twenty Years Later

Buzz dropped Cara and Jessica off at their hotel before taking Andrew and Proof to his parents' house. "You have a good time with all your parties, and I'll pick you up at the crack of dawn on Monday. Since we're not making a bunch of stops on the way back, we should be back in Boston by midnight. And I appreciate you rabbit sitting for the weekend, 'cause Mom's allergies haven't gotten any better lately."

Andrew shook Buzz's hand vigorously. "You've been terrific and I appreciate all your help." He paused and smiled slightly. "Any parting tips you'd like to bestow? Proverbs I should keep in mind during your absence?"

"Wear gloves when you spray paint?" Buzz offered. "And I think you can really count on Cara and Jess if you need backup. They're good people."

"Backup?"

"Oh, you know how things can get at a wedding or reunion."

“Buzz, what do you mean? I’ve never been to a reunion and I haven’t been to a wedding since I was about ten years old,” Andrew said anxiously.

“Oh hey, I didn’t mean to get you all jumpy. I was just mouthing off a little. Look, what I meant was, if you’re not used to so much attention, it can be intense when you get swarmed at that kind of get-together.” Buzz nudged him in the ribs. “Especially if what Cara and Jessica said about all those girls in high school having their eyes on you was true.”

Andrew smiled in relief. “Ah, well, I’m sure that if for some reason, women come out of the woodwork to assault me with their attentions, I shall survive the onslaught.”



After a long afternoon of his parents’ pointed questions about his job prospects and their unsolicited advice about alternative career fields with more long-term potential, Andrew borrowed their car and left an hour early for the rehearsal dinner. He drove around Powell, noting that the old Friendly’s had turned into a Mediterranean restaurant. Other than that, there weren’t any obvious changes since his visit last Christmas. Not wanting to show up at the women’s hotel too early, Andrew stopped at a shopping plaza and walked around aimlessly.

A florist’s display caught his eye. Driven by a sudden need to demonstrate his appreciation for the way they’d let him into their circle, he bought a large bouquet for Cara and Jessica. After making the

purchase, he worried that flowers might be inappropriately romantic, so he also picked up a bag of dried cranberries and some yogurt covered peanuts.

When he walked into the lobby of the hotel with the flowers and snacks, he found Cara waiting. She was wearing a red sundress and had her foot propped up on an ottoman. "I'm so glad Jess agreed we could stay at a decent hotel," she said. "The Motel 2 was hilarious, but it's been a long day and I needed a long shower and a good nap."

Andrew put his presents down on the coffee table. "How are you holding up? You would certainly be justified in feeling as if you'd been run over by a truck."

Cara grinned. "Yeah. Well, it's not exactly what I would plan for a vacation, but the rest of this trip has been great, so I won't complain." She looked at the flowers. "Oh, are you bringing those to the barbeque? It's going to be at Richard's father's place, and I forgot to pick anything up."

"These are for you and Jessica," he said. "But we can stop by a store for some wine on the way to the dinner."

"Thanks! The roses and daisies are beautiful," she said. "I like the combination of formal and casual. Would you mind running them up to the room? Jess is still up there and I'm trying to stay off the ankle."

Andrew went up to the room and then hesitated. He didn't want to knock and interrupt her if Jessica was still getting dressed. He considered just lurking outside the door until she stepped out and then pretending he'd just arrived. While he was debating whether that ploy would be too obvious, the door opened.

“Andrew! Hey, how were your parents?” she asked. “Anything new?”

“Nothing I haven’t heard before,” he said. “They’ve decided that genomics and informatics are the new hot fields that I should investigate. Although they still like the traditional MBA option as well.”

“I think my parents have totally given up on doing any career advising,” she said. “Oh, those are pretty. Daisies always make me think of sunshine.”

“I just wanted to bring you and Cara a little something.”

Jessica took the flowers and brushed her cheeks on the petals. “Mmm, thank you.” She looked at the snack foods and laughed. “You’ve kept up the red and white theme, I see. Brilliant.” She walked back into the room. “Would you put everything on the table? We should probably get going soon.”

He held out his arm. “Onward, then?”



When they arrived at the party, they saw a large white tent on an expansive lawn. Lanterns had been hung along the path and there were rose petals scattered on the grass. “Whoa. Tonight’s just the rehearsal dinner, isn’t it?” Jessica asked. “This is fancy enough to be the wedding.”

“I guess Richard’s family must be pretty well-off. This place looks even more impressive than Susanna and Julius’s house,” Cara replied.

A white-jacketed waiter appeared with a tray of miniature hamburgers. After serving them, he told them that most of the guests were gathered in the tent, but that they should feel welcome to walk anywhere around the property. He accepted the wine they'd brought and assured them that Colonel Johnson appreciated their kindness.

"I don't think this is the kind of barbeque where someone's Dad uses too much lighter fluid and burns off his eyebrows," Jessica said.

Inside the tent, they looked around for people that they recognized. "I don't see Matt anywhere," Andrew said. "But that looks like Melanie and Terry."

Jessica waved. "And I see Laura and David. Oh, and Jeanna's there too."

People were standing in small groups, juggling bottles of beer and plates of food. There were some chairs around the back of the tent, next to a chocolate fountain. Another waiter came by with tiny sausages in little hotdog buns, and a third waiter appeared with several white folding chairs. "Ma'am, Sir, would you like to sit down?"

"Oh, super. Let's go over near the other chairs," Cara said. They made it over to the seating area before the soft classical music playing in the background was interrupted.

A gray-haired man with a moustache stood on one side of the tent holding a microphone. "Thank you all for joining us tonight. I'm Richard Johnson, the older one of course. I know that many of you have traveled from around the country to celebrate with Matt and Rick. I hope you all enjoy the party. For those of you from Rick's side of the friends and family, I'm real glad to be seeing you again. And, for you folks from

Matt's side, I'm looking forward to getting to know you. Now, without any more jawing from me, here are the two men you've been waiting for."

Jessica whispered to Cara, "Rick looks totally like his dad! And look at Matt, he's gone all clean-cut!"

"So about five years ago, I was in a farmer's market in San Francisco when I saw this attractive fellow shopping for produce," Rick said. "I couldn't figure out a good way to strike up a conversation, but when he bumped into the table and set off an avalanche of oranges, I jumped at the chance to help him chase down all the fruit. And when the vendor insisted that he should buy all the oranges that had been rolling around on the ground, I offered to lend him my juicing machine."

"Imagine our surprise when we got to talking over some fresh orange juice and found out that we'd actually been classmates back at Powell High School. Since my family had only moved to town towards the end of our senior year, we'd never met at school. But fifteen years later and 2000 miles away, there we were."

Matt continued the story. "I'd noticed this cute guy at the farmer's market, but when I made the ultra-smooth move of knocking over a pile of oranges, I thought I'd blown any chance of looking cool enough to get his phone number. But it must have been my lucky day, because not only did he have a great use for a huge box of oranges, but eventually, he agreed to be my husband."

"We're thrilled that all of you will be with us for the wedding on Sunday. And for our old classmates, we hope that everyone has a blast at the 20th class reunion tomorrow night!"

The two men hugged Colonel Johnson. “And we want to thank my Dad, who has just about single-handedly organized this party plus helped with all the wedding logistics, and who’s been the best parent and friend that any kid could ask for,” Rick said.

“Well, I’ve been lucky. I’m not losing a son, I’m getting another son,” Richard Sr. said.

They cued the music to start playing again, and the three men starting circulating through the room and greeting well-wishers. “You know, now that they mentioned it, I think maybe I do remember seeing Rick in the cafeteria or something,” Cara said. “I always forget how many people were in our class who I didn’t even know.”

“Mmm. Possibly even some of the other guests in this room,” Andrew speculated.

“But better late than never,” Jessica said. “We should definitely try to meet Rick’s friends from school, either here or at the reunion. I’d expect to already know any of Matt’s friends, since we hung out so much back then.”

“Go ahead and mingle, Jess. I’m going to mostly stay off my feet, but you two don’t have to sit in this spot all night,” Cara said. She waved off their protests and convinced Jessica and Andrew to go work the room.

Two hours later, Andrew plunked himself into the chair next to Cara. “Jessica is having a ball meeting all the relatives and friends of the family. She’s completely charmed Colonel Johnson,” he said. “But I’m running out of steam.”

“I got to tell David and Laura about Susanna and Julius’s new twins,” Cara said. “They’ve got a son who’s almost twelve and another one who’s just turning two.”

Andrew yawned. “Melanie and Terry seem to be doing fine. He didn’t say too much, but sometimes she talks enough for two.”

“Some things never change,” Cara said.

“I wish I knew a good way to determine which things can’t be changed,” Andrew remarked, looking at the crowd.

“What would you want to change first?” Cara asked.

With a sigh, Andrew shrugged. “I hate thinking that if I suddenly died in my apartment, no one would notice for a week or two until my parents became irritated that I didn’t return their regular phone call.”

Cara put her hand on his knee. “I can’t say for sure that you’ll stop thinking that it’s true, but I do know you could change things so that it’s not true anymore. I mean, you could find a cool roommate, get a job with coworkers and get to know them, do regular volunteer work so that there are other people always depending on you, start dating someone, get a daily exercise buddy...you’ve got a ton of options.”

“It’s not that I haven’t tried,” he said.

She tipped her head and pursed her lips. “Are you sure this isn’t one of those things where you think it will be worse if you really put some effort into it, in case things don’t work out? Look, we all had a great time on this road trip, and you’re a friend now. And as Jess probably warned you, that means I’m going to be giving you more advice for your own good than you probably want to hear.”

Andrew watched Jessica talking to another group of strangers. "Please don't mention this to Jessica, but I wouldn't object if you wanted to offer some advice about how I might attract her attention."

Cara clapped her hands. "That's a great idea! Well, you're already her date for the wedding, aren't you?"

"But I'm sure she thinks that's a bit of a joke."

"If you want to really talk to her, just do it. Stop acting like there's all this stuff you don't want her to know. That just makes people think you don't want to be better friends with them."

They were interrupted when Jessica bounced up and handed Cara half a bottle of hard lemonade. "Do you want to finish this? I've got to stop drinking so many calories."

Cara took the bottle with a smile. "Thanks for sharing. So who all did you meet tonight?"

"Well, Rick, most importantly. He's smart, funny, and just perfect for Matt. And his father is great too." Jessica laughed. "He made a joke about being sorry that I already had an escort for the wedding, and he managed to be completely courtly and amusing, instead of the creepy old guy hitting on his son's classmates. The rest of their relatives, well, I'm not sure I'm going to remember everyone's name for when I see them at the wedding on Sunday."

"You're better with remembering names and faces than anyone else I know," Cara said. "I'm jealous."

“It’s a survival skill when you’re depending on tips,” Jessica replied with a groan. “I am so not looking forward to going back home and job-hunting.”

“I agree,” Andrew said. “But for this weekend, we’ll have the reunion and then the wedding.”

“I’m going to have to catch up with Melanie more at the reunion,” Jessica said. “But I think I’m tuckered out for tonight.” She stood up. “Ready to go?”

Andrew helped Cara up from the chair. “Ladies, your carriage awaits. We’ll go now, before it turns back into a pumpkin.”

As they made their way back to the car, Jessica started humming ‘Forever Young.’ “When I told Melanie that I didn’t remember us having a theme or a particular song at the prom, she whipped out her iPod and played it for me. She told me that she and Terry also used it for the first dance at their wedding.” Jessica looked at Cara with a slight smile. “I’m just warning you, no making fun of the song or anything else reunion related in front of Melanie. She’s being all bridezilla about it. Maybe to make up for Matt and Rick not being high-strung enough about their wedding.”

“Their invitations were beautiful and distinctive,” Andrew recalled.

“Matt told me that his parents produced them using some of Rick’s ideas,” Jessica said. “His folks have a printmaking studio and do a fair amount of commercial work plus their own art.”

“I bet they’ll like your sculpture,” Cara said.

“I hope so, but it’s kind of hard to predict. Just because someone’s an artist doesn’t mean they’ll like my stuff.”

Andrew pulled up at their hotel and walked them to the door. “Well, I’m looking forward to seeing this sculpture of yours. After driving cross-country with it all bundled up, it will be exciting to see it unfold.”



“Oh no, we didn’t really look that funny, did we?” Jessica asked the others. They walked into the function hall and were confronted with a series of large posters with pages from their old yearbook class photos. “The glasses. That hair!”

A man came up to them as they were picking up their name tags. “I’d be happy to have 80’s hair, if only I had hair!”

“Tony! No more earrings?” Cara asked. “You’d gotten up to about five per ear by the time we graduated.”

He laughed. “When I went into the seminary, I had to lose the piercings. The dress code’s relaxed a lot, but eyebrow rings are still completely unthinkable.”

“Wow, so you’re a priest now?” Jessica asked.

“Yep. I was one of the few coming in from a public school, but I’ll tell you, my Latin was up to snuff and I was ahead of most of the guys in math. But I was out of my league with some of the theology classes at first.”

Most of the other people were also walking around the room slowly, looking at the pictures posted on the walls. Everyone wore a name tag, and the tags for members of the class were printed with their class photo.

“That must be an interesting job,” Cara said. “Do you live around here still?”

Tony shook his head. “I’m out in Michigan these days.”

“Cara, hello! What happened to your foot?”

“Hi Jeanna. Oh, no big deal, it’s just a sprain. I got bumped by a car yesterday while running. What’s new with you?”

Melanie bustled over carrying a pile of programs. “Cara, would you like to sit down? We’ll be starting the program pretty soon. We’re not doing seating assignment or anything, but Terry and I staked out Table 3, if you want to sit with us.” She continued across the room, smiling and nodding at everyone.

Jeanna tapped another woman on the shoulder. “We’re going to sit down now, do you and David want to come along?”

Andrew hung back slightly as several people crowded around Cara, chattering rapidly as they slowly walked to a table. Jessica nudged him. “I would never have guessed that Tony would be a priest when he grew up. He poured glue on my head when we were in kindergarten.”

“Hmm. Not exactly the same as sprinkling holy water. I’ll always remember him as the kid who stuck a compass through his own ear,” Andrew said with a shudder. They followed Cara and the others over to a table. “So, do you have a nefarious plan to induce a confession from the

mastermind of the plague of crickets?” he asked, in a conspiratorial whisper.

Jessica stopped walking and whispered back. “I’d love to shake a confession out of the guilty party, but I haven’t been able to come up with any ideas for how to do it. If someone’s kept a secret for twenty years, they’re probably good at keeping their lips sealed.”

“Ah, but maybe that’s the key! What if we assume that they must have confided in at least one other member of the class, if not more? It might be easier to get a confidant to slip up,” Andrew said.

Jessica grabbed his shoulder. “That’s brilliant. If I can figure out who the logical confidant or confidants are, I might be able to work on them.” She looked around the room. “Well, for now, let’s just sit down.”

Andrew sat next to Terry. “So Melanie was saying that the two of you visited Greece this summer. How was it?”

“Yeah, we went with Laura and David. You know David’s family is Greek, and he still has some relatives over there who wanted to meet their kids. We spent most of our time near Athens in a small coastal village.”

“Greece is definitely on my list of places to go,” Andrew said. “I really haven’t traveled much, though.”

The lights dipped twice and Melanie stood at the front of the room. “Hi everyone! It’s so nice to see you all back in Powell. To get things started, we’ve got a montage of old and new photos that you people have contributed. Laura Kulanski nee Winters did such a great job putting together this slideshow. So, here it is, a video about “The More Things Change.””

Black and white pictures from the yearbook, interspersed with personal snapshots, quickly got the room laughing and talking. The soundtrack started with ‘Turn! Turn! Turn! (To Everything There Is A Season)’ and moved into ‘Time Stand Still.’ There were pictures from the school play, football games, and graduation all mixed with family Christmas photos, people and their pets, weddings, and headlines from old issues of the school paper. As ‘Time After Time’ wound down the show, there were a handful of In Memoriam pictures. There were some that almost everyone knew about: the boy who’d shot himself junior year, the teenaged couple who had died when their car flipped over, a classmate who’d joined the Army and died in a training accident. Then there were the more recent ones that surprised old friends who hadn’t kept in touch: a woman who’d died of cancer, a man who’d collapsed during a marathon, and two of their former teachers, including Mr. Chester. The show ended with a flurry of graduation pictures, including one of Andrew delivering the valedictorian speech. The audience applauded wildly and Laura looked pleased.

“Laura, that was so good. How did you get so many pictures together?” Jessica asked.

“Thanks! I’ve been bugging people on Facebook since Christmas. I think I ended up getting almost two hundred pictures. I was even messaging people’s parents to round up more color pictures from our high school days.”

“You looked so serious in that last picture,” Jessica told Andrew. “Were you really nervous doing the speech?”

“I think that was the most alarming experience I’d ever had, at the time,” Andrew admitted. “Looking back, I have to think that the high school valedictorian speech is a bit of a silly tradition. After all, hardly any high schooler has much of interest to really say, and it just ends up boring the audience.”

Cara laughed. “Well, they pick more experienced and famous people to speak at college graduations, but those are usually pretty boring too. I suppose that for a high school graduation, one big advantage of having the valedictorian speak is that it doesn’t cost anything.”

“And you weren’t completely boring,” Terry said. “As a matter of fact, I remember you talking about it being our mission for the future to turn good ideas into a better reality.”

“I’m flattered, Terry. I myself probably only remember that speech because the sheer terror of public speaking burned it into my permanent memory.”

Jessica read the program. “Looks like most of the speeches tonight are after dinner. There’s just the slideshow and class reunion gift before.”

Melanie went up to the front of the room again. “Now, as you probably remember from our 10th class reunion, we’ll be doing some fundraising for a great cause here tonight. We canvassed you all to vote on a good cause to support, and I’m happy to announce that the class has selected the Jon Chester Field Trip and Enrichment Activity Fund for our group donation. Mr. Chester was famous for taking his students to so many interesting places where we got to see how math could be used in the real world. I’m sure many of you remember going rollerskating to

calculate wheel revolutions, visiting the cemetery right before Halloween to do death demographics, or following people around in the grocery store to estimate rates of milk and cheese consumption. But what you might not know is that there were always kids in the class whose families couldn't afford the extra transportation fees to go on these trips, and that teachers like Mr. Chester were always reaching into their own pockets to help. So, in memory of a great teacher, let's help make it so that kids don't have to worry about being able to pay for field trips. There's a big fishbowl up by the registration table, and I hope that each of you will stop by at some point tonight and contribute at whatever level you're able to. And even if you can't afford to make a donation, please stop by and sign the card we'll be sending to his family."

"Buzz will be glad to hear about the class reunion gift," Cara said. "I don't know if you remember Mr. Chester's stepson. He was a few years younger than us."

Jeanna shook her head. "I don't. How about you, Melanie? Did you talk to the family about the gift?"

"No, there wasn't really anything we needed to tell them yet. Of course, after tonight, we'll send the card and the collected donations, and I imagine someone in the family will probably send us note," she said.

"It's a little strange realizing that our teachers had families and lives outside of school," Terry said, shaking his head. "I feel like we were all so self-absorbed back then."

"Oh I don't know, even back then, you and Andrew were really nice guys," Melanie said, smiling at her husband.

After the bread and salad was served, there was break for more mingling. Jessica and Jeanna went off to visit other tables while a steady stream of classmates came by to talk with Cara and Terry. Andrew listened in, occasionally offering a comment and smiling at Cara's jokes.

"Excuse me, Andrew, but would you mind coming out to my car and helping me with a box? We've got some Powell High School key chains that I promised the PTA we'd try to sell tonight," Melanie said. "Poor Terry already had to climb up and down a ladder all afternoon putting up decorations, so I don't want to interrupt his chat now."

Andrew looked up at her. "My pleasure to be able to lend a hand. You've done a marvelous job putting together this event." He followed her out to the parking lot in back of the building.

"You know," she said, with a laugh, "Terry and I have been married fifteen years now."

"Congratulations. You both look very well."

"Some people might get bored of each other, after so long," she said, looking at him and shaking her hair away from her face. "But luckily, we're both very open-minded."

"Mmm."

"Do you every have any regrets about high school, Andrew?"

"I can't really think of anything at the moment, but I'm sure there must be a number of things that I might do differently."

They were standing next to a small, red car. Melanie leaned on the car but made no move to get anything out of the trunk. "I know there are some things I'd know better than to try, but there are other

After dinner, the DJ played a mix of 80's songs with an occasional big band swing number thrown in. About half the crowd danced occasionally, but so many people sat out that Cara was never by herself at the table. Jessica danced with Andrew a few times and then coerced Terry into getting up for a song.

"I'm so impressed with how Melanie organized everything for this party," she said. "You two must have had the most put-together wedding ever."

"Did you ever meet her mother?" Terry asked. "I'm pretty sure it runs in the family."

"I remember her mother always handled signing up parents for car pools to after school activities when we were kids." Jessica smiled. "And all of us liked when it was Melanie's turn to bring in snacks for preschool."

"I get kind of spoiled not having to plan vacations and stuff."

"That must be nice," she said. "Oh hey, I haven't signed the card for Mr. Chester's memorial fund yet. I guess since you were on the organizing committee, you probably did all that before this party got started."

"Yeah, we figured that if there were some checks in the fishbowl and some signatures already on the card, people wouldn't feel funny about being the first."

"Gosh, did Melanie feel funny about the class picking this charity?" Jessica asked. "You know, because of that stuff with her and Mr. Chester?"

“What?”

“I mean, I always thought she felt guilty about that prank, after seeing how he reacted.”

“Oh, I didn’t know she’d told you about it,” Terry said. “But yeah, I think she did feel bad later.” He shook his head. “At the time, she was just so mad that he gave her a ‘D’ in the class after he caught her copying homework. I mean, I wasn’t too thrilled about it either. I got into just as much trouble because I’d let her copy off me.”

“But you weren’t in on the cricket caper.”

Terry laughed. “Nope. I wasn’t talking to her for a month or two, much less helping with any more of her ideas. Which is why we didn’t go to prom together. But obviously, I did get over it eventually.”

“Well, I’m glad it didn’t mess things up between the two of you.”

He nodded. “We had our fifteenth anniversary already. It’ll be great to see Matt and Rick getting married tomorrow.”

Jessica smiled. “Yep, it gives me hope that I’m not too old to meet someone myself!”



Cara had been worried about not being able to help Jessica set up the sculpture, since she couldn’t walk with crutches and tug on the inflating material at the same time. But luckily, Andrew found an extra waiter who was willing to assist. Matt’s parents had been able to help Jessica get a last-minute large sculpture display permit, and Colonel

Johnson had gotten the country club to agree. The thirty foot high tower slowly inflated, with gargoyles and spiral twists taking shape. Once it had completely unfurled, Jessica and Andrew sat down next to Cara. They had left plenty of time to get the sculpture set up before the rest of the guests arrived.

“So guess what I managed to do last night at the reunion,” Jessica said.

Andrew chuckled. “You managed to save me from a terribly awkward situation.”

“Huh?”

“A certain woman had cornered me and I was nearly forced to kiss her, but you phoned in the nick of time.”

“Told you,” Cara said. “There were so many girls who had a thing for you in high school, I just knew someone would try to make a move at the reunion.”

“I could hardly believe it,” he said.

“Good job, Jess. And since you’re his date at this wedding, you can help him hold off any other women looking to take advantage.”

Jessica put her hands on her hips. “Well, in addition to inadvertently rescuing Andrew, I absolutely confirmed my suspicions about who set the crickets loose in school.”

“No way! Who was it?” Cara demanded. “How did you know?”

“Originally, I was just suspicious because I knew Melanie’s brother had pet lizards, and he had to order bugs for feeding them. And I knew she’d tried to transfer to a different math class because she thought

Mr. Chester wasn't fair enough," Jessica explained. "But those weren't really good reasons to actually accuse her. A couple of times during that week it took to get all the bugs out of the school, I thought I saw her smirking when she thought no one was looking."

"I would never have guessed that Melanie would do something involving thousands of insects. There were probably a number of students who enjoyed the minor chaos more than she did, though they were not the perpetrators," Andrew said.

"Exactly, so I just couldn't justify saying anything to the teachers. But anyhow, last night I talked to someone who'd heard the story from Melanie herself. So now I'm sure." Jessica shrugged. "I mean, it doesn't really matter at this point, but I always wanted to know what really happened."

"But why would she do something like that? I knew she didn't like Mr. Chester's class, but hating algebra doesn't usually make the senior class president unleash an infestation," Cara asked. "I mean, everyone had some class or the other that they couldn't wait to get out of."

Andrew remembered his run-in last night. "Jessica, now that you've told us, I can see how it all fits. Melanie always was a bit intense and I was often surprised by her reactions. But surely you don't intend to confront her about something that happened twenty years ago."

Cara nodded. "You don't even have to ever let on to her that you found out. Though we should tell Buzz. I think he'd want to hear the whole story."

“Yeah, I’ll tell him about it. And I wanted to tell you two, of course. It’s like the Fellowship of the Rings. Once you go on a road-trip with people, you’re bonded for life,” Jessica said.

“It’s nice that we didn’t have to get attacked by orcs along the way,” Cara said.

“Well, we do still have to drive back,” Andrew pointed out. “But if we’re careful not to knock anything over, maybe we can sneak through upstate New York without arousing any monsters.”

The other guests began to arrive. Nearly everyone was talking about the sculpture, which was clearly visible from the area where chairs had been set up for the ceremony. Several groomsmen in tuxedos escorted people to their seats as a string quartet played.

“Wasn’t it nice of Matt’s parents to be so helpful with the sculpture? When I heard that they were doing all the flowers and decorations, I wasn’t sure they’d think that a tower of gargoyles was going to fit in with the theme,” Jessica said.

Cara looked around at the trailing orange nasturtiums draped over the folding chairs, the ivy covered polar bear topiary, and the blue glass globes of various sizes which hung from glitter-encrusted coat racks. “I think your sculpture fits in really well.”

“Are you familiar with his parents’ art?” Andrew asked.

Jessica shrugged. “I saw some of their work around their house when we were in school, and I went to their big show in Rochester a few years after graduation. And since most of what they do are printmaking pieces, they have great pictures on their website.”

“It’s really hard trying to get a good picture of something like this sculpture,” Cara added. “Oh look, the minister’s standing up front. They must be ready to start.”

The string quartet paused, and then started playing again with amplification. The ushers shooed everyone into their seats and an expectant silence fell over the crowd. Instead of one central aisle, there were two aisles and the seats were set up in three sections. Two flower boys walked down the aisles, carrying large bundles of sunflowers that were nearly as tall as they were. Then a procession of attendants followed. The quartet’s music swelled dramatically and then Matt and Rick appeared. They walked down the aisles and met each other at the front, turning to face their friends and relatives in the audience.

Although the décor was unusual, the ceremony itself was traditional, if brief. The audience giggled a bit when Matt, who had been concentrating on listening intently to the minister, missed his cue to say ‘I do’ until his best man gave him a nudge in the ribs. But soon they were kissing while the audience cheered.

“Matt told me last night that they actually got legally married in Vermont earlier this year, but Rick’s father really wanted to have the ceremonial wedding back here in Powell,” Jessica said. “I can see his point, though. It must be cool to have so many of your friends and relatives help celebrate.”

“Did you have a wedding when you were married?” Andrew asked.

Jessica snorted. “No, it was a war of escalating dares during a party in Rhode Island.”

“I’ve always been curious, did you win?” Cara asked. “The daring contest, I mean.”

“Actually, I didn’t, which pretty much tells you all you need to know about that party. That was back when I was younger and more reckless, of course.”

“Mmm. Whereas I suspect that I may be getting more reckless in my middle age,” Andrew said. “Why, I nearly participated in painting graffiti just this week.”

They got up with the rest of the guests and were slowly carried along into another area on the country club grounds which was differently and lavishly decorated. Here it seemed that Richard Johnson the elder had directed the color scheme, which was similar to the gold and white from the rehearsal dinner.

Jessica waved. “Colonel Johnson! Congratulations. I’d like to introduce you to my friends, Cara Chang and Andrew Langer. They were also in Matt and Rick’s graduating class at Powell High.”

“So nice to meet you. I was telling Jessica at the barbeque that I’ve so enjoyed meeting Matt’s friends from Powell. Rick and I have lived in many places, but Powell has been my favorite.”

“It’s nice to be back,” Cara said. “Since my parents moved, I don’t make it to Ohio as often as I used to.”

“Do you have a chance to visit Rick in California once in a while?” Andrew asked.

“Nothing like flying out to a warm sunny place when February starts to feel too long,” he said. “And as much as I like Powell, if there

were to be a grandchild or two in San Francisco, I could be tempted to relocate for good.”

There was starting to be a crowd of guests waiting to speak to Colonel Johnson, so the travelers wrapped up their conversation and moved along. Waiters circulated with trays of champagne, mozzarella and tomato skewers, and mini-quiche.

“Cara! Sorry we didn’t get to chat much at the reunion,” Matt said, hugging her carefully, crutches and all. “Jessica told us a little about the road trip, though. Maybe next time you all could drive across the entire country and come visit us.”

“Well, I have to admit that Jess and Andrew had to convince me to do it, but I’ve had a great time,” she said.

“And other than driving around the country and escorting the lovely Miss Jessica to our wedding, what have you been up to lately, Andrew?” Matt asked.

“I’ve been job hunting. Just moved to Boston not too long ago to try my luck there,” Andrew said. “Not too much new. How have you been?”

“Rick and I are remodeling our condo, so that’s been pretty crazy. I’m still doing patent law,” Matt said.

“We’ve had a hole in our ceiling for months but I’m hoping that we can tackle it now that the wedding’s been accomplished. Honestly, I don’t know if I would have agreed to the big wedding idea if I’d had any idea of how time consuming all the arrangements would be. Even with my father doing way more than his fair share,” Rick said.

“At least you guys didn’t end up on the reunion committee,” Jessica said. “Terry said that Melanie and Laura have been going nuts all summer.”

“Was the date just a coincidence?” Andrew asked.

“We’d been aiming for this weekend because it’s close to the anniversary of our first date,” Rick said. “But when we heard about the reunion, we decided to go with the Sunday morning party instead of the Saturday night bash.”

“Speaking of Melanie, what is she doing with your sculpture?” Matt asked.

The others turned around to see where he was pointing. “Perhaps too much champagne?” Andrew said.

“Oh no, that’s not good,” Jessica said. “I’d better go tell her not to climb on it. I really don’t know what she’s thinking.” She hurried toward the sculpture, with Matt right behind her. As they got near, there was a very loud pop.

“Damn it, you air-head! You can’t climb up an inflatable tower wearing high heels,” Jessica shouted. The sculpture was deflating on top of them, and Melanie was shrieking from inside the middle of the mound.

The guests were spellbound by the tableau of the two women shouting and struggling under the pile of plastic, and most of them walked towards the hubbub. Only Andrew, who had ducked behind Rick to get out of Melanie’s line of sight, noticed that Colonel Johnson was waving his arms frantically. He dropped his glass and ran towards the older man who was staggering and clutching at his own throat.

Andrew pounded Colonel Johnson on the back, and then grabbed him around the waist with a quick jerk. A mozzarella ball flew out of his mouth and Colonel Johnson gasped for breath. Andrew collapsed to the ground, shocked that his intervention had worked.

Rick ran over in alarm. “Dad! What’s wrong? It’s not a heart attack, is it?” His father sat down on the grass and shook his head weakly before speaking.

“It’s Andrew, isn’t it?” he said. “Well, young man, I appreciate your quick action. I haven’t had that kind of a scare in years.” He cleared his throat. “Thank the Lord that I’m not being sent to heaven by a chunk of cheese.”

“I, err, didn’t actually think that was going to work,” Andrew said. “But I’m glad it did.

“Andrew! You were great,” Cara said. “I wasn’t sure what was going on when you just ran off like that, but it’s a good thing someone knew what to do.”

“What’s all this?” Matt asked. He was dragging Jessica along by the wrist. Her hair was disheveled and she had scratches on her arms.

Colonel Johnson stood quickly and gave Andrew a hand getting up. “That loud pop caught me just as I was taking a bite, and I inhaled my hors d’oeuvre. Good thing Andrew knew the Heimlich maneuver.”

Jessica hugged Colonel Johnson and then Andrew. “Wow, I remember Mr. Chester talking about what to do if someone was choking, that time that someone was trying to swallow a crumpled-up ball of paper. But that was all sort of theoretical.”

Andrew nodded. “Luckily, once in a while, something in the real world actually works as described. I was rather surprised myself.” He kept his arm around Jessica. “My apologies. I must have been remiss in my escort duties. It looks like you got into a tussle.”

“You should see the other woman,” Matt said. “But yeah, I had to break it up. Andrew, my dating tip to you is that you really don’t ever want to get this woman mad at you.”

“Jessica, perhaps when we return to Boston, you would be so kind as to allow me to take you out to dinner, to make up for not helping you defend your sculpture.”

She smiled. “Sometimes it’s better for these things to go out with a bang than a whimper. I didn’t think Matt and Rick could keep it around forever anyways. But, thanks to you, the bang didn’t take Colonel Johnson out with it.” She kissed Andrew on the cheek.

“Maybe it’s just as well that you’re an only child,” Colonel Johnson said. “One of these weddings is about as much as I can handle.”

Written in the Stars

That evening, Buzz called and suggested some late-night stargazing. “I’ve got the converted van we’ll be driving back to Boston, the Perseids are looking good this year, and I know a quiet spot by a lake. I was going to go out myself, but it’ll be better with company.”

“Wait, did you bring these air mattresses out of the Mathilda for stargazing?” Jessica asked, once they were parked by the shore.

Buzz grinned. “Tell you the truth, I first bought one of these easy-inflate mattresses for going stargazing years ago. Now August in Ohio is plenty warm, but if you go out to western Massachusetts in November or something, you do not want to be sitting on a thin blanket on the ground.”

“I’m glad you called. I wanted to tell you about something while we were all still in Powell,” Jessica said. They lay down and watched the sky over the lake. The chorus of frogs sounded loud in the quiet night.

“Go for it,” Buzz said. “Someone did call my Mom to tell her that your class raised a good chunk of money for Pop’s memorial field-trip fund.”

“I don’t know if you remember when I said that I thought I knew who set the crickets loose.”

“Yeah, but you didn’t want to say who, because you didn’t have any evidence.”

“Now I do, so I can tell you. It was Melanie Papadopoulos. Your father had caught her cheating on some homework, and gave her a bad grade. It was completely unreasonable on her part, but she was out for revenge,” Jessica said.

“The whole thing didn’t make a lot of sense,” Andrew said. “But at least we know.”

They watched as a bright streak passed through the sky. “I appreciate you tracking this down,” Buzz said. “All the cricket killing did bother my Pop, but I think what really upset him was that he had a suspicion about who did it. And he always felt that he couldn’t get over that suspicion, and having bad feelings about that one student bugged him. He was afraid that maybe he was wrong, and that he’d end up treating that student unfairly because of his suspicions.”

“Did he ever tell you which student he thought was the one?” Cara asked.

“He didn’t mention a name, but he said it was your class president.”

“So he did have it right,” Jessica said. “He wasn’t sure, but his instincts were right.”

They watched the stars for a while, searching for meteorites. “How was your visit with your family?” asked Andrew.

“Mom’s doing okay. She’s been getting into volunteering at the senior center. Leading nature walks or organizing shopping trips or putting together art slide shows. And my baby sister is planning to go to law school. She’s all fired up about being a public defender someday.”

Another meteorite flashed, and then another. “You know something funny,” Buzz said. “The more I think about getting married or getting a normal job, the less the whole responsibility thing bothers me. Pop really liked his job, and he liked having a family. Having those responsibilities, well, they meant something. They meant that what he did was important.”

“So you’re ready to take the plunge?” Cara asked.

“Yep. I’ve decided to ask Gloria to marry me.”

“Wonderful,” Andrew said.

“So long as she agrees, yeah,” Buzz said, with a laugh.

“I’m going to take the plunge too,” Jessica declared.

“Who are you marrying?” Buzz asked.

“No, not that. I’m going to get a grown-up job, something that’s not an hourly barely more than minimum wage gig.”

“That’s great!” Cara said. “I’m sure you’ll be great at whatever you do.”

Jessica kicked her foot. “Duh, I mean I’m going to be your assistant, so you have someone competent around and can start taking time off to write mysteries. I think those booth displays could use a little more zip. You know. Edgy is starting to be popular with the mainstream and you don’t want to get left behind.”

Cara sat up, relieved. “That’s so perfect! My problems are over!” Then she started to worry. “But Jess, are you going to mind working for me? And what about your habit of being a little late all the time?”

“Cara, in your daily life, do you feel like your assistant works for you? Because I strongly suspect that at least half the time, you feel like you work for your assistant. I’m cool with that,” she said. “And I’m not going to promise you that I’ll never be late. But, I was thinking. Maybe we could agree on a punctuality criticality rating for different events and occasions. Like, a meeting with a client is a PuCr 1, but a normal workday is a PuCr 3, and going to the beach is a 5.”

“I’d be willing to try your PuCr idea,” Cara said. “I was thinking about how it’s kind of pointless that I’m always worrying about being on time, even when it’s not that important.” She snorted. “I’m embarrassed to admit this, but last week I was starting to get stressed out while talking to a neighbor, because I’d been planning to start a load of laundry by 8, but I knew it was going to take at least ten minutes to shoot the breeze. Maybe I should have just said to myself, ‘Starting laundry is only a PuCr 5.’”

Andrew smiled. “Another great thing about working with Jess as your assistant is that you’ll already know what sorts of foods she likes. And if both of you need a last minute person to run around in a pill costume, well, I’ve accepted my fate and you’ll know where to find me.” He reached for Jessica’s hand and squeezed it. They kept holding hands as they watched more shooting stars.



The travelers were up early the next morning, leaving Powell while it was still bathed in the soft morning light. Andrew had Proof in his freshly tidied cage. The rabbit, however, was still half asleep.

“So Jess, I never heard what happened when you caught up to Melanie inside your sculpture,” Cara said. “What was she trying to do?”

“First of all, I have to say that I really hope she didn’t have that much champagne at her own wedding, because she’s not a very charming drunk,” said Jessica. “Anyhow, as I was running over to the tower, she’s trying to climb up the side because she wanted a picture where she’s posing the same way that one of the gargoyles is standing. At least, that’s what I have to assume, because when I get there, she’s shouting at Terry to take a picture of her.”

“Poor Terry,” Cara sympathized. “Or, was he pretty drunk too?”

“I didn’t really get a chance to inspect him, because before I got close enough to tell her to get off the sculpture, she’d popped it. The hole must have been good sized, because the thing went down fast. She ended up inside it, and I got stuck underneath all the plastic.”

“I guess plastic bags can get pretty heavy when you have enough of them melted together,” Buzz said. He was laughing hard, glad that Andrew was the one driving. “Remind me not to invite any crazy people to my wedding.”

“Then Melanie starts screaming that it was all a trap, and that I’d been trying to trap her all weekend. We both finally broke free of the sculpture, and she starts trying to kick me while accusing me of stealing secrets from her husband. And then I punched her.” Jessica looked at

Cara, who was in the back seat with her. “Now Cara, you know I’d never deck someone at work unless it was absolutely necessary, right?”

Buzz laughed even harder. “And what were the rest of you doing while Jess was getting into a fight? Doing a little ‘TPing? Egging someone’s house? Bashing mailboxes? Golly, Jess. You’re making me a little nostalgic for high school.”

“Andrew was busy saving Colonel Johnson from choking,” Cara said.

“Believe it or not, I remembered your father talking about the Heimlich maneuver in class the day that he also explained the quadratic formula,” Andrew said. “It seemed like the right thing to try. And now I can say that at least something I learned that day in class turned out to be useful in the real world.”

“Dang, that’s almost as weird as getting stuck inside a giant plastic bag. I can’t believe you remembered some random lecture Pop gave twenty years ago.”

“Actually, it was a rather dramatic day, because one of our classmates had just been choking on a big wad of paper he’d tried to swallow,” Andrew said.

“Wait, now that I think about it again, wasn’t that Terry?” Cara said. “He’d been passing notes with Melanie and didn’t want Mr. Chester to confiscate the paper.”

“You’re right!” Jessica exclaimed, laughing. “So really, Melanie almost killed Colonel Johnson by startling him into inhaling his food, but then she was also a tiny little bit responsible for Andrew knowing how to

save someone from choking. But I think Mr. Chester gets more of the credit, and of course Andrew.”

Buzz sighed. “Dunno if I’m going to have nearly so much fun at my reunion in a couple years.”

“I’d been rather dreading the experience,” Andrew said.

“I was a little nervous, too,” Jessica confessed.

Cara smiled and did not tell the others that she’d known all along that they’d been silly to worry so much about what their classmates would think. Then Jessica smiled and rolled her eyes, because she could hear Cara thinking ‘I told you so.’ Andrew just smiled because Jessica was smiling.



The journey home was uneventful. They made good time to Massachusetts and were just crossing the border from Connecticut when Gloria called to say that she was driving up to Boston to meet them. Buzz was excited that he’d be seeing her an hour or so earlier than expected. He was also looking forward to introducing her to the others, since he’d been telling her so much about their road-trip. They decided to rendezvous at Gloria’s favorite Chinese restaurant in Cambridge.

When Cara arrived, Jessica and Andrew were already there. “And meeting for dinner is only a PuCr 3!” Jessica said.

“I already emailed the HR person to let her know your address for sending the official offer,” Cara said. She cleared her throat. “And

you know, one of the nice perks we have at this company is that they'll do a 100 percent reimbursement for tuition to get a degree. Not that you'd have to do that, but..."

"Maybe after I get used to the job for a while," Jessica said. "Cara, I really do appreciate what you're doing. I know you're kind of going out on a limb to hire someone without the normal qualifications and everything. And then the whole extra risk of working with a friend."

"I know we'll probably have some occasional issues, but I trust you more than anyone else I know," Cara said. "And I can at least promise that I'll be more fun to work with than Kristin, that's for sure."

Jessica rolled her eyes. "Would you believe I got a phone message from her and she's looking for someone to be a reference? I guess Walgreens got a clue and canned her."

"I don't suppose you have a nice web programmer job up your sleeve?" Andrew asked.

"No, but I do have an extra ticket to a Boston area women's networking event next week," Cara offered. "You're guaranteed to be a stand-out candidate if you show up."

"Uh, Cara, isn't that going to be just for women?" Jessica asked. "Or were you planning to convince him to wear a costume?"

"It's an event for people who want to network with successful women," Cara said. "If you're the kind of guy who isn't intimidated by being outnumbered and who's okay working for a female boss, it'll be an interesting event."

“Err, thanks for the suggestion. Though I’m not certain that I’m not intimidated by being outnumbered.” Andrew looked back and forth between the others, smiling slightly.

“Worst case, it’s excruciatingly embarrassing and some woman kicks you in the groin for showing up, and then Cara owes you one,” Jessica said.

“Buzz! And this must be your better half, Gloria,” Andrew said, glad that a distraction had presented itself.

“Yep, this is my fiancée, Gloria Zimmerman,” Buzz said proudly.

Cara squealed and Jessica high-fived Buzz. They all hugged Gloria and admired her ring, a plastic secret agent decoder gadget that Buzz had found in a gas station on the way back from Powell.

Dinner was a boisterous affair, with many toast made with cups of tea as the travelers described their adventures for Gloria. She’d only met Mr. Chester a few times before he died, but had already grown fond of his quirky sayings and genuine warmth. Gloria didn’t have her heart set on any particular wedding plans, but she did suggest a cross-country road-trip for their honeymoon.

The meal ended with everyone promising to get together again soon and passing around fortune cookies.

“Your proposal has great merit,” read Buzz. “Good one!”

“Hmm, I wonder what I’ll get,” Gloria said, breaking open her cookie. “Many roads lead to home.” She snuggled Buzz. “Guess you’re finally home, at least.”

Andrew went next. “A secret becomes old news after it’s shared. Mmm, I shall have to remember that one.”

“Your new venture will bring you prosperity,” Jessica read. “So Cara, I think we should be in good shape. The fates are on our side.”

Cara took the last cookie. “Never eat anything bigger than your head.”

The others erupted into disbelieving snickers. Buzz demanded to see the fortune.

“Huh, I always thought Pop came up with that one.”

“I know! It’s Mr. Chester saying hello from wherever he is now!” Jessica said. “Okay everyone, we need to take a group photo.” She arranged everyone around a central empty chair and then waved down a waitress to take the picture. “See, whenever we look at this picture, we’ll know he was here too.”

Cara put the fortune carefully into her pocket. She knew that she wouldn’t need the slip of paper to remember Mr. Chester, their road trip, or the reunion. But it wasn’t every day that she got a postcard from the great beyond. She looked around the table, from her oldest friend to someone she’d just met tonight and was hoping to know better. No matter what would happen in the next twenty years, she’d always have her friends.