



The Couriers

By S J Garrett

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A Novel by S J Garrett

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Part One: One Hundred Days

Anima: an alien technology that presents itself in three human forms; prepared, summoned, and inhabited couriers.

"So here we are Hugh; just you and I - the two of us, so to speak. These next few months will be a rare chance for you and I to grow old. Imagine that. We'll be alive! How exciting is that?"

"I know I'm here because of experience and you: well you were nominated and elected out of necessity, no less. It'll be alright. We'll manage. We're both clever. Yes?"

"Me? Like I said, it's my second crack at this."

"You know, do you remember your tangle with that big old pike a few years back, I bet had you not been swallowed up by that fish, and with both you and that big old pike able to escape disaster like you did - well that's why you are here - because you are industrious Hugh. You are an absolutely marvelous team member and in the eyes of all of your peers, too, and that sir is a for certain."

"You and I, we'll lay low, bide our time, and with a bit of luck we'll be picked up and returned to our crystal homes again. You watch. You wait and see."

"We are anima after all, and we will make it happen."

"You know, we could become celebrated for inhabiting these two marsh men bodies. I can see the title now: 'Hugh and Manny and the Tale of the Marsh Men'."

"How long till the couriers get here Manny?" asked a concerned Hugh who apparently hadn't been listening to me for the past five minutes?

"Let's check on their progress," I answered as I consulted with their interface: "Six hours or so," I reported, "That'll be just before sunrise. It'll be chilly out there. Our couriers will be freezing without their upper garments on. There's going to be whole a lot of shaking going on - that's for sure."

"We should rest Hugh," and I trimmed my energy down, "and if you can't sleep - study the lay of the land just like you did inside that big old fish," I said.

"What's it like?" asked Hugh as he tried to relax.

"Where? Out there on the terra firma? Well, it's wet. It's damp. It's moist. It's misty - or perhaps they call that foggy I think. It's rainy, snowy, and icy at times. It's wet in every shape and form, but you don't need flippers and gills to get around, instead you have these moist air bags in your chest cavity called lungs that absorb oxygen that in turn is circulated with some glucose in a closed loop circulation system - like what a jalopy of a set up I must say."

"Presently, the atmospheric pressure out there should be around a thousand millibars or so, and falling. Oh-oh, you know what that means: Snow! The temperature on the shore of our favorite lake is negative five degrees Celsius at this moment and predicted to rise to about negative four and a half by the time our couriers finally arrive. Oh. I forgot to mention - the wind. There's going to be a good breeze out there; we'll only be a few meters from the shore."

"Is that like a current or a wave?" asked Hugh.

"No," well maybe I thought. "But wait until you feel the wind on your flesh and blowing through your hair."

"Hair?" asked Hugh in wonderment.

"Yeah hair, but we'll have to wait to see what kind of hair Hugh Macdonald has; he could be bald for all we know."

"Bald?" asked my befuddled anima.

"Not to worry my friend; it's just a bit of vernacular to describe a lack of hair. Hair is nice but we won't be alive long enough to worry about it. One hundred days; I have to empathize that – it's only one hundred days in these conditions - just keep that in mind while you are here."

"Why when I was last in this same predicament, my courier had the beginnings of a monkey's butt."

"A monkey's butt? On your head?" asked Hugh in a panic.

"You'll see. It's no big deal. There's lot of them out there, and it's the least of our worries," I said to my excited partner.

"Worries?" cried Hugh.

"Adaptation will be the biggest hurdle. We have to assimilate, Hugh. We have to blend in. We can't be arousing the suspicion of the natives. If any of them get wise to us; we got to go. We got to relocate. You'll see. And if I can indulge you a little, picture our new world like a big enormous school of fish, and where every fish in that school looks just the same as it's neighbor, and you and I too, are going to look just like all the rest in that school. With some practise, it'll become easy fitting in."

"Manny, how long ago was your last time?" asked Hugh who was starting to get a grasp of what I was telling him.

"Alive? Well I believe that there were about four and a half billion fish in that school back then and if I recall correctly someone in the media didn't like Mondays. That would be about forty-four indigenous, solar years ago I'd say."

"So let's review. What's your full name?" I asked.

"Hugh Macdonald," answered Hugh.

"And where are you from?" I asked.

"Toronto, Ontario."

"And what's my full name now?"

"Emanuel Logan."

"And where am I from?"

"Thunder Bay, Ontario."

"Very good. We're going to ace this thing! Right?" I asked Hugh who appeared a little more confident.

"Yep," answered a reassured Hugh.

"I'm going to power down for a few hours. There's not much that we can do until our couriers arrive. Got it?" I asked.

"Yep," answered Hugh.

"Tomorrow, I'll show you how to wink and whistle."

"Wink? Whistle?" asked a confused Hugh.

"Yeah. Don't worry you'll like it."

Two minutes, two hours, two years; they all felt the same on powering up. But for me this power up was going to be my last as anima for at least the next three months. There were things that had to be done now. There

was no turning back. The escape pod was readied. The bandoliers had been loaded with our fellow crew members; four for me and four for my companion. The couriers would help us navigate and bide the time for our recovery in one hundred days at a precise location and time that was yet to be determined.

Anomalies such as the sudden wreck of our lab happen, but it is unusual – disaster preparedness and predictive failure analysis are foundational to all of the many disciplines of anima technology. The primary suspect here for root cause I suppose was the age of our lab, and in fact, it was in its final twenty years of service of a two hundred year long research project in this fresh water lake on the water planet known by its indigenous inhabitants as Earth.

I suspect that the ‘powers that be’ will destroy the lab rather than finish the project, and most of what remained to be finished was more custodial than developmental. That being said, they’ll eventually be back here once again because there are few places in the galaxy that are such a good source of pristine, virgin, algae chloroplasts.

“How are doing Hugh?” I asked.

“I’m okay I suppose,” answered Hugh haltingly. “Maybe I’m a little frightened. I’ve never been alive before,” added Hugh.

“No? Well, I’ll help you out. I’ve been sent to the trenches a few times. It can get a bit untidy for anima like you and I sometimes. It’s quite the conundrum for us isn’t it – that once we are alive – no one wants to die. As anima we appear to be immortal, but that’s not going to be the case for the next one hundred days.

“What worries you most, Hugh?”

“Death by kinetic energy,” replied Hugh in the softest of whispers.

“Like a savage, brutal kind of end?” I suggested.

“Yes. It scares me to near death, Manny.”

“You worry far too much my friend. The life we are about to enter is filled with rules, patterns, habits and laws that are meant to extend life rather than shorten it.”

“You’ll see,” I continued, but it wasn’t very comforting to my distraught companion.

“This world of marsh men is more one of socialized animals; not the civilized men as they often boast of being. They see themselves like animals – like they are the true masters of their domain. They believe in an order that can be violent and horrific at times, but also one that has billions living together in peace. Early civilization can be brutal, but even brutes respect peace and prosperity or there would be nothing for them to fight over. Right?”

I still sensed some apprehension with my novice partner.

“Hugh? Are you still distressed from being swallowed by that big fish?”

“Maybe,” whispered Hugh.

“I thought you handled it brilliantly. He wasn’t going to be able to digest you. I mean - you were safe in your pod. But you might of been the end of him,” I laughed.

“It took you while, but you found a harmless way to have that fish anesthetized for just a moment and then out you came from between his big toothy jaws. You should have been there in the lab – the whole team was cheering for you. Hugh, you are the bravest of the brave. You’ll do fine navigating the marsh mans’ world.”

“Woo! Guess who’s almost here?”

“Who?” Asked Hugh in a worried voice.

“Our summoned couriers of course. Why they must have acquired an automobile. In ten minutes our escape pod will take us to the shores of our Lake Superior. Are you ready friend?”

Hugh couldn't get the words out, and presently I don't think he was a very happy anima.

“You must have studied up on what's about to transpire, Hugh. Yes? No?”

“I have. I'm ready as I can be, - considering the circumstances,” answered Hugh in his halting voice.

“Well I've been there. Once the seal is broken on the escape pod we are solely in the hands of our marsh men couriers. They are running a program and they're program isn't complete until they complete our transition. So for a few minutes my friend we will have no control over our personal destinies.

“The transfer takes about a minute or two. One courier will supervise the transfer of his partner and that partner will then do the same for the other. Two sets of hands make's it fail safe.”

“Now my personal experience is that the first half a minute is pleasurable, but the second half is painful and that also is depending on what direction you're going – to crystal or to life. Some think that that's a result of your previous mood or personal subjective experience. So be aware that it can be - inspirational if I can put it that way.”

“Is it surgical?” asked Hugh.

“No. Absolutely nothing as invasive as that. It's simply an adhesive patch designed for the native animal hide here. It requires that it is to be placed just above the nape of the subject's neck. You can peel it off yourself once you're right.”

“Right?” asked Hugh.

“Yeah in a few minutes, a few hours, no more than that and you should start feeling yourself again. And Hugh at this moment, - is the moment where I would love to be able to give you a wink. But it’s going to have to wait till later my friend.”

“Here comes our destiny!” I shouted as the pod launched from our ill-fated lab at the bottom of Lake Superior.

There’s no g-force. There’s no sense of acceleration. Anima cannot feel such things as crystal, but we are travelling rather quickly through the water and then the low atmosphere. In twenty seconds we will be resting on some pebbled shoreline.

“We’re here Hugh. Progress is being made.”

I checked the progress of our summoned couriers; ten meters and closing.

“Hugh?”

“Yes Manny?”

“Remember to breathe.”

And we went offline.

Birth cannot be like this. My soul was shaking. It was like being torn from a warm breast and then being tossed into an ice bath. I took a breath and it tasted toxic with oxygen. I could see but not too clearly a grey twilight of an overcast sky.

I couldn’t speak. I knew not to scream or shout. Adapt Manny. Adapt Manny I kept thinking to myself.

My hearing awakened. I could hear waves of water crash on a nearby shore and smell the odor of distant smelting lingering in the air.

I could feel the pebbled beach beneath my knees and I searched about by touch cautiously and felt the kneeling body of my friend Hugh next to me. Life was getting better already. I pulled and tugged on the heavy clothing my courier had provided and braced it about my naked upper body, while each breath I took got easier.

“Hoo? Hoo?” I ‘hoed’ as I tried to call out to my friend.

“Hugh? Hugh?” I called out again with more precision, but he didn’t answer; he was having a tough time breathing, and his flesh was becoming blue.

“Hugh. You’re a bum. Look at you. You’re not dressed for the weather. What’s become of this place?” I declared as I collected what clothing he had and wrapped it about him.

“Breathe. Breathe my friend. Breathe through your nose. Take some big draughts in.”

“That’s it,” I said encouraging him.

“You’re getting some colour my boy. Come to life my friend. I’m going to need you. We’re going to need each other. We’ll be a team; you and I. You wait. You’ll see,” I sang to him as I cradled his emaciated body as best I could.

I could hear the slightest tiny noise; a ping of sorts if I must describe it. It came from my breast pocket. I reached inside and a toy of an electronic device was there. We’ve seen these before; they’d show up here and there on the lake bed near marsh men communities and such. As far as we could ascertain they were best at being a timepiece, but they were also used for unnecessary personal communication between marsh men.

It seemed simple enough and came to life with a brush of an index finger. It said that there was a message for Emanuel Logan from Anne E. Mah. I navigated through the interface of the simple device and opened the waiting message; it was in common alphanumerical symbols that I would have no trouble reading but I doubt a marsh man would find legible. Nonetheless, it informed me that there was a nearby safe house that we could use if all was not well. It directed me to follow a path that was located just a few meters behind me. An automobile was parked one hundred and twenty-three steps away that we were to use to expeditiously remove our selves away from the escape pod's landing site.

There was more to read, but I've been through this before. Time is of the essence at moments like this and I went through the motions like I was following an internalized check list. I checked my groin for my bandolier's presence and then I checked a semi conscious Hugh for the same – and boy does that guy need a bath. I collected our escape pod and placed it safely in a cargo pant pocket and buttoned it up. It's the only anima technology we will have for the next two months, and it can be cannibalized and repurposed into many useful things that we may need between now and the time of our transition back to crystal in one hundred solar days.

"Hugh?"

He was looking at me but he was certainly not right in any meaningful way. His eyes were wrong. His color was better, but not ideal. His mouth was making weird fish movements, and his hands had light resting tremors.

"Can you hear me, Hugh?"

"Can you stand up?" I asked.

I rubbed his hands and I blew into his face. I even pinched the man, but after all these things I tried there was no reaction.

The wind was picking up, and we were going to freeze to death in minutes on this shore line if we don't get up and into the nearby tree line. I

tried something from the 'old anima tool box' for rescuing animals: I rubbed his chest and belly with an open hand just like a lower mammalian mother might do with her tongue to her kit.

In another minute or so, Hugh's tremors began to subside. His eyes became less dilated. Hugh was in there. He just needed some coaxing to come out.

"Come on friend. You just need a little bit of help," I spoke with a momma like melodic trill.

"Show us a smile my beautiful boy!"

And he started to grin. And his eyes began to focus on mine. And suddenly life was worth living again.

In minutes more, he was up on his feet and though wobbly at first he got some gait and we got off that frigid beach. I hope that automobile has a good heater I prayed, as we climbed and navigated a steep trail in our brand new bodies to wherever it might end.

Well, I was so disappointed. It wasn't a nineteen seventy-eight Cordoba like I drove the last time I was here; it was Japanese and had a bunch of nonsensical chrome letters instead of a real name upon its grille. It was shaped like a bread box, but I soon found out that it had plenty of room inside. It went much faster then it looked I must say. I'll reserve my final judgment just now. The heater works well; so it gets an 'A' for now.

"This reminds me of a pod," chimed in a defrosting Hugh, his voice just a murmur.

"It does," I agreed. "Like that pike chaser of yours," I added with a grin.

But Hugh was unresponsive again and drifting off to sleep as far as I could ascertain. His face was plastered to the passenger's side window. It was becoming clear that we are going to need that safe house until we can get to the bottom of what was wrong with him. It wasn't his transition. The

man was clearly in poor order. His teeth were the worst I've ever seen and he had scabs on his skin that he kept scratching at.

Couriers can have a tough life I've heard. Why just think about it; they have to be ready to run off at a minutes' notice, and leave their jobs, their friends and family to rescue a needy anima. The real truth is that most have no friends, no jobs or family to speak of. How would one explain an absence of two, three months or more that one cannot remember? So they are considered by their peers to be psychotics or worse. If only they knew that they were really kidnapped and altered to be treated like mules by interfering anima like me. Thankfully, there are only fifty or so of these prepared couriers in use on Earth at one time. I am Manny this time, and I was Peter the last time, and my friend here Hugh Macdonald – well he appears to be having a very difficult first time at it today, and I'm all but certain that like me, this is not Hugh's couriers first time either. I too, would be upset, if I were him.

The timepiece contained an encyclopedia of sorts, and with a little bit of perusing it became clear that what our Hugh was likely suffering from was an opiate addiction. Hugh will need at least a week of supervised abstinence to recover from the drug's acute effects on his person. Some respite at a safe house seemed to be the logical choice. A week would help or maybe two, but first we must start the process, so I messaged Anne E. Mah about our dire need.

Only a week long respite was available at the safe house that was located at a remote seasonal location four hours away. Directions on how to get there however, were conveniently available right in front of me on an illuminated screen built into the automobile's dashboard; those clever Japanese. I bet plenty has changed in the marsh mans' world since the nine-teen seventies.

I love driving in the snow. I'd forgotten how much fun it was; always correcting your steering, the white outs, and all the snow drifts. I must say,

it was an impressive and balmy twenty-five degrees, centigrade inside the Japanese bread box that I was driving and for good reason: the window and door seals actually kept the cold out and weren't howling like that old Cordoba did.

The billboards along the highway featured the word 'Superior' over and over again in every kind of way. There were bumper stickers that said 'See the Soo' and road signs pointing in the direction of Sault Ste Marie to the east and in the other: Thunder Bay - my courier's old stomping ground. Our final destination was a private villa of sorts just north of a place called Wawa off the Trans Canada Highway. And was I excited: the final stretch of our journey was a ten kilometer stretch of dots and dashes which apparently meant a logging road or such - snow covered and unplowed I was hoping.

"Manny?" called out Hugh, "I think I'm having cramps," he cried while gripping his belly.

"Where?" I stupidly asked.

"Here," he groaned pointing to his belly. "Is this hunger? It hurts so much," implored Hugh.

"Oh dear, I don't think so. We'll need a bit of privacy I think. Hold on Hugh."

I swung my head to and fro about me and searched for a side road or some handy nearby foliage.

"Ahh," groaned Hugh imperatively.

"There. Hallelujah! Just in the nick of time my friend!" and I exited the highway on the left on a much less travelled side artery.

A delirious Hugh stared back at me. I pulled the vehicle to the side of the road as soon as I could, jumped out and ran around to the passenger's door and beckoned my friend to come out.

"Pants down for Sunday my friend," I said to the man, and I had him squat by the idling vehicle.

"It's BM time. Let it out my friend. It's a normal daily occurrence for marsh men like you and I!"

Hugh's eyes rolled up to the sky and an awful wet clatter of loose poop was heard dropping to the snow covered ground as neighboring traffic sped by. There was a horn honk or two, and all in good fun I assume.

"What was that all about?" asked a troubled Hugh.

"That my friend was just some more living I must say, and probably a pretty common occurrence here along the Trans Canada Highway." I answered. "And while you're lucid Hugh; there's going to be more of it for you. You keep me up to date with how you feel. You know your health is now a major concern. We're heading to a safe house for a few days of rest and rehabilitation. We'll get to the bottom of it so to speak. I'll make you right as rain again. It just might take a few days."

And Hugh responded with a big wary sigh.

We made good time arriving at our safe house destination just before mid day. The private road was more civilized than what I had hoped for, but not a single vehicle passed us on it along the way and that's a good sign for a safe house if you ask me.

The house however, or facility I should say was ridiculously enormous. It looked to be institutional more so than someone's tidy country home. It was thick with trees surrounding it, and for as far as the eyes could see.

"Are we here?" moaned my pathetic friend.

"I think so Hugh. I've followed the directions precisely and I think we'll be spending our time here in what resembles an old country estate. A summer home or a getaway I think. Gee -," I said as I took it all in for a moment or two.

“Well, I suspect we won’t have to share a bed that’s for sure. I do hope it’s on the grid. This timepiece is near dead.”

I opened a tall double door after entering six numbers on a keypad that unlocked the door and disabled an alarm. I could have parked at least two Japanese bread boxes inside the entrance hall or lobby I should say; the place was huge and freezing cold.

“Come with me Hugh; we need to find the hearth in this old place. There should be one in the kitchen where marsh men cook their protein and carbohydrates. We just need to find it.”

Well no surprise, we found more than one. One; a kitchenette - was off a comfortable sitting room with a majestic view of towering treetops and open sky. Down below, in what I’d call the basement was another much larger kitchen with enough pots and pans and counter space to serve an army. Wherever we went the rooms were winterized or put to rest with linen and plastic sheets draped over various articles of furniture.

“What’s that?” barked Hugh in alarm.

“What? Did you see something?” I asked.

“I saw a small mammal run by,” said my bug eyed friend.

Vermin came to mind, but no, after some hunting and rooting around it was discovered to be just a feral cat. Orange, short haired and probably an expert at eluding capture by anyone foolish enough to give chase to it in this enormous labyrinth.

“No worries Hugh; cat’s are no trouble as long as you don’t make a pet out of them. Well, we’ve got plenty of lighting - let’s see if we can start one of these – one, two, three, four ovens in here.”

Hugh found a wooden chair and I had him park it front of an open oven door. The ovens all worked and though the kitchen was very large we were

certainly going to be able to raise the ambient temperature in here by another ten degrees.

“You’re looking white again Hugh. How are you feeling?”

“I think I need to have another BM,” said the man.

“This time we have just the thing. It’s a lavatory, a washroom, a toilet. And it’s located just outside this door, down the hall and on your right. Come I’ll show you,” I offered.

“There you are sir; a fresh commode, toilet, can, and etcetera. It should look quite intuitive to operate. Yes?” I asked.

“Pants down for Sunday,” answered Hugh.

“Yes. Then place your derriere right over that bottomless seat.”

It took some time, but I located a list of instructions to bring this old villa to life. There was a pump to be activated to bring water through the plumbing, and much more lighting than the pittance that came from the small battery powered units that were hung in the hallways and in the corners of each room. I refrained from activating the central heating as there were just two of us and we only needed the use of a few rooms.

The depleted timepiece was the next problem, but fortunately I found plenty of cables and wires for just that purpose in a kitchen drawer. It took some time of course, but one of those I found worked and I had a charging timepiece and another little victory to celebrate. And we thought that living was so difficult; I’m going to report to my friend Hugh what I’ve done.

“Hugh!” I scolded him.

He was in pile on the floor of the washroom. He was trembling and curled up fetal.

“You’ve destroyed the bathroom. There’s tissue you are supposed to use.”

I placed my hand to his brow and I do believe the man was feverish. The marsh man touch is far from satisfactory in determining the exact temperatures of things, but I believe he was two degrees centigrade warmer than he should be. The bandoliers cannot regulate their own temperature so I removed his and attached it next to my own.

I found some warm bedding and prepared a container of water for my dehydrating friend.

“Hugh. I need you to drink or you will not become well,” and I held a pitcher of water out to him.

He drank it down as best he could because he being anima knew what I was saying was true.

“Have you passed any water from your pee-pee down there?”

“I need some,” I said, “There’s much that can be determined from a sample of animal urine you know,” I continued, and I held out another container that had an icon of a giant water wheel on it and the words: The Steady Brook Brewing Company.

Hugh took the empty cup and pulled up a blanket to his quivering chin.

It was a challenge to determine what was what, and how it could be done, but with the help of the timepiece and some anima ingenuity I could positively determine that without some timely intervention my dear friend Hugh was just weeks away from a certain death by chemical toxicity. He’ll be pleased it wasn’t going to be a death by kinetic energy that might kill him, but more of one of wasting and eventual asphyxiation.

He didn’t care, but after a few days of light food and plenty of water he started looking healthier. Perhaps I won’t have to dig a hole for him out in the woods yet as I had been contemplating just a few days ago.

You know, I told him that his particular type of affliction infects both the body as well as the mind. Its good luck for your courier that you and your more perfect anima mind happened by or Hugh MacDonald the marsh man courier would soon have been dead.

On our fourth morning at the safe house I awoke to find an orange cat sleeping with Hugh in a makeshift bed I had arranged for him in the big kitchen. Cats are an animal that are often domesticated and sometimes feral. He appeared to be of the domesticated variety, and a quick message to Anne E. Mah confirmed that he was part of the household and provided some measure of pest control for the owners of the villa.

His name was Hector, and he used a pet door to access fresh air, and he had a dog run at the back of the home as a place to empty his bladder and bowels. I was quite curious, and when he saw me stir he jumped up and ran for safety. I followed his scent down the hall and indeed to the back of the house where I discovered a man door with a tiny animal door installed at its bottom. I swung the man door open and while cold air rushed in and swirled all about my protruding head I could see that someone had gone to a lot of work to accommodate Hector's lively hood. The fenced in enclosure was large, and covered from top to bottom to keep the birds of prey at bay, and any other predators that had paws or slithered - safely at bay.

Tomorrow's project was going to be twofold. We needed some protein and vitamins in our diet and then there was also a dire need for some clothing for Hugh as his were in tatters, and they were sure to draw us some unwanted attention from the natives.

Anne E. Mah had a solution for us. We were to ascertain Hugh's clothing size today, and then order some from an on-line marketplace that would have it delivered to the post office in Wawa the next day.

“Hugh? This is not a very good breakfast meal. I simply can’t eat this cheesy pasta anymore. I’m just carbed out. I just read about it. It will bring our marsh men bodies to an early end. Heart failure. Obesity. It’s just terrible my friend. Anne E. Mah says we should top up the petroleum in the bread box, and visit one of the grocers located in Wawa.

“What about Hector?” asked Hugh who was stroking the cat’s orange coat?

“He’ll be fine. Remember, we are the visitors; he lives here. I bet they sell pet food there. I see it advertised on the timepiece all the time. We can pick up your clothes at the post office at the same time. Are you well enough for a little adventure? It’ll be some practice for urban living. You can’t hide in rural areas like here for long – someone will notice, and someone will start asking questions. In the big cities; believe me - no one cares.”

“Before we can leave for town Hugh, we must visit the washroom again sir; this time for some grooming that I can assure you that we both are very much in need of.”

Some thoughtful soul had left out an overnight bag with a razor, hair brush, tooth paste, toothbrush and such. The thought of sharing the toothbrush with Hugh was more than I could consider at the moment, but we shared a shower and bathed ourselves as best we could – and what rough hands that man has.

An hour later, I was properly attired of course, and Hugh: I found an old ski jacket with a wonky zipper in a closet that just fit the man and a pair of a size or two, too large rubber boots, too. Hopefully if any of the natives give us the once over they’ll only notice Hugh’s stained pants.

“Make sure we bring the money card,” chimed in Hugh trying to be helpful.

There are actually three of them and all in Manuel Logan’s name. The last time I was here we used a lot of paper notes to pay for things. With the

money card I can just tap for things that are under five hundred dollars and type in a pin for any purchases above that. Money is no object; it's our safety that's of utmost importance, and it says just that in all the couriers' operating manuals: Money can fix almost anything in the world of the marsh men.

The Japanese bread box started up like a charm, and it had been very cold last night, but down the road we went; first stop of the day would be a petrol station. It didn't take too long to find one, and the sole operator was a chubby person who sat in a heated kiosk behind a sliding glass window. The last time I bought gas, there was someone in dungarees who would top up the Cordobra's reservoirs and take my money, and who would then run back to his kiosk to make change. Today, I carefully watched as those ahead of me serviced their own bread boxes, and it appeared to be a self-serve kind of thing now; no more gas jockey running his legs off all day because now you just tapped your money card to pay.

What to do first; get the clothing from the post office or go visit the grocer and buy some food? It made more sense to Hugh if we collected his clothing first and then he could change his pants from inside the our bread box before getting groceries where there would bound to be more people on the lookout for strangers and strange things in general. So that was our plan and we were off to visit the local Canada Post at Forty-four Broadway Ave. in Wawa Ontario.

"What's wrong with you Hugh? Why are you twitching like that?" I asked.

"I don't know. But that yellow OPP sign next door is causing me some anxiety," answered Hugh.

"Like a flash back... Oh it can happen my friend. Let's just get your clothes quickly. We'll skip having you changing your pants until we get back home. If you look around your attire isn't so bad. These are rural marsh men; they're not going to be suspicious of someone in old worn pants."

Inside the post office a polite young aboriginal man asked me for some photo ID and after feigning a look at it as I showed him it, he handed us a big plastic package of clothing with Manuel Logan's name upon it. It was like magic, and I had already apparently paid for the purchase yesterday when I had ordered it. I didn't have to talk with a store clerk, a cashier or anyone else remotely attached to the transaction except for a young fella at a post office. I can't wait to live in a big city; there I hear that what you purchase on line is brought right to your doorstep!

Hugh said it smelled like death inside the grocery store.

"Now, now," I said. "That's a little severe. We are not anima today; we are animals and thankfully – omnivores rather than a beast that eats nothing but animal protein. We are at least that refined. You know as well as I do that we have to eat a proper diet so we don't do harm to our marsh men bodies. We're going to buy some dead vegetation for its fiber and remaining vitamins, and we're going to also buy some slaughtered fish, hoofed animal parts, and something I recall as being called hamburger. Hamburgers – I ate many of them back in the day, and I must add my friend that they were: salty, greasy, addictive, and delicious!"

"What treat do you want Hugh?" I asked as we perused the market.

"I'll have a can of beans; that will be both my fiber and my protein," he answered with a look of disdain.

"Can I tempt you with a bottle of vitamins or do I have to twist your arm sir?" I asked.

"Whatever Manny," said Hugh who was rolling his eyes, "I just want out of this mortuary so we can go back to the villa where I can spend some more time with Hector."

"What is it with you and that cat? I warned you remember – not to get too involved with him. He's someone else's pet."

“He’s a beautiful animal. He’s lonely. He told me so. Manny, they treat him like a mouse trap – not as a pet,” complained Hugh.

“Hugh – listen to me. We are anima, we don’t keep pets. In two days we are leaving the villa because of necessity. It’s the program we have to follow. We are like two rolling stones you and me; we have to keep moving, we can’t grow any moss!”

Anne E. Mah brought good news the next day that there were now just less than one hundred days left for us to wait for our recovery and transition back to crystal. The countdown had begun and arrangements had been made for our transition and recovery, and just a hundred kilometers north from where we were plunged into this mess on the shores of our favorite great lake just a week ago.

Arrangements - meant that a contractor had been hired, and more importantly that an accessible means of transport would be nearby. In these regions a transport visits pretty regularly at about one hundred day intervals, however there can be exceptions to this schedule, and sometimes there’s simply not enough room on the next craft. As I remember, it can get quite dicey at times as my seventies experience almost went on for more than two hundred days. What a nightmare that appeared to be at the time. Once it was all over however, it was like water under the bridge as some romantics like to say. I’ll take a hundred days over two hundred or more any time. The sooner I get back to crystal the better.

Hugh meanwhile was making life as comfortable as he could for Hector. The two enjoyed a tin of cat food together on our fifth night, and there would be time for that once more tomorrow I suppose, then we’ll be gone and there will be no one around with opposable thumbs to open Hector’s next can; a predicament that caused our Hugh some amount of concern.

Hugh additionally took some initiative and reinforced Hector’s outside enclosure; a badger of some kind had been trying to infiltrate its fencing.

Then there was Hector's water supply; which caused some debate. Did Hector actually require water if his diet was made up solely of moist mouse bodies or was liquid water required because after we leave whatever water that was left in his bowl would freeze and soon become ice? The debate ended with my observation that the cat was healthy when we first encountered it, so obviously his water requirements were being met before our arrival, and in all likelihood by someone who comes in and checks on him.

"He's a pet; someone loves him," I said, which suddenly raised an eyebrow of reflection on Hugh's face.

"You think a marsh man who eats cheesy pasta loves him?" asked Hugh.

"Yes I do," I lied.

That feline hissed at me when I tried to pet him on our last morning at the villa. I thought he'd be more gracious; we actually made his life better here over the past week we spent with him. I tidied the villa up for a couple of hours because it's always the right thing to do; it had been a good safe house and who knows maybe some of my brethren may require its pleasant respite again.

"Hugh. It's time for us to hit the road," I called out from the villa's lobby.

Hugh was saying his goodbyes to Hector. It was almost touching to watch; there was hugging and whispers of adoration and such.

"The sun is coming up my friend. Who loves twilight and red sunrises? I know who," I sang to my sad friend as I pulled the villa's front entrance door closed.

Personally, I like sunrises more ochre, and the blue skies they have here – well they are a bit much, too.

“Next stop: the Soo. It’s just a couple of hours down the road Hugh. Anne E. Mah has booked a short term rental for us there. The Soo is a lot bigger than Wawa and we’ll be able to get some better kit there, too. Soon we’ll be walking and talking just like the natives. Things are looking up fella,” I said, but Hugh looked pretty unhappy as he stared at the wintery vista down the road ahead.”

“How long will be in the Soo?” asked a sullen Hugh.

“You know the program; a week or two likely, and then we’ll move to another location again. Hugh, - try not to get too attached to the creatures so much. Let each one become – a good memory my friend. You and I are going to meet a lot of the natives in the next ninety days or so and there will be plenty of wild life to see along the way. Why in this kind of hinterland there’s an absolute plethora of animals to admire. If you get in the right mindset Hugh – you might really enjoy our once in a lifetime time spent here.”

The Soo; my nose kept telling me as we approached the city that it was the source of that smelting odor I smelled with my first breaths eight days ago. It reminds me of space odor – a burnt, medium pungent kind of thing. Like the smell of molten iron and rare earth metals all mixed into one.

“I smell steel making Hugh. You know what that means my friend?”

“What?” asked a bored Hugh?

“That is the smell of civilization in the making,” I gleefully answered.

“What the marsh men have learned from metallurgy over the years they applied to electronics by doping silicon. And look at them now! These marsh men are learning, slowly but surely, how to be more than just a part of the life that surrounds them, but eventually how to create the very life that surrounds them. Someday when they become clever enough, they’ll leave their parent planet with the same lofty goals of studying strange, new, alien mitochondria and chloroplasts – just like you and I do.”

The short term rental that Anne E. Mah had booked for us was divine, and it was just a short walk to the shores of the St Mary's River and our favorite lake: Lake Superior was just a mere fifteen kilometers away. The local natives appeared to be mostly absent except for the few who were hardy enough to endure a Northern Ontario winter on the waterfront.

The nearest commercial establishment to us was a bar called The Golden Galley that featured live exotic dancers nightly. It's flashing sign illuminated the night sky in a yellow glow for a good kilometer down the road from us beckoning the locals to come have an alcoholic drink and enjoy some live exotic dancing - whatever that meant.

"Hugh, I got a good feeling about this place, maybe I can talk Anne E. Mah into having you and I spending two weeks here if it's possible."

There was an enormous television screen in the living area of the rental. Out back, a lower walkout opened up outside to where an enormous stone patio laid which had an upper wooden deck above it. And atop that upper level deck was situated a patio set with southern exposure and access to the master bedroom.

"This is just wicked," I kidded Hugh with some seventies talk.

I turned the big screen on with a handy clicker and found out that there was a plethora of channels available; some required a payment to view and others were for free. My second selection brought up a free nature channel and there in all its glory was a giant ibex climbing a mountain side somewhere far from here.

"Look at the horns on that thing!" squealed Hugh in delight.

We skipped our dinner that day. Hugh was just mesmerized and dutifully commented about everything he found interesting in the programming. Hours later when we grew somewhat tired of the fighting and mating story lines of the mountain dwelling creatures of the Swiss

Alps, we yet found another nature channel that was having a weekend festival or celebration of all things aquatic.

I never got to control the clicker again after that; Hugh had become its master. Occasionally, he'd pause the big screen's programming to go to the washroom or to visit the kitchen for food that he'd bring directly back in with him to consume in front of that big screen. I'd sometimes have to step over his sleeping body if I needed to navigate to that side of the living room. The nature channels became our solace and they were on 'twenty-four-seven' as they like to say around here.

"Hey, I bet we'll see that old pike of yours on the box some day!" I kidded Hugh.

While Hugh thankfully was finally amused, I got busy buying gear we could use. I got a new timepiece for me and one for Hugh. He wasn't too impressed with it and referred to it as a cell phone like the natives do. I found them to be the new keys to the marsh mans' universe because with a little clever persistence there was virtually nothing you couldn't access or find out about in this marsh mans' world.

If it was clear out, Hugh and I would go outdoors early in the morning and walk down to the waterfront to watch the sun come up. You can get all spiritual about it, but the fact of the matter is that sun light is the true corner stone of life. You could live in a cave or on the bottom of a deep sea and never see it, but beyond the entrance of that said cave or above that said sea, is a star, and it is its energy that makes every living thing come to life here.

"Its petty cold out here this morning, isn't it Hugh," I remarked to Hugh on one such morning. "And according to the weather app on my timepiece spring is going to be late this year in the Soo. Summer will surely come however. Just think how beautiful it will be here this summer. We'll get to see some of it. I think we should be leaving right, smack dab in the middle of it."

“Just when all of this world’s beauty will be at its annual apex,” complained Hugh. “Why can’t we head south for a few months? The weather there will be much finer,” lamented a disappointed Hugh.

“We can’t risk unnecessary travel to the tropics Hugh, but I do know where we can find actual tropical life as soon as tomorrow. There are indoor plant shows and aquariums a day’s drive down the road in Toronto. Wait until you smell real pollen for the first time and sense the humidity of giant aquarium! It’s not as tangible as walking through the woods and grass during their reproductive season however, but it’s as close as you can get to the real thing in these parts at this time of the year.”

“I’d rather visit the everglades. We could drive there in two days I hear,” said Hugh.

“I hear you Hugh, but that’s another country and an international border to cross. Remember: we are Hugh Macdonald and Emanuel Logan, and Canadian by identity I might add; we’d come under scrutiny crossing the border and it could possibly void the contract for our recovery and transition. We can’t have that,” I answered, and perhaps a little too sternly to my anima friend.

Hugh was sullen the rest of the day, but that didn’t stop him from digesting more nature shows and - travel channels. If you ask me, the man is clearly the author of his own troubles.

“Manny, its happened twice now,” said Hugh.

“What?” I interrupted the man.

“I had a dream,” answered Hugh who knew that this was not a normal occurrence for anima, but not completely unheard of when they are acting as inhabited couriers.

"That's impossible Hugh," I lied. "Your body may be marsh man, but your mind is anima. Anima do not dream when their host is unconscious; we go off line," I assured him.

"Not me," answered my worried friend.

"Well what did you dream of? The lab? The crew? I hope not me," I said.

"I dreamt of Hector and I was petting him."

"The cat!" I shouted.

"Did he speak to you or what? Because that my friend is not normal behavior," I added.

"No," answered Hugh.

"Were you frightened? Was it one of those nightmares? I've heard about them."

"No. It was beautiful and heartwarming," declared my guilty looking friend.

"That can't be true," I implored.

"It's terrible. I don't know what to say, Hugh. Hopefully it's just temporary. I'm going to run some tests on you. We'll get to the bottom of it. In the mean time - sleep less. Just an hour at a time before that creepy rapid eye movement thing starts. That's when as I understand that marsh men start to dream."

"And less screen time," I said sternly. "It's no good for either anima or marsh men."

"They called that thing an idiot box when I was here last. That just goes to show you what even marsh men think of them," I went on while shaking my finger at the wall of pixels in front of us.

I ran tests on Hugh and me, and you'd be surprised how easily it can be done with a few on-line market place purchases and everything else you need you can find in a kitchen or a washroom. Hugh was normal so far as I could ascertain, but me? I had high blood sugar. Inherited I suppose. It's not all caused by lifestyle choices as I continually read on my timepiece. I'll start with endocrine massages; I'm not about to start looking for an organ donor because I won't be living in this body eighty-five days or whatever it is from now.

Anne E. Mah refused my request to stay a second week in the Soo. I half expected that this would be the case but she did allow us to visit Toronto which because of its much larger size we could stay there a month should we chose to, as long as we kept relocating once a week or so. So a room was booked for the two of us in downtown Toronto and in a hotel no less.

"I'm telling you Hugh, you may find the congestion in a big city like Toronto a bit overwhelming at first, but you'll see that with the exception of just a few, no one there will want anything more from us other than for us to just get out of their way. Big city people are rude, but in an okay sort of way. They like to be left alone no matter how overcrowded the conditions might be. I swear: Never ask for directions. Never ask for help. Never say hello to anyone of them and everything will be as right as rain."

I'm assuming he was listening to me, but he was also intensely watching a colony of fire ants deal with a flooding river in Brazil on the big screen. Be it flora or fauna there was nothing that moved in the water, or through the air or travelled on land that Hugh wasn't interested in. He'd pay more attention to me if I were coated in fur, feathers or scales I think. Having a conversation with the man however - was near impossible. If only I was Hector would I get his deserved attention it seemed.

Come our last day in the Soo I had Hugh all prepared. I showed him some sample screenshots of our new lodgings in Toronto, and yes there was a big screen TV in every one of them. I showed him pictures of the

aquarium we would visit and that raised an eyebrow of interest in him I must say. It had a three storey fish tank devoted to native fish I told him to clinch some more of his enthusiasm.

“Say good bye to the Soo’s black snow, Hugh. I checked the weather in Toronto and there’s talk of an early spring down there. Won’t that be nice; we won’t need to wear a parka anymore,” as I merged the Japanese bread box onto the Trans Canada Highway East.

It was an eight hour drive to Toronto, so we decided to make two short rest stops; one in Sudbury and the other in Parry Sound along our way.

“Hugh, are you ever going to try driving?” I asked while slapping the steering wheel with my open palms.

“Well, I Hugh Macdonald; officially do not have a driver’s license. In a pinch I guess I could. You’ve driven plenty before; you told me so much and that it was called a nineteen, seventy-eight Cordobra. You have the advantage of previous experience Manny,” replied my grinning friend.

Eight hours of driving this metal box on wheels is a bit trying on the patience I must say, but such is living I suppose. And, it frankly annoyed me how some drivers negotiated the traffic at the expense of others to gain even a millimeter more of progress. Why don’t they just commit themselves to the rules of the road and get to their destination safely? Have they not considered the risk of death by kinetic energy?

“Hugh? I think there’s some bad driving going on just up in front of us.”

Two large open backed bread boxes ahead of us were changing lanes rapidly and using their hand operated warning devices in a rapid and aggressive succession. I think they are having road rage. I’ve seen it reported on my timepiece many times.

“Well we’ve seen it in the wild have we not Hugh? Animals will be animals. It’s all about blood sugar you know. Someone needs a snack or

more often has had far too many. Cranky pants! Get over yourself!" I shouted at my windshield and the unfolding drama down the road from us.

And I must admit, the need to use my own personal hand operated warning device, and to pass judgment on the situation was incredibly overpowering.

"I thought you have already admitted to having high blood glucose levels Manny?" said an overtly amused Hugh.

"Well – yes I do, and thanks for reminding me mister smarty pants Macdonald. We shall safely put some space between us and those two who are toying with their own early demise."

Well, the Toronto I remembered from the last time I was here has changed plenty. Back then the city's skyline was dominated by a recently completed needle into the sky tower and of which it appeared to be skewering a dinner plate at the top of it or something like that. Today, the city's skyline is dominated with towers of glass homes called condominiums; acres and acres of them. If you looked hard enough however there were still some familiar things to see in the downtown core that have remained such as a vast downtown mall and some parks of note.

"Hugh this isn't the Toronto I remember. There are ten times as many bums on the streets, and half of the people here are wearing backpacks of all things."

What's that about, I wondered? But I do see tents erected here and there, and some directly in front of shop storefronts.

"Hugh. I think there was more order in the wild. What do you think?" I asked as I carefully navigated the bread box through the congested city streets.

"I've never seen a marsh man civilization before, but I half expected this. I see a lot of mass manufactured disparity Manny," answered my saddened anima friend. "Instead of normal divisions of say young and old, I see a very broad spectrum of many social classes. There are some here Manny that are total outcasts from the rest. I don't want to stay here Manny."

"Truth be told, Hugh - both of us will appear to be outcasts once we leave our hotel room and walk these streets. You'll see. We'll fit in better here."

"We'll be the coyotes of the streets and not of the woods."

I must secretly admit that there were some things that I adored regarding the busy urban environment of downtown Toronto. For instance, there was pretty much any kind of food cuisine one would want within steps of our hotel's doors. Hugh favored vegetarian and vegan cuisine. I wasn't as fussy, but some of the animal protein servings I tried were either too large or were ruined during their preparation. One dish however that we both liked were deep fried root crops as in French fries! A death wish dish, but delicious and Hugh and I could never get enough of them.

The hotel room was just what we expected, but Hugh had issues with our outdoor neighbors living conditions and became frustrated with our own financial limitations. All our monetary transactions were to be done by plastic cards. Carrying cash was discouraged because it sometimes led to disagreements that resulted in theft which often then resulted with complications with marsh men law enforcement. Interactions with law officials or medical officials were strictly forbidden and were to be avoided at all costs. Hugh's problem is that he wanted to indulge the many beggars that we crossed paths with every day. I suggested that he could indulge the real wild life as much as he liked, but the marsh men had to be left alone. It did not sit well with him because he like many other anima consider themselves to be the universe's nurturers.

“I’m breaking my oath,” he’d complain.

If only life were so simple. I’m anima also. It’s a pleasure to do good things, but you have to consider the big picture and in the big picture we are the aliens. We are the: ‘what’s wrong with this picture’, and we do not belong here.

All was well otherwise, and Hugh was enamored with the aquarium visit except for the color of the gills of several of the more exotic salt water species in the Pacific coast exhibit. He was absolutely certain that they were suffering and were unsuitable for living in captivity. I reasoned with him that the good people that manage the aquarium will recognize their facility’s shortcomings and address the issue in good time. Hugh however was having none of that, and once we were home he began composing a very long text message to the aquarium’s managers with his advice on how to lessen the trauma that in his opinion - some of their fish were experiencing.

Sometimes what in retrospect seems plausible is nonetheless, in real time totally unexpected, and that is what happened next. As I listened to my anima friend’s ranting my timepiece chimed. I checked to see what Anne E. Mah wanted to share with me, but it wasn’t Anne E. Mah who was messaging me it was someone named Olivia who wanted to know my whereabouts! How on Earth did this happen?

Frantic searching of social network platforms revealed that my courier, Emanuel Logan did have a sister living in Sudbury Ontario. Anne E. Mah ordered that she be ghosted immediately, and I was to block all calls and communication with her should she try and contact me again. Tomorrow, I was to purchase a new timepiece, destroy the old one, and Anne E. Mah would take care of the rest.

The following day, Anne E. Mah hastily booked us new lodgings in North York. It turned out to be a furnished condo and ten stories up. It had a wonderful view from its balcony I must say, - of a busy ten lane highway

down below. Two bedrooms this time, and I had to insist upon this amenity because Hugh had become a noisy sleeper.

“You need a doctor Hugh. Anyone that labors as much as you do to keep breathing definitely requires medical intervention,” I told him half kidding one morning.

I showed him what he needed. It was called a CPAP. It was a ridiculous looking machine of hoses and wiring that created a mild amount of positive air pressure to your lungs while you slept at night.

“I’m never wearing that thing,” he abruptly told me when I showed him the device.

“They’d be better off stenting the sinuses or dealing with the root causes: such is all the pollen, mold, smoke, and other particulate matter in the air here that inflames the mucous membranes of lung breathers,” added my favorite anima Earth science’s technician.

Fortunately, my personal courier is blessed with a rather large nose, and its accompanying nasal cavities have a generous amount of space for savoring aromas and odors. Hugh’s nose however was kind of flat and small; a meaty little button of a nose rather than a protruding beak as I have.

“Do you still dream of Hector?” I needled him.

“No. Do you think often of your sister?” he answered as I distracted him from a documentary on the daily life of the eastern meadow vole.

Well - touché! En garde! There we were, either suddenly not getting along so well, or condo living was not meant for us. A wound had been clearly opened between the two of us.

The box that we used to travel from floor to floor in our condo was a mechanical deathtrap. There were two of them that you had to wait forever for their doors to open and at times they were filled to the rafters

with germs, passengers and other contagion. And there were the little marsh men too, to contend with at the condo. And they were fewer in numbers than I can recall from the seventies; each of them now however carried both a back pack and their own personal timepiece.

I had to remind my colleague Hugh not to become too friendly with these young pups because as friendly and approachable as they were, their parents would be wary of strangers just like any other animal in the wild. There was this one little one with a mile wide smile that liked to charge at you from down the hall way and all the while he'd be laughing and shrieking like a little monkey until he'd get a hold of your leg and wipe his snot and saliva all over your pant leg.

You had to watch out for Trevor. Hugh liked to high five him and would almost personally thank him and his family for soiling his pant leg. I'd just smile until I could escape from him. I kept special wipes in my pocket just to clean up after the little man. He's just a child after all, and there is by the way, a direct relationship between happiness and fertility in life. Reproduction is more than important; it's absolutely necessary in the animal kingdom.

Early in our week at the North York condo I noticed that birds would collect on our balcony's railing. They'd hop about like small birds do, or if they were the larger pigeon type they'd waddle about the concrete pad out there. I suppose I counted a half dozen or so early in the week but several days later there were more than a couple of dozen out there.

"Hugh. Are you feeding the birds?" and I pointed out the growing flock that now inhabited our balcony.

"No," he lied.

"That's a violation of the terms of agreement between us and our recovery contractors. You must know that?"

"Manny," announced Hugh and his eyes lit up. "Watch this!" and Hugh got up from his seat and walked out into the cold on the balcony and

extended his arms like a cross. Thereafter, a feather storm of flapping wings and such occurred and Hugh held ten birds perched upon his arms and shoulders as he grinned back at me.

“Hugh!” I complained. “You can’t be doing this. You will draw attention to us.” I told the man.

“I didn’t feed them Manny. I didn’t. I think they - just like me,” added a delighted Hugh.

“Hugh this isn’t just about you and me. There are eight others here with us who want to get safely home. Please remember our other team members stored on our bandoliers. We have to follow the rules: like lay low, bide our time uneventfully, and we will all get home safely.”

Oh those birds liked him alright. Any time we were outdoors they’d follow us from lamp post to lamp post and from one intersection to the next and all the while, it felt like we were under this weird bird surveillance.

“They better not poop on us. I’m telling you Hugh!” I’d complain when we were out for fresh air or grocery runs.

Anne E. Mah said we could stay another week at the North York condo providing that we did more things independently. It wasn’t that she wanted us to be separate in all our outdoor excursions, it was more because normal marsh men often operated independently and that being a constant pair also attracted unwanted scrutiny from others in the community. In general, marsh men are sensitive creatures and to the point of being – well paranoid.

I like being alone at times so it was of no matter to me, but I personally think my partner requires some supervision. When he wasn’t looking I’d check for mud on the soles of his shoes and bread crumbs and such in his outer garment’s pockets. Once I found a burr attached to a stocking.

There's nothing wrong with exploring parks and the urban wilderness, but it can draw attention especially if there's a weirdo named Hugh Macdonald spending too much time on secluded trails and such. One evening he told me he climbed a tree earlier that day! I think he's becoming more primal than he should. So I began keeping an eye on him electronically with the help of an app on my timepiece.

One day in that second week there was a warm spell and there were all kinds of marsh men outside who were much less attired than usual. The star's radiation was just intoxicating and you could smell the thawing earth and feel it growing softer and more pliable beneath your feet. Nature was beckoning and there was a park of some size that was not too far away from our condo that I had traced Hugh to a number of times, and according to my timepiece's app - he was there again today. And so, I decided I'll see what he's up to like the nosey, busy body I've become.

The closer I got to the park the more exposed flesh I saw and in particular among the post adolescent population. Some were baring their arms and legs and the present ambient temperature was perhaps just eight to ten degrees Celsius. There were joggers, cyclists, prams and electric scooters all converging into this alluring green space.

My timepiece directed me to the center of the park and in the distance I could see a crowd gathered about a convenience facility meant for washroom use. There were also two emergency vehicles visible. I hope that man has not broken the rules. I'll kill him if he has. My middle aged temper was building and that awful animal hormone: adrenalin started to take over. It ceased my good logic and it stole my moral compass as I neurotically searched for anything else nearby that I could hate and vilify.

Hugh MacDonald was not going to be the end of me. I'm not going to allow it to happen. He'll be sorry. I'll make him pay.

By the time I reached the gathered crowd I was in a fury, but I nonetheless, prudently slowed my progress substantially as I neared the epicenter of the milling crowd. There, a prone body lay on the ground and

one of two law enforcement technicians had just administered an intramuscular injection into the thigh of a poorly dressed catatonic man who was poorly shaved, malnourished, and covered in scabs.

I was shocked with what I saw. There were onlookers standing about and some appeared to be just curious, some seemed concerned and some appeared indifferent, like why stop and have a gander if you don't care and thankfully one of the onlookers was our Hugh and he was staring right back at me. I smiled at him; I couldn't help it because frankly I was overcome with relief that he was not the object of the law enforcement technicians' attention, but I could plainly see that Hugh was genuinely disappointed that I had chosen to spy on him.

So I broke his trust. It hurt a little, but I felt no guilt once the effects of the adrenaline subsided. It also occurred to me that Emanuel Logan is not quite as human as I once thought because with just a dash of adrenaline his teeth became bared.

For the first time I felt guilt and it kept me up that night. Hugh slept well in the next room; I could hear him and I felt jealous and of all things - his sleep apnea. At least he could sleep soundly now knowing what he probably had already suspected - that his high strung friend was not to be trusted.

What is it about Toronto? It's a big metropolis and quite frankly filled with plenty of pleasant marsh men, but since I arrived here I often think the worst of people. And I will admit that I also think of Peter. Peter was my last courier and as anima I almost completely erased any memories I had of him. However, now I recall that he was young, and he was healthy and he had a brilliant mind that you could really fill out. I do wonder what happened to him; he'd be forty-six solar years older now if he is still alive.

If it were so, he'd be elderly now. That's the trouble with living. Couriers have a difficult life. It's taxing on them. Many become outsiders and turn inward. Mental health issues are common. Never mind their abduction and surgery. Life is harsh in the marsh – there's a lot of weathering.

It was time for us to leave North York and Anne E. Mah had booked us new temporary lodgings in another Toronto suburb called Etobicoke. This one was a ground floor suite with parking just steps away out front. It's a struggle sometimes to keep up with the local accents and pronunciations for the names of the localities that you might encounter in the world of the marsh men. The Soo is one example and Etobicoke is another and it's pronounced: 'Uh-tow-buh-kow', and in the case of the Soo it is vernacular for the French word: 'Sault' and of course Wawa has its own aboriginal roots. I also found the local news media to be the best place to garner this kind of information. There was plenty of interesting things to learn from local news presenters on the politics and culture of a town or city. If you don't want to stick out, you have to do your homework and learn the lay of the land.

At any rate, there was another huge park nearby our new abode; Anne E. Mah is thoughtful about things like that. My nature loving companion pretty much required a generous amount of outdoor time and she was well aware of that by now. For me, parks are nice, but they are not like our former location: the Great Lake Superior. The local lake here was citified and almost inaccessible along its waterfront. I like big city noise, and frankly only it allows me to relax knowing that my own presence is safely hidden as long as I remain quiet and still in the cacophony of the urban world. Parks are a nice place but only for a visit. Those team members on my bandolier have no need to worry – I'll get them safely home. Those travelling with my companion however, I don't know.

For a minute after we had moved in I thought the birds from North York had followed us to Etobicoke, but no. These were a brand new lot, and dozens of them perched themselves along the window sills of our new home. A single lady who lived alone beneath us in a basement suite found it so amusing that she'd point it out to us each time she saw us.

"I've never seen such a sight," she said to me catching me exiting our flat alone one morning. "They're not afraid. They're of all different types.

They appear to fly after your friend. Like down the street,” she added with an effervescent giggle.

“I haven’t noticed,” I lied.

“He does love animals,” I admitted as I shirked myself away from her, and thankfully she was leaving to go back home to her ‘Manitoba’ early the next morning.

I don’t want people like her to ever remember me. I’m like the rolling stone that gathers no moss, and I see why we need to move every week or two; marsh men are actually overtly social. They are far more engaged with their environment than they think they are.

I began to putter around with our old escape pod that I had dutifully saved from our first moments as Hugh MacDonald and Manny Logan. I could feel the need to do so like a storm was coming. I could feel it like that sixth sense that marsh men talk of. I could feel it my marsh man bones.

I learned a trick or two back in the seventies on how to confound marsh men. The most useful way was to interfere with their electrical power supply. And with some practice and improvisation of our own escape pod’s power source I made it so that I could interfere with anything located nearby that required electrical conduction or induction for that matter, to operate. I could stop it, reverse it, slow it, or simply overload it if I wanted to. I got so good at it back then that I could interrupt any electrical activity for up to a one hundred meter perimeter. Not something you want to do in some cases, but no one is going to consider the quiet and unassuming, but also nearby marsh man with his hand in his pocket as the source of the trouble.

I can remember reversing an analog clock movement on a kitchen wall while I was seated three meters away across the room. I can recall stopping traffic at the exit from a shopping plaza. And, I bricked a marsh man’s car back in nineteen-seventy-nine. All those moments were in my youthful days spent inside the mind of a young marsh man named Peter Thorncliffe.

As the reproductive season approached, our days here in the marsh grew longer, and the mid day temperatures rose too - to more comfortable levels as the local star tracked higher and higher in the sky above us. Hugh and I have been successful. We've kept our presence secret in these marsh lands of our hosts for more than a month now and at the end of each week we'd toast each other with a cup of tea or a cola and reflect on our recent successes, and there have been many. Now, after more than twenty sunsets a tiny light was there for us to focus upon at the end of our proverbial tunnel. In about eighty earth days we'll be home again and in the safety of our crystals.

"Manny, I have a toothache," said my grimacing partner the following morning after our last toast night.

So I asked the man, "Let me see. Open your mouth Hugh."

But it wasn't that easy. I needed more light and a tiny mirror.

"We'll salt it," I said. "Tomorrow I'll collect a few things together and we'll have a closer look."

"How about I go see a dentist?" pleaded Hugh.

"No. That's forbidden. You should know that. Rinse your mouth thoroughly with some warm salt water, once before bed and twice through the day. It works wonders I've heard. I read it on the internet," I said to Hugh who was rolling his eyes in disbelief at me.

Well in hindsight, I should have looked at Hugh's weeks ago considering his marsh man history. Opiate addicts such as Hugh MacDonald typically possess a whole host of dental issues such as gum inflammation, tooth decay, dry mouth, and broken teeth resulting from bruxism, and my examination of Hugh's teeth the following day found signs of all of these.

Anne E. Mah suggested we try a more effective oral rinse that was available at most apothecaries. I however could clearly see the problem tooth. It was a lower molar; the second one from the back on the lower right. It was clearly broken and had a soft, shrinking abscess bump just beneath it.

Hugh thought I was crazy when I suggested that I could pull the tooth for him. I was hurt; I only offered to pull it in an effort to help him. Nonetheless, I ordered a beautiful pair of mandibular, cow horn forceps and a set of dental elevators for prying from an online dental tool supplier. They were made of a high grade, German stainless steel and had a five star rating; only the best for my friend and of course only if the need arises.

The following day Hugh's pain had subsided but only moderately so, and he remained inside our rental icing his sore face. He was so pathetic, and I must say in some very real, aggravating pain. And lately when upset, Hugh had this curious pattern: if he was on the mend or in good shape he'd watch his nature documentaries concerning birds or fish, and if his condition was trending negatively he'd watch hardcore Great Ape docs concerning the likes of rutting Silver Backs, or competing Gibbons and et al..

I was at a loss on how to help him. In time the salt water rinses should help. If he can't wait till then I'm pretty certain that I could get the offending molar out, but I had no tools to do so just yet. I didn't want to broach the subject with him anyways until I had both the forceps and a local anesthetic at the ready. The staged monkey dramas were getting to me, so I left the marsh man to his misery and went out.

How does one buy Lidocaine or Procaine illicitly anyways? I don't know, but today I was going to find out. And it was so simple: you simply use your timepiece. You text or have conversations with sketchy marsh men until you find a suitable hook up.

So I waited for a marsh man in a parking lot in the comfort of my Japanese bread box. The gentleman was prompt and right on time and I

paid him in cash which I had obtained earlier in my travels from another retailer at the point of sale of a hardware shop for a handy, strap-on headlamp that I felt I had to have.

Ali; my Lidocaine hook-up was a cheery South Asian fella of twenty solar years or so. He also appeared to be a man of few English words and he handed me a small cardboard carton containing several cartridges of dental purposed liquid Lidocaine. Further, he also threw in a dental syringe, a smile and his business card – all for a couple of hundred dollars.

I bid Ali goodbye and he returned to his waiting shiny black sedan with tinted windows and in no time he was gone as quickly as he appeared. I too left thereafter, and watched my rear view mirror for trouble; one never knows after all, but there were no authority figures following my progress and no shiny black sedans either.

I had only been away for a few hours but the situation in the living room of our rental had deteriorated further. The tenor in the room was thick with tension being emitted from the big screen and Hugh had draped himself over the sofa in a lifeless way. There were grunts and growls coming from perturbed adolescent gorillas who were not properly cohabiting with one and another in some jungle in the lowland forests of East Central Africa.

I raised my voice over the din coming from the big screen, “Hugh have there been any deliveries brought to the door while I was out?”

He lifted a listless hand and pointed to a newly arrived cardboard carton that had a sticker prominently attached to the top of it that read: ‘Expedited Package’ in large red letters.

My heart rate picked up; were these the remaining tools that I required? And yes they were! I deduced after carefully examining the shipping slip.

“Hugh,” I said excitedly. “I have everything we need to pull that rotten molar of yours out – and painlessly! What do you think of that?” I asked

the pale marsh man with a swollen jaw.

Nahhhh - or some other unintelligible utterance came out from his aching mouth.

“That’s a no I think my friend. Yes?” I asked for some confirmation. He waived his arms around furiously back at me to confirm his decision on the matter.

“That’s okay Hugh” I lied. “But should you change your mind: I’m here for you. Does it still hurt?” I asked, but he didn’t answer, but there was something coming from one of his eyes that I would think that not any anima has ever experienced before. It was a tiny tear drop.

It took ten more hours and well into the middle of the night at that, before Hugh would agree to allow me to remove his aching tooth. I told him everything I knew about the procedure before we started. I told him how the two percent solution of Lidocaine would sting as I administered it. I told him how I would push the syringe’s needle tip to about five millimeters into his gum and then aspirate about one third to a half of the cartridges contents, withdraw the needle a tad, and then empty the balance of the cartridge of Lidocaine into his gum before removing the needle tip.

We used the sofa and a bundle of pillows to get him into just the right position. I put my head lamp on and turned up the baboon chatter on the big screen to console my patient, and waited for the anesthetic to work.

“Are you ready Hugh?” I asked, five minutes later and he nodded his head in confirmation. And I had that rotten tooth of his out in less than three minutes!

Who doesn’t like to help a friend? And I got to feel ‘like a million bucks’ as they used to say back in the seventies when I was once Peter Thorncliffe.

The following day Hugh was back to watching fish and bird videos and another newly found penchant: vintage animated cartoons. Oh there's so much to absorb in the latter; they were practically social commentaries on moral and cultural marsh man behavior and delivered with a delightful, childish flair.

Anne E. Mah had found us new lodgings and this time in another Toronto suburb called Brampton. They were all becoming a blur to Hugh and I. Next time I'm hoping we rent some space somewhere different like in the Niagara region where we can watch some of that great lake water fall into that chasm called the Niagara Gorge.

We now had six suitcases of clothing and – 'stuff' for the lack of a better descriptive word. Soon we were going to require a bigger bread box if we don't start downsizing. Anne E. Mah suggested we donate some of our single use items such as my beloved mandibular, cow horn, dental forceps to one of many charitable organizations that take in unwanted things, and then resell them for a profit to help provide for the many disenfranchised marsh men who live in poverty.

Our new home was a little less extravagant than the others we've had, but it still had an enormous big screen television. The place was quiet and frankly almost too quiet. There were no noisy distractions like ambulance sirens and the like. No playgrounds; at least not nearby. And it was here that I had a very powerful and vivid dream of someone I try to forget.

Dreams are illogical. Their only purpose it seems is to expose the flaws and weaknesses of the individual who's having one. So this was who I dreamt of.

Peter Thorncliffe was just eight years old when he was abducted by anima contractors. The year was nineteen sixty-five, the nearest town was called Timmins, and Peter had just one simple goal in his young life at the time and that was that he wanted to become a cub scout with a local troop that met at the Timmins Community Center each Tuesday evening

throughout the school year. He was all signed up for it and looking forward to learning about the great outdoors and the nature of things.

Peter too, had also personally saved thirty dollars doing chores to buy a canvas pup tent and a haversack to help outfit himself for that goal, and on his third night sleeping alone outdoors in his little tent, and safe inside his family's fenced backyard, he was abducted for two hours by anima technicians. They painlessly implanted a tiny crystal receiver into his flesh that night just above his C1 spinal vertebrae for the purpose of preparing him as an anima courier for future use some day when his person might be needed. Though the procedure was painless it was not without considerable psychological trauma and it haunted him for the rest of his days and mine, too.

I have abduction dreams, and they are those of my former courier. Sometimes they are from a third person perspective and sometimes they are from Peter's first person point of view. All are terrifying to experience. Sometimes, they begin with that sensation of one being carried by mysterious arms while you sleep. You are limp and frozen in fear. You cannot speak or call out for help. Your consciousness becomes compromised. You don't know what's happening to your person at the hands of a faceless enemy. You have no control. You are at someone else's mercy.

You wake up, but its hours later and yet you feel like you never slept. You cry. You take inventory. You think about it till it hurts all the next day because none of it makes any sense, and as the days go by thereafter, you begin to feel better until one day you are summoned - to ultimately become a courier.

Though I didn't care for our new short term rental Hugh however did. He enjoyed the peaceful walks that he took by himself each afternoon. Often he'd shop at a small local market on his way home and we'd enjoy frankfurters and mac and cheese – a favorite dinner for both of us. Pain

had wizened him up it seemed. He learned to enjoy life more and I was secretly jealous. What possible wisdom could he have learned? And after all it was me who saved the day by removing that wretched tooth as I remember.

One evening he told me that he bought a kite earlier in the morning. He took it to the not too far away park and assembled it and with the aid of a little person, launched it up and into the sky so he could feel the power of the wind just like his bird friends do.

“Hugh. We are not to engage with little people. It’s a rule as you should know,” I said without getting too angry or too severe.

“He was by himself and without supervision. I gave the kite to him once I was done with it,” replied Hugh with a light in his eye.

“That doesn’t make it okay.” I responded.

“Yes it does. I made his life better,” replied Hugh.

“By giving him a kite?” I asked.

“Yes. Little acts of kindness can make the world a better place,” answered a smug Hugh.

I wanted the debate because I know I would win it because little acts of kindness just like loose lips - can sink ships. We are part of a rescue mission. There are eight other anima depending on Hugh and I to get them to safety. We can’t make mistakes not even little ones for the favor of a little person. Good judgment tells me to remind Hugh of his responsibilities and to appeal to his sense of duty, but arguing with this man will achieve nothing. He’s really not quite the same anima that I once knew.

After our dinner, I spent some friend time with Hugh. We watched his latest media discovery and which of course concerned animals. This time there was a whole village of them living out their lives as if they were marsh men though they were clearly rodents, rabbits, and frogs and such.

They were real animals however, each with their own staged personality and each spoken by a marsh man voice. Each ten minute episode included a parable concerning, justice, humility and good sense. The ingenuity of the production was infectiously clever, but it left one to wonder why marsh men don't behave more like their imaginary creations. Well I suppose that's when something called life happens and drama takes over.

Anne E. Mah has come through for me and has located a week long, short term rental for us in Niagara Falls. I've secretly wanted to visit Niagara Falls for a few weeks now and that's because I think I've found my Peter Thorncliffe. His smiling face showed up in an information video for a long term care facility called the Marvin Gardens Nursing Home and Hospice. I know it's him because couriers have a certain look about them that apparently transcends both dementia and infirmity. It's a glow, a sparkle. Not a halo or an aura or something like that. It's a charm that gets doors opened for them and gets difficult people out of their way; it's more of a charisma than anything else that comes to mind. I think I'd like to see him once again and if he is infirm that's okay. I just want to tip my hat to the man. Words will not be necessary.

"Well Hugh, at the end of this week we'll be half way through this rescue mission. Seven more weeks in the marsh, and then we'll be out of here and back where we belong – safe in our crystals. There's bound to be more work for two experienced marine life technicians like you and me. What's a light year or two of travelling if you are not alive for it anyways?" I said to Hugh as we headed down the Queens Highway to our new digs in the Falls.

Hugh of course didn't answer; he was busy watching nature videos on his tablet from the comfort of the passenger seat of our Japanese bread box. He often ignored my banter. That's alright I'm a grownup. I can see the bigger picture and my place in it. I don't need his juvenile approval.

"Manny?"

"Yes Hugh."

“Can we see the Horse Shoe Falls tonight? The weather is clear for tonight but rainy for tomorrow.”

“Of course we can, but you know; it’s a twenty minute walk from our lodgings to the big light show,” I said.

Hugh was acutely aware that I’ll drive anywhere in the world in a Japanese bread box, as long as the traffic is moving. I hate grid lock. These days if I have to wait for two lights to make a turn at an intersection for instance, I’ll lose my mind. What’s the point of road travel if you’re not moving? It was all that living in Toronto that did me in. I lost hours of living there that I’ll never get back. And all for what? But for a precious bit of anonymity.

The new digs in the Falls were good. There was a big screen TV, a vibrating bed in the master bedroom, and a balcony that was at least pointed in the correct direction, but still provided no view of the Niagara River or much else unless you liked concrete and glass to look at. It took an hour to get settled in and eat our take out of protein and carbs that we had delivered, and then off we went as anima couriers disguised as tourists to visit one of nature’s greatest wonders here on Earth.

As we walked, I must say that I can note that there was a real diverse assortment of marsh men as in culture and dress, and more so than say what one might see in downtown Toronto. There was also a small but noticeable carnival atmosphere that grew in intensity as you got closer to the downtown area and then - there were the casinos; big massive ones and situated in two tall towers overlooking the Niagara Gorge, and where many a marsh man’s dreams have been dashed.

“We’ll check them out later,” I said to Hugh as we continued on towards the much promoted and touted Niagara Falls.

Oh indeed, it was clearly a sight to behold.

“Hugh this is ridiculous or should I say - incredible,” I shouted to a grinning Hugh who was taking in this enormous watery vista.

I've seen oceans that wherever you might look there would be no normal horizon to see but just huge swells of water rising and falling all around you. This was similar, but here it was falling water and an immense amount of it; three thousand and one hundred tons of it per second to be more precise. The noise it generated was deafening. And all I could think of while I took the experience in was the imagined fright of our little lab going over it and into the giant whirlpool swirling all about at the bottom of this watery chasm. I could have happily spent the all evening here, but there was plenty of competition for a good view, and I'm sure that after an hour or two, I'd arouse the suspicion of someone in authority, what with my goofy grin and awestruck stare.

After some reflection, I shouted to Hugh, "If these two prestigious lakes were not so polluted I'd love to work here!"

"Me too," agreed Hugh over the watery din.

You walk away from something like that and as awesome as it was, it makes you wonder for a minute or two. It's so beautiful but it's just a watery anomaly. If a big lake drains over a cliff what becomes of it is just a big splash.

I thought after that treat for the senses that the rest of the evening would be awesome, but we made the mistake of visiting one of the casinos. Where we were greeted by smiling faces and lots of jovial chatter at the casino's entrance, but once we entered the gaming area there was nothing but a stony silence. The place was half empty and what marsh men, who were in attendance, looked both sombre and contrite as they sat in front of a variety of electronic machines that for the most part paid out no more than thirteen cents on every dollar invested. Oh, there was plenty of flashing signage promising big winnings but that rarely happened. I saw a thousand poor souls that evening.

"All you need to do is to find a loose machine," said my numbskull partner beside me.

“Indeed,” I said while rolling my eyes. “Well we have no need to find out because we have plenty of money,” I said in an effort to discourage Hugh.

“It’s that one,” said Hugh pointing to a machine that was presently in use at the end of a ten dollar a play, row of machines.

A sour looking marsh man was sitting at the machine in question and I suspect he’d been there for a good part of an hour. You could see him collecting his personal items together as he scanned the room for another enticing machine promising winnings of thousands and thousands of dollars.

“I’ll wager you dinner if you can make some real money on ten plays or less at that machine mister smart guy,” I said.

“You’re on, Manny,” exclaimed a rabid Hugh who had become suddenly bit by the lure of gaming.

We bought ten, ten dollar tokens from a smiley man at a tall counter and on Hugh’s fifth play on that machine whose seat was still warm from its previous occupant; Hugh won a thousand dollars.

“Okay mister ‘easy come, easy go’. I’m buying lunch, but not here. Let’s get going,” I said feeling like a fool for challenging an anima at a wager. What was I thinking anyhow?

It’s not like we are all a bunch of lucky dogs or something, but what we do understand is the math and science of things. And if something is predictable, well we can be pretty good at picking the correct outcome.

“How did you do that back there?” I asked Hugh over a sirloin steak dinner on my side of the table and an unappetizing vegan dish on the other.

“I did the math and then I listened to my heart beat and I settled my focus on where I thought fate might strike,” said Hugh as he lifted a glass of lake water to his lips.

"How do you hear your own heartbeat?" I asked him.

"Well maybe it's the pulse at my carotid artery but it's something that I can hear in my head if I concentrate. It's slow when I want to sleep. It beats fast when I'm anxious. Slow is no. Fast is yes. Should I ask a question?"

"That's psychotic behavior Hugh. You are hearing things."

"No it isn't. I'm listening to my blood flow Manny. I'm not having a break with reality. It's not a hallucination. It's more like a mindfulness that you can acquire from practising transcendental meditation."

"And when did all this start happening?" I asked.

"With Hector first, then the birds, and bees now, too."

"What about slot machines?" I asked.

"Manny once a year a depressed marsh man who gambles regularly will win big. That's part of the calculation. The house knows it. The gambler knows it. You just have to pick the lucky one out of a room of a hundred unlucky ones. It's easier than you think. I took his machine. I stole his fate. The guy was sticking out in there like a sore thumb."

"And the animals? Well they like a steady hand, a sturdy branch and a calm, secure old soul. Does that not make sense Manny? How else do you think I got out of that big old fish?" said my smiling anima friend.

"So you looked for someone who you felt was going to be lucky and that he would likely be attending the loose machines?"

"Yes. He appeared to be well seasoned, you know a man of some experience and someone who fate often strikes. He could very well become a man who has a short and volatile life," added Hugh.

"And what does that make you may I ask?"

"His predator," answered Hugh.

I like the Hugh who watches nature videos. And I like the Hugh who pets stray cats and the clever Hugh who can escape from the belly of a giant fish. I like the Hugh who birds will flock all around, but this cold calculating Hugh; he scares me.

Marvin Gardens Nursing Home and Hospice was located on Morrison Street near a large cemetery. I left Hugh alone back home in our rental. He was deep into a shock video that was highlighting the top ten most threatened species of animals from extinction here on Earth. It was a somber subject for an obviously very committed animal lover like Hugh. Existential stuff like this could make his anima blood boil. We are after all the stewards of all that lives in this universe. Animals are innocent little souls, and they and all the plant life on this planet are the result of some murky water and a local star's emitted energy.

It was getting to feel more like summer as we got further into the reproductive season and I was hoping that just maybe, that Peter Thornecliff would be found outdoors sitting on a patio chair in an enclosed area for just that kind of thing and enjoying some fresh air. However, that was the romantic optimist in me speaking this morning, and I circled and hovered about the place for the better part of an hour and entertained ideas of how I might get myself in there because up on the second level of the building I could see a sunroom. It was beckoning me. Peter is in there I can feel him just like my brethren felt the lucky energy of a winner in a depressing casino yesterday.

The cemetery across the street afforded both a good view of the nursing home, and a justification for my presence there in the first place. It was the old part of the cemetery that I stood in and I was admiring the monument for a Samuel Beckwith born in eighteen fifty-three and died sixty-five years later in nineteen eighteen when a small private bus pulled up to the front entrance of the nursing home. A cardboard sign in the little bus's front window said: Niagara Casino.

I studied the scene closely from my strategic view. A short queue of slow moving elderly marsh men and women slowly boarded the bus and one did stand out from the others; he helped and aided those less able to board the bus. If only I was a little closer, because if it was Peter; I'd see those tell tale signs of his infectious charisma more clearly even if it had been diminished by his age. Everyone that boarded the little bus appeared to be quite excited. I bet it was a regular weekly excursion for those who could still get out with the assistance of a drive to in this case a casino and back home again.

I know where I'm going, and it will take me about an hour by foot, but I have an idea on how to get there in half the time. I downloaded an app for the timepiece and opened an account for a scooter rental company. The app promptly reserved a ready and fully charged scooter that was located only a few blocks away at a lamppost.

Oh, Hugh would love this. This is ridiculously awesome. I'm mobile, and on just two wheels, no less! It's easy. You follow the rules of the road and hope and pray that everyone else does, too. I must look like a jolly idiot right now navigating the morning traffic on Stanley Street surrounded by Japanese bread boxes, transit buses, and delivery vans.

Look out marsh men! Anima on a scooter here! I thought out loud while ringing the scooter's bell.

I must say though, that navigating intersections was tricky and not for the faint of heart. My tiny one hundred and fifty millimeter wheels where no match for the neighboring four wheeled behemoths that ruled the road around me. For example: my rig weighed in at twenty-two kilograms as opposed to the eighteen hundred kilograms for a Japanese bread box.

Ah. I could finally see the casino now, and I began scouting for some parking where I could lock the scooter up. I used a park bench. It was convenient after all, and then I headed directly towards the entrance doors of the shimmering casino.

It must be that day of the week or that day of the month because it seemed that everyone in the casino today had a head of white hair. Seniors day I figured, and I scoured the rooms and hallways for Peter or his likeness. If he'd just laugh I'd find him in no time. He had brilliant laugh that screamed here I am, and look at me at one moment, and you're so funny and you are so fantastic the next moment. Peter; - laugh a little for your old friend. Emanuel Logan needs a reason to keep on living.

My heart started racing when I got close to the bar. Fast means yes. Yes?

"That's fantastic," I heard as clear as a bell over a cacophony of joyful voices in the packed room.

Say it again. Say it again. And I whipped my head about to take in the room in a quick three-sixty.

Look for a guy who is entertaining at least two people, that's what Peter would do. Look for groups of three and groups of four.

"That's fantastic!" I heard again coming from a man whose back was to me and facing a group of laughing seniors sitting at a booth.

"Turn around Peter I can't see you", I whispered, and which he did just as though he had been summoned to do so. His face was solemn and pale like he was suddenly unwell, and all that lovely laughter at the table stopped rather abruptly.

I'd had enough. I'd seen my old courier friend Peter and I felt like a million dollars for having done so. Thank you my old friend. I shall never haunt you again and I left the room.

When I arrived back at our rental I found Hugh immersed in digesting a large pepperoni pizza, and just like a pro he was folding the slices together to optimize the experience. He pointed to me and the pizza and with some further sign language he invited me to join him. Apparently there wasn't

enough meat in the pepperoni to be considered non vegan he told me later when his mouth was less full.

Between bites of pizza I asked him about his day? He had been out he said, and then he broke into a lengthy diatribe about the injustice of the marsh mans' life.

"I saw hundreds of walking cases of insulin insensitivity, a hundred or two of homeless people, and hundreds more with obesity and heart disease. I was accosted on the street for spare change, cigarettes and offers of sex for sale. I saw alcoholics and opioid addicts. I think I saw preoccupied marsh men from every culture, class, and country in the world today."

"I heard crying little ones, and I saw the vacant stares of dementia in the elderly. I felt all the anxiety that plagues this species. What a mixed up crazy place this world of marsh men is. Living here could be so much better if it were just managed correctly. Their priorities are all wrong."

"Manny. It causes me anxiety just thinking about it. I just get so obsessed with the injustice of it all. Look at me; stuffing my face with empty carbs and sugary drinks. It's so stressful living here and it shouldn't be. That's all I got to say about it," and then he belched.

"How was your day Manny? Better than mine I hope." asked Hugh.

"Do you remember me talking about my former courier: Peter Thorncliffe?" I answered.

"I think so," said Hugh with a raised eyebrow.

"I went to see him today. He lives in town here at a retirement home."

Hugh's raised eyebrow had now transformed itself into a double furrowed brow as he looked at me and waited for me to elaborate.

"I didn't speak with him Hugh. I just had to see him. I dream of him you know. I've told you that. It went well and I will not do it again. He did something very special for me forty-five years ago and I worry for my present courier now. How will this impact his life? Its guilt you know. We are anima. And we are the stewards of all that's living in this universe - and admittedly we are not the best managers either."

"Hugh?" I asked?

"Yes," answered Hugh.

"Have you ever rode a scooter?"

"No," he answered with a surprised smile.

"Well you're going to love it! Do you want to try it tonight? It'll be a gas!" I said smiling.

Well, our week in Niagara was coming to a close and Anne E. Mah had booked another short term rental for Hugh and I in the city of Hamilton for a two week stay. She also brought us some good news that our team was to be reassigned to another water planet just a mere ten and a half light years down the road, so to speak. I'm sure that we can all agree that the rest and downtime for travel would be wonderful for all of our team members. I personally can hardly wait for the end of this ordeal and those of us who are temporarily confined to the bandoliers; if only they knew – they'd be ecstatic with excitement, too.

I'd heard recently that the city of Hamilton was Toronto's Brooklyn these days, and I think these admirers of the city were not just referring to its close proximity to Toronto, but more for its affordability regarding the price of its real estate. The Hamilton that I remember from the seventies was primarily known for its steel industry and working class population, and Toronto was known for its many white collar occupations.

Nonetheless, Anne E. Mah was confident that we'd be safe and anonymous in this city's burgeoning population of a half of a million souls.

Our furnished residence was located in the west end of the city. Geographically speaking, the city was built upon shale and clay sediments and the same escarpment that the Niagara River spilt over and into Lake Ontario was here too, and it cut through the city from East to West. Peppered throughout the city were small cascades and waterfalls which were tiny in size when compared to the great Niagara Falls, but very beautiful nonetheless. Before the advent of steam and electrical generation technologies these small falls which were in turn fed by running streams supplied a natural energy source for water wheel powered saw mills, grain mills and steel shaping mills. And thus, a working class city got started with changing the world for the better or for the worse.

There were several parks nearby and a number of nature trails near our new residence for the pleasure of our nature loving Hugh. A shallow body of water named Cootes Paradise was just ten minutes away by foot and this marsh was the source of twenty percent of the fish population of the attached Lake Ontario and our man Hugh was attracted to it like a magnet.

It confounded him how much of this vital natural habitat had been spoiled by industry and urban sprawl, but none of that kept him from visiting the waterfront almost daily. The birds were back and sometimes flocked behind him as he walked the paths and trails that ran throughout the parks and green spaces. He also got the unwanted attention of some Canadian Geese and a swan or two. I must say however their behavior was unnatural for wild fowl; he looked like the pied piper at times with a marching mob of feathered friends following behind him.

One day, I accompanied Hugh for a walk and we rested for a few minutes at a wooden rail at the end of a short pier or lookout, and as we looked down into the water fish appeared from out of nowhere, and schooled about in the water at our feet. When we got home that day there were geese in our yard.

“Hugh this has to stop. There are six geese out in our backyard right now. People will notice and soon enough they’ll connect the dots and direct their attention to the weirdo that just moved in here. You can’t feed them. You can’t encourage them. You can’t be friends – with wild animals. It’s just not right!” I said and I was a tad upset.

“I don’t feed them Manny. I think they like my vibe,” answered a somewhat bewildered Hugh.

“You got more than a vibe going on. Has this happened before as anima?” I asked.

“Well,” said Hugh and he paused for a moment. “I was swallowed by a pike if you remember,” said Hugh.

“That fish was trying to eat you. That’s just foolish thinking Hugh. The fish was hungry. He liked you as a meal not as a chum to hang-out with. This is crazy talk. It makes no sense. Maybe you need to wear a metallic hat or a lead vest - or something? I don’t know, but we’ll get to the bottom of it. I’ll get on it right away,” I told him.

Anne E. Mah had no immediate suggestions other than our lock down until she could arrange some new lodgings away from wildlife and I ended our conversation by asking, “What’s going to happen in five weeks time when we need to spend our last week in the Soo?”

I gave him the news: It was lock down for him until Anne E. Mah can find us somewhere else. If he required something beyond the confines of our current residence he’d need to talk to me first. Hugh was not - amused.

The following morning the weather is warm, sunny and beautiful. Hugh is in the living room watching nature videos while sulking over his bit of bad luck. We’ve pretty much seen all of them now. I’ve grown tired of them, but Hugh could watch them over and over again so I left him alone while I gathered things up and packed them away into our ten pieces of luggage.

After an hour or so of tidying and packing, I noticed a dozen or more pigeons on the fence rail outside in the backyard and it went through my head that not even brick walls were thick enough to keep Hugh's vibe at bay. Then there were several starlings at the sill of all the windows I checked, and they were pecking on the glass! It was an awful racket that they were making. And then suddenly there were even more birds and some were actually colliding into the glass and making an awful clatter. What's with them? They're going to do harm to themselves.

I went to get Hugh in the living room to come and see, and though I found that the television was on, - there was no Hugh in the room!

"Hugh!" I called out, but there was no answer and I searched the apartment for him but of course he was nowhere to be found.

Now in a panic, I then went directly to my carry-on bag and collected the escape pod that I had altered perhaps just a month ago if I remember correctly.

As odd as it appeared, these birds wanted to lead me to something in a hurry so I went outside and there was a cacophony of alarmed birds communicating amongst each other all over the neighborhood. You'd think there was a three alarm fire going on but I knew where to head to, and I headed down the street as fast as I could without running, to Cootes Paradise.

I was packing trouble for whoever was foolish enough to get in my way but I kept my cool. I was not prepared however for what I came upon. A police bread box was parked with all its lights flashing at the bottom of a hill and near the entrance of a parking lot for the park's visitors. I could see that someone who was under suspicion was seated in the backseat of the police bread box. There was no doubt as to who it was because there at least fifty birds all about the cruiser. Some were in flight doing diving and soaring maneuvers while others were on their feet marching about. I spotted an available park bench that was located perhaps thirty meters from the police bread box and I casually took a seat.

Not more than one hundred meters away from where I sat was a busy six lane highway that connected the Cities of Brantford, Hamilton, Burlington, and Oakville and etcetera to the Metropolitan City of Toronto an hour or so east down the road from my park bench. I adjusted a few settings on the pod that I had in my pocket and gave it a short pulse. The police bread box's lights went silent and a car coming down the hill lost power and ran into a large shrub or a tree at the bottom of the hill and about fifty bread boxes and large vans on the highway suddenly had a chain reaction collision. What a noise that was! It was like a dozen tiny thunderclaps in succession and with no horn honking involved of course. That's the 'sound of victory' I thought. I hope no one's hurt, but we anima cannot be discovered.

And as suddenly as all this calamity had happened the police bread box came back to life and its lone operator got out and scratched his head in disbelief. He ambled over to the civilian bread box that had collided with the smallish tree at the bottom of the hill to check on its driver and passengers who all appeared to be okay. This poor policeman was about to have his busiest day in his professional life and I awaited for the man to do some calculus.

From my vantage I could see that there was some real carnage on the highway, but thankfully no smoke could be seen. Those in the middle of the calamity seemed to be okay because all those vans and bread boxes had lost power at the same moment. But for those who were following the power outage, they unfortunately took the real beating because those vans and bread boxes were still fully powered at the moment of their impact with the idled ones. Overall, it was an excellent demonstration of the power of kinetic energy I thought.

So now I waited for the police officer to do the right thing and release Hugh or things would have to get even more interesting. And Bingo; do they still play that now? It was real popular back in the seventies. It reminded me of big smoky rooms and large marsh man ladies. The dutiful and civic minded policeman opened the rear passenger compartment of his bread box and sent our Hugh packing.

Well I was not about to follow the man. I'll let him find his own way home. One thing is for certain however, and that's that an anima courier was recorded on a police body camera. Anne E. Mah is going to be livid, but it won't be the end of the world; digital things like that can be made to disappear with the click of a button.

I reset my timepiece and there was an urgent message from Anne E. Mah who demanded that I immediately respond to her query: Someone in the City of Hamilton had activated anima technology five minutes ago and she demanded an explanation. I explained the situation as best as I could and that I thought that I had responded to the threat responsibly. She disagreed, and thought that I had over reacted and was too heavy handed in my response to the threat. She also said that I was going to be formally reprimanded for willful misuse of anima technology, and that she would be interviewing Hugh in the coming minutes for his part in the matter. I was also directed to return directly to our rental and expedite the packing that I had already started.

I was being written up, and all because of this incompetent dummy that I had been assigned to work with. How do ridiculous things like this happen? But in real life I have learned: that we have much less control over things than we think we do.

I met Hugh in the kitchen. He was not well. Tears were rolling down his cheeks. He'd been instructed to only move independently under my or Anne E. Mah's direction for the rest of the mission.

"Manny. All I wanted to do was count how many new goslings had been hatched overnight down at the waterfront," cried Hugh.

"We'll talk about it later. Presently, you and I need to load up the bread box and get out of this city as soon as possible as per Anne E. Mah," I said, and I returned back to the task of packing what I had already half finished before all this chaos got started.

We took side roads to get clear of the traffic chaos that we had just created; headed north to the 'Four – Oh – One', travelled east, and then north to the city of Peterborough where we were to set up camp for the next two weeks. Hugh was quiet as we drove and though I was angry with him I had some pity for him, too. This wasn't entirely his fault; there had to be something else at play here, too. Perhaps it's because as anima, we follow a more program oriented approach to things that are presented before us. The program here however – is that there is no program. It's not quite the organized chaos as they used to joke about back in the seventies, but life here seems to require both a plan and some good decision making. I wish, and I dearly wish now that I could return back to my boring and uneventful studies back in the waters of the Great Lake Superior and its algae's chloroplasts.

"Hugh. Things may very well become more challenging for you. We are literally leaving the frying pan to join the fire. Peterborough is a rural city center. Anne E. Mah has found a country side safe house for us near Peterborough. We will be isolated from neighbors, limited to one visit to town every two days, and you must stay within thirty meters of the rental. No ifs, ands, or buts, - or animals for that matter! If you fail to follow these rules Anne E. Mah has recommended the use of marsh man sedatives. This is the country. People here pay attention to strangers and strange things. You can't be going around behaving like a woodland fairy out here."

"What kind of sedatives?" asked Hugh.

"I don't know," I answered curtly. "Perhaps something that might moderate your mysterious animal magnetism," I offered. "We're not talking about putting you into a coma! At least I hope not," I added.

"What did that police officer have to say for himself?" I asked.

"He was polite. He checked my identification and asked if I was visiting the city of Hamilton?" said Hugh.

"Did he say why he was called upon to investigate you?" I asked.

"He said there was a call about a man disturbing a beaver," answered Hugh.

"A beaver; as in *Castor Canadensis*?" I asked.

Hugh nodded in agreement.

"They have beaver in that cesspool?" I asked.

"Apparently yes. At least one anyways," answered Hugh.

"What did you do? Throw a rock at him?" I asked.

"No. I wouldn't do that. I called to him," said Hugh.

I looked at him confused for a moment and then returned my attention back to the road.

"They bark," said Hugh, and then he indulged me with some beaver barking.

I laughed out loud, "Is there actually a law against talking to a beaver?"

"I don't think so, but there are laws apparently for disturbing wildlife. That's what the officer told me," complained Hugh.

"I think he bothered you because you were behaving oddly," I suggested.

"He told me that there had been a native demonstration in the park a few days ago and he was doing his due diligence because a complaint had been made. Once his car lost power and all the collisions occurred, he seemed sad and he let me go."

"And what did that beaver have to say?" I asked kidding with Hugh.

"He said: Go away. This is my territory."

Our safe house was technically rural but Anne E. Mah liked to have us on a short tether; meaning an internet and cellular connection, so our new home was located just twenty minutes away from town. The home was a century old farm house and our nearest neighbor was about a kilometer away. There were no parks or school yards or anything else like that nearby, but there were tall grassy meadows and tree brush for as far as you could see. A short distance from the farm house stood the old field stone foundation of an ancient cedar barn, but not much else interfered with the local landscape with the exception of a handful of utility poles that provided power and communications to the old homestead.

“This is going to be nice Hugh, I said to Hugh. “I got a good feeling about it,” I added.

But this wasn’t the case. I unpacked most of the ten suitcases myself whilst Hugh took a tour of the yard.

The home had an unlived in odor about it. It was in good repair and much of it had that old nineteen-seventy’s decor to it. There was an avocado colored range and a matching countertop toaster. The refrigerator had been updated; it had an early millennium brushed metal finish. No big screen TV however; we’ll use the laptop. I surveyed a little more of the main floor where I came upon a big picture window and standing outside and looking up to the heavens was Hugh.

“Hugh,” I hollered from the front door, “are you going to come in?”

“No,” the man answered.

“What’s wrong?” I asked after I detected some strange apprehension on his part.

“This house is haunted,” said Hugh.

“No its not; it’s just old.” I answered. “Are you telling me that you are going to be spending the week living in the bread box?” I asked the dumbfounded man.

“That’s his window,” said Hugh pointing up to a window on the second floor.

I came out and looked up at the said window and all I could ascertain was that it and the rest of them needed a good cleaning.

“He was very unhappy and he spent a lot of time looking out that window,” said Hugh.

“Who?” I asked.

“I don’t know his name. I think he was a young marsh man and he was very troubled,” said Hugh.

“Hugh that’s marsh man bunk. That is super natural thinking and marsh man style if you get my drift. You and I are super natural,” I said to him with a wink. “Shall we go in?” and I pointed to the home’s front entrance.

Reluctantly, Hugh followed me in. It took some cajoling and convincing, but once in the entrance hall I saw him looking behind himself for the exit to retreat to.

“Okay, let’s visit every room and we’ll have us a ghost hunt. If we find one; we’ll call the landlord and ask for new lodgings.” I said.

The dining room had a dining room table and an old upright piano with some missing veneer. The living room had some old blue velour furniture and a fireplace. There was a creepy larder, and it was wallpapered inside with a mallard duck kind of theme. There was a main floor washroom that was recently renovated and it consisted of a white Euro styled toilet and a basin shaped like a pasta dish.

The second floor was accessed by a squeaky oaken staircase. I could almost hear my partner’s heart race after the first creak from the staircase.

Once we reached the second floor - there was a strange aura. It smelt musty like old clothing. Everything up there was painted with ten layers of institutional green paint – even the floors.

“Well someone here clearly had no decorating taste,” I said to Hugh trying to normalize the experience.

“I’m not sleeping up here Manny,” said Hugh and he turned about to travel back downstairs.

“Hey I thought you and I were ghost hunters? Don’t you want to see what’s in that room down the hall?” but Hugh was already gone from sight.

I continued my ghost hunt and each room that I looked in were furnished very sparsely as in a single bed, a chair and an empty dresser. And of course, each of the three bedrooms was painted in the same institutional green color as the hallway. If it hadn’t already been declared a haunted room I don’t think the haunted room looked or felt any different than the other two, but because it was already declared haunted by my partner - it did feel peculiar.

Peculiar as animal anxiety may be, and I’m referring to that kind of animal anxiety that only requires only a mere suggestion, or a tiny pretense, before it takes hold of you. You don’t just smell dust or mold; you smell death. You don’t just hear the starlings outside; you hear whispers and moans. The hair at the back of your neck begins to unfurl. A chill runs down your back. Your heart races. You doubt yourself. Fight or flee are in the balance. Logic is absent. And finally you see a huge black crow in the branches of the tree outside and it’s looking directly back at you. Now you are a believer and without so much as a whiff of real evidence that something evil resides in that empty room.

“Hugh, I have decided that we should both bunk down here tonight. I don’t want you to feel uncomfortable. It’s the least I can do. There’s the sofa here and a folding guest bed I found out there in the entrance hall’s closet. We, - like in you and me can bunk right here in the living room. I wasn’t looking forward to dragging our suitcases up that staircase anyways.

It looks rather dangerous to me. You know how I feel about death or injury from kinetic energy. One of us could trip or slip and break our necks on that thing,” I said to Hugh who looked on approvingly knowing that I had just become a converted believer.

Our first night in the haunted house was uneventful. I’m sure of it because I don’t think Hugh slept a wink through it. If he’d heard something he’d of told me. Which made me wonder: How do deaf people know that a home is haunted?

One might think that there’d be a flock of birds or a talkative beaver in the yard by now of our new temporary residence, but not just yet. It appears that firstly the word has to get around that a celebrity guest has moved in because all that I noticed was a couple of humming birds that frequented the yard.

The daily reminder to check your personal bandolier and your partner’s too sounded off at two pm. A healthy crystal was clear and transparent and any hint of hue or color change was to be reported to Anne E. Mah immediately. I checked mine and they were all happy and healthy looking crystals and I reported the same, but the report is not complete until you’ve checked with your partner. My partner was presently absent at the moment and he’s well aware of our two pm bandolier checks and that we are obligated to confer together that our bandoliers’ integrity are intact.

“Hugh!” I shouted, but there was no answer.

In the past, when he was not in the immediate area I’d simply text him and we’d meet up, but his timepiece is clearly in the living room because I heard it enunciate the arrival of a new message at the same time as mine did, and he is nowhere to be seen. I’ve got five minutes to find the missing courier and then there will be ‘hell to be paid’ as they use to say back in the seventies.

I could see no sight of the man from the front porch of the old house so I looked for the trails. This is not like the big city; there are no sidewalks to follow - you have to look for the footpaths. I spotted a fresh path. It didn’t

look like deer trail or coyote path, this one had knocked down grass down like one might expect from a domesticated marsh man. A humming bird flew by; another good sign. And then, there he was standing in all his glory, waist deep in tall grass with a bee beard of perhaps five hundred or more.

“Hugh. Its two pm. It’s time for our bandolier check. Have you forgotten?”

“Oh! Can you do that for me Manny,” asked Hugh.

“You know I can’t do that. It needs to be done on your timepiece,” and I’ve been here before with the man and I tossed his timepiece to him from a safe distance in this case.

“Thanks Manny,” answered Hugh.

“Are things copasetic regarding your crystals?” I asked.

“Oh. Of course,” Hugh answered.

I have to ask and I recorded his confirmation accordingly. I am a courier and I will always do my job as best I can. And I would undoubtedly expect that any of these crystal files that I carry in my bandolier would do the same for me if they were in my shoes today.

According to the media, the mysterious chain reaction, car crash in Hamilton Ontario earlier in the week was still being investigated. There were also unsubstantiated claims from some of the drivers involved that their cars had suddenly and mysteriously lost power.

“Oops!” that’s all that I got to say about it and that I’d do it again if I have to. Heck, it’s no worse than one of those unexplained UFO sightings you hear about all the time.

And speaking of unidentified flying objects there was one here in our haunted house last night. It turned out to be just a bat however, and a Little Brown Myotis to be more precise according to my animal loving

friend. We watched three hours of bat documentaries on the lap top after that little adventure. It's terrible what's happening to those little guys; what with white nose syndrome and such. It kept Hugh up all night with worry.

I was so excited. There was great news again. Firstly, next week we were to spend a week at a cottage near Parry Sound and then for our final week we'd be meeting up with old Hector the cat again at our old safe house near Wawa. The latter would put us less than an hour's drive from our favorite Great Lake: Lake Superior. We now had a final date, a final time and a final location all set for our transition and recovery. And now, I know what that famous euphemism: 'life is good' feels like.

Cottage season was the best time of the year to hide away in the north. Traditionally, the locals tolerated almost anything from the renters, vacationers and cottagers. It was a given, a certainty that they'd ignore odd people like Hugh and I. All that the locals wanted from cottagers was that they'd pay their property taxes promptly and then for all of them to mercifully go back to their big city homes after the first frost of autumn or - there'd be hell to pay!

There was more from that haunted room. It took a few days of observation, but if one left the room's door open wide or slightly ajar in the evening, that by morning; it became closed – all by itself. Now it's a drafty house and I suppose if a breeze came in through the front door later in the evening then just maybe that door upstairs at the end of the hall might close on its own from the incoming draft. But as my partner would point out: we sleep through the night and don't open the front door through the night. And we reasoned, would there not be an expectant slam of the door closing upstairs if such a thing occurred? We even tried to recreate it but with no luck.

Hugh was just wired with creepy fear.

"Hugh. I think that ghost just likes his privacy," I said.

And I do think that in this sensual marsh man world that one must learn to live with our fears.

I avoid dreaming. It terrifies me. They make no sense. If I do have one, it ruins my rest. Hugh has confessed of having had a few with sexual connotations. Following that bit of news I instructed him to specifically leave me out of his dreams.

On our last night in the haunted house I was awakened in the middle of the night not by a bad dream, but by the sound of Hugh's voice. After a moment's wait for my eyes to adjust to the dim light I could see that Hugh was absent from his sofa bed in the living room. I carefully arose from my guest bed and that's because marsh men are typically clumsy after suddenly being awakened and I followed a one sided conversation that Hugh was having with someone in the entrance hall. At the doorway, I stopped my advance. Every inch of my flesh was alive with goose bumps at the moment and I listened to Hugh ask questions, and in turn return answers to someone who was clearly not present at the top of the staircase.

"Manny," declared an excited Hugh with his head now turned towards me. "He likes his door closed at night to keep a bad person out."

"Well thank you Hugh for that enlightened bit of information and please tell the young man he's got nothing to worry about. We'll keep that door shut for him," I said, and I went back to my bed to give my hair follicles some much needed rest.

No more haunted house; thank goodness, and just fourteen more days till our evacuation from the marsh. I felt like a million bucks just like we use to say back in the nineteen seventies as I drove the old Japanese bread box north along mostly one lane county roads. We were deep into the reproductive season now. The insect population was near its peak and

every plant that could find some sun light was either in seed, going to seed or had already flowered. It was beautiful sight to behold if you love life.

Parry Sound is a small town on Georgian Bay of the mighty Great Lake: Lake Huron. Our rental was just south of Parry Sound on Healey Lake and the nearest town for gas and groceries was called Bracebridge.

“The rich and the famous are known to vacation around here Hugh. How about that?” I said to my partner who was on hawk watch.

He was too immersed in his birding to pay any attention to my annoying insights. We’d seen Coopers, Kestrels, and Turkey Vultures since we left the haunted house earlier in the morning. The one hawk that was at the top of Hugh’s birds of interest list was a fish hawk called an Osprey or the Pandion Haliaetus.

The Osprey was a sophisticated and elegant hunter of fish; who could dive like a spear into the water for its prey and carry it away in its talons that articulated its catch aerodynamically for the least wind resistance while in flight. They were an amazing bird and we anima had been admiring them for almost two centuries along the shores of the Great Lake Superior. There used to be a lot more of them in the early days of our research; not so much later. I hope they don’t disappear.

The cottage had an internet connection and that’s most important, three small bedrooms, deck, dock and a small watercraft. Hugh was just itching to get into that lake water. I don’t even know if either of us knows how to swim or has a fear of water! But we’re going to find out.

We both brought a swim suit along because we heard that that was required these days. Hugh went the whole way and had ordered a pair of flippers, a snorkel and a diver’s mask days ago.

“We’ll be looking at fish and algae from whole new perspective Manny,” announced Hugh with his diver’s mask stylishly strapped to his forehead.

“No giant aquarium this time. Aye buddy!” I kidded.

“No,” answered Hugh grinning and in a pinched voice; having now lowered the mask to its appropriate position on his face.

The road trip went quick; in two hours we were in the town of Bracebridge, Ontario. What a nice town it was too, and it was just teeming with cottagers and vacationers wherever you looked. We topped up the tank for the Japanese bread box and squeezed in as many groceries as we could into the cramped cab for our stay.

“Oh this is awesome,” I said to Hugh as I exited the Japanese bread box at our rental. Why didn’t they acquire a safe house here? I wondered.

There was some birch and cedar that for the most part that landscaped the property on most sides. The waterfront was most attractive. The only drawback was that the lake was just humming with internal combustion engines of all manner of size and vintages.

“If you plug your ears; its paradise,” I said to Hugh after elbowing him.

Healey Lake is famous for its angling. It’s a relatively shallow body of water and has plenty of weedy shallows and wetlands that make it a great home for the likes of game fish such as the Northern Pike, Large Mouth Bass and Small Mouth Bass. In general we anima do not eat fish no matter how we might present ourselves; fish are our friends, and we’ve cohabitated with them rather nicely in the Great Lake Superior for two centuries.

What my friend was looking forward to this week was exploring what was living in the water of the lake other than those many fish, crayfish, and amphibians, and that was: the Zooplankton, Phytoplankton and their Diatoms. Difficult to see for the marsh man eye, but with a little bit of magnification and the correct lighting their beautiful green chloroplasts can delight the eye of a knowledgeable beholder. Interestingly, the Phytoplankton are also responsible for producing as much as eighty

percent of this planet's oxygen, and the marsh men have so very little respect for them.

Hugh and I went directly to the waterfront. The dock was calling out to us. It was about eight meters long or so and at its deep end there was a nice drop off to a depth of about three meters of water. A paddle boat was moored to its one side and it unfortunately obscured the view of a beautiful lake bottom. The water was both magnetic and repulsive at the same time. The color of the algae was mesmerizing, but its poor quality, its lack of diversity, and its over abundance were disconcerting. But nonetheless, after a mere minute had passed our shoes were off and we were both walking barefooted in weedy mud and grinning at each other from ear to ear like a couple of kids.

How many anima have had this pleasure? I thought. How about none!

A Cray fish was sighted. I thought we were going to lose control of our bladders for certain at the moment of that discovery.

"Hugh this terrible lake water, this gooey mud and slime – it's the best thing I've ever experienced as a marsh man!"

"Manny. I think I'm feeling aroused," said a flush faced Hugh.

"I don't want to see it or hear about that. That's private stuff. I know what I'm doing though. I'm going to get my swim suit on and enjoy some of this watery jungle," I said while trudging back to the shore.

"Now listen to me Hugh," I said as we walked back to the cottage. "We are going to enjoy our time here but there are rules for couriers concerning swimming, and even wading. If you are in the water beyond your waist your bandolier must be held by me on the shore or on the dock, and that goes for me too if I'm having a swim. It's not about harming the crystals; it's about losing one. Imagine that. That would be just horrible," I emphatically implored to my over stimulated partner.

There can be some of what is referred to as transference with one's courier. It could be a bit of instinct, a fear of heights, a talent like perfect pitch or the ability to swim for instance. Within a few minutes after entering the water for the second time it was soon apparent that Emanuel Logan was an excellent swimmer because I could do laps around my partner. I was the playful otter that could disappear for minutes beneath the water's surface and poor Hugh, he struggled along with a clumsy dog paddle, but without any fear I must say.

"Hugh. Look over there," and I pointed to a log with a deaf or very well adapted shelled reptile resting on it. "He must be drying his shell," I added.

But there was no answer from Hugh; he was partially submerged with his diver's mask on scouting out the flora and the fauna of Healey Lake's lake bottom. So much for that lecture I just gave him, and I tapped my bandolier for its presence and returned to the dock. One of us has to follow the rules.

A minute or two later Hugh lifted his face from out of the water. He eventually figured out why I was sitting on the dock and surrendered his bandolier to me.

"What did you see down there professor?" I kidded him.

"The turbidity is just terrible," complained Hugh.

"No great white sharks?" I asked. For which he did not answer.

"You could have seen a turtle if you didn't have your head in the water. He was a beautiful specimen; a *Chrysemys Picta* I believe."

Hugh feigned some disappointment and then returned his focus to becoming an expert snorkeler. One could clearly see that his flippers were causing most of the local turbidity. He'll figure it out - he's anima after all.

As for me, there was nothing new here that I haven't seen before. I've likely seen every kind of marine life there is on this planet at one time or

another. The real experience today however was of having water flow all around your body as one swam, and the feeling of buoyancy was far more tangible in the flesh rather than in a vehicle like our Lake Superior lab. I think that this experience today, of actually swimming here in Healey Lake today will be something that I will remember forever.

I couldn't see too much of the neighboring lots except for their docks and chimneys. There was lots of privacy unless you were out on the lake in a watercraft or enjoying some sun on the dock. There was a peculiar looking fella of about sixty years on the dock of the neighboring lot just east of us. He was waving to passing watercraft and at one point to me like we were old friends. He was dressed up like he was a member of the British royal family: black leather oxfords, tall socks, Bermuda shorts and topped off with a baggy wool cardigan. I waved back; it seemed like the appropriate and neighborly thing to do.

I unloaded the rest of our luggage and brought it into the cottage, stocked the refrigerator, and then returned to the waterfront. Hugh was keeping close to the shore for safety and I'm sure that there was plenty of stimulation for him along the thirty meters or so of cottage's waterfront. I brought two lawn chairs with me and set them so Hugh and I would be out of the sight of the peculiar neighbor next door.

I sat there by myself and took in the many bucolic sights, sounds and odors of Northern Ontario. It was beautiful and if an internal combustion motor interrupted; with its tell tale rattle well it sounded different than say the similar noise back in the city. In the city with its abundance of hard surfaces like concrete and pavement any noise appeared to get amplified, but here however, in cottage country where there were hundreds if not thousands of nice soft trees to dampen and absorb some of that harsh edgy noise emitted from the various and many internal combustion engines that buzzed about – well that noise became far more tolerable on the ears. Here in cottage country a gunshot would sound almost palatable; the drone of a distant lawn mower could sound like a lullaby and a jet ski if it was off in the distance it too would sound like just some romantic fun.

Cottage living was certainly not like living in paradise, but it was much better than living in a built up urban setting – one's senses could feel it.

I kept an eye out for those elusive Ospreys that Hugh had a serious need to locate and tick off his list. If there were any about around here they'd be out busy hunting fish for their young I figured. I also had to keep my eye on Hugh who was generally partially submerged somewhere along the waterfront counting minnows, and tadpoles and he was never going to spot an osprey unless one dived into the water in front of him.

Once however, he came dashing out of the water like he'd just seen a ghost. But nope; it was just a Northern Pike that he'd spotted hunting for a meal in the pondweed and we know how Hugh feels about the Northern Pikes' these days. Nonetheless, I spent most of my attention each day following the travel of Hugh's red swimming trunks as they progressed back and forth along our lot's waterfront.

By about mid week Hugh and I had identified two hundred different species of marine life living along the shores of Lake Healey. No Osprey sightings yet; but a dozen or so Canadian Geese did come by for a visit one day. Hugh's snorkeling had improved and he was venturing out further into the water when the watercraft traffic permitted it.

I started spending more time scanning the sky for those elusive Ospreys after I thought I spotted a pair of light colored birds at times soaring and swooping off in the distance in the direction of another nearby lake called McRey Lake. One never knows, but maybe if I report this possible sighting I can get Hugh out of the water before he completes his gradual metamorphosis into a fish.

So I switched my attention from Osprey searching to life guarding duty as frequently as every couple of minutes as the week wore on, when suddenly one afternoon I noticed that Hugh's bright red swim trunks were no longer visible on the water's surface. I stood up immediately in alarm. I

expanded my view by walking down to the waterfront, but there was still no sign of Hugh's red swimming trunks.

Let's not panic, I thought to myself; the man is not above playing practical jokes. He's done it before.

I looked hard again.

I removed both bandoliers from my trunks and then placed them safely inside the docked boat and dove into the water.

I wondered as I swam beneath the water whether my courier was also as intuitive at finding lost things as he was at swimming. I went up for a breath and scanned the lake for something or anything for that matter that might indicate where I might find Hugh. All I noticed was that our odd neighbor was waving his hands for me to swim out further into the lake.

I must have swum another ten meters when I spotted Hugh's diving mask. A tiny beam of light I swear pierced through the turbid water and illuminated the oval glass window of Hugh's florescent blue divers mask.

I cancelled my next breath and collected the still body of my friend in my arms from where he floated eerily just above the lake's bottom.

"Damn you!" I cursed once I reached the water's surface.

"This can't happen." I hissed realizing that I needed to get this man to shore in a hurry if I was going to save him.

"Bring him here!" shouted the excited neighbor. "I'm a licensed cardiologist!" he shouted.

I headed directly to our dock; got Hugh into position and started a hard reset. I punched him repeatedly in the navel, I kept his airway open, I massaged his heart, I massaged it hard and I massaged it soft and then I felt a pulse. Hugh coughed up a good mouthful of water.

“You’re killing that man!” screamed the intruding cardiologist who now hung over me.

I pointed at him with a no nonsense finger that left no doubt that if he took a step closer he was going to be the one who needed a doctor.

“You stay away Hack,” I hissed. “This is my friend and he will be fine. He has a pulse. He is breathing.”

“His lungs are full of lake water. He needs to go to a hospital!” implored the angry neighbor.

A sixty something woman showed up suddenly and began pulling the man by his cardigan away from me. She could sense the anger and tension in the air. She was much smarter at assessing the gravity of the situation than her excited mate I must say.

By this time, Hugh too was waving to the two to leave us alone.

I was overwhelmed with stress and emotion.

I probably looked worse than Hugh.

I was blinded by a fog of adrenalin and it just took over.

What a weakness these hormones are. In just a moment you can become a brutal chest beater; a howling primate. There’s no time for thought or logic - just fight.

“I’m so sorry Manny,” cried Hugh from where he lay on the dock, and he coughed, and he coughed so hard that his eyes became red, and bulged.

I collected the bandoliers and my weeping companion, and carried them to the cottage.

Anne E. Mah was alerted and she promptly took total control of the situation. I was to pack up our things up as quickly as possible and every five minutes she’d have me check on Hugh’s recovery. Time was of the

essence; who knows what might become of our neighbors' involvement in Hugh's drowning. Hopefully that wise woman reins her tiger in.

Three hours down the road I was to stop at a pharmacy in Sudbury and collect some awaiting antibiotics for Hugh's lungs. If he should fall deathly ill; it will be my responsibility to humanely euthanize his courier. I can't imagine a worse outcome. We would need another courier and that unfortunately is only if one is available. We still have the escape pod. I can perform an emergency transition. There's even room on one of the bandoliers for one more crystal. I know there is at least one spare; I remember seeing it. I can carry nine, but Anne E. Mah; she will likely not agree.

It's not easy being a marsh man. Life can change in an instant; and that's why there must be two of us.

We were not more than a couple of kilometers into our road trip to Sudbury when I spotted an expensive electric bread box following behind us. I don't have the telescopic vision to ascertain exactly who was following us but with a little bit of obvious deduction you could figure it out that it was highly likely that a certain crazed cardiologist was giving chase.

I brought Anne E. Mah up on the hands free and asked for her advice. She had telescopic vision of sorts and used our Japanese bread boxes back up camera to run the plates of the electric vehicle that was following us, and yes indeed the vehicle was owned by a retired Toronto cardiologist.

Moments later the doctor's car would lose power, slip into limp mode and with all its dashboard's warning lights illuminated it would crawl to the side of the road – bricked.

"Good bye doctor," I hissed as his disabled car disappeared from my rear view mirror.

"Why are we so bad at this Hugh? Being a marsh man is like living with one arm tied behind your back. We couldn't make a good decision if our life depended upon it. We have no experience. Simple tasks are impossible

for us. Between the two of us we'd screw up boiling a pot of water if we needed it in a hurry."

Hugh didn't reply, but he silently stared back at me like I was his savior and every word I spoke was music or wisdom to his ears. I was his angel.

Anne E. Mah had booked an overnight room for us at a motor inn in Sudbury, and along our way to the inn we'd be briefly stopping in at a twenty-four hour pharmacy on the outskirts of town that had a prescription waiting for Hugh. There were three medications; all of them football sized antibiotic pills – just how does a marsh man swallow such things I wondered? Well - Hugh somehow managed it.

When I finally got Hugh into a proper bed at the motor inn it was about ten in the evening. I was exhausted but I knew I was going to be pushing my marsh man's body to the limit for the next few days and there was just no way out of it. I watched over Hugh all through the night and if he rolled over onto his back I'd help him back onto his side. I checked him for fever every two hours and I watched his nail beds and skin color for any change in color.

Anne E. Mah said that in forty-eight hours or less we'll know if Hugh is going to come down with pneumonia. I hope that's not the case, but in any event Anne E. Mah has another drug therapy in mind that the marsh men haven't quite discovered yet.

We paid for our overnight lodgings early the next morning and six and a half hours later Hugh and I arrived at the old safe house down the road from Wawa. I swear it looked just like we had only just left the place. Yes, the wild ferns and grass were a foot higher, but the rest of the 'foresty' ambience was much the same. Hector the cat hadn't forgotten us, and he greeted us with some body-rubbing and purrs. I made a bed up for Hugh in front of the big screen and found him a nature documentary on the night

life that occurs every night in a California desert. When I left the two to continue unpacking the ten suitcases from the bread box, Hector had curled himself up strategically next Hugh's chest. Makes you wonder.

Anne E. Mah was sending a new replacement bread box for us since presently ours was now considered to be a risk. This meant that our present bread box would require a careful cleaning and a wipe down of all its smooth surfaces to remove any identifying bits of DNA or fingerprints. I felt like an innocent criminal covering up a crime that never happened, but I did what Anne E. Mah asked me to do because she was my only ticket home. Eight days is all we have and somehow in that short time we have to have our Hugh healthy enough to endure a transition at a remote location on the shores of Lake Superior. Nonetheless, I familiarized myself with the oral medications that Hugh was taking, and I must say that I wasn't too impressed, and in particular after having studying the many pitfalls and intricacies of successfully treating aspiration pneumonia.

So far my patient is lucid, in good color and breathing but it's the next few days that have me worried. Hugh had gained ten pounds over the past three months, but it's his missing medical history of the past ten years which was presumably one of prolonged substance abuse and malnutrition which is worrying if he has now expected to fight off a lung infection and fever.

Anne E. Mah wanted me to run into town the following morning; I needed only to collect a package at the post office that contained two sets of new licence plates; one set was for the new bread box and the other set was for the old bread box. According to Anne E. Mah the new bread box was currently on route to our safe house on a small, flat bed that was owned and operated by a marsh man named Dhillon.

As it turned out Dhillon was a cheery young marsh man from the city of Toronto and on the bed of his truck was a shiny new German bread box. It looked very sleek like a large, dark grey missile. I was in envy as it was unwinded from the tipped flatbed. I swear that cheery man never stopped smiling through each step of the operation of unloading the new

bread box and then the loading of the old bread box. He asked no questions. He required no washroom visit. I signed a receipt for him and he handed me my new fob and off he went back to Toronto.

Hugh unfortunately was now becoming feverish. He was losing interest in the nature documentaries and the Hector compress on his chest was clearly not helping. Anne E. Mah had me take Hugh's vitals every hour and as the day continued his fever increased to forty degrees Celsius. If it gets to forty-one I'm to start cold compresses and a cold bath if necessary. I need Hugh to be healthy by the end of the week or our transition and recovery will be in jeopardy. A proper transition and recovery required some planning, such as a dry run the day before and a contingency plan in case something unexpected should occur.

It was becoming impossible for me to get much rest. Hugh's lungs were filling with phlegm and his breathing was getting noisy. Anne E. Mah suggested a new treatment that was going to require another shopping run to the pharmacy in Wawa and another visit to the post office the day after. There were about four steps to manufacturing this new drug treatment that was administered by means of a peripheral intravenous drip and I had only a kitchen to manufacture it in.

I adjusted Hugh's timepiece so I could monitor him by video while I was out collecting the many things that were required for his new treatment. I estimated that I would be away from Hugh for about ninety solar minutes. The German bread box was sleek, but the operation of just about everything in it was counter intuitive at first. It was however, both quick and powerful. You could feel the road so much better and it took sharp turns like those gazelles do that Hugh often watched being chased by lions and such in nature videos.

Hugh hung in there however, and Hector never left his side. I began the manufacture of the drug with some advice and guidance provided by Anne E. Mah and company. They allowed me just one precious hour of rest. I didn't waste more than a minute of it; we had to save the life of Hugh

MacDonald or things were going to become much more difficult or impossible in five days time for our ultimate transition and rescue.

By late afternoon the next day Hugh was receiving his first dose of Anne E. Mah's antibiotic. The process took about sixty solar minutes and would be administered three times a day for the next four days. Now, we needed only to wait. Either Hugh's marsh man body was going to recover, or it was going to expire by the week's end.

Two days into the new drug regimen something odd occurred. It was late in the evening and I heard the strangest noise outside. It was a shrill howling noise with a couple of yip, yips thereafter. It appeared to be coming from outside the house and I scooted from window to window looking for its source. Out front, and perhaps ten meters from the front entrance sat a coyote. He was large and tattered looking and he appeared to be focusing his attention on whoever was within the house.

It was strange and creepy, and it made me wonder - was he here for our Hugh's soul? It was a ridiculous notion, but this animal was here and had shown up on its own accord. What a spooky world these marsh men live in.

I went to Hugh to see if he was lucid enough so I could tell him just who has come to visit him and indeed, he was conscious and with both his eyes wide open.

"Hugh, there's a large coyote out there at the front of the house. I think he's calling for you," I said in a voice just above a whisper.

"It's a medicine dog. I'll be alright now Manny," said Hugh in a teary falsetto.

Part Two: One Hundred More

Now however, was not soon enough and our transition and recovery were scrubbed. Hugh and I had been getting a real lesson and in the first person, that life can be difficult for anima in the marsh man world. Yes, some anima are very bad at being marsh men. It looks so easy being a primate, but it is not. Good decision making? Is that an adaptation? If it is, I'm no good at it.

Anne E. Mah has made new arrangements for our rescue in another one hundred days. In her own words: it just didn't seem feasible to go ahead with it. Too much risk, too little time to stabilize Hugh and a rescheduled recovery made a lot more sense than having a failed attempted recovery.

There is however, a healthy pinkish hue coming back to my patient's face. He's pulling through his acute case of aspiration pneumonia and I'm sure he'll find plenty to do over the next one hundred days; making friends with animals and watching his nature videos. I'm however, going to go crazy.

On the night of our cancelled rescue there was a significant storm. The rain came down in torrents from the skies above our safe house and so I heard the following morning that the wind gusts were above ninety kilometers per hour and that the waves on the Great Lake Superior crested at six meters in height. And so it was, very much the same when I was last recovered from the living as Peter Thornecliff and returned to crystal more than forty years ago. We anima always seem to arrive and depart this world during a significant storm or so it seems.

I haven't forgotten; it's just a blip in time for me. I remember waiting in the wind and the rain on the shores of the Great Lake Superior that night. I

remember clutching my precious cargo in my trembling hands and searching the stormy sky for a tiny dark dot that would eventually appear in the sky. And I remember watching as a tiny black object in the distance that night grew larger and larger as it approached to recover those who had been lost in the world of the marsh men.

We spent another week in the Wawa safe house and then we were off for two weeks in the city of Kingston, Ontario. Our new lodgings were advertised as the perfect party home that was located just minutes from the city's urban center. And it was I suppose, because the next nearest residence was five kilometers away on the other side of a major highway so no one was going to lose sleep over a loud party that was five kilometers away and on the other side of a four lane highway.

There was plenty of parking for say: a large gathering of one hundred or so. There was an in ground pool encompassed by a large stone patio. It also came with an outdoor stage and an audio sound system. One could host a wedding there, but Hugh and I were going to quietly lay low and avoid as much contact with other marsh men as we can during our stay. Our marsh men lives depended upon it.

"Hugh I think Anne E. Mah is losing faith in us. Here, we'd have to drive into town to get into trouble. There's nothing around here but a million grasshoppers and a flock of starlings," I said to the man after three very long days in our huge, and palatial short term rental.

"That's my fault Manny. Anne E. Mah is unhappy with me – not you," answered Hugh.

"Well that's not quite fair you know. Anne E. Mah might appear to be in the driver's seat of this operation, but it's you and I who are in the trenches here. As I remember, it wasn't easy for me the last time I went through this. And for all the excitement and stimulation that comes with living, and as intoxicating as it might very well appear to be, – life is

stressful. You know what marsh men do when they are tired and stressed?”

Hugh looked at me dumbfounded and asked, “What?”

“They unwind a little,” I said.

How do you unwind without a relaxing task, I wondered? There’s food I suppose; eating, and preparing it - is a bore. Drinking alcohol is forbidden. There’s exercise; well what’s the point - you’re only borrowing this body for another ninety days. Then there are hobbies; - well I do like a project and I like to fix things and make them better.

“Hugh? I have an idea. Something that will make our time here go by faster. Something I think we’ll both like,” I said.

“What is it Manny?” asked Hugh.

“We will become angels. We will help those who are the down trodden and those who have suffered from an injustice. We can help animals, too Hugh. You and me. We can make it look like some good luck or magic. We just have to find ways to do good things secretly and from a distance. It can be our project. If we are only here in the land of the marsh men for a short period of time - why can’t we try to make it a better place?”

“We just put together a new treatment for infection. Why can’t we find a way that we can share that too with the marsh men’s health care system? We’re experts with math; why can’t we crack a lottery or two – win a big cash prize and then have the unredeemed ticket delivered with a receipt of a cash purchase of course - to a good charity? Think of it. It’s not going to be the end of the marsh men’s world if we can make it a better place for the next ninety days. Ninety days of good deeds is not going to fix this place, but it might make it a little better. What do you think, Hugh?”

“I like it Manny,” answered Hugh who was already practising his angelic smile.

In the days that followed we found three charities on the internet that seemed worthy of a big cash influx. One was described as a frontline operation that assisted those who were homeless and living on the streets. The second was a support provider for those who suffered from mental health issues. The third was an animal rescue organization that saved unwanted pets from a certain death in kill shelters, and that latter one was right up you know whose alley.

We needed to do it right, and there were at least a couple of things that we needed to do to conceal our identities. Firstly, we needed to purchase the ticket by cash only from a 'mom and pop', marsh man's variety store that's local to the charity's head office, and secondly, - also one in which there's no security camera present to record the transaction. And this is because the tickets are time stamped, and if their sale came under suspicion, you do not want to find Hugh MacDonald's or Emanuel Logan's likeness purchasing the winning ticket on camera.

It was great fun. We got to buy lots of chewing gum and such as we cased out the perfect variety stores. Each store was in a different city and steps away in some cases to the homes of the chief executive officers of each foundation. It took us several days to find the perfect store, then a few minutes of calculations before purchasing each ticket, and then we waited.

Those were the best days I'd had since arriving here in the marsh land. The two of us were grinning all week and dreaming how clever we were. On the day of the draw we danced circles around that giant patio and pool when we saw are numbers being drawn. It was euphoria. It was real living. Each ticket won one million marsh man dollars!

We thought we were making a difference in the world, but when the lottery released the photos of the winners the following week; the smiling gentleman who operated the mental health charity said he was going to retire on the money he won. The operator of the homelessness charity was grinning too, and he too was going to take some well needed time off and

perhaps buy a new bread box with his winnings. The winner of the third ticket; the animal rescue charity – that prize went unclaimed.

Hugh and I were gob smacked.

“These guys are a bunch of phoneys! Where’s their souls?” I hissed to Hugh who answered with a shrug from where he sat on the sofa.

“I’m not giving up. We’ll try the medical community next,” I declared waving my finger about.

It took several days to document this new infectious disease treatment that Anne E. Mah had shared with me. I wouldn’t call it a dissertation by any means, but I made it as thorough and detailed as I could. After all, I’m no academic, but it was thirty pages long and a lot of work.

But who was I going to e-mail this to; perhaps an infectious disease, team leader at a research hospital, or a young med student, or a post graduate? We settled on a balding, middle aged, bespectacled man who had twenty-five years of experience as a front line E.R. surgeon at a major hospital in the city of Toronto. I sent it using a VPN and a fake e-mail account, and then we waited.

I told myself: Manny, it’s like planting a seed; it will take some time to germinate and grow. Maybe, we’ll never know, and never find out in the coming weeks - if we’ve actually changed this world for the better. Maybe; just maybe it will make a difference and this not knowing; this mystery, - will somehow make the whole investment of time and emotion - much more palatable.

I did feel better afterwards. The uncertainty was refreshing. Maybe by trying to do the right thing is enough, and we’ll leave the rest to chance.

“Hugh, I think I like being an angel. It’s the effort that’s important. You try and hope for the best result,” I said to Hugh who was intently watching an adult peregrine falcon regurgitate a meal into its chick’s open beak in a

nature documentary on the giant big screen that covered most of a living room wall in our Eastern Ontario party house.

It was once again time for Hugh and I to pack up and move to another location. This time it was again somewhere we were already familiar with: the Soo. There was a temporary rental available for the next two weeks that was just down the road from the old Golden Galley.

“Hugh,” I said excitedly. It’s almost the same neighborhood. It was wicked - remember?”

“I remember it being smelly,” opined Hugh melodramatically.

“The rental?” I asked.

“No. The Soo,” answered Hugh.

“I remember it being a lot less isolated than this place is, and it’s practically on the shores of our favorite lake. I’m just amped about this! You’ll love it. You wait and see,” I said to my less than enthused fellow angel.

The Soo was some real driving from here; it was nine and a half hour road trip without breaks. Once we got on the road though, we got her done in about eleven hours. There was a one hour long stop for a meal and another quick one for a tank full of some refined, liquid fossil fuel and the perfunctory washroom break.

I must say however, the German bread box was a transportation marvel. I can still remember what it was like to drive a seventies sedan. But this was like comparing night and day. You’d put your foot to the mat in one of those old sedans and then there’d be this delay before it would even begin to start to move. They called it hesitation. And once you got her up to highway speed – there was no more! No more ponies. No more

horse power. The German bread box however, had three times the ponies and then some over a seventies sedan. I was amazed.

The new rental was far more practical than our last rental in the Soo and it wasn't situated quite as close to the waterfront as the other rental was back in the spring. The living room's big screen was also a disappointing one meter in size and it seemed there was far more vehicular traffic at this location then at the former location, too. From inside the place you could hear the gravel being stirred by just about whatever went by out front.

To make matters worse, the Golden Galley's illuminated sign board was in easy eyesight of our front yard and parking. The bar or tavern, and its motel room suites had seen better days too, and frankly the place was hard on the eyes. Clouds of dust rose from its parking lot when bread boxes and pickup trucks came and went. Though I'd catch Hugh looking longingly at the establishment at times it wasn't a place that I would want to frequent myself. In the seventies I learned that intoxicated marsh men were more argumentative and in general just more difficult to deal with. Perhaps that's the cynic in me talking, but that's what I remember.

"This city does have an aroma, Hugh. It reminds me of the city of Hamilton. Remember tearing out of that place?"

"Yeah," said a grinning Hugh.

"We've had our adventures haven't we? It'll be quieter this time around. We've learned our lessons. Haven't we?" I added.

I bought myself a styling billed cap and went on long walks to burn up some time. We were still in the reproductive season, but things were winding up. The wind carried weedy pollen and those once beautiful green leaves that adorned almost everything in marsh land were now curled into cups with yellow and black spots on them. Autumn was just around the corner. The afternoons were warm and the evenings were cool.

When I'd leave for a walk I usually left a contented Hugh behind who was reclined on the sofa and watching documentaries about bees and wasps and such. When I'd come home there he would be, still reclined and watching more docs about the arctic fox or the rutting moose. Until one afternoon he wasn't there. The big screen was off and Hugh was nowhere to be found.

My marsh man intuition was primed. Just where is that silly bugger I mused. It's none of my business I'd muse one minute, and just where is this guy I'd wonder the next minute? Hours later and just when it was time to irradiate a frozen meal in the micro wave - Hugh showed up. There was a happy glow about the man which was a little unusual. He was talkative as we ate our pizza, but when I asked how he had spent his afternoon he was evasive. He'd been here he said, and he'd been there, and that kind of thing.

The following afternoon the man had a change of habit. Instead of watching nature documentaries on the big screen he had begun watching marsh man soap operas. Uncannily, much of the dramatic content of the soap operas was quite similar to that of the animal documentaries – just a different species was involved. Personally, I preferred the animal dramas over the marsh man dramas. The animal stories seemed much less pretentious and the marsh man stories appeared to be far more salacious in nature.

I went out for a walk as the weather allowed it the next afternoon. I must have covered half the city by now with my walks. I was just another marsh man out for a walk. No one paid much attention to me. The sun was shining and life was good, but when I got back to the rental with a few groceries in hand there was no sign of Hugh again.

I tried to find his location using a timepiece app but his timepiece was showing that it was here and indeed that's where I found it in the living room. Hugh is breaking rules again and that is not a good thing.

I used my marsh man intuition and I searched a green area that was not too far away, but he was not there. If I keep walking around in the same neighborhood some people might begin to take note of me so I headed back to the rental and the mystery man was back.

Hugh was cheery and unusually pleasant again. I was reluctant to ask too many questions and I didn't want him to think that I was some kind of Inspector General. So I held my tongue, and kept my powder dry.

That night I'm sure I saw him with another timepiece in his hand. It was the same brand, model and color but one was in his hand in his bedroom and the other was in the remote control holster that hung from the living rooms sofa's armrest.

Do I raise the alarm and report this to Anne E. Mah, or do I investigate first so I don't look like a fool if I'm wrong. This is what I hate about living. The politics of it drives me crazy. I can't be throwing my partner under the bus until I know what's going on.

The following day he followed the same script. He watched soap operas until lunch time and then had a shower. I left with my billed cap for another walk but this time I circled around the neighborhood. I watched the door of the rental from a distance when I could and I kept my timepiece off.

Not thirty minutes went by before I saw Hugh leave the rental and walk down the street, then cross the dusty gravel road, and enter the Golden Galley. I had to keep moving or someone was going to get suspicious so I circled back to the rental to stakeout the Golden Galley from the front seat of the German bread box that was parked in the rental's driveway.

I waited for about three quarters of an hour in the German bread box and saw nothing suspicious going on at the Golden Galley. It was their slow time of the day and there were only a few pickup trucks and a delivery van in the parking lot. I psyched myself up for the next step. It was time for a closer investigation.

As I approached the Golden Galley I could see that there was nothing odd about the place. It looked like a tired tavern with several attached motel rooms. But you know what? There were a lot of bees around, and the outside entrance to one of the motel rooms had a big bee beard attached to its storm door.

There's only one marsh man that I know of that attracts bees and we know who that is. But what's he up to? If I knew his new timepiece's number I'd call him right now to find out. But I have to be rational, so I went back to the rental and waited.

While I waited, I investigated his old timepiece; it was still in the holster at the side of the sofa. It took several minutes to crack it, but once I did I was disappointed – there was nothing suspicious. There were the many texts from Anne E. Mah that one would expect to see. No contacts. There were just the default apps that one would find on any other timepiece. He had a tablet or what I called a large timepiece and it too was pretty clean except for the browser which had dozens of bookmarked pages for nature programming.

Finally, I heard the rental's front door lock being unlatched. He'd been out for two and a half hours and was obviously concealing some kind of nefarious goings-on in that Golden Galley motel room, and I was going to confront him about it.

A dodgy Hugh skulked by me and went into the kitchen.

"How was your walk?" asked Hugh evading my gaze.

"It was short today," I answered.

"Why's that?" asked Hugh as he drank from the kitchen faucet.

"Can you not use a glass or a cup? You don't have to slurp up water like an animal," I complained.

Hugh grinned.

"My walk was short because I became distracted by a hive of activity that was going on across the street at The Golden Galley," I said.

Hugh feigned confusion.

"I noticed a giant bee beard hanging off the door frame to one of those sleazy motel rooms over there. And it made me wonder like for an hour or two who might 'bee' behind that door. No pun intended my dear Hugh, but once again I think you've broken some rules."

"Just what went on over there?" I roared like an angry upright grizzly bear.

"Did you have an illicit transgression? That's most forbidden," I shouted. "You are going to threaten our rescue Hugh!"

Hugh's face was red with guilt.

"Did you have a transgression?" I asked.

"Manny. It was nothing. It was no big deal. I had nothing to drink. It was just an hour of fun. She doesn't know my name. She needed some money. I helped her out. She called me her angel," answered a sheepish looking Hugh.

Tremors took over me, and words that meant nothing to me up to this moment suddenly erupted from my mouth, "Oh my - God! What were you thinking?"

"What were you doing with that female marsh man?" I asked.

"We danced."

I thought I was going to black out from anxiety. "What kind of dance?" I asked.

“A lap dance,” answered Hugh, “It was actually quite exciting,” he added.

“No, no, no, no, no – no one can know about this. If anyone finds out; they’ll leave us here Hugh. You want to go home don’t you?” I pleaded with him.

Hugh shrugged his shoulders, “The place is growing on me,” said Hugh.

“Well; it’s not growing on me.” I answered sullenly.

“I want to go home.”

Her name was Dale; at least that’s what we think. She was young. She was fair haired, petite and rumored to be double jointed at the hips. She was a pleasant enough young female marsh man. She was that type that was always smiling and sticking her tongue out and generally mugging it up but in a cute way. I wouldn’t consider her as one of the downtrodden - because she appeared to be far too adept at many forms of debauchery.

Her latest conquest was a marsh man known only to her as Hugh; an American from Gardenville Michigan or so she thought, and he was so smitten with her. I was obligated to look at pictures of the young marsh man lady in various stages of undress from pictures and video taken with Hugh’s new timepiece. As far as I could ascertain, I do think that the rumours of her being double jointed at the hips were true.

The two first became acquainted with one and another through an infamous internet marketplace and had enjoyed each other’s intimate company twice now at the Golden Galley. It was so easy at first said Hugh but he now has feelings for the young lady and we will be leaving the Soo in two days time for a week in the town of Lindsay Ontario. It seemed like an episode from one of his soap operas and I told him to get over it.

There were few words spoken between Hugh and I on the morning of our last day in the Soo. I had agreed to keep quiet on the matter of Hugh's transgression and Hugh had agreed to end his relationship with Dale. Anne E. Mah was kept out of our dark secret and if she ever gained knowledge of it, I fear what might happen.

It rained in a typical marsh land fashion which was - most of the day and that added another hour to our road trip to Lindsay Ontario. I had researched things that I might say that could help put Hugh's broken heart at ease, so while we drove in the rain I did my best.

"Hugh," I said, "There are other fish in the sea."

He didn't acknowledge me.

"Hugh," I said, "I'm here for you."

There was no response.

"Hugh. I can't imagine what you are going through. Is there anything you want to share?" I asked.

He told me to: "Shut up."

My friend's broken heart made for a long and solemn drive to Lindsay. I've never had such a thing as a broken heart. I'm beginning to think that Hugh's more marsh man than I am; not that there's a competition, but he and I are not alike. I think animals are nice, but Hugh thinks that animals - are beautiful. Hugh can see beauty and I cannot.

The town of Lindsay is small, but it's part of a built up region of cottages, farms, and small communities. It's rural, but in a good way, and there are plenty of places for Hugh and I to get lost in. You go to town for groceries and services, and then you drive back to your rental in our case, and live in one of thousands of rural homes and cottages that help make

up what is called the Kawarthas. Interestingly, the town of Lindsay's primary employer is a one thousand bed, correctional facility for wayward marsh-landers.

"Hugh, I said. "How many innocent convicted felons do you think are locked up in there?" I asked as we drove by the Province of Ontario's, Central East Correction Centre.

"I don't know. A few maybe," answered the man.

"We're supposed to be angels, remember?" I said.

"What are you thinking Manny? Busting some out?" answered Hugh trying to be snarky.

"No. But I've heard of this criminal lawyer who takes on cases of the wrongfully convicted and tries to exonerate them. His name is Casper Vickman. There can't be anything worse than being sent to prison for years for something you didn't do. How's that for downtrodden?" I replied.

Hugh was listening now. I had his attention. Anima are suckers for making a wrong right.

"Will give him money; anonymously of course. It costs a lot of money to hire investigative legal staff and such. I bet a few hundred thousand dollars would help re-open a case or two," I added.

"Is it just another one of those charitable organizations? You know what happened the last time, Manny," said Hugh.

"We're angels Hugh, not judges. We have to focus on what's right and hope for the best just like Caspar Vickman does," I answered.

"Let's do it then," said Hugh.

"Be angels again?" I suggested.

"Yeah," cheered on Hugh.

“How about food banks this time,” I volunteered.

“Animal shelters, too,” piped in Hugh.

“Hugh. I think we should think big this time. We’ll focus on winning a large lottery prize. One big prize will mean we only have to win once. It could be won by several tickets in one draw. It can be done. Each winning ticket would be purchased from a mom and pop variety store located conveniently in the same community as our favorite charity’s CEO - just as we did before!”

“Imagine how many of the downtrodden we can help with ten, or twenty million dollars split three ways. We can go back home with our heads held high. There will be less shame and less guilt,” I said while being clearly intoxicated with money fever.

“Manny,” said Hugh in a somber voice. “You talk about Peter Thornecliff sometimes and I know it bothers you, but you’ve never mentioned much about your old anima partner from back then. Who was he? What happened to him?” asked Hugh inquisitively?

I didn’t want to answer Hugh. I took a long pause to consider what I was going to say.

“Why do you ask?” I asked Hugh, and where did that come from I wondered.

“No. It’s okay Manny if you don’t want to talk about it. But your partner today would be interested in knowing what happened to your partner the last time - back in the seventies as you like to say,” said Hugh.

Sigh.

“Arthur Kennedy was my partner back then. It was a one hundred day tour just as ours was originally, and it stretched over the last couple of months of the marsh man year of nineteen seventy-eight and the first

month of nineteen seventy-nine. He was the experienced one, and I was his novice wingman. We had six crystals to carry and one morning he just wasn't there. He jumped ship. He left his bandolier behind and he disappeared. I searched for him for days but I could not find him. Hugh, he once told me - that it's harder the second time. And that my friend is why I want to be an angel this time. I want to make the marsh man's world a better place if I can."

"We lost a senior member from our team back then, and the marsh men lost Arthur Kennedy. They got Peter Thornecliff back; I made sure of that, and in nine more weeks they'll get the couriers: Emanuel Logan and Hugh Macdonald back, too."

I blinked my damp marsh man eyes.

"Did they ever find him?" asked Hugh.

"The Anima?" I asked, and Hugh nodded his head.

"Arthur I heard was summoned to his death weeks later when it was good and cold, and would have died of exposure on the shores of our beloved Lake Superior," I answered to a horrified Hugh.

"This is serious stuff we do. There are irreversible consequences when we aren't careful. No more fraternizing with the natives," I added shaking my finger at Hugh as we crossed over a bridge spanning the Scugog River.

"Would you like to try fishing Hugh? There's a few marsh men I see with rods and reels fishing off the bridge back there."

"Never!" answered Hugh with a shudder; to him fish are nearly sentient.

"I guess they too are the downtrodden. Tricked and then consumed," I added.

Anne E. Mah did a very thorough and impromptu audit of our present situation just days into our planning for the big lottery win. We had the winning numbers; we just needed to purchase them for our chosen beneficiaries. Anne E. Mah however cancelled our plans; they were too provocative she said. The prize was far too large and too big of a bonanza for three CEO's of charities. It could provoke an investigation by the provincial gaming commission. She acknowledged our noble intentions and the need for us to maintain some morale, but the risk to the mission was just too great.

"Find another means to earn your wings," she cynically chided the two of us.

Once you've been told that you can't do something; it gets your dander up. Hugh and I want to be angels – at least figuratively speaking, and we're going to find a way.

We can't win big. We can't help individuals directly. We can't form relationships to give advice. Just how are we to make a difference in the marsh man world with both our wings clipped?

We could make money at the casino for a little while until we become unwelcomed. We could also make a little gambling on line until we become unwelcomed there, too. We could try the bit coin market, but it's not doing so well right now. There's not enough time for flipping real estate, playing the stock market and angels are not allowed to steal. How are we going to do noble things that make the marsh man world a better place?

We could help them to properly harness electrical energy. It would be just an incremental technological step of course, but Anne E. Mah I'm sure would frown upon that, too.

"I think I have a plan," I said to Hugh on day five of our stay in Lindsay.

"And what's that Manny?" he asked.

“We simply need a couple of chequing accounts; one for you and one for me. We need somewhere to keep our collected winnings or earnings for the next eight weeks or so, and then they can go dormant and we’ll be long gone. We’re not likely to collect a large sum of money in that space of time, but who knows - we are anima after all?”

“Anne E. Mah won’t let us do that,” said an anxious Hugh.

“We are not going to tell her. Money doesn’t matter to her; if we need money - she simply arranges for our cards to be topped up and perhaps by fraudulent means as far as we know. She pays attention to her records and not the bank’s records,” I answered.

“Hugh, you and I are going to do this. We have fifty-eight days left to make this marsh man world a better place. We’ll watch the numbers carefully so not arouse any suspicion and we’ll make sure we are not overdrawn after day fifty-eight arrives. We’ll keep it small, and win small many times and disburse our winnings continuously as donations. No big lotteries and lots of small electronic payments to our favorite charities. No one will know,” I added.

This was much better. This having a purpose was more like living. It was like having a real job and it gave us something productive to do. I now found myself watching nature documentaries with Hugh while he and I surfed the web for ways to win more money, and find more charities to donate our winnings to. Anne E. Mah made arrangements for our next temporary rental back in the big city of Toronto and I didn’t care; I’ll go anywhere as long as there is a decent internet connection and a frozen food aisle nearby.

Anne E. Mah found us a nice neighborhood in Toronto called the Beaches and it was within walking distance to Woodbine Beach on the shores of Lake Ontario. Our rental had a big screen, parking - thank heavens, and a terrace.

“We’ll be living in style here Hugh,” I declared upon checking out the view from that terrace. “I bet our next rental will be in a real hell hole. I just got a feeling,” I added.

If the weather was fair Hugh and I worked from the terrace. The mornings were great for walks along the waterfront and just as I had figured Anne E. Mah warned us that two weeks from now that more was going to be expected of us. The angel business was picking up nicely; we’d already accumulated nearly seventy-five thousand dollars. I know that some animal shelters were going to benefit from our philanthropy as soon as tomorrow, and maybe one more, poor bugger who was unfairly imprisoned in a penitentiary was going to get a chance to clear his name as soon as next year.

Downstairs from us was another short term rental. A young couple of the same gender was renting it and they had a tiny pet dog. Hugh said it was a highly sought after breed: a miniature French Bull Dog. I don’t get it. It looked ridiculously fragile and was kind of ugly looking as far as I was concerned. But there was love in Hugh’s eyes.

I told him as soon as I noticed his interest in the animal, “Do not look at that dog. Do not touch it.”

“But he has a halo; there’s a glow about him,” pleaded Hugh.

“No Hugh – that is an example of animal adaptation. He’s looking for a meal. If I wanted a free meal and had no money - I’d have a glowing halo, too.”

The following day Anne E. Mah delivered a shopping list for things that we would need for our next rental. I was in a little shock. Anne E. Mah wanted Hugh and I to get fitted with survival suits, acquire two LED flashlights, a real magnetic compass, nitrile work gloves, hiking boots, and – fifteen meters of rope!

“Oh dear,” I said to Hugh. “We’re going to need a bigger bread box to cart all this stuff around,” I added.

“Why? What has she got planned for us?” asked Hugh.

“Well I can only assume that our recovery location; only four weeks away from now must be very remote,” I answered.

“And why the magnetic compass?” asked Hugh.

“Because we may be out of mobile coverage for our timepieces I would think,” I answered.

The shores of our Lake Superior can be severe and daunting to negotiate. There are cliffs, bluffs, rocks and some dense vegetation to deal with. There were places there that were off limits to even a mountain goat for heaven’s sake. Why can’t it be a few big rocks for some privacy and a sandy beach? Our courier’s aren’t mountain men; they’re older gentlemanly marsh men. My body is of nineteen-sixty’s vintage; I can’t be rappelling down a cliff at the end of a rope! My partner for heaven’s sake has more in common with a stout bowl of gelatin than a mountaineer.

But these were our instructions. We were tasked with outfitting ourselves with whatever gear we would need and to attempt a trial run next week at a remote location near Terrace Bay Ontario on the shores of our Lake Superior. I looked up the location on the internet; and I quickly determined that we would be better served approaching the site by water.

“No boats. No watercraft,” said Anne E. Mah when I complained.

“It’s two kilometers of bush from the road at night with a cliff to negotiate,” I said.

“It’s a bluff and the two of you should be able to manage it. You are primates after all,” and that was that.

It looked more like the bloody Niagara Escarpment to me. Hugh just exhaled and frowned any time the subject came up throughout the rest of our stay in the big city of Toronto, Ontario.

Anne E. Mah had Hugh and I doing calisthenics to build up our strength. Gymnasiums were out of question and we weren't about to start lugging weights around. So it was leg raises, pushups and other forms of physical torture that we had to endure. This sweating business however is clearly old school when it comes to cooling. And the pain – who thought that, that was a good idea? But there were cold showers and steroids to help things along. Who knows? In a couple of weeks maybe we just might be ready for some gentle rappelling.

That Hugh is becoming a crafty character. All week he carefully avoided that little dog downstairs; just as I asked him to - up until the last hours before our departure to our new digs near Terrace Bay. He was packing the bread box with me when Buddy the French bull dog appeared leashed to the more feminine half of the same gendered couple who inhabited the ground floor flat of our rental.

“May I pet your dog?” asked a brave Hugh.

I was firing imaginary lasers at him with my marsh man eyes. Had he forgotten that unnecessary fraternization with marsh men was strictly forbidden again?

Buddy seemed immediately interested in having a meeting with Hugh and his owner feeling the tug on his leash said, “Yes of course.”

Hugh petted Buddy and their eye's met and they were then - united.

“You know. He often won't engage with strangers. If anything he'd cower and make a puddle if someone came too close,” said the smiling and surprised dog owner.

“He just needs to be reassured that the world isn't always the frightening place that it sometimes appears to be,” said our dog whisperer: Hugh.

“Bye-bye Buddy. It was nice meeting you. You are real little charmer,” said an elated Hugh when he must of felt my laser eyes burning into the back of his neck as he stooped to greet and pet Buddy.

We continued with our packing and Buddy the dog looked back at Hugh his new love interest several times until he and his owner walked out of sight.

“Bye-bye Buddy,” I said in a hushed voice under my breath. “What’s wrong with you?” I asked the man.

“You don’t understand marsh men or animals,” answered a smug Hugh.

“I suppose I don’t sometimes. I’m also not going to be here long enough for that to matter,” I replied.

Terrace Bay is a Northern Ontario town situated along the Trans Canada Highway and the northern shores of our Great Lake Superior. It’s a picturesque town that is noted for its lighthouse and splendid views of our illustrious lake. There’s hiking and kayaking but not much else to do there unless it’s hunting season. It’s also about two hundred kilometers east of Thunder Bay which is my courier’s hometown and about five hundred kilometers west of the Soo which to some degree is our old neighborhood; having spent three weeks there since this whole thing got started.

About fifteen kilometers west along the lake shore from Terrace Bay is the small town of Schreiber whose beach front contained access to the Casque Isle Hiking Trail. A remote location nearby, had a Red Chair Lookout site and about two kilometers of some rough hiking beyond that was the location of our scheduled recovery in twenty-seven local calendar days and counting. Hugh and I will be doing some much needed reconnaissance and a rehearsal of sorts over the next three days along the Casque Isle Hiking Trail.

Our new temporary rental was a motel room at a local motel that had a two star rating. It had free Wi-Fi which is nice. The big screen TV was not so big however and may be seventy centimeters in size. It was a bit austere I must say; and it had a seventies feel to it, and for a moment when I first entered the room I thought I felt what the marsh men call *déjà vu*. It was like I was Peter Thornecliff again and Hugh was Arthur Kennedy and parked outside was our Cordobra.

“Manny this is roughing it,” complained Hugh glaring at the smallish big screen TV.

“No. This is not roughing it. I can assure you that. Believe me I’ve seen roughing it and this is nice for where we are situated my friend. If Anne E. Mah has us spend a night in our survival suits – that’s roughing it,” I said to my naive partner: Hugh.

The following morning we drove over to the nearby town of Schreiber to an access point for the Casque Isle hiking trail. There was no need to bring along the survival suits and rope; not this time anyways. We wore practical clothing, hiking boots, and brought along a few bottles of water to quench our thirst. I also brought along a hand held GPS, my timepiece, a compass just in case, and – a four prop, electric drone that Anne E. Mah insisted upon us having.

We passed some hikers off and on as we walked the trail. The vistas of the lake from the shoreline were wonderful. Hugh was in a good mood and I must say it looked like home to us because after all, this lake had been our home for almost two hundred years.

“Where are the red chairs,” asked Hugh?

“Oh they’re back behind us. They’re part of a national park’s board promotion,” I answered.

“Are there going to be all these people about for our recovery?” asked a doubtful Hugh.

“No. It’ll be about five degrees Celsius or colder, four in the morning and it will be like always: a very dark and stormy night,” I answered. “And that’s why we require the survival suits.”

I stopped. The hand held GPS was indicating that we now needed to move in land. I took pictures of the landscape around us for any obvious land marks before we moved much further.

“This is where we turn right,” I kidded Hugh as we studied the landscape.

This is why Anne E. Mah suggested we utilize the hobby drone. It took a quarter hour to get the drone operating but once it was up and running we looked for the precise location of our recovery operation and how best to get to it.

“Well. I feel sorry for our couriers: Manny Logan and Hugh MacDonald; they got to find their way out of here in the dark of the night without knowing how they arrived here at the top of a bluff in the first place. I can however see a couple of ways that we can get to it. See Hugh, there’s a potential path off the trail behind us. It’s steep though,” I said, and it occurred to me - hence the need for the rope.

We packed up the drone, and retraced our steps behind us to where, to the best of our judgment was an opening to a poor path to where we could climb the bluff. We fought the bush until we reached the base of the bluff and the bluff wasn’t exactly a wall of rock, but it was pretty steep, nonetheless.

“Shall we give it a go?” I asked Hugh as I sized up the climb.

Hugh looked at me like I was crazy. It was doable however and it looked less daunting the more you studied it. I suppose that’s why Anne E. Mah had us come to check it out today and in the daylight.

My timepiece chimed. Anne E. Mah said there will be no climbing today. Tomorrow night however and at two in the morning no less; we

were to climb it.

“In the dark?” complained Hugh.

“Yes. In the dark and it’s a full dress rehearsal,” I said.

The next night, at one-thirty in the morning we packed up the gear and headed back to the access point to the trail. Not a soul was to be seen on the road or the trail. There was a sliver of a moon and a cool breeze off the lake.

“This is nice,” I said to Hugh.

“I feel terribly over dressed Manny,” said Hugh as he tugged at his ill fitting survival suit that was riding up the crack of his ass.

“Take a deep breath,” I said.

Hugh obliged and looked at me with some curiosity.

“Smell that?” I asked.

He looked at me still; wondering if I was being philosophic or just silly.

“That Hugh is the smell of our freedom,” and then I notice a patch of facial hair on his chin.

“Hugh you’ve missed a spot shaving,” I said.

“No I haven’t. I’m starting a soul patch,” said Hugh.

“Why in heaven would you do that? We’re leaving here in three and a half weeks. How’s the old Hugh MacDonald going to feel about your taste in facial hair?”

“It can’t be any worse than waking up in the middle of the night to find yourself dressed in a survival suit, and up on a hillside overlooking a lake,” replied Hugh.

“Well you do have a point there Mister MacDonald. This is our turn,” I said stopping to look up at our bluff in the distance. “Did we bring any bug spray?” I asked.

“No,” answered Hugh.

The bush was thick and I kept my eyes out for any other extra sets of eyes that might be out there. It was much more difficult to navigate in the dark of the night. I kept the flashlight aimed to the ground to prevent myself from tripping and I certainly didn’t want to bring any unwanted attention to my presence from man or beast that might be in the vicinity.

We stopped at the base of the bluff.

“Hugh. I’ll take one end of the rope up there with me and tie it off to something sturdy. When it’s ready I’ll tug on it to get your attention. No shouting. No flashlight. You can text me if there’s a signal,” I said as I feebly swatted at a cloud of mosquitoes.

It was brutal. The rope kept getting hung up and snagged where ever it seemed possible. I tried, I tried hard to be like a mountain goat but, even a mountain goat would know better to not climb a bluff in the dark. Ten minutes later however I was indeed at the bluff’s summit. I tied the rope off securely to a stump of a weathered tree and I tugged on it hard twice for Hugh down below.

While my friend ascended the bluff I had a look about. There was a small clearing of sorts. I tried to dig a hole in the soil but I couldn’t get very deep so I collected some rocks and planted the pod that had brought us to our couriers more than five months ago in a depression in the ground. The pod would be our beacon and guide to direct our rescuers here.

I could hear Hugh's arrival and the sound of his labored breathing preceded him.

"Woo," declared the winded man. "I need more aerobics and upper body strength, Manny," complained Hugh.

"You and me both," I answered.

"Are we done?" asked Hugh.

I nodded and checked my timepiece for a signal. It showed a couple of bars and we waited for Anne E. Mah to message us.

"Hugh. When we arrive here again in three and a half weeks time or whatever; it might feel different. You might feel out of sorts. You could have strange thoughts. The experience for a marsh man might feel somewhat hallucinatory. Don't feel too anxious about it. All that is required of you is that you arrive in time and that you have your bandolier with you. Everything else will be managed by the contractors and our couriers – we'll be in good hands."

"It's probably my imagination but I feel four anima voices cheering inside my pants," said a grinning Hugh.

"That's what I mean about those thoughts. In three and a half weeks everyone should be cheering: Hugh Macdonald will be cheering, Manny Logan will be cheering, and all our team members will be cheering."

My timepiece chimed. It was Anne E. Mah. We can go now, and Hugh and I rappelled and slid along on our asses for at least part way to the bottom of the bluff.

Anne E. Mah complimented the two of us for our success with the rehearsal. I think we surprised her. I'm sure she's had an easier time with other couriers over the past two centuries, but the life of a marsh man was

much less complicated back in the day. Why even back in the seventies when I was Peter Thornecliff the word 'digital' meant a style for a trendy watch face; today in the marsh man world it's a word used to describe an enormous emerging technology. I remember walking along a street more than a few times back then in the seventies while I was out and about, and a pay phone would start ringing in an empty phone booth as I was walking along – and it was Anne E. Mah calling. If my fair voice didn't answer she'd hang up and move on to the next pay phone or catch me back home at the rental.

There certainly was no hiding from her, and concerning that same subject; that Hugh was behaving peculiar again. It wasn't quite like his disappearing act of six weeks ago with Dale; it was - that he had begun to spend an inordinate amount of time in the washroom.

I'd notice sometimes that he'd have his timepiece in hand when he came and went from the washroom, but if guy needs to play a game or two of solitaire to get his train running that's alright with me. My marsh man radar however was telling me that there was some kind of subterfuge taking place. Once - I even held my ear to the washroom door for a moment or two, but I could hear no voices to indicate that he was secretly talking to someone on his timepiece.

What could it be? I don't know yet, but Hugh MacDonald is going to be under my microscope until I find out.

I discovered a new way to be an angel: gift cards - I leave them everywhere. Typically I load them up with one hundred dollars. I came across a marsh man once who had a blow out along the Trans Canada highway. He looked needy to me so I gave him three to buy a new tire and wished him better luck on the rest of his journey. I've left them in motel rooms but not the short term rentals so much. It's always best to do it anonymously, but if someone is clearly in need and in your face, it's nice to receive a smile or a thank you. Today I'm leaving fifty dollars in cash on the

bed at a two star motel and that's even if there were a few tiny arachnids found living beneath the toilet tank. Nothing alive escapes the eye of my companion. Tips of more than a few dollars here in Terrace Bay – are pretty rare I think.

Anne E. Mah had a new short term rental for us located just eight and a half hours down the road from Terrace Bay at the Big Nickel or also known as the city of Sudbury. Driving long distances was becoming a second nature to me; just put me behind the wheel and I'll start counting cows and red cars as the time rolls by.

Sudbury was a service center of sorts for smaller surrounding communities that provided hospitals, shopping, a college and a university to the local masses. It's also known for nickel mining and smelting. Metal foundries are unpopular to many marsh men and understandably so for many health and environmental reasons associated with the process of mining and smelting, but I love the smell of it. It smells like space; burnt dust, slag, and dross - odors that are displaced by this foreign marshy atmosphere known here locally and colloquially as air. And I will sleep every night of our stay in Sudbury with the window opened just a crack to allow that delicious aroma in.

Our rental in Sudbury thankfully came outfitted with two washrooms. The mystery was still there but I no longer had to pace my washroom visits according to Hugh's schedule. He did appear to be somewhat preoccupied with something these days and it's not normal for anima to worry much about anything. I'll keep the peace until it all comes out in the laundry as they say here in marsh land.

Autumn is a season that I'm not so familiar with. I've had a taste of winter, summer and spring, but never the fall. It's seems a bit romantic if I must say. It's not just about the death of the reproductive season; it has more to do with the tilt of this planet and the need for life to adapt to the swooning temperatures of a planet's tilted axis. But autumn is almost here in Sudbury, and its deciduous trees have started to change their color to

mostly yellow, then orange and red in that order and quantity, and it is a sight to behold on a bright sunny morning.

I walked to my favorite strip mall on Wednesday of that week and purchased some more gift cards and lottery tickets for my angel hobby. My back was turned away from those who were squeezing by me as I picked out some gift cards at a display.

"Excuse me sir," said an excited middle aged marsh man who came up behind me.

"Yes," I replied and before I could get my brush off started.

He said to me, "Are you Manny Logan?"

I was flummoxed.

"No," I answered.

The marsh man frowned a little.

"You share a striking resemblance with that of my missing brother in law," said the flabbergasted man. "You sound just like him... Could I take your picture? This would blow my wife away! You are an absolute doppelganger for him."

I feigned flattery. I stopped him with an open hand and a fake smile to not take a picture of me with his timepiece.

I got to get rid of him. I got to get out of here.

"I'm so sorry your brother in law is missing. But you are unfortunately mistaken. Did he live around here because I'm unfortunately from out of town?" I said.

"No," said the man. "He's lived in Thunder Bay for years and went missing no more than six months ago. Just like that," he said raising his hands up slightly in exclamation.

“Well I’m so sorry for your wife, you and your missing brother in law. It must be terrible. He must have been a handsome fella!” I kidded him with a bit of levity. “But it’s just a case of mistaken likeness I suppose.”

“Yeah. It’s just crazy; you two look so much alike,” agreed the disappointed marsh man.

I put my purchases back on the shelf and extricated myself from that store as quickly as possible under the lingering eyes of Manny Logan’s brother in law. It wasn’t easy getting rid of the man once I was out of the shop either; he followed me in his white bread box for some time.

I made a call to Anne E. Mah and she had his vehicle boxed in by a BEAR unit that she had falsely alerted. Once he was stopped I returned directly back to the rental. Who am I, that someone would want so much to find me?

Well, I looked me up, or my courier that is. I was a school teacher at one time and for several years I taught English at a high school in Thunder Bay but this was more than ten years ago. Apparently, I coached a girls’ junior, volley ball team and I also headed up a winning, provincial championship debating team. But again that was all ten years ago.

I really wanted a picture of my sister Olivia; she was the one I had to look out for. I found more pictures of me dressed in terrible sports jackets. I looked stiff and imposing in all of them except one; that one I acquired from a missing persons’ site. I found my name Emanuel Logan and picture notated as recently gone missing from the Thunder Bay area. However, in this photo I was better attired and I appeared to be confident and pleased with myself. It looked just like me except for a pleasant smile I was wearing. It was a smile that I was totally unfamiliar with – it was affectionate. It was caring.

“Have I ever smiled like this?” I asked Hugh who I had already sufficiently filled in on my terrible shopping trip.

“No. You’ve never looked that happy,” answered Hugh who was wearing the briefest of smirks.

But he wasn’t being mean, he was being truthful.

“What dynamic am I missing here?” I asked Hugh.

“Who’s taking the photo? I think that’s the question to ask Manny,” answered Hugh.

“I don’t understand?” I said.

“Manny, it’s quite likely that your sister is taking the photo or perhaps someone else that your courier - loves is holding that camera,” implored Hugh.

Now, I felt stupid. Now, I felt guilty. Life is difficult. Love is precious. I know all these things but I don’t keep them front and center enough.

Anne E. Mah has me in lock down now. I’m not to leave the rental or go anywhere outdoors until the weekend when I will be allowed out again to pack the German bread box and leave this place in the middle of the night.

I caught up on my nature documentaries. I raised more angel funds for charity. I sat around and stewed a lot while Hugh visited the washroom ten times a day. If ever I come back to this place I vowed, the first thing I’m going to do is send my courier’s DNA to one of those large ancestry data bases to find out exactly who I am and who my people are.

As strange as it sounds my sister Olivia Stokes (nee Logan) lives just two kilometers away from my rental here in Sudbury. I used the internet to find her town house and I used the internet again to look up my paternal grandparents’ obituaries; that’s how I found out my sister’s married surname. A satellite image dated from a year ago showed me that the Stokes’s were likely the owners of two vehicles as they were both parked in their drive way: one a white bread box and the other a red Korean sedan. I learned a fair amount about my old family from just a few minutes of

perusing on the internet. None of this however helped me to smile like her brother once had for her, one afternoon in a backyard, many years ago.

Collingwood was our next hiding place which was just three and half hours south of Sudbury and ultimately eleven and a half hours away from our target in two weeks: Terrace Bay. And that's just how I felt. I was a fugitive. I was the hunted. And these rentals were my hideouts.

Hugh was still as secretive as ever about his washroom time but I have noticed a distinct uptick in his humor of late. He was pretty good company for a change while we drove to Collingwood. We did all sorts of reminiscing about our good times here in the marsh. We played red car for a good hour and Hugh won – with ten red cars spotted within just a kilometer! I think he cheats and I'm handicapped anyways because I have to watch the road for traffic at the same time.

"You're going to like Collingwood Hugh; it's got history. It's an old port town for the steamships of more than a century ago. I can remember them. Some were so old they had coal fired boilers and plumes of thick black smoke wafted out from their smoke stacks. They actually built many of them right there in the town's harbor," I said.

Collingwood was a surprise because initially we were to hunker down in Thunder Bay for our last two weeks, but that's all out the window now. The Stokes and Logans are onto me; they'll for certain check out Thunder Bay if they decide to search for me. That's alright however, because in two weeks time the old Manny Logan should be available again.

"You know Hugh, just what are the chances that out of fourteen million people who live here in the province of Ontario that I would somehow unwittingly, bump into my brother in-law in a strip mall?"

"I don't know. Let me think about it for a second: I would wager about one out of fourteen million chances," said Hugh laughing.

“You know; you should play the lotteries!” I said.

“I do. I do,” declared Hugh.

Wouldn't you know it: the new rental in Collingwood had only one wash room? Things were going to get spicy I thought. But no, Hugh started going for lone, quiet walks down to the waterfront and he spent more time in his bedroom under the security of its courtesy lock.

The Collingwood rental was a high rise condo. It had all the necessary accouterments for a fine temporary rental; a kitchenette, a big screen TV and parking. The shores of the great Lake Huron were just a short walk away. The community's population was diverse, but there appeared to be a large number of inhabitants of the frosty haired, retired kind.

Hugh and I still dutifully worked as angels and a goal of raising a million dollars for charity by the end of the week now seemed plausible. Even the owner of that animal shelter turned up in social media belatedly to announce that as a result of a recent surprise windfall that a new animal hospital and shelter was to be built in the Toronto Bureau of Agincourt.

Hugh was so proud that he shouted: “Redemption!”, but there was still something eating at that man.

Anne E. Mah had me spy on Hugh. I followed through with it - kind of, sort of, but my heart wasn't in it. Almost always after furtively following him on one of his many walks he'd just end up alone at the end of a pier or a lookout point on the waterfront. Sometimes, I'd quickly walk pass the glass front of a coffee shop where after briefly peering in I'd see him sitting alone at a table nursing a coffee and talking on his personal timepiece.

“Can't you just trace his calls?” I asked Anne E. Mah.

“Yes. They're from a cellular provider in the city of Hamilton,” said Anne E. Mah.

“Well that isn’t very helpful is it? There has to be at least a half million timepieces there,” I said.

“Manny? Why do you always refer to cellular telephones as timepieces?” asked Anne E. Mah.

“Because that’s all they are good for,” I answered tersely. “And other than telling the time of day correctly, they’re only useful for spreading, but bile and ill will, and nothing else.”

“I see,” lied Anne E. Mah after hearing my cynical dissertation.

“Has Hugh ever used his personal hand set to call or text you?” asked Anne E. Mah.

“No. I haven’t a clue what his number is?” I answered. “And why don’t you just instruct him to provide it?” I added.

“He simply denies that a second or personal hand set exists,” answered Anne E. Mah.

“Manny? Do you yourself have a personal hand set?” asked Anne E. Mah.

“Absolutely not; I’ve already expressed my personal thoughts on how I feel about them. Believe me; one is plenty.” I answered. “They’re difficult to read anyways. I prefer a laptop or a tablet format; something with a larger screen and a real keyboard. You know that in time, these marsh men are going to have to evolve a new appendage or tiny fingers or something if they don’t improve their technology. It’s frankly ridiculous,” I added.

Anne E. Mah sighed.

It was pasta night. I had protein with mine; all beef frankfurters in fact and Hugh had zucchini with his. We watched a sperm whale rescue on the

big screen as we ate. It's a sad state of affairs when the largest animal on the planet has to struggle to survive. This behemoth of an animal was entangled in fishing nets, buoys and line. It was a struggle for the beast just to breathe, but two hardy angels in a dinghy and who were marsh men themselves nonetheless, worked furiously to cut him free before the great beast drowned.

Hugh was just livid.

"We have to put a stop to this!" he declared.

"Hugh our remaining time here is just ten days; give or take a few hours. We've done a good job picking our battles and winning some, too. We've been excellent angels. There will be others; not all marsh men are foolish. Why look at those two saving a whale; angels if I've ever seen one," I said to comfort the man.

Hugh's face was still red and contorted with frustration.

"Hugh. This is living and it's often not fair. I personally can't wait to get out of here. It's stressful on me, too. I don't want to suffer and I don't like anything else to suffer either. Focus on the end of next week. The suffering will come to end and things will be better – I can promise you that," I said trying to console the distraught man.

He put his bowl of pasta down and stared intently at the floor. I think the man is losing it.

"Hugh? What's troubling you?" I asked.

"Nothing," said the clearly upset man. "Maybe I just need some rest," added Hugh and he got up from the sofa and headed to his bedroom once again.

It's six in the morning and my marsh man needs are calling me. I have water to lose and a tummy to fill, and I go through the motions. I made two cups of coffee just as I always do and I knocked lightly on Hugh's bedroom door and announced that the coffee was ready. While I sipped coffee from my cup I set the big screen up for Hugh. I found a nice nature documentary that was following a day in the life of a short-tailed weasel family and the momma weasel was nursing her kits at the time.

I knocked on Hugh's bedroom door again because I know how much he likes maternal content in his nature documentaries but there was no stirring in his room so I slowly pushed the door open as it was also unlatched. The bed was empty.

"Hugh?" I called out.

"Hugh?" I called out again as I surveyed every possible spot that you could hide a marsh man in. But he was gone! Oh I hope he's just gone for an early morning walk I told myself.

"Don't you do this to me?" I said under my breath.

Resting under his top sheet I found a heating pad wrapped with a bathroom towel for insulation, and resting atop of the towel was Hugh's bandolier!

"You silly fool," I said and I collected his bandolier and attached it to my groin. Now I carry eight.

I tried his official timepiece. It rang in the next room; so he'd left it behind. I have to report this right away and so I called Anne E. Mah immediately on my timepiece.

Anne E. Mah was not pleased. Hugh's transponder had not pinged for eight hours; I'm sure they ping at least once a day. We'll know soon enough where he is. She had me search the rental immediately however for any kind of clue as to what was up and where her missing courier might have

disappeared to. After a thorough search of the premises I found nothing that might shed some light on Hugh's whereabouts.

I used the German bread box to visit the waterfront where Hugh liked to visit, but he was not there. I checked the coffee shop where I'd previously seen him hang out, but it hadn't opened yet. Anne E. Mah gave me the go ahead to speak with the rental's concierge on the subject.

He was a pretty affable man when we collected the keys for the rental just five days ago as I remembered. I was rattled at the moment, but I confidently approached his counter and asked if I could have a word with him.

"Why certainly sir, how may I help," he asked with one of the most pleasant and polished smiles that I'd ever come by.

"I seem to be missing my partner sir. May I ask if you have seen him in the past eight hours or so? He's a short chubby sort, and a quiet fella."

"Trouble in paradise, Huh?" replied the man.

"No. There's no trouble just a misunderstanding," I answered defensively.

"Well, the night clerk did mention that a gentleman fitting that description and wearing a hoodie had spent an hour in the lobby on his phone crying and then left with a young blonde lady at about one in the morning," said the concierge raising his eyebrows.

"Thank you sir; you've been very helpful," I answered and I headed back to the suite.

Dale. I know it. It has to be Dale.

"He's run off with a girl," I said to Anne E. Mah.

"What girl?" asked Anne E. Mah.

"Dale," I answered.

"Has there been some untoward event that I have not been informed of?" asked my superior.

"Yes, I believe that would be an accurate assessment," I answered, and then I bawled out the whole story: How Hugh had agreed to end the affair and how unbeknownst to me he had rekindled their illicit relationship - and without my approval of course.

"And without my knowledge either," interjected a perturbed Anne E. Mah.

"He promised me - that it was over," I answered while pleading for some hope and mercy.

Like a chorus these words: 'Don't leave us here', repeated over and over in my head.

"Pack everything up, pay the concierge and give him a tip. There's still time to find our missing courier," said Anne E. Mah.

I ran around the rental like a whirlwind; gathering things up and packing them into waiting suitcases. There was one bag missing however, a shaving kit and toothbrush, too. Hugh must have packed one up for himself before disappearing into the night with that girl.

I hate her now, and she's not even the one at fault. Hugh bears the responsibility. She has no idea that the man she is involved with is a courier for an alien technology. He hardly exists but for the last twenty-eight weeks. I can't understand what would possess the man to do this and then my timepiece rang.

I knew who it was.

"Where are you?" I asked.

There was a moment of silence and then in the tiniest of whispers he spoke.

“Have you found my bandolier?”

“Yes I have and I’d like to know what’s going on Hugh?”

“Forget about me Manny. Tell Anne E. Mah that I’m never coming back.”

“This is crazy. Come to your senses. Why?”

“It’s Dale,” answered Hugh.

“Dale? The girl from the Soo?” I asked for some clarity.

“Yes. She’s expecting a child,” said a defeated Hugh in a cracking falsetto.

“You got to be kidding; that’s your courier’s child,” I said emphatically, “Not yours,” I said.

“No Manny that child is my responsibility,” replied Hugh.

“Who says?” I asked.

“I do. I say so,” answered Hugh.

“Look, tell me where you are and I’ll come and get you. We can make the kid and Dale millionaires, and you’ll have nothing to worry about.”

“No. I can’t have a drug addict be my child’s father.”

“This is crazy. You’re talking nonsense. You’re not thinking straight. Tell me where you are?” I asked and then he hung up.

My timepiece came to life again; this time it was Anne E. Mah.

“He’s two hours away at a highway rest stop called the Stop and Go near Cambridge Ontario. I want you to head there immediately. See if you can find that hand set. If he’s disposed of it there it should have the young female’s hand set’s number on it. And did I hear correctly that the female is pregnant?” asked Anne E. Mah.

“Yes,” I answered.

“Proceed with haste Manny,” replied Anne E. Mah.

“I’m on it,” I answered.

Ten minutes later, I’ve signed out, packed the bread box, and I’m on my way south to a greasy spoon called the ‘Stop and Go’ rest stop that’s located just outside of Cambridge, Ontario. Just what am I to do if I ever catch up with him I wonder, and I’m afraid to ask.

The bread box’s navigation system is guiding our progress along the shortest route to Cambridge, Ontario. Anne E. Mah is watching for the presence of police radar along the route, and I’ve managed to save twenty minutes of travel time already by increasing the bread box’s speed by ten to twenty percent over the speed limit depending on the volume of traffic as I encountered it.

The Stop and Go rest stop was just getting busy with lunch time diners when I arrived. I wore an orange reflective vest to pose as a working man and I scoured the outside of the premises first, but I could not see any signs of a discarded hand set.

Anne E. Mah asked me to check the rest room next, so I marched straight in there like I was a regular diner needing to lose some water before finding a table. There happened to be another occupant in the rest room at the time so I whistled aloud an annoying melody that reverberated off the hard surfaces in there and passed some gas; that always gets a marsh man’s dander up and he was out of there in a minute. And indeed, I

did find a discarded timepiece in the rest room's waste bin. I pocketed it, washed my hands, and went back into the dining room and ordered a banquet burger and fries with a transparent soft drink because these days I like to see what I'm actually drinking.

Anne E. Mah messaged me a list of potential passwords to try on what appeared to be Hugh's personal timepiece while I was eating, and the sixteenth one I tried worked just like that! The burger was actually pretty good, and the messages and photos on the handset were – well some of them anyways, were pretty spicy. All Anne E. Mah wanted however, was Dale's handset number and while I was finishing my fries Anne E. Mah messaged back that the last tower Dale's hand set pinged was just outside the City of Hamilton.

"Manny?" announced Anne E. Mah using the hands free feature of the German bread box. "We may have only one chance at this. I want to have a conversation with Hugh. I'm sure you can understand how important this matter is. It's only a matter of time, and then they'll likely destroy the young female's handset. I want you to proceed directly to the city of Hamilton. I'll call that handset once you are in eyesight of them," commanded Anne E. Mah.

It's about a half hour drive from Cambridge to Hamilton and I drove directly to a location that was near a bay front park. Unfortunately the handset's travel was now by foot and still moving, albeit at a much slower rate.

"Pick up the momentum," demanded Anne E. Mah, and I was already pushing my luck as it was. "They're nearing a commuter train station," reported Anne E. Mah.

"No!" I groaned despondently to myself as I got more aggressive with my driving.

I cannot attract the attention of the marsh man authorities. It's the middle of the afternoon for heaven's sake and I cannot be racing about and

risk contact with the authorities, but I sped up as much as I could. Hugh, my friend - you are becoming one big pain in the ass.

“Manny? The female’s handset’s signal has gone offline. I think they might be onto us. Perhaps, our reluctant courier is also tracking us, too” said Anne E. Mah and she added, “A train has just stopped. It’s a commuter and will be heading East for Toronto. I’m going to delay it, but I want you to sweep that neighborhood for a parked, red, four door, two thousand and twelve Japanese sedan; with Ontario licence plates: GIQO-653. And keep your eye out for the two of them,” implored Anne E. Mah.

I parked the bread box, put an ear set on as instructed and started on my way into the direction of the train station while scoping out everything that moved around me for a young, Caucasian female with bleached, blond hair and accompanied with the portly Hugh wearing a dark hoodie. There were plenty of marsh men out and about, but frankly they all look the same to an impatient anima like me. If there were just some bees hanging suspiciously around, I’d be a little more optimistic about finding these two but there were no bees to be seen.

I did find two red four door sedans parked along Stuart Street; however none of them were plated: GIQO-653. What one can glean from just anyone’s timepiece number is surprising. Anne E. Mah must know Dale’s last name, age and home address by now; if she’s still living at the same residence that is. I have my doubts about that however.

“Manny? Buy a ticket for the train. I need you to check the platform and the train; it won’t be going anywhere for another twenty minutes,” instructed Anne E. Mah via my ear set.

Has no one ever heard of a ticket seller; you know - someone selling train tickets behind a window at a wicket? I’ve done it before back in the seventies. The machines that sell them now are about as intuitive to use as a two legged table! I could get the app, but there was not enough time, but nonetheless, I got a ticket purchased: a round trip to Union Station, Toronto.

I checked the platform quickly for the two but they were nowhere to be seen. There were ten cars with two tiers of seating each to search. I wasn't going to get to search them all, but I walked with purpose and even ran at times through the empty cars; it was easy because the train was more than half empty.

"Next stop Aldershot... Doors closing," announced a marsh man, over a public address system and I ducked out quickly before being able to search the last two remaining cars.

I stood on the dock and withdrew my timepiece from my pocket to call Anne E. Mah and as the train lurched to life a flock of about fifty pigeons soared up and into the air from the other side of the train.

Sigh. I got no luck. Those two were on that train. I know it. If it were anyone else, this would all be laughable, but in Hugh's case fifty pigeons can't be wrong.

We suspect that Dale and Hugh are on the train and that he was likely blocking his courier's embedded transponder with something hidden in his hoodie called a Faraday Cage here in the land of the marsh men. I've never seen him wear such a thing before; perhaps the hoodie was a gift from Dale? I don't know.

The train will have eleven stops before it arrives at Union Station in downtown Toronto, from there, there are connecting trains to seven more commuter routes. Then to that you can add another Trans Canada train line that has a stop there and there was also yet another connection to an international airport, so there's absolutely no point chasing them without knowing their final destination. So I continued to look for Dale's car and I eventually found it in a parking lot off of MacNab Street near Stuart.

I cased it carefully. As I like to refer to my automobile as being a bread box, Dale's automobile was more like a butter dish; smaller and sleeker and a Korean one at that. It appeared to be locked and was very messy inside.

“Manny? Take a photo of the car’s serial number located on the car’s dash board with your handset when it’s safe to do so,” instructed Anne E. Mah.

A minute or two later there was no one around so I snapped a picture of the serial number through the car’s windshield.

“Give me a minute,” said Anne E. Mah.

“Manny? Use your key fob. Any key fob will do - and open the automobile’s door,” instructed Anne E. Mah.

It worked and I ducked inside. What a mess it was inside and clearly the property of someone who never heard of a vacuum.

“Manny? Carefully search the car for anything that might tell us more about this young female. If it looks interesting take a photo of it,” instructed Anne E. Mah.

Well firstly, I’m going to buy some time for the parking meter so I don’t get disturbed by a parking lot attendant. A few dollars in coins did the job and I got busy.

What the inside of an automobile can tell you about its owner is just amazing. For one thing, I think I was the first person to ever have paid for parking for this car because the glove box was full of unpaid parking tickets! And that in itself tells me a lot about the character that owns this vehicle, and that being that someone can’t be trusted. Birds of a feather flock together - Hugh. More study of the parking tickets made it abundantly clear that she also spent a lot of time here in Hamilton according to the Hamilton Parking Authority.

And after digging through candy wrappers, napkins, Kleenex, lip balm, an unopened package of condoms believe it or not, and some nickels and dimes in the console I hit pay dirt: a certificate for an expired auto insurance policy and the vehicle’s ownership. The little red sedan was owned by Dale’s father or brother, or so it appeared, and whoever that

might be - lived just a kilometer or so away from here where I'm presently sitting.

So - she's a resident or former resident of Hamilton.

"Manny? Tidy up any mess you've made in the young female's automobile. Leave it the way you found it, and I want you to check out that address. You can walk there in five minutes. Size it up and I'll digest what we've got to work with," said Anne E. Mah.

The address was located only a short walk away; why park in a lot a kilometer away? Well, that's because there was no parking at the location I would say, seeing how the streets were lined with automobiles parked bumper to bumper, up and down along the street. The residence appeared to be a second storey walk up. I tried the door at the street level and it was locked. I wasn't supposed to knock so I didn't, but I believe someone had peered out a curtained window from a second storey window above the doorway.

There was no front lot to speak of at the front of the home, so I went around the corner where I found a very uninviting Hamilton, Ontario alley way that serviced the same homes but from the back. I counted the back lots to the address and arrived at a locked gate with a 'beware of dog' notice fastened to some much graffitied, pressure treated fencing.

There was no dog here to be aware of as far as I could tell. That's a typical marsh man ruse to frighten off people like me I think.

"Hey," said someone who suddenly came up from behind me. "You looking for someone?" He added with a cheeky sneer.

"Why yes I am," I offered politely to a diminutive little man in a pair of big, cowboy styled boots, and he immediately kicked me hard, - right in the location of my reproductive organs!

Oh my, the pain was instantaneous. What in heaven's name were they thinking when they thought it was a good idea to put such sensitive organs

out in harm's way?

"Uugh!" I moaned.

I swear, I have no idea of what I was doing in the seconds that followed, but the anima in me must have intervened because in a moment I was lucid and I had him on his back with my hand around his throat.

His eyes were just bulging at me as he stared back at me in fear. I took my hand off his throat and checked my pockets for my wallet and timepiece and then he took off like jack rabbit in a nature documentary.

Seriously, I thought I was going to pass out. I was seeing blurry stars.

"Hey there fella," said a friendly face that appeared from over a tall neighboring fence top.

I looked over at him through my watery eyes.

"Did you just get a kick in the junk?" asked the man who appeared to be an elderly ghoul of a marsh man.

I rolled my eyes back at him and shook my head affirmatively. I could hear him talking to someone apparently much shorter than he next to him. It sounded like an elderly marsh lady. A stubborn gate then pushed open and an elderly marsh lady no taller than one and a half meters in height smiled back at me like an elderly; marsh lady angel if that's possible.

"Would you like a cold compress for that young man?" she asked with a grin that was missing a few teeth.

"Would that help?" I stupidly asked.

"Oh yes," she said and she turned around to fetch whatever she had in mind to ease my intense pain.

I wished that she too was just like a jack rabbit at that moment but beggars can't be too choosy.

“The neighborhood has gone to shit,” offered the old fella wincing for me as I waited for the compress to arrive.

Five minutes later and after a lecture about everything that’s wrong in his neighborhood and how he didn’t like the Covid his lady came back smiling.

“All I have young man is a half a bag of frozen French fries,” said the somewhat disappointed elderly marsh woman.

I took it out of her hands immediately and stuffed it ‘tout suite’ into the front of my pants.

“Oh my god,” I said, “You are my angel!” and she beamed with her eyes wide and sparkling.

I took out my wallet and the elderly gentlemen shook his head negatively.

“No. Please!” I pleaded, “I’m giving out gift cards today,” and I put three of them into the elderly marsh woman’s hand and I limped away while thanking them more and headed back to the comfort of my bread box that was unfortunately parked a kilometer away.

What a waste of effort that was. Thanks a bunch Anne E. Mah. Maybe we found Dale’s brother; indeed the man who kicked me in the junk was fair haired, small in stature and had a lot of attitude much like Dale. He probably lent her his car. We’ll never know now because I think we just burnt our bridges with that fella.

An unapologetic Anne E. Mah had more for me to do: Dale and Hugh were sighted on close circuit camera leaving the commuter at Exhibition station in Toronto.

“Where do you think they are headed?” I asked.

“To somewhere where there are no cameras I would imagine,” answered Anne E. Mah. “Let’s hope they spend the night in downtown Toronto first,” she added, and I was on my way to the big city.

There were only three or four hours of useful day light left and two of them were going to be consumed by rush hour traffic, but we have to find our Hugh. Not only does Anne E. Mah want to have a conversation with him, but I too would like to pop him one right in the nose.

There were a couple of parks that I wanted to try and that’s because just as animals like parks, so does Hugh, and there are also happens to be fewer cameras located in most parks. I had two in mind: High Park and Trinity Bellwoods Park. Those two parks were located not too far from the Exhibition commuter station that they were last seen exiting and I know that Hugh liked the both of them and had visited them more than a few times during our stays in Toronto. Besides, I now had a half a bag of thawed French fries that I could feed to some hungry squirrels that I might come across.

Night time was going to make it difficult however. These days city parks are the home of the homeless, and the night time atmosphere in these park encampments can be difficult and even dangerous, but if that is the case then Dale and Hugh might still seek out some refuge in a nearby coffee shop. And if I see a flock of pigeons hopping about or a mass of insects on a shop window you know what I’ll be thinking. I got nothing else to work with unless Anne E. Mah can locate the two by some kind of electronic means.

That Hugh, he definitely thought this out. He has a history of being very clever. Since this afternoon, his and Dale’s timepiece have been off line and anything he’s purchased such as train tickets, meals or even a hotel room has obviously been paid with cash or a new credit card registered under someone else’s name. His transponder has still not pinged and I have no idea how he’s defeated it so easily. I feel he’s going to be a hard man to find.

I started my search at Trinity Bellwoods Park; it was the closest. I don't know about some of these homeless marsh men; they look at you like you're trespassing or maybe they're just scoping you out before they bump you on the head, but for whatever reason it was unnerving walking near their encampments. Home is home I suppose - even if you are the homeless. I however, found no sign of the two while I walked the park's paths.

Next, I drove over to High Park because it was a bit of a hike by foot and by about five kilometers in fact. Dusk was approaching and I headed out and into the open areas first. Off in the distance I could see some activity that seemed suspicious. I could hear a young lady's shrill voice laughing hysterically. I could also make out in the twilight a line of Canadian geese marching along in single file in a big circle around a large grassy, open area, and leading the parade was a stout man wearing a hoodie that fit my suspect's profile to a tee.

At first I was angry; very angry. I even opened my mouth to shout Hugh's name, but nothing came out from my mouth because now I had suddenly become jealous. I had come to my senses. This man was having a life and I was just a courier following orders and a plan. I swallowed my ego at that moment and turned away from the two and their laughter and walked back out of High Park.

I told Anne E. Mah nothing about seeing the two in High Park. Instead, I pleaded with her that it was a fruitless waste of time to search for Hugh and Dale, who were obviously actively trying to hide from us in this city of three million people. We were not going to be successful in finding the two unless we can find a real lead, I lied.

"Anne E. Mah? My junk is just aching. I've been going steady for hours," I whined. "I need some rest. I need to inspect the bandoliers and their precious cargo. I need a hotel room. Please!"

Well finally, Anne E. Mah did show some pity for me; I got some take-out and eight hours at the Fairmont Hotel out of her, no less. I soaked my injured area for two hours in a cold bath. It was heaven. The crystals were no worse for wear. I tried to sleep, but the day's excitement had me all amped up. I tried watching the room's big screen TV, but the nature documentaries just made me sad – and lonely. There was no Hugh to talk with. There was no one but Anne E. Mah who was far too busy to deal with my marsh man needs.

I tried to listen to music, but it was all crap and meant for marsh man ears anyhow. However, the one thing I did find comforting on the internet was some nice pleasant pink noise and if you played it just above a whisper it sounded very much like space travel from where I come from.

I want to transition back to crystal in the worst way. I've earned it. The chances of catching up to Hugh and changing his mind on the matter are nil; he's made up his mind. He's like another Arthur Kennedy: he's made a choice and he knows what he's doing and the clock is working in his favor.

Anne E. Mah was disappointed with the realization that an anima courier had gone rogue under her watch again. She hadn't given up hope just yet; she had cast a broad net of surveillance over all of the greater Toronto area. If one of them slipped up in the next forty-eight hours she would see it and the chase would be back on. Unless this is what Hugh truly wants - then stay low my brother.

Anne E. Mah now knows everything there is to know about Dale Blackwood except for her present whereabouts. She knows who her parents are and where they live. She knows about her brother who wears the cowboy boots and she knows she has another. Paul is the former and Neil is the latter.

Anne E. Mah also knows the names of certain marsh man physicians who might be able to interfere with a certain anima device that among other things serves as a transponder that's implanted just above Hugh MacDonald's C 1 vertebrae. She's been here before in nineteen seventy-

nine in fact when marsh man surgery was not quite so advanced. In hindsight, perhaps I should never have told Hugh the story of Arthur Kennedy, and you know – maybe I did do the right thing.

When morning came Anne E. Mah had a list of tasks for me. She had some house cleaning in mind. Hugh and I had reduced our ten suitcases down to six only recently knowing that our recovery was pending. Now, Anne E. Mah wanted it down to a single bag containing one change of clothes, a survival suit and the rest of the vital tools that I would require for this coming Saturday evening.

Hugh and I had spent time in twenty different rentals, in fourteen different towns and cities, over the past one hundred and ninety-seven solar days. We were the real rolling stones; no moss had time to grow beneath our feet. The weather man was already talking about the dreadful weather coming to our beloved Lake Superior this coming weekend. An area of intense low pressure was already forming over our favorite great lake pulling cold Arctic air down from the north and warm Gulf air up from the south. They were calling for an outstanding weather Armageddon.

Bring it on; I say.

I sifted through all the things that Hugh and I had collected over the past twenty-eight weeks of life. If there was anything that might identify who we were, then it went into a special pile to be burned into ashes.

There were hard disks and memory sticks to wipe. No one on Earth was to know that there was ever such a thing as two anima couriers called Hugh MacDonald and Emanuel Logan.

When I was done, I emptied the clothing from the suitcases into green garbage bags and placed the bric and the brac into cardboard cartons, loaded up the German bread box and drove to the nearest thrift shop just down the street at Queen and Jameson. A cheery young bohemian of a marsh man there helped carry away all those memories that Hugh and I

had collected over the past six and a half months and deposited them promptly into giant over filled bins of other old discarded marsh men memories.

I'm now finding that my mind is becoming quite preoccupied with my partner's predicament. His situation though similar to Arthur Kennedy's is different because of the child. That child incidentally is an innocent. He requires more than just the resources that his mother can provide. He too, also requires a good father in a marsh man society. And if I may add, he could also use an uncle Manny, too.

That child however, will be a marsh man child, but will there be some transference from the spirit of - let's say that of his courier father? Will something inherited from his anima father reveal itself in this child? Such as a fondness for animals, a passion for science, cleverness, or his of love of life?

Anne E. Mah says, "No," but I wonder and I bet Hugh does, too.

"Personally, I'd rather watch life rather than have one myself," I told myself.

So there I said it. The elephant in the equation has been revealed.

It's the voyeur in me. There's no argument that life is beautiful. But spending all of your life in a caustic environment that literally drains the life out of you, lasts just eighty solar years, and is totally finite at its end is a dear cost for some intimacy, so why not just watch, I say!

This living is for the birds and all the other living things on this planet in fact, but not for me. It's not about death. It's not about rebirth. It's about transition.

My role is one of a courier. My purpose is to deliver very important things from point A to point B. I have to deal with the weather, the geography, the politics and anything else that may impede my progress. Two of us were utilized to improve our chances of success; it's a good thing

because life is chocked full of temptations, happenstance, and both surprises and compromises, too.

It's a good thing for the eight crystal souls I carry. It's a good thing for me but my partner has been blinded by his affection for this world. Yes, its love and yes I know all about the power it has over marsh men. It keeps most of them on the high road, the straight and the narrow and it gives meaning to their lives. But there's no room for a good anima courier here. I have somewhere to be in just hours and then I'll return this marsh man body back to its rightful owner: Emanuel Logan, and my time living here will come to an end.

I'm having coffee and something called a doughnut at a counter in a quaint coffee shop and bistro in downtown Toronto. It's been hours since I've heard from Anne E. Mah. When she calls, she'll either have another task for me to do or she'll give me orders to head for Terrace Bay I figure. There's got to be ten other marsh men idling here in the shop and I don't know about the others, but I'm doing my job: laying low and biding my time under the fog of urban living.

My timepiece came to life just half way through my donut and coffee. The coffee was just okay, but that donut was the best thing I've ever tasted here in the past one hundred and ninety-eight days. It was called a walnut crunch and I'm going to make sure that I have another before I get out of this place.

"Manny? I need you immediately," said an upset Anne E. Mah.

"I've found Hugh and he has just exited from an outpatient clinic at a downtown hospital," said Anne E. Mah.

The Toronto Western Hospital wasn't too far off from where I sat, but you needed to either walk or helicopter to get around in this city; the streets were always congested or under construction. I bought another

walnut crunch for energy and off I went. Anne E. Mah had found him alright, but only momentarily.

“Was he caught on CCTV?” I asked as I hurried down the street in a westerly direction towards Bathhurst.

“No, but his transponder went on and then offline ten minutes ago at that location,” complained Anne E. Mah.

Oh boy. That Hugh has done it now. He’s gone and done what Arthur Kennedy pined for; he’s had his transponder removed or disabled. I wonder how he did it. Arthur thought that something as simple as an X ray might do it. Perhaps something a little more powerful such as a CT scan if a conventional X ray didn’t work; there were no MRI’s available back then – proto types perhaps, but nothing more. The thought then was being that should a radiograph disable the transponder, rather than having a surgical procedure to remove it as a foreign body that it would just be left behind in the body like say a bullet fragment sometimes is. Anyhow, that was the theory back then and we know how that worked out, but back in the seventies it was enough for Arthur Kennedy to gamble on.

The West Toronto Hospital is a world leader in neuroscience and is located at Dundas and Bathhurst in downtown Toronto. And in another ten minutes or so, I’ll start scouting the parks, the patios and the shops for flocks, swarms and herds of animal life. It’s sunny today and the weather man is calling for a relatively balmy autumn day before that nasty weather arrives late tomorrow. It’s not the country here, so animals massing in large numbers are highly unlikely, but there could be some pigeon activity, some end of the season wasps, frantic squirrels and who knows what else.

I checked at least a dozen eateries and coffee shops and two parks, but I saw nothing of the two and that’s even if they happened to be together at the moment. Time was running out; surely if they visited a shop or two in the past three quarters of an hour they’d be on their way home by now which made me think. There was a TTC subway stop nearby called Saint Patricks Station and I headed over to it as quickly as I could.

I was winded by the time I got there and from street level the station appeared to be just a hole in the ground with a concrete staircase and a concrete balustrade all about it, but low and behold there were hundreds if not more of Coccinellidae or - other words: lady bugs gathered about the subway entrance on the sun soaked concrete of a busy University Avenue.

I dashed down the stairs, swiped my timepiece, and crashed through the turnstiles. Pushed through the departing crush of disembarking riders and ran down the dock carefully looking for a portly figure in a hoodie. The stopped train however, was about to leave the station; its doors were just closing. And I scanned its cars as best I could through the passing windows. And there he was, seated alone, still wearing his soul patch, and smiling like the luckiest marsh man in the world. There was no hoodie; instead a colorful gaiter covered his neck – probably a Michael Faraday frock of some sort that covertly covered his implanted transponder.

Hugh, have a beautiful life my friend. And I returned back up that lady bug staircase and called Anne E. Mah for help.

“Anne E Mah, I can’t find him,” I lied. “I think I’m experiencing some kind of quickening. I feel out of sorts. I can’t separate reality from my dreams. I think I hear voices calling me. I need to come home.”

“Load up the automobile Manny, pay for the room and tip them well. We’ve done our due diligence here. Rooms are scarce to rent up in Terrace Bay right now. It’s the weather I suppose and it’s to be expected of course. We’ll instead have you rest up at the safe house near Wawa until tomorrow night,” replied Anne E. Mah.

That put some bounce in my step. My friend was fully committed to having a life here, but I have my own plans. Someone has to do the right thing. I’ll be the hero. Eight souls here in my pants are cheering for me. I can’t hear them of course, but I know what they want and it is the same thing that I want. We want to go home. We don’t want a life. We want eternity.

It's overcast and the sky grows darker with each kilometer. I've been on the road for two hours and Wawa is still another eight hours away. Some of my marsh man faculties are diminishing. I can see and quite clearly, but there is less color. I think Dichromaticism is setting in. Paradoxically, I can smell things better than I ever could before. I can't however whistle any more. I think I'll miss that. By the time they get here, I'll be more animal than marsh man.

It's all part of the process. I'll be reduced to one of those animals I've seen so many times on those nature videos. I'll be able to swing through the trees and run up steep hills. And, I will be a much better grunter than speaker of sentences and words.

I have ten thousand dollars in cash stowed inside my two breast pockets and it's for the real Emanuel Logan; not this fake. I wish I could leave him a note of thanks and an apology for a still slightly sore left testicle, but I can't. The ten thousand dollars in his breast pockets and the sore testicle will have to be mysteries for him.

"Good bye big cities; hello hinterlands," that's what my old friend Hugh used to say when we were finally away from all the traffic, and where finally - where all the roads were just two lanes instead of three or four. We'd loosen up and begin to dicker over the breeds of the cattle, the horses, and sheep we'd see along the way.

All those colorful cows and horses that used to delight Hugh and I so - are all colored in shades of grey now. They call this God's country if I recall correctly, but today: its grey field stones and grey rock eruptions that litter the landscape, and its ever-grey trees and old grey farm houses that silhouette the country side.

"Hugh my friend I miss you, but I don't think you'd like this grey business much," I said to the empty space in the passenger seat.

"Hey. I hope that every day you live is filled with love for Dale and your child," I said again to the absent passenger sitting next to me.

My timepiece activated the hands free feature of my German bread box. It was Anne E. Mah.

"Manny?"

"Yes?" I answered.

"The housekeeper at the safe house has asked for another hour to prepare for your overnight stay. I think you should stop for a meal and a washroom break," said Anne E. Mah.

"Will do; I'll stop in the 'Soo' for a bite to eat - it's coming up in another one hundred and ten kilometers according to the trip navigator," I answered.

"How are you feeling?" asked Anne E. Mah.

After some pregnant thought I answered, "Resolute. I am feeling resolute Anne E. Mah."

"I'll take that response as an affirmative. Remember, that transition can be difficult and stressful. I want you to be mindful of that. And Manny - your recovery is in progress and will proceed at the prearranged location of Terrace Bay Ontario at the native time of two am early Sunday morning."

Oh that sounded so good. That's just thirty-two hours from now.

"That's like music to my ears Anne E. Mah. I'm telling you: there have been moments in the past one hundred and ninety-eight days where I thought I was never going to hear those words."

"Well its happening. You can be certain of that and it will be my last time supervising couriers here, too," said Anne E. Mah.

"Why's that?" I asked.

"They're wrapping up this fresh water project early; if you were not already aware of that. The lab is apparently not recoverable and most of the project's goals have already been met. So, I'll be moving offline for a good solar century or two I hear," answered Anne E. Mah.

"I'm pretty certain that there is a salt water project that's still ongoing in the southern hemisphere. Who will oversee their couriers?" I asked.

"My namesake: Anne A. Mah."

"Oh, I wasn't aware that you had an associate. Are you okay with that Anne E. Mah?" I asked.

"Yes. It is uncomfortable being considered redundant but a new task will come up for me eventually. I've been off line for longer. It's only time after all," she joked.

I don't see what's wrong with speaking to someone who's not there if you know what I mean. I had a great time reminiscing with my absent friend next to me. He was much quieter than he used to be and more agreeable too I must say, but these new one sided conversations were nonetheless a real comfort for me at the moment. There were things that I needed to confess, and there were subjects we could now address from the past that once were too taboo to discuss, and now they are not. I got a lot off my marsh man chest.

So what; if a few people in passing cars thought I was nuts because I appeared to be talking to myself. For all they know; I could be talking to someone on my timepiece - hands free. I could also be rehearsing my lines for a character in an amateur theatre play. To all those judges passing by me, who caught me talking to my absent friend sitting next to me: they didn't lose a good friend - forever like I did today!

I had a hankering for some junk food. Hugh I know would not approve, but he's not here today to put a stop to it. I'm thinking a small pizza or

some kind of monster sized burger. A feast of carbohydrates that's what I want for my send off.

And I don't want breaded chicken and a salad like my buddy Hugh would insist upon. I can eat mountains of junk food and never gain an ounce, but if Hugh has even a single French fry it goes straight to his waist. Poor Dale is never going to enjoy fast food again.

So, the 'Soo' is old and familiar to the likes of Hugh and I and the place to go for fast food was down by the water front. I decided I'd try something called a Double Burger with cheese from one shop and something called a beaver tail from another. I bought and paid for the burger from a young lady who I tipped generously. The dining area at the burger shop was tiny but I devoured my double smash burger on a toasted, sesame seed bun – 'tout suite' at a tiny table in a room filled with loud and boisterous, young marsh men.

I don't know what a beaver tail is in the confectionary world, but I'm about to find out. Were there real beaver tails involved? Were they sprinkled in sugar or coated in syrup; I don't know. When I did get inside the shop there was immediate pressure to order; apparently you are supposed to already know what you wanted. And it's no wonder, because there was no dining area in there to speak of. At one end of the line up someone took your order and payment. In the middle of the line up you watched someone assemble your order and at the end of the line; it was out the door you went with your order and a handful of napkins in hand.

I bought something that I think was fried dough. And it did come with plenty of napkins because I asked for extra sugary syrup all over it. I ate it like a sugar monster would: secretly, and in a secluded parking spot in the driver's seat of the German bread box. It was delicious, but it made me dizzy by the end. This has truly been a night of guilty pleasures and meant to celebrate my last hours as a man of the marsh.

I cleaned myself up, did my civic duty and ditched my beaver tail trash into the appropriate trash bin, and looked up into the dark night sky above.

It was more than an hour after sunset now and the winds were picking up off the great Lake Superior situated just twenty kilometers away from here where I stood. From West to East those angry winds churned cyclonically, but to a tiny marsh man like me standing on the banks of the Saint Mary's river, those gusts seemed to come from every direction.

The rain was just starting. If you hadn't yet tied your stuff down outdoors, you were now going to get soaking wet doing it now. You could hear tethered flags slapping in the gusts and loose litter was sailing up and into the air to ten meters or so. And this was only the beginning.

My timepiece activated. Anne E. Mah was likely texting me a message to start my next leg to Wawa. It wasn't. It was a text message from an unfamiliar number. It was a picture; a selfie of sorts, of Hugh and Dale at a petting zoo by the looks of it. They were smiling like a couple of young kids with a llama's head between the two. I've never seen a happier llama or a young marsh lady for that matter, too.

There was a short clutch of words that accompanied the photo that said: "For as long as I live, you will always be my friend and brother - Love Hugh and Dale Macdonald."

I was so touched. They bought a burner timepiece just to send me a photo and a beautiful message.

My timepiece chimed. This time it was Anne E. Mah, "Did you just receive a message Manny?"

"Yes I did." I answered.

"It came from a Toronto park and then went off line. May I ask what the message contained?" asked Anne E. Mah.

"It was a selfie of Hugh and Dale, and a llama. I can forward it to you if you like," I volunteered.

"A llama?" asked a surprised Anne E. Mah.

“Yeah; a Lama glama – the domestic variety like you might find in a children’s petting zoo,” I elaborated.

“I don’t think it’ll be necessary,” said Anne E. Mah. “All things considered Manny, I think our Hugh spent just too much time here as a marsh man. It happens. Our Hugh was just a little too sensitive to the realities that come with living a life.”

Personally, I think the man wanted to assimilate into this world. He was in love with it! And clearly, the old Hugh MacDonald had little use for it; he’d be dead months ago if he hadn’t been summoned to become an inhabited courier two hundred days ago.

Life for some is just a roll of the dice, and for others there seems to be nothing more precious than – life itself. I’ll miss its tactile touch, its aromas, its taste, its music and all its beautiful images that I have seen, and for all of its glorious ambience I might add. But I am anima, and I can exist forever in crystal and yet, live here and there, for a few minutes, a few days, or a few months when needed, and then transition back to crystal – where the passage of time and space are irrelevant.

The rain was now coming sideways and I was becoming quite wet, so I headed back to the German bread box. I had another two and a half hours to drive before I can rest for the night. No matter to the German bread box; it had fresh tires, all wheel drive and traction control. It was an amazing automobile and well suited for a November gale on the shores of our great Lake Superior.

I wasn’t on the highway for more than a few minutes when I noted that since I had left the ‘Soo’ there appeared to be another German bread box tailing me. It was white and had unusual headlamps that I recognized as belonging to that of another German bread box manufacturer. This is now the second time that I’ve been followed. A doctor tailed me back then in the reproductive season and I only got rid of him with the aid of Anne E.

Mah. I got into the passing lane and got the engine humming, but that car following me kept up at about six car lengths behind me and, - then I really let it go. The road was slick but the bread box didn't lose its grip. At two hundred and twenty kilometers an hour the bread box still had more to give, but I was growing tired of the risk and the pursuing vehicle behind me matched my speed.

I can't allow myself to be stopped by the police, and I can't drive safely like this under these conditions forever either, so I called Anne E. Mah. I slowed the bread box quick for a moment with the brakes to see how many occupants were in the car that was tailing me. It was just a lone marsh woman at the wheel as far as I could tell. She must be a professionally trained, race car driver by the way she handled her automobile.

"Anne E. Mah. I have a bit of a problem," I said rather loudly to overcome the noise of the bread box's speeding engine.

"Yes Manny. Tell me the details," answered Anne E. Mah.

"I'm being tailed by a crazed marsh woman on the Trans Canada highway. I can't seem to shake her and its kind of getting dicey out here regarding the road conditions," I shouted.

"Manny. Get into the curb lane and gradually slow down," said Anne E. Mah.

I did so and the car tailing me did the same.

"She's doing the same," I said as I lowered my speed.

"It's a marsh lady you said?" asked Anne E. Mah.

"Yes. I'm certain. Dark hair, Ontario licence plates and a very good driver," I answered.

"That's Marie," replied a noticeably relieved Anne E. Mah.

"Who is this Marie?" I asked slightly bewildered by her answer.

"She's a courier Manny, who's been summoned to shadow you. She'll remain within ten to twenty minutes from you at all times until the transition is completed successfully. She shouldn't be following you so close however. I suspect she's the passionate type when focused on a task. She's just doing a thorough job much like you do Manny. Do not engage her however - that could complicate things. She is not under the personal control of an inhabited anima like you; she's following an embedded program."

"Is she security? What is her purpose?" I asked.

"She's a facilitator of sorts today. She's an extra set of marsh man hands if they are required for the transition. Remember, we're running a marsh man courier short here. You would have had someone performing her task the last time you performed this duty."

"You mean forty-five years ago?" I asked.

"Yes Manny. We lost a courier named Arthur Kennedy that time, too and another summoned courier would have been employed then, too for the last twenty-four hours of that recovery mission."

"Well I don't remember much about that last twenty-four hours back then; I was barely functioning. It was a big blur. It wasn't even in color and that's something I forgot about, too."

"Are you losing some of your vision?"

"Yes." I answered.

"Well that's normal. You can't see reds: correct?" asked Anne E. Mah.

"I cannot see reds. I cannot see greens." I answered.

“You might recall more of that past experience as we approach your transition tomorrow night, Manny.”

“I don’t want to think about that right now, and I don’t like this marsh woman following me either,” I answered.

“She’s been tasked to do that until your transition is successfully completed and the bandoliers have been collected. There’s no changing that.”

“She’s not coming to the safe house is she?” I asked.

“She appears to have a lot of conviction for the task she’s been assigned to, so - she might look in the windows to make sure you are safe.”

“Sigh: A real keener and a ‘peeping tom’ to boot.” I said while under the watchful eye of Marie who was about six car lengths behind me.

Thankfully, after about two hundred kilometers of being followed by Marie, she continued on along the Trans Canada highway as I turned off and onto the ‘One-Oh-One’ towards the Wawa safe house. The wind and rain did abate a little as I drove away from the lake, but not as much as I would have preferred. At times the winds were so strong that they would grab a hold of the less than aerodynamic shaped bread box I was driving and shake it so fiercely that I thought I was going to end up in the ditch, but I kept on top of it because I have an important appointment to see a special cat named Hector who apparently I’ve been told - was waiting to see me.

Twenty minutes later and no worse for wear, I pulled up and into the circular drive of the safe house and parked the German bread box for the night. Not a light was on at the house, but it didn’t matter; I had some kind of animal night vision going on. I swear I could spot a moving mouse or vole at thirty meters if it was necessary. I entered the safe house and Hector was there - looking at me with a puzzled face - like why was I back

here again? He studied me carefully as I set down a suitcase and removed my wet jacket.

“Hello Hector my old friend,” I said while stooping to pet his silky back. “Are you my last night’s company before I leave this place for good?”

He answered with a knowledgeable look back at me, but I think he was a little disappointed that I didn’t have his better friend: Hugh with me.

There was an open card board box on top of the sitting room table that caught my eye which I approached to have a closer look for what might be inside of it. The box contained some personal possessions of my courier’s: there was both a hand set and a wallet. The wallet was empty. I put ten one hundred dollar notes in it, my health card and driver’s licence; the remaining ninety, one hundred dollar notes were going to have to fit somewhere else.

The hand set was a small affordable model. I turned it on and it was fully charged. And then, just like that I punched in a six number password that came to mind – and I was in. There were two hundred and two unanswered messages waiting for Manny Logan. I didn’t open any of them but most were sadly from Olivia Stokes – Emanuel Logan’s sister.

I turned the hand set off, sat on the sofa, and cried as Hector looked on and took all the drama in as he calmly stared back at me. I swear there’s nothing worse than being a courier.

“There’s nothing worse than this!” I wept as the cat looked on with pity.

My timepiece chimed.

‘Get some rest tonight’, read the text from Anne E. Mah.

Guess what? Nothing here has changed over the past two hundred days. It was a safe house frozen in time.

I got up from my pity party on the sofa and I checked each room and they were all exactly the same as when Hugh and I had last left them. It was not until I opened the refrigerator that I saw something different. There were the usual things such as the makings for a cup of coffee or tea in there, but with one additional item: that of a single can of beer. What's the point of that I wondered as I continued to search elsewhere in the cupboards and found only the same dehydrated pasta dinners that Hugh and I both had eaten months ago on our first day as marsh men.

I briefly scanned the news sites on the internet on my timepiece; a habit that's grown into an addiction these days, and was surprised to hear that a sixty year old Ontario man who had been imprisoned for thirty-five years for a murder he insists that he did not commit was finally going to get a new trial. It made me smile.

And I wonder if my old friend Hugh is smiling, too and shouting: "Redemption!"

Hugh, you are going to be the last remaining angel on this planet - come Sunday.

Hector followed me into the bedroom upstairs and I climbed under the inviting bedding, and fell fast asleep. I didn't rest for more than four hours however, when the sudden arrival of headlights of an automobile appeared at the end of the house's drive and then drove up to the house's front parking area where it then stopped. I peeked out the bedroom's window like a spy behind a half drawn curtain, and whose purview was situated from directly above the home's front entrance and of course - it was Marie down below. She had a careful look at my German SUV and she even gave the driver's door a tug. And next, she cased the front of the house I think, but I couldn't quite see as she was situated directly beneath me. When she appeared to be sufficiently sodden enough from the rain, she returned back to her waiting white SUV and then promptly left.

What's with this woman? Did she come here in the middle of a rainy night just to make sure that I wasn't sleeping? I was wide awake now; thank you very much. If she comes back again I'm going to complain to Anne E. Mah.

I went back downstairs to check that the doors to the safe house were secure and there at the foot of the front door I found a folded note that had been pushed through the mail slot. And it read: 'I know who you are. I know why you're here'.

Well - that took my breath away. Was this woman just a very unusual summoned courier or am I just imagining things? You know; like having hallucinations. I am approaching my transition from life to crystal. It's just twenty-two hours from now. It's quite possible. And then just for a moment I even considered my present state of consciousness and pinched myself like an old fool.

Do I call Anne E. Mah? I know already what she'll think: that I am just having a stressful transition and claims of mysterious notes are just part of my transit back to crystal from life. And what's with this single can of beer in the refrigerator; I don't drink.

"Hector?" I asked who's been following me like a shadow since I arrived. "Do you think I drank in my previous marsh man life?"

Hector didn't have an answer. He just stared back at me like we were old friends having a weird staring contest.

I wish I could call my old friend Hugh. He was so much better than I at finding answers by intuitive means because it's clearly beyond me what's going on here.

Message to me: I could have been more observant during my marsh man stay – I'm clueless when it comes to the matters of the living.

Well, Hugh would be angry if I neglected his old friend Hector, so I fetched him a tin of cat food from an enormous inventory of cat food, both

dry and wet stored in the pantry. I patted him on the top of his head in a gentle manner once I had pushed a bowl of fresh moist cat food in front of him. He seemed to be hungry so maybe he's more in need of some sustenance than a staring contest with me. When he'd had enough he licked his chops and took off.

If a man is to leave one world for another, I think it's best that he be well mannered and respectful to all of those who have crossed his path during his life's journey. And on that same subject, I feel I should have a bath so that I might leave this body that I've commandeered for the past one hundred and ninety-nine days in good order for its return to its rightful owner.

The bath was splendid. It felt so warm and – marshy. I know that tomorrow things might get quite sweaty and grimy. There will be torrents of rain, gale force winds, and muck to contend with, but perhaps this bath might help wash some guilt away. I have stolen six and a half months of life from someone, but I'm going to return it to its rightful owner - tomorrow.

The lights flickered after a big gust of wind outside. It would not surprise me that we might lose electrical power at sometime in the next twenty-four hours. It's okay; there's storm provisions stowed away downstairs in the pantry. There are flash lights, firewood, candles and enough dehydrated pasta to last more than a fortnight stored in that pantry downstairs.

I patted myself dry when I was done with the bath, and returned to the sitting room downstairs. There in the sitting room I scanned the front yard as best as I could through streams of rain that ran down the panes of wet glass of the sitting room's windows. It was so stormy out there that one felt that you were looking out over the prow of a ship caught in a mighty ocean tempest.

You know, its occurring to me now, that perhaps that sister of mine may have caught up to me. Was that her? She and her husband did own a white SUV. And her husband, he seemed to me to be a smart marsh man fellow.

He could have got my bread boxes licence plate number from our chance meeting in Sudbury, and tagged me with a tracking device. There were several days there in Sudbury where such a thing could have been planted on the body of my German SUV. Who else would have left such a note? After all, we Logans are a determined bunch; tracking technology would not be above our acumen.

And Marie; she is likely following her program and is only twenty to thirty minutes away as she should be. She could be parked in a lot. She could be waiting in a motel room in Terrace Bay. She wouldn't know who I am and she frankly she might not know why I'm here either.

And as for the licence plate: I couldn't read those plates from the window of the bedroom upstairs; the angle was all wrong. And presently I'm much better at seeing movement rather than colors. There must be thousands of white SUV's on the road for that matter of that make and model.

And white; white is after all the most common automobile colour as it was in the case of my old Codobra; it too, was white as I remember. But I shrugged it all off because no one followed me on that last leg of my journey here; it was just me and a lot wind and rain on the road as I travelled north. I saw Marie or whoever it was continue west along the Trans Canada. I remember that vividly. It just doesn't all add up.

I looked back at the cardboard carton on the sitting room, coffee table and picked up my courier's old cell phone from out of the box. And I wondered, if that was Olivia who left the note might she not have sent me a text too, tonight. I powered up the cell phone and it said that there were now two hundred and three unread text messages to read.

Hmm. Should I open just that last one and see? Maybe my courier's sister: Olivia has found me. I could disable the cell phone's connection to its carrier and open just that latest message and see what it says.

So I for a change will do something daring and impulsive: and I disabled the phone's connection just like that; it was hardly at a bar at any rate. And

I opened up that last message from Olivia Stokes who had dark hair incidentally and a big smile that positively radiated from her tiny circular icon of a picture.

‘Manny,’ it said: ‘I hope your life is not in danger. I’ve been searching for you for almost six months. You never return my calls. Are you alright? I recently heard from some friend of yours named Hugh. He told me he’d help me find you if you don’t show up in the next few days. WTF! I’ve been thinking the worst all this time. Have you been drinking again?? I’ve been living in a nightmare! Love Olivia.’

Well I’ll say it again: It just sucks being a courier. The trouble I’ve caused for some very nice people, or so it appears.

Olivia will get to see her brother Manny again. I’ll make sure of it. And apparently an angel named Hugh wants to help, too. I reconnected the phone’s service and shut it down again. That’s enough of that – mister nosey busybody.

Hector wasn’t gone for too long. He was back again licking and preening himself intimately dare I say while intermittently staring at me with his squinting yellow eyes; judging me. I know Hector: someone here is a big asshole - and it’s me.

There’s twenty more hours of this to endure. When do I get to see my tiny, short life of six, six and a half months or so flash by? When do I see that bright light? I hear that’s how life ends here. Will I see my maker? Well – yes I will in a way.

I was angry now, and I decided to get my things in order for later tonight. I needed the distraction; I’d frankly do anything to hasten an end to all of this. I opened my suitcase and spread my survival suit out and onto the sofa. It looked like a deflated marsh man laying there. It was originally a bright, vivid red in color garment and had reflective silver stripes on it when I purchased it; now - it was a gray brown -taupe. I collected up my sturdy hiking boots and flashlight, and set them down next to my survival suit. And that’s all that I will need.

I know where the site is to wait for the recovery team. I won't require the aid of GPS because the escape pod that I buried there at the recovery site two weeks ago will guide me there like a beacon. I can feel it now and as subtle as it is, its calling me from two hundred kilometers away. If I really concentrate, and focus my left eye upwards and to the left I can see a numeric countdown counting the time down to the millisecond.

Nineteen hours and fifty-five minutes and thirty thousand milliseconds to my transition it says.

I miss him. We were compadres. We were an item. I wish there were still two of us. It would be so much easier if there were two us today. I'd feel far less uncomfortable with this transition process if only there were two of us. There were in fact two of us up until everything changed so suddenly once Hugh touched that marsh woman in a carnal way.

"Too many nature documentaries? Right Hector?" I suggested to Hector, who looked on compassionately. "We let our guard down then. Didn't we?" I added, trying to get him to agree with me.

Those nature documentaries; they were the only interesting thing to watch on the big screen I thought. Everything else in this world was a mystery to the two of us. You had to be from these parts to know what's funny or not, what's right or wrong, what's a good idea or what's not, and etcetera.

It was all so simple at first. Lay low. Bide your time. It all came apart after a little bit of boredom and a little bit of curiosity came along. Just like that tin of cold beer in the refrigerator tempting me: easy to open, easy to drink, refreshing to the tongue but also a potential pitfall.

"I'm not going to touch it. Right Hector? I learned that lesson from my good friend, Hugh."

I remember kidding with our Hugh that being a marsh man was as easy as putting one foot in front of the other. But, it's so much more than that.

I'm in the bathroom again. I want to leave it tidy; that's important to me. And I'm looking at my handsome reflection in the mirror. I smile and it occurs to me suddenly that this is the first time that I personally have been able to do that. It's like my transition back to marsh man has already begun.

You know, I think that the ability to smile is one of the most beautiful characteristics of this marsh man species. It's charming. It's joy. It's pleasure.

And I think I prefer my side profile best. It's more regal and less weirdo. Indeed, I estimate that I'm probably a seven out of ten on the weirdo scale. I can also personally vouch in fact, that all of the couriers that I've become familiar with - have all had comfortably high scores on the weirdo scale as well. It helps to keep the unwanted admirers at bay; at least that was the theory until handsome Hugh came along. It was that soul patch of his that the finer sex was interested in or so he told me.

My cell phone rang. I'm sure it's Anne E. Mah checking in. She probably wants to wake me up.

"How was your rest?" she asked.

"It was great until it got interrupted," I answered playfully.

"How so?" asked Anne E. Mah.

"Well, I think Marie was here and checked my windows here just like we kidded about earlier in the day," I answered.

"And at what time did this happen?" asked Anne E. Mah.

"Less than an hour ago, I suppose."

“That could not have happened Manny. She’s on standby in Terrace Bay. She’s been there for two hours now!” exclaimed a surprised Anne E. Mah.

“Was it not her?” I asked defensively. “Well, whoever it was - left me a creepy note,” I continued.

“Manny. Why didn’t you report this immediately?” asked Anne E. Mah.

“I thought it was the summoned courier: Marie. Remember, we kidded about how thorough she was and that she just might check in on me.”

“What did that note say?” asked Anne E. Mah.

“It said: I know who you are. I know why you’re here, and that’s all it said. And it appeared to be written on a paper napkin.”

“Can you send me a picture of it?” asked Anne E. Mah.

“Give me a moment.” I answered.

I went downstairs to the sitting room and recovered the note from where I had left it on the sofa. I opened the folded napkin up and flattened it out on a seat cushion to take the photo.

“Oh shit...” I whispered to myself.

“Something wrong Manny?” asked Anne E. Mah.

“Yes. I should say so. Anne E Mah, - this drink napkin has printing on the back of it that I did not see earlier. It’s from ‘Gustave’s Grill and Bar’ of Sudbury.”

“No,” complained a surprised Anne E. Mah.

“Yes,” I answered. “Is that bad?” I added apologetically, and the call abruptly ended on that note so Anne E. Mah could start mending the latest disaster that my name will be attached to.

I sent the picture I had just taken of the napkin note and uploaded it to Anne E. Mah just as she had asked.

A minute or so passed, and I'm thinking that this isn't so good for me. How - did this happen? My eyesight isn't that terrific at the moment; I am kind of eagle-eyed and I really can't see things up close so well. I suppose my good judgment must be lacking, too. I mean, I could have given that note more than a once over I suppose. Why did she not try knocking at the door if she wanted to have a conversation? I would never have answered that knock at any rate, and she was acting just like she knew who she was dealing with. Sigh.

Is Hugh helping her out? Is he sharing information with my courier's sister? It said so much in her last text to her brother's cell phone. I clearly read that.

I looked up Gustave's Bar and Grill on the internet and I wasn't too impressed. It had a three star rating out of five and just two dollar signs for prices. I'm surprised they provided printed napkins; maybe it came with the poutine dishes that were Gustave's specialty. I've never tried poutine, but I hear that it is - 'carbolicious'.

Am I becoming a dithering idiot? I used to be anima for crying out loud. I don't know what to think anymore.

My cell phone chimed.

"Manny," said Anne E. Mah.

"Yes," I replied.

"I'm sending Marie to pick you up immediately. It's going to take her two to three hours to get to you. In the mean time if that female human comes back to the safe house. You are not to converse or interact with her in any way! Do not answer the door. Do not talk to her; even if she declares that you are her brother – do not initiate any conversation with her. If the

authorities become involved there is a safe room in the house that's hidden in the basement. No one will find you in there. I will send you a map of the house so you can find it," said Anne E. Mah.

"Can I not just leave now and head directly to the recovery site myself?" I asked.

"No. Your vehicle has been compromised. Marie will be your driver for now on and your partner for your transition. I think that's best considering what's transpired. The recovery contractors have been committed, and you and the bandoliers are well within range for a timely arrival at the recovery site," answered Anne E. Mah.

"I want you to collect what you need for the recovery. You'll need your survival suit, a flashlight, your courier's cell phone and wallet. Everything else you can leave behind and the house keeping will take care of it. Do not turn on your courier's cell phone unless it's an absolute emergency. And, leave your key fob for your SUV somewhere that's easy to find - like on a table top. I'll be in touch with you when Marie arrives at your present location and at that time we'll have you destroy your cell phone's sim card and start a factory reset. Is all that clear Manny?" added Anne E. Mah.

"Yes, but I think I'll still need a cell phone. Won't I? How will we communicate Anne E. Mah?" I asked.

"We will use Marie's," answered Anne E. Mah.

And with that the conversation ended.

I'm losing control of my own transition. I'm now without a car; I thought that I was supposed to be the driver. I was supposed to be in charge here. I was supposed to aid Hugh in his transition, and all of it has become undone over the past two days. I'm feeling used, and betrayed. I've simply become a host for alien technology. I am not the calm, confident and experienced courier that I remember.

I still have a couple of hours or so of relative freedom left. Once Marie arrives, it'll be a rush to get to the recovery site and after that, it'll be a hurry-up and wait game until the contractors arrive. The contractors; they'll behave like they are heroes as they always do – picking up the pieces of an almost disastrous mission.

I activated my cell phone, and I went through the photos and I opened up that one of Hugh's that was taken at a petting zoo; it was a selfie with him, Dale and a llama. I love that picture. I can't really take it with me, but I'll try. It took about five minutes to do so, but I committed that photo literally, bit by bit to my memory. There's something called transference where a parent can pass on a memory or more commonly a trait to their next generation, and I am trying to do just that. Though I dearly want to go back to my crystal world I don't want to ever forget what the faces of love, freedom, and vitality look like. That picture will be stored forever with me in a crystal matrix where I can always recall what it feels like to be alive. To me - that picture screams: Manny you did the right thing.

The phone chimed, and I received the map of the safe house and all of its secrets. There was not just a safe room; there was also a bomb shelter and a secret underground tunnel into the woods out back. The safe room was down in the cellar in a storage room that had a false wall of shelving. I gave the correct shelf a push and a two meter high section of wall opened revealing a metal blast door. The whole thing was quite well crafted and operated just like an old reliable clock. Inside the room was just what you would expect to find: bottled water, a blanket, a bed, a bucket with a lid, and a spare light bulb.

The tunnel was accessed on the ground floor at the back of the house. I found that too, and it was accessed in the laundry room. You had to move a folding table out of the way to get at it beneath the floor. It would have made for an excellent adventure to explore it, but there was no time for that today.

Hector showed up, and yawned at me. He acted like he'd seen all this hidden stuff before. I picked him up and cuddled him. I'm going to commit this moment too, to my transferable memory, if I can. It'll likely be the last time that I get to feel something alive in my arms. Imagine that.

The lights flickered some more. The sun had risen hours ago and it was ten in the morning in fact, but outside and with this weather you could not determine what time of day it actually was; all you could tell was that it was a dark and gray outside. It could be anyone's guess whether it was morning or afternoon. And according to the weather app on my cell phone, it will not get any brighter until at least mid day tomorrow.

I nonetheless, peered out the ground floor windows of the safe house to have a look around. There was aerial kamikaze debris such as leaves and twigs flying here and hither and all about. The front drive was more of a pond than it was a parking area. A good sized tree branch had come down out in the side yard but it wasn't threatening anything. It was pretty much a stormy, marsh land scene out there.

I've checked and double checked everything. I even found the perfect pocket for stowing the remaining nine thousand dollars that I wanted to pass on to my favourite courier: Emanuel Logan; it was a zippered breast pocket sewn into the survival suit's lining. Now, I need to only put my survival on and tie up my sturdy shoes.

It felt like time was slowing down however, every minute that passed by felt like an hour and every passing hour felt like an eternity as I waited for Marie's arrival. It'll be good to have some company. I can't wait to become her passenger and have a real conversation with someone besides a cat.

Hector the cat by the way, has found a new spot to nestle in. He's curled up like a furry turban and resting on top of my survival suit. I thought I might watch a nature documentary to help kill some time but the big screen TV's connection was down. My cell phone's reception was failing too; it was down to just one bar. I wonder what will happen to this place

once I'm gone. There will be no use for it with the Great Lake Superior's research project now wrapped up. I suppose someone will decommission the safe house and put it on the marketplace. And maybe couriers like Marie might get to retire. It's all no matter to me.

Of all things, I wish I had – it would be a doughnut right now. What a crazy world it is here. There's always a craving or a need for something. Sugar seems to run this place!

My phone chimed. Anne E. Mah had an update: Marie's estimated time of arrival was just a half of an hour away. Fifteen more hours until my emancipation; I can't wait.

The sound of an automobile splashing through a shallow pond could be heard out front and from where I was sitting I could see it come to rest on a bit of high ground near the safe house's front entrance. I quickly determined that it appeared to be the same white German SUV that had followed me for two hours on the Trans Canada highway yesterday evening. A tall female human exited the driver's door and she too was dressed in a survival suit much like mine.

That's my Marie. That's my ride. She sheltered her face with a raised hand from the driving wind and rain and proceeded to the front entrance of the safe house.

I opened the door for her and waived her on in. The lady was large and as big as a grizzly. I said hello but she didn't acknowledge my greeting and instead, walked directly to the downstairs' washroom in her wet shoes like she owned the place. I closed the front door and began pulling on my own survival suit.

She came out looking moderately more at ease and went directly to the refrigerator. She took out the can of beer and held up in the air and mournfully mimed: 'May I have it', and I nodded back to her and said, "Sure. Go ahead."

My cell phone chimed. "Has Marie arrived?" asked Anne E. Mah.

"Yes she has," I answered part way into my survival suit.

"She's so fast and ahead of time", said Anne E. Mah. "Manny. I need you to retire your cell phone now and remember to destroy the sim card. There's no time to waste. I'll call you two back in five or ten minutes on Marie's cell phone."

Marie sat in the recliner and rocked while I fastened my survival suit about my waist. She said nothing and nursed her cold beer down with a couple of belches.

I removed the sim card from my phone and cooked it in a spoon over an electric burner on the stove in the kitchen. Next I started a factory reset on the cell phone. After confirming my action I left the cell phone on the kitchen table.

"Marie. I'm ready," I announced heroically to the large lady who sat in a large, over stuffed recliner.

She said nothing, but got up from the recliner and headed for the door. You could look at her, make eye contact and see that someone was in there. But it was like she couldn't speak or think for herself; she appeared to be operating under a program. Wow. I'm glad that's not me. But that's in all likelihood how Emanuel Logan would have appeared six and a half months ago on the shores of our great Lake Superior before my transition to human.

In the car Marie demonstrated again that she could drive like the wind and her speed always matched the road conditions. She never needed to correct for over steering or loss of traction and the road conditions at the moment were: well, in a word - treacherous. I could relax a little; I was confident now that anima technology was watching over me.

The hands free chimed in the car, "Manny how's the weather?" asked Anne E. Mah.

"It's ah – really wet here," I answered.

"Much traffic?" asked Anne E Mah.

"Just trucks for the most part," I answered.

"Thank you for leaving the safe house so quickly. Your courier's sibling is really upsetting our plans."

"I think she will be much happier sibling tomorrow if she gets her brother back in one piece," I said.

"I've been in contact with the contactors and they are still on time and scheduled to arrive at two am tonight at the set recovery site. You and Marie will have to bide some time until then," added Anne E. Mah.

"Yes. We'll take care, and be discreet of course." I said.

"That sounds good Manny. We'll keep in touch until the recovery is complete."

With this weather and these road conditions, it was going to take us at least three hours to get back to Terrace Bay. The storm had intensified. It was like driving through thick clouds of wind driven rain. In no time we saw one transport truck stuck in the ditch along the roadside. It didn't look too serious and the driver had lit safety flares and had placed them along the shoulder of the highway where he had left the road.

After another hour into the drive, I had come to the determination that Marie was never going to speak. She was effectively mute in my judgement. Any time I asked her a question she'd respond with glaring eyes that appeared to indicate that someone was screaming from inside of her. It was a trapped animal kind of face I think; fearful and terrified. She wasn't in full control of herself and was acutely aware of it. I hope that by

sometime tomorrow this whole nightmare will be over for her. This is after all, the unfortunate life of a summoned courier. She's lucky she wasn't chosen for my mission as an inhabited courier. She'd be missed by her friends and family for six months like poor Emanuel Logan here.

The storm seemed to continually intensify with each kilometer we drove and accordingly the road conditions deteriorated as well. There were two more transport trucks blown off the road that we had seen in the past half hour; one with its trailer blown over and on its side. After bearing west at White River the wind gusts off the lake were reaching gale force. Marie however guided her German made SUV expertly around each and every road hazard she came upon. She was amazing.

It was here that I saw my first moose, an *Alces alces americana*; a monster of an animal who stood majestically at the side of the road contemplating his next steps which were: will he or won't he cross the highway in this terrible storm. After passing the great beast, I hoped dearly that he had chosen wisely, and had turned back, and gone back into the safety of the woods behind him. It was a sight that for certain would have upset my old friend Hugh.

The 'hands free' came to life, and of course it was Anne E. Mah.

"Manny. The safe house has had another visit from your courier's sibling about ten minutes ago. Once you reach Terrace Bay I want you two to gas up, and find somewhere out of town and out of sight to hide. Is that understood? I want you two, and the automobile to be out of sight."

"Do you think Hugh has been in contact with her?" I asked.

"I suspect that's highly likely," answered Anne E. Mah.

"Do you think he's told her where the recovery site is located?"

"No. I think she'd be lying in wait at the location if she was aware of that."

"And how would we know that?" I asked.

"The recovery site is under surveillance at the moment Manny. I can assure you that in weather as inclement as this that there's nothing living out there on that bluff that's larger than a very wet field mouse."

"Hmm," I agreed.

"How are you holding up Manny? Any hallucinations? Any concerning anxiety?" asked Anne E. Mah.

"I think I'm doing okay. No hysteria to report, but occasionally I find myself affected more by little things - like for instance I saw a moose at the side of the road a few minutes ago and that's a pretty common occurrence around here I would think, but for me this moose was more like a spiritual messenger. And I've learned to smile. How about that? And I smiled at a confused Marie who was trying to focus on her driving.

"That sounds manageable. Is your sight still suffering?" asked Anne E Mah.

"No. Not really," I lied. "I can almost see like a hawk, but just the same I'm seeing fewer colors. It's probably a good thing that I am not driving; I'd be just driving off the road and into the - gray. It's a real blessing that I'm in the good hands of Marie here. She's such a better driver than me. I only wish she would speak," I added.

"Manny. A summoned courier will only speak if she's been authorized to do so; remember she's not inhabited. And regarding your transition; be prepared for more nonsensical changes Manny. It's quite a common occurrence in the hours leading up to a transition. I'd of course like your personal courier to regain all of its former attributes and not suffer any harm by the end of the procedure. We'll hope for the best," said Anne E. Mah.

“Yes,” I agreed.

Terrace Bay will soon be approaching; we'll be able to gas up, use a washroom and get a bite to eat and maybe a beer for Marie. She looked like she could use a break from driving. Her face has been stern since we left the safe house. I'd like to see her smile. They really do make the world a better place as I've now found out.

You know, I now know why that can of beer was in the refrigerator at the safe house. Marie as many other marsh men couriers often suffer from substance abuse. They all have suffered the trauma of abduction and implantation at sometime in their lives. For Hugh MacDonald it was opioids, for Marie it's obviously alcohol. I suppose a beer or two a day helps to keep Marie's demons away.

I want pizza now, and in the worst way. Isn't that strange: having a craving for junk food on your last day on Earth instead of something richer and more significant like prime rib or a juicy steak? Anyways, no animals will have suffered for my last meal here, and that would make my old friend Hugh a happy man I suppose.

Terrace Bay Ontario is not a very large place. The metropolitan population is around fifteen hundred people and it probably services another three thousand beyond its boundaries. So if needed, you could probably case out every vehicle here in town in a matter of just a ten or fifteen minutes. Since my sister is likely two to three hours away behind us we have a couple of hours to gas up and eat before we'll need to find somewhere to hide out. In the mean time Marie and I will be on the lookout for any suspicious looking white SUV's and a good hideout to lay low in.

I got my vegetarian pizza and Marie got a draught. The restaurant was near empty and there was only the two of us at the gas pump. The

manager of the restaurant told us that the storm was to yet, grow stronger in intensity into the night. I feigned some surprise.

“You know under any other weather conditions I’d wonder why you two were dressed in snow mobile suits, but look at it out there,” he said. “Shoot. I lost my sign out there just three months ago in the last gale to go through here!” he complained while pointing to the weather outside just as another brave customer entered his premises and dutifully fought off the wind to close the restaurant’s entrance door.

While I ate my pizza I watched as a litany of trash and litter blew about outside in the parking lot. There were little twisters and updrafts propelling anything that wasn’t secured up and into the stormy evening sky. There was going to be a zero chance of finding anyone down on that waterfront tonight and that was the whole point of all of this I suppose.

Marie had gone to the ladies room; maybe it was the beer. She’s had a couple that I know of today. But my last partner liked to spend a lot of time in the washroom, too. I wonder if she’s ah; you know - putting something up her nose because I know absolutely nothing about her and I couldn’t ask her if I wanted to; she doesn’t speak. When she did come out of the boudoir her face looked kind of ashen or even gray.

From Terrace Bay it was fifteen kilometers to the small town of Schreiber where we’d be hiking to our final destination. Do we go there directly now and wait it out while we are potentially still ahead of Olivia or do we do as planned, and hide out here in Schreiber somewhere? How much does she know - that’s what I’d like to know?

There was a busy truck stop along the highway on the edge of town that came to mind that I can recall visiting during my last visit here, and it occurred to me at the moment that it might make for a good place for us to lie low. I suggested it to Marie as she finished up her beer.

When we did get to the truck stop, it became immediately apparent that a lot of people had chosen to park here, but unlike us, they wanted a safe place to wait out the worst of the storm. And I get it; I watched more

than a few of those big RV's teeter about in the wind out there while we drove up here - they must be a nightmare to keep on the road in conditions like this. Marie found just the spot for us, and parked our SUV between two big old RV's in a large back lot behind the truck stop.

It was awkward sitting there while the wind whistled about us and the rain rained like bullets onto the hood of our car and its roof. Marie kept to script and sat silently as the time slowly ticked by, and once every thirty minutes or so, she'd start the car up to warm up the automobile's cabin.

A couple of hours went by like this, and I did entertain the idea of telling Marie my whole life story; all six and a half months of it, but I thought better. And indeed, Marie did eventually point to the rest stop's washrooms. I waived my hand politely and off she went with the car's key fob in hand. As I remember from my last visit, it was the kind of washroom facility that had showers and such. There was even a coin operated Laundromat on site according to the signage. She'll be gone a while I figured, and I put my seat back to try and get a little shut-eye for the sake of my courier.

I had to dream of course, and it was that kind of hypnagogic type: between half awake and just asleep. It's the exact same type of state of mind that is responsible for many an alien abduction story, or so I've heard. You can actually hallucinate; they say. It could be visual, auditory, smell or taste – the whole bag and gamut.

Anyways, one minute it's raining and the wind is blowing like a locomotive outside the SUV, and the next minute its quiet, and then I hear someone's knuckles rapping angrily on the passenger's window next to me. I raise my seat up electrically and I see this strange frantic face outside the window. I don't know who it is, but then I decide it must be Olivia!

"I know who you are," she's shouting angrily.

"I know why you're here," she screams.

Is this for real or am I hallucinating? I unlatch the door and step outside and now I'm being embraced by my sister. She's squeezing me and hugging me like she's just found something that she thought she had lost and would never see again. And then, - I'm standing alone in the rain, in an inch of water and there's a crack of lightning and its following thunder.

I get back into the SUV and I'm trembling. It's cold. It's freezing. What's going on here? Can I not shut my eyes? I suppose I cannot.

Where is Marie? I need to report this to Anne E. Mah.

"Anne E. Mah!" I screamed at the top of my lungs from within the SUV.

I have no phone, but for one that I cannot power up unless it's an emergency.

The driver's door is suddenly pulled open and the cabin is filled with wind. Marie then climbs in and she looks briefly at me but with no acknowledgment. Her eyes are red and dilated; her face - as ashen as the storm outside.

I activated the SUV's 'hands free' now that Marie's cell phone was connected.

"Yes?" answered Anne E. Mah.

"Anne E. Mah. It's getting worse! I'm having serious hallucinations," I cried frantically.

"Okay Manny," answered Anne E. Mah, "Marie will take you directly to the transition site. There's just two hours to the recovery," added Anne E. Mah in a soft and reassuring voice. "Once there Manny, you'll need to realize that exposure to this weather is going weaken our couriers. Try not to remain exposed to the elements for more than an hour. Plan to start your final hike outdoors accordingly."

"We'll do that," I replied and then the cellular signal failed.

Marie started up the SUV for our final drive. If this were a month later I'm certain that the highway would be closed for a blizzard. Not that that would matter because right now it was drive at your own risk situation; parts of the highway were ponding.

The high beams are on. The wipers are operating at maximum, and the defroster is blowing as hard as the wind outside. And the driver is clearly under the influence of some kind of substance and yet, our SUV continues on alone along the almost vacant highway as if it was driven by an expert.

Minutes later, headlights appear behind us. Marie keeps turning her head around to ascertain exactly what kind of vehicle it is. I can't tell, but it appeared to be following, too close at times.

"Is it white?" I ask Marie.

She shrugs; she can't tell. There's still no cellular signal and there probably won't be any until this storm is over tomorrow morning. Suddenly, we have to decelerate briefly to avoid aquaplaning and I get a better look at what's following us. And of course it is a white SUV.

It's her. It's her. I know it is.

Marie is already one step ahead of me and it's not quite 'pedal to the metal', but more like 'pedal until you start to lose control'. The engine is racing far faster than it should be, and I can see the car behind us, and thankfully it's losing the race. I don't know if it eventually left the road or gave up the chase, but we were clear of it and there was nothing with headlights to be seen on the road behind us.

There can't be more than another five kilometers until our turn off to the trail and my neck is getting sore from craning it to look behind me. Marie however, is still the master of the road; she might be inebriated and she might be under the control of alien technology, but her marsh man hands and eyesight are operating at one hundred percent.

Give it up Olivia; your brother will call you tomorrow.

Finally, we arrive at the parking area at Schreiber Bay Beach. And not surprisingly, there are no other cars here in the lot. It's about twelve-thirty in the night and there's an angry and raging lake in front of us whose wind gusts are shaking our car. Marie shuts the car down and puts her head back into her headrest and sighs.

The storm's surge has raised the lake's water level and part of the parking area is under water. There's very little light out there, but I can just make out the trail that I must follow later in the next hour. My journey here is almost done. I pat my pockets and check for my courier's phone, his wallet and cash, my flashlight, and my fellow crystal brethren stored in the two bandoliers that Hugh and I have carried around with us for the past two hundred days or so.

Marie too, pats her pockets and awkwardly shifts her large body about in her seat and reaches into her inside breast pocket of her survival suit and pulls out an energy bar and offers it to me with a contorted grin. I thank her and take the bar and devour it quickly and think: yet another fine act of kindness from another marsh man.

I'll have quite the tale to tell this time; about the many marsh men and women that I got to know over the past six months for example. The jack pots and the fixes that Hugh and I got ourselves into and out of, on this water planet called Earth; occupied by the hominids known here colloquially by the anima fresh water researchers of the great Lake Superior - as the Marsh Men.

Tomorrow, I could tell my brethren about how the couriers and their kin suffer for our science, but I don't think they would care. I could tell them about how important love, life and the feeling of vitality is in this world, but I doubt that they would listen to that either. The Anima focus only on the very basic building blocks of life; the rest of creation are parasites. It's a terribly small minded way of looking at things, but that is their way. As silly

as it may sound, I think that they would benefit from spending some time watching marsh men nature documentaries instead of studying algae chloroplasts, it might open their eyes. Of all the things that I have learned here over the past six months in this marsh man's world, the most striking lesson that comes to mind - is that the marsh men here have a very intimate relationship with their world. They may not be as keenly aware of the importance of the finer details and minutia regarding the building blocks of life in this great universe as we do, but their innate eagerness to master technology bodes very well for their species' future. These marsh men are not to be underestimated.

And after having said that, I think I now understand why Hugh chose life here over the more insular world of anima crystal. I will miss him, but I know he's happy here and this is what he has chosen.

It's time now; time to face the storm outside and to walk the beach trail that will take me and my eight crystal companions back home. The car's windows have become heavily coated inside with condensation and you could hear a storm raging outside, but you could not see it; it was hidden from sight by the clouded glass. And it was at this moment that I caught Marie gazing at me. It was dark here inside the car's cabin, but I could still see her - staring in pity at me with a long tragic face and noticing my attention she reached up to the windshield and wrote with a finger on the clouded glass: 'GOOD LUCK' it read.

She would be the last person on Earth to see me smile.

It was a struggle just to open and close the SUV's door without losing a limb in the process. I took the lead, since I was pretty certain that Marie wouldn't know the last steps that we must take to reach our rendezvous point with the recovery contractors, and who should arrive in just less than one hour from now.

We must have looked like a pretty strange pair walking the lake's shoreline in our fluorescent survival suits and water resistant balaclavas.

We were blown about at times and so violently, that at one moment the wind would stop us dead in our tracks, and at other times the wind would be pushing us forcefully along the lake's shoreline. The suits worked well, but I do wish there was a little more protection for the face because tomorrow I know that my courier is going to wonder just how his cheeks and nose got so wind burnt.

At the bottom of the bluff, Marie and I had to use our flashlights to find the rope that Hugh and I had hidden away a few weeks ago. Marie stayed immediately behind me as we climbed the steep slope and at times I felt her pushing my butt with her hands when I required a little help with my ascent to the top of the bluff. I suppose her intentions helped, but I also felt slightly violated and a little inadequate if I must say, but she had far more strength than I for this.

The conditions atop the bluff were abysmal. There was very little shelter from the wind and there was no escaping the frigid rain that pelted our eyes and cheeks. I nonetheless, got on with my next task, and searched about for where I had buried the escape pod a few weeks ago; it would expedite the arrival of our rescuers. Marie sat upon a large rock with her back to the lake and appeared to meditate or sleep while I searched the pockets of soil, here and there, for the buried pod.

It turned up eventually and I would have found it quicker had there not been so many puddles. In size, it's not much bigger than a small coffee cup and once I had it free from where it had been buried I activated its beacon. It was all rather anti climatic once this was finally done; there was no applause just howling wind. My only remaining task was to wait patiently for the contractor's arrival.

I kind of know what's happening up there: for instance, the contractor's space craft has been slowing its speed for at least the past twenty-four hours. Their hold is being prepared for nine passengers of which eight are already in crystal form and one will require a transition to crystal from an inhabited courier. If all goes well the whole process will take about five

minutes or so to complete, after that, my courier's well being will be in the hands of the summoned courier: Marie.

Twenty-five minutes and thirty thousand milliseconds are all that remains in my life here; those are the numbers that I see up there in the corner of my left eye. Except for my blurred eyes and burnt cheek bones I'm pretty comfortable. Marie is still sitting on her rock and waits to be summoned to perform her next task. She will likely assist in my transition and then deliver Emanuel Logan back to his former home in Thunder Bay Ontario. There I hope he will soon be reunited with his sister Olivia. And with the fresh water research program officially wrapped up here on great Lake Superior, maybe he too will become retired from the courier business for good.

There's now just fifteen more minutes to live and I'm trying as hard as I can to enjoy these last minutes. I'm imagining that this bit of wind and rain are refreshing and that tomorrow morning that the Earth's star will be out in all its glory and these winds will have abated.

I'm facing the lake because I want to see that space craft just as soon as it appears, and I'm trying to dream of how it will feel to be home again. But someone else inside of me is dreaming, too. He knows this beach and he knows this shoreline; twenty kilometers this way or ten kilometers the other way. It doesn't matter because he's been here before.

"I remember now," he says.

"I remember sharing the story of my abduction with my little sister Olivia. She was the only one who would believe me. I told her how they had paralyzed me and did strange things to the back of my neck. I told her how small the spacecraft was and how ghoulish grownups seemed to help them. Olivia too, used to come and cry with me during those stolen nights so many years ago when I was too afraid to close my eyes and go to sleep.

We wondered for years afterwards: what it was all about, until one night I was summoned to become a courier.”

One minute and counting; I have both of my hands acting as the bill of a ball cap to keep the driving rain from out of my eyes and I’m searching the dark grey sky. And then - there it is a mere dot in the sky at the moment, and as it draws closer you can see that it is no larger than that of a sofa seat cushion. There were no flashing lights. There was no noise but for the raging wind. It came to our place on the bluff directly, and stopped above me.

I got down on my knees and pulled the top of my survival suit down to my waist. I placed each bandolier into my two hands; one in each open palm. I assumed the position, and knelt down before them, while two hundred days of memories flashed by.

And the very last living thing I felt - was that of Marie’s firm hand gripping the back of my neck, as I began transitioning from this world to another.

The End