



Tree Me Now

By

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Prologue

“Okay, listen up.” Randy had on his no-nonsense face. “No more sitting around bullshitting. Time to do some real field work. Here’s an assignment: I want you to travel around the neighborhood. “

“Travel, as in, hop-travel?”

“Exactly. Just jump into someone’s senses, see what they see, hear what they hear like we’ve talked about. Then tag along. Witness. Don’t try to influence. Just learn. Travel with different types of people. We can’t help what we don’t understand. Pay attention. Take notes. Report back to me next time.” And then he was gone.

-1-

Orientation & Training

When we first came through, we ended up in a mop closet of a restaurant. We were supposed to have been delivered to a protected and encrypted building in the city where we'd be hooked up to our feed and go through Orientation and Training. The mop closet didn't have so much as an electrical outlet.

We'd all heard rumors that something was weird about O & T, but no one knew exactly what. The instructors only said that it could be long and difficult, but necessary if we wanted to learn how to navigate this strange planet. But there we were, offline and unhooked, in a restaurant kitchen instead. When you're arriving from as far away as we had, crash landing in mop closet is not a good idea.

In those early days, while running on our emergency pack, we barely left the mop closet, waiting for Central to come looking for us with our hookup. Or that the rest of our pod would show up. On our planet, a pod consists of five podlings that do everything together all the time until eventually they grow up and each become a separate pod. But we podlings were a long way from doing that. Right now, four of us are somehow missing. If we'd been an Earthling, we might have said that it felt like we still had arms and legs but were missing our hands and feet. To avoid feeling like this, we did our best to keep feeling that we were all still connected, if not to what we called the Big We, but at least to the "we" of our pod.

But still, we were lost, alone and afraid. Two things scared us the most. First, the needle on our emergency pack kept getting closer and closer to empty. If that happened, we would be no more. Ever. The second was that something bad had happened to the rest of our pod.

Every day we waited and waited, hoped and hoped, but nada.

Eventually, using our ancient translation program, we took little forays out to explore the kitchen. Although we can see humans, their eyes lack the necessary bits to see us. Has to do with something about detail mapping or energy vibrations or something else we can't remember. We were told that sometimes the Earthlings could sense our presence or see twinkling lights, but not always.

At the Academy, after we'd volunteered to do field work for our Advanced Earth Studies Program, they warned us that we might lose a sense of why we came, where we

came from. We were taught that over the centuries our program had been operating on Earth, many had gotten lost, gone feral. But then, quite a few made extraordinary advances, creating significant changes in the culture. You'd recognize many of them, but name dropping is considered impolite.

When we'd go into the kitchen, it was so full of noise and jets of water and open flames that we'd soon jump back into our home away from home in the closet. We could still hear the Chef bellowing words that didn't show up in our translation program. And listen to the waiter named Michael talking to different people. But we didn't always understand what was being said. Worse of all, overcome by all the noise and speed, our memory started to dim. And our emergency pack was still losing its charge. At night, when Michael would unplug the Yakety Café sign, we'd feel that we were also being unplugged and would soon go dim and blink off.

Where was the rest of our pod? Were they still together, looking for us? If our light went out, how would it affect the rest of them? These questions bother us quite a bit especially since we have no answers. Things just kept getting worse and worse. We went from being afraid to being terrified.

One day we heard the kitchen staff talking about Miss Salvatore who taught writing classes once a month in the dining room after the restaurant closed. We heard Archer, a street guy who hung around the back entrance of the Yakety Cafe, ask the Michael if there would be doughnuts again and if so, count him in.

That night, we could hear people coming in and moving the chairs around. When Miss Salvatore's started talking, we turned up the volume on the translation program so we could pretend to be part of the group.

"Our first writing prompt," she said, "is to describe your family. If you want to start near the beginning, write 'My Early years' in the middle of a sheet of paper, then just sit there for minute or two. Breathe. Empty your mind. Then jot down whatever comes up. Maybe use where you were born or where you grew up as a jumping off place. Keep adding words and phrases as they come to you. When I ring the bell, go back and underline or circle the most important points. Cross out all the things that don't seem to belong. Work with what is left. Think visually, use metaphors and images. Be specific."

Back in the mop closet, we wanted to start with the name of our home planet, but it is 108 characters long, full of clicks and tones and digital beeps. Put that in a translation program and it freezes every time, so we just call it 108 or There.

There, as opposed to Here, is too different to really explain. To communicate, for instance, we use bits of music, language, code, images, mathematic formulas, tonal scales, algorithms, clicks, spirals, expansions and contractions all intermingling and changing through multi-levels of consciousness. See what we mean about being hard to explain.

When we were just little bitty podlings back There, if we didn't behave, they'd threaten to send us to The Bad Place, they called it. The Bad Place Far Away. We'd all shudder, huddle together and behave.

When we were a little bigger and asked what was bad about the Bad Place, they'd say that we were all alone. Alone? It wasn't a word we knew. What did that mean? We saw our pod against a blank wall, an empty landscape. "That's just it, the teachers told us, "You're surrounded by many others, but not connected to them."

"Not connected? How could our pod not be connected?"

"It's worse than that," they'd say.

"What could be worse?" We clung to each other, truly afraid now.

The teachers almost whispered, themselves full of fear: "You don't even have a pod."

"Five more minutes," Miss Salvatore tells the group. "Focus."

What we would have written if we'd had been able to write started like this:

Back There what you'd call "family" is the collective, the Big We. Vast, expansive, unimpeded. Interconnected. To be part of the Big We is to hear music, see colors, feel peace, connection, love, joy, equanimity.

We wrote on and on, fueled by profound homesickness.

After a while, Miss Salvatore rings a little bell, then starts to ask people to share what they've written to the rest of the class.

A young woman has written about being raised in a big family in Los Angeles, feeling ashamed of being poor in a world that has so much. She starts to cry just thinking about being so poor that she can't buy the right kind of running shoes. What does she mean? What kind of shoes are the wrong kind? Two left ones? Holes in the bottoms? Do they go in different directions? She's very sad. Miss Salvatore pats her on the shoulder and says something about how brave she is to find her own voice.

But what does that mean? This girl talks all the time. Isn't that her voice? We begin to feel even more confused, alone.

Coming up with an image for my family was easy:

If you look at one leaf, examine it closely, separate it from all the others on a tree, you become deeply aware of that particular leaf. But if all you think about is the leaf, then you've forgotten the twig or the branch not to mention the trunk or the forest or the sky above or the deep roots below. My family is the tree. Our tribe is the forest. The sky is our home.

We become so homesick at this point that it sets off a distress signal without us meaning to. Suddenly we received a ping in our own language, loosely translated as: "Where are you? Are you alright?"

If we'd had a heart, it would have skipped a beat or two. We pinged back the first thing that came to us. "Lost. Help."

Then the voice came again. "I'm Miss Salvatore, from Central – and here she mentioned the name of our blessed planet not skipping as single trill or note – Don't worry. I will help you."

And so, at long last, we made contact with Central, and could finally aid in understanding this poor deluded planet now hurtling toward certain destruction.

-2-

Questions

Back at her house, we communicated with Miss Salvatore for a long time as we got things sorted out. "Do you have any other questions?" Miss Salvatore asked.

"Everything seemed so clear cut in our training," we told her. "But nothing has gone right since we've arrived. We're beginning to understand why it's called "the Bad Place."

"Well, it's not entirely bad although your experience of landing in a mop closet certainly is just that. I still don't understand why Central didn't know you were there. Or how on Earth (pardon the expression) you survived without the rest of your pod. Not even a datapak! You're one strong, brave little podling."

"So scary! We thought maybe it was part of Orientation."

"No. Not that. But I have as many questions as you do. Will try to find out more tomorrow. In the meantime, remember that you're safe now. Don't try to hop-travel or anything else for the time being."

"Hop-travel?"

"Oh, dear! You don't even know..." Miss Salvatore bit her lip in dismay.

"But didn't you learn that as a podling? Play the hop-skip game? You did go through training at the Institute, didn't you? She looked at us, almost in alarm. "Right?"

"We did, but we're so confused without our datapaks."

"Don't you remember taking theory courses at the Institute?"

If we'd had physical bodies, we would have hung our heads.

"Understanding Earthling's Heart/Mind Division?" Silence. "Insights into their aggressive biological inheritance? 108 top reasons why progress is difficult with only partly evolved human beings?" More silence. "At least listened to the talk 'Earthlings as an Invasive Species?'" She sighed. "Okay then. What can you remember?"

"Just bits and pieces." We didn't add how tiny they were. Or how every day there seemed to be less of them. We missed the others in our pod something terrible.

Miss Salvatore opened her MacBookPro laptop, pressed a few buttons, frowned, pressed a few more, frowned deeper. We later learned that she was connecting to our planet's private net known simply as Central, accessed by the 108 character password that Jobs had set up for us, bless him.

She finally closed her laptop. Stared at the floor for a while, seemed to decide something.

"Okay. It's not just you. Something in the system is messed up – the fact that you landed alone at Yakety Café and not at one of our facilities with the rest of your unit is a symptom of something bigger. Right now, I don't know what exactly is wrong, but I'll do some digging. The good news is that you came through intact as a functional podling despite the damage."

"Damage?"

"Some of your memory banks don't seem to be functioning the way they should. Sometimes that happens in a rough landing. The main problem is that neither you nor I can access your datapak. This has to do with Central, not you. But it does mean that you aren't fully online, thus can't access all you used to know. Or need to know. You'll have to operate manually until this gets straightened out. In the meantime, you also need some basic orientation and training. I'll see what I can do about that. In the meantime, watch and learn. Don't try to change anything. Just see and hear. Pay close attention to everything around you no matter how small it may seem."

-3-

Miss Salvatore Talks to Randy

When Miss Salvatore found that the podling needed more of an orientation than it had gotten in the mop closet, she went into action. Leaving the podling behind, her first stop was at Randy's Wrecks.

Randy and Miss Salvatore greeted each other as they always did by pressing their foreheads together, exchanging energy and such. They'd known each other a long, long time, had even shared a podling pen when young. Later, they'd gone through the Earth Studies program together then traveled far and wide in the same pod group. Later, some of the others had gone elsewhere, but they all remained close. Not unlike children who have grown up and moved away but still sent text to their parents on the weekend.

"Poor little lost podling," she explained to Randy. "No one told us a unit was arriving. Much less that four of the podlings somehow went missing. Then for a single podling to land in the Yakety Café's kitchen without its data pack? Unheard of."

"How could that happen?"

"That's what we need to find out. Something is up."

"Or down."

"Anyway, it eventually found its way into my writing group at Yakety, but the entry was very ragged. The podling has been damaged, its memory spotty. Worst of all, its datapak is completely missing."

"What about the pre-directive?"

"There wasn't one. This has never happened before."

"How's the podling doing?"

"The best it can. Trying hard, but lots of missing bits. It thinks that the whole experience has something to do with Orientation and Training, poor lamb. Amazing it survived at all, if alone and afraid."

"Sorry to hear all this. We're lucky nothing like that ever happened to us on entry."

Some years before, their unit had arrived in the same area of the city in California as the podling, only intact and in a better location.

Their first step in Orientation was to read everything they could in the local bookstore. The pod who later became Miss Salvatore found itself right in front of Religion & Self Help and as soon as the translator program kicked in, started with Baha'i and read straight through to Zoroastrianism. After everything she'd heard about modern Earth as The Bad Place, she'd been mystified to find that many religions had already focused on compassion, wisdom and love. And that they already had with lots of techniques for creating and maintaining equilibrium. But why hadn't they evolved more? Or why did they keep regressing?

When she read through the Psychology-Sociology section, she became suspicious. By the time she read through Self Help, she was sure that a great deal had been left out in her education, especially about Western culture. But despite the unfortunate tendencies rife in this planet, she realized that although Earth was dangerously close to doing itself in, there was still a glimmer of hope. She'd decided on the spot to work with young people, not adults. Ignorance was as dangerous as a pandemic and as hard to cure. She soon became a counselor and part time writing teacher at a local high school.

The pod now known as Randy had landed in front of the automotive section of the bookstore that night. By dawn he knew as much about carburetors and catalytic converters as anyone on the planet. He felt he'd fallen into a mechanical mecca. Only later, when he visited several repair shops, did he realize how many issues regarding working on cars simply don't show up in auto repair manuals.

"But there's more." Miss Salvatore told Randy. "There's something wrong up the line. When I tried to log in this morning, local feeds were okay. But on Central, there was nothing but static."

Randy immediately pulled out his laptop and tapped in a code with blunt, grease-stained fingers. "Still some static. Message."

"Which one? "

"Sorry for any inconvenience,' etc. Must be doing repairs."

"Or something." They looked at each other. They'd both heard the rumors. Randy was the first to shrug.

"Maybe something, maybe nothing. So how can I help with the podling?"

"Provide some basic training and orientation for starters. Find another emergency survival kit. Fix its piece-of-shit translator program if you can't find a new one. Try to find out what it doesn't know. Seems to be a lot. Answer questions. It's parent conference week at school so I'm pretty booked up. In addition, I'm preparing for our Representative coming next week."

"Next week? Maybe you can find out more about what's going on with Central."

"Sure hope so. But Randy, I have a feeling the news isn't going to be good."

- 4 -

Help from Mr. Randy

Miss Salvatore introduced us to Mr. Randy, explained that she had to be away for a while, but that he'd help us get oriented. Then she left us alone with him for a question-and-answer session.

For a while we bombarded him with questions, and he bombarded us with answers. Few of which we completely understood. Everything still felt all inside out, upside down.

"Just to review," he said tentatively. "You know where you're from and why you are here. Yes?"

It felt wonderful to trill the 108 parts of our home planet's name. He joined in and we did it again together.

"Good. Just checking. And why are we here?"

"Our whole pod studied Earth, uh, stuff at the Academy."

"Yes, and?"

"We came to Earth to...um, to understand how to help?"

"Hm. Sort of. Help with what?"

We couldn't think of the word. We almost said it but then it suddenly wasn't there. We tried to think of another but somehow it was gone as well. Something about the planet being in trouble. We consulted the piece of shit translation program for a little while. "Maybe we help them stop being teenagers and grow up so they could join the, um? Join, uh..."

"The Galactic Federation? Yes?"

This sounded sort of right, so we nodded.

"What do you remember about it?"

Suddenly other words came to us, "We can't help what we don't understand!" we blurted.

"Ah, you remembered that from the Federation's manifesto. All is not lost. Remember the rest? "

“Well, there’s more words, something, something, then it ends in ‘for the good of all.’”

“And the Foundation itself?”

“It’s like they live upstairs from us.”

“Oh?” Randy looked puzzled.

“Like Mr. Springle who owns the Yakety Café and goes up to where he has an office. People must climb the stairs to see him. After they’re gone, Mr. Springle comes down waving a bunch of papers and yells at everybody. Even Chef looks scared. Every so often he comes down and tells people what to do. He doesn’t cook at all or wait on tables either. Doesn’t even sweep up.”

Randy sort of snorted. “Well, that’s one way of describing it. Elder members of the Federation might disagree, but I get your point. Okay enough with the history lessons. You have another question?”

“Miss Salvatore said something about hop jumps and we almost remembered something. What is the difference between a hop-jump and a full jump?”

He was silent for a moment, his face scrunched up while he was thinking. “Um. Okay. Varies from place to place, but basically even a podling can merge with or walk into another person’s awareness. Can see through their eyes, hear with their ears. Just through their senses. That’s a hop jump.”

“Do they know we are there?”

“Usually not. Depends on the person.”

“What happens then? Do we start thinking for them?”

“That’s against the rules of course. All you can do is to listen, hear, and so on. In a full jump you can contact their consciousness in the first phase, then later on mess with it a little.”

“Mess with it?”

“Figure of speech. Open their minds up a little. Create little spaces or help them to focus.”

“What good does that do?”

“Then they don’t react so automatically. Become aware of more choices. Hopefully better ones. But that’s more than a podling like you can do.”

“That’s a full jump?”

“A full jump is when you can occupy the person, act through their body. Needs lots of training. Takes years. But you remember how they drilled this into us at the Academy, of course.”

“We do?”

“You should. Okay? A quick or hop-jump is when you’re like in the background and everything continues in the person’s mind at the same time. Hop-jumps are pretty easy. Especially when someone sneezes or is high. Or is a hybrid – you know, someone has an ancestor that went feral and mated with the natives. They don’t talk about that much in the Academy, but the woods are full of them.

“Anyway, lots of ways to find an opening. Full jumps and takeovers are more complicated. And take longer.”

“Takeovers? Like getting a body?”

“Obviously.”

“How did you get that body? Did you jump and take it over?”

“Well, sort of, but not all at once. More gradual. During orientation here in California, I got interested in machines, mainly cars. How they were made, how to fix them. How to improve them.”

“Were you a podling?”

“Oh, no. Been a pod for ages, ever since we’d completed the Program way back. Anyway, when we got here, I’d pod-travel around the auto shops in the city, learning this and that. This one guy named Randy was getting deeper and deeper into various drugs, so I started spending more and more time in his body. If he’d space, I’d jump in and help out when he was fixing a car, then jump out when work was over, and the needle came out. Fine for a while.

“Then Randy overdosed right there in the shop’s john. Heard him thumping around, jumped in to check on him. Terrible fix he was in, hard enough to watch,

downright awful to experience. Right at the end when he was about to leave, I took over his body completely and, after some serious rehabilitation, became Randy."

"And you've been Randy ever since?"

"More or less. Can still come and go."

"Will you die when Randy does?"

"Hope not. Next question."

"What's your name?" we asked.

"Right now, it's Randy."

"But what is it, really?"

"There is no 'really.' Time's up, my feckless little friend. Got cars to fix."

-5-

Tree Me Now

Miss Salvadore knew all about us, but we didn't know much about her except that she pretty much saved us from blinking out.

"How did Miss Salvatore get her body?" we asked Randy one day.

"Have to ask her."

The one time we tried to hop-jump into Miss Salvatore, she batted us out so fast we thought we'd end up in space again. We didn't mention this to Randy.

"Another question?"

"Why does Miss Salvatore keep saying 'Tree me now?'"

"Well, it has multiple meanings. Around here in EarthSpeak, the basic would be sort of like someone saying, 'Heaven help me.' That's the short version."

"And the longer one?"

"With us, I guess it might be 'I've done all I could to help this human invasion on this adolescent planet, but I'm getting nowhere fast. Let me rest and recover in that marvelous forest of trees where there is kindness and caring until this idiotic mess currently going on here is straightened out. Where beauty and universal harmony are present without a price tag. Where wisdom and knowledge combine to work together for the benefit of all. In short, a place that is the closest they come on Earth to our home planet."

"Oh my," was all we could think up to say.

"You should have seen Miss S the first time she ever saw a redwood forest right after we'd landed. She thought it was a god to be worshipped or something. Bent right down and started bowing to it. This was a long time ago."

"Did you know why?"

"Later, I asked her what she liked about trees and she just said, 'Their kindness.'"

"Huh?"

"Well, she does have a point. A forest has an incredible underground network, goes for miles. Lots of helpers with the fungi and such. A huge cooperative system. Sort of like what you podlings call the Big We. Only different.

"Since then, some of us have found that jumping into a tree, especially a long-lived one like a sequoia or redwood, can be a life saver, especially after a traumatic end to a body. Or when Earth has gone awry in some major form, and we need to get out of the way for a century or two. Never tried it myself."

"Mr. Randy..." We wanted to hear more about trees and Miss Salvatore.

"Forget the Mister stuff, okay. I just fix cars. But I can answer one more question before I get back to the shop."

"Are there other ways to get a body?"

"You can tag along with someone for so long that you sort of merge with them. Like I did with Randy. Takes a while. Or you can start as a baby. That takes even longer."

"We can't just walk in and take over?"

"If only. That's not the way it works. It's more gradual. And that's the problem, time is running out for planet Earth. It comes down to whether the local fuckers get it together quick enough to avoid bringing on a self-created extinction."

"Fuckers?"

"Genetic word for Earthlings."

"We don't understand. Why don't the fuckers ask help from the Federation?"

"They don't even know the Federation exist, much less know how to negotiate with it. Try to tell the locals and they think it's just another conspiracy theory. They have no idea what they are on the verge of basically throwing away."

"What does this have to do with us? How can we help?"

"Well, there's lots of ways to help a planet. Some fast, some slow. We've had people working all over the place in different areas: medicine, tech, culture, economics, land management, the arts, interpersonal relationships. You name it. Mine is the mechanical world. Engines of all sorts. For years we've been working to improve these extremely useful things called cars. Among other items we're working toward different power sources that are safe and don't harm the environment. Not there yet."

"We don't understand. Why hasn't our whole program worked?"

“Well, it has in the past. Been wonderfully effective in so many ways. But in the last thirty or forty years or so, things began to change. Slowly at first then everything just sort of exploded. Now things have started going so fracking fast who can keep up? And the tech has outstripped most of the people’s ability to use it. In politics, power has eaten compassion alive. Along with a lot else. We kept waiting for the situation to hit bottom, then finally realized that there is no bottom.”

We had no idea what he was talking about but didn’t interrupt. “And?”

“We have preventions and solutions galore. All sort of ways to reverse this gallop toward extinction, most recently including AI. But so many of the fuckers don’t listen, don’t act, just deny what is. Spread disinformation. Mainly, the worst of them are living in what amounts to a fairytale gone bad.”

“But what’s going to happen? We don’t understand.”

“Don’t worry about it. It may be too much for your piddling little podling system to contain right now.” He picked up a jar of nuts and kept pouring them into a small dish until they heaped up then started spilling out all over everywhere. “Like that.”

“But basically we’re here to save the people, right?”

“Not the people, the planet.”

-6-

Traveling

“Okay, listen up.” Randy had on his no-nonsense face. “No more sitting around bullshitting. Time to do some real field work. Here’s an assignment: I want you to travel around the neighborhood. “

“Travel, as in, hop-travel?”

“Exactly. Just jump into someone’s senses, see what they see, hear what they hear like we’ve talked about. Then tag along. Witness. Don’t try to influence. Just learn. Travel with different types of people. We can’t help what we don’t understand. Pay attention. Take notes. Report back to me next time.” And then he was gone.

Our first ride out in the world was with a young girl walking along with a big backpack and a towel slung over her arm. She kept sneezing so hop-jumping was easy.

We were stunned. We’d seen Earth on our Digifeeds, of course, but this in no way prepared us for the real thing. Our view out of her eyes was breathtaking. Trees, flowers, sky. Rocks, wooden fences, trailing vines with bright pink flowers. And wide open spaces. So incredibly much space.

We wanted to stop and look at every little thing, so intricate and beautiful, but she kept walking, talking on her cellphone. She was unaware of what she was seeing. Nor did she have any perception of the delightful sensations of just walking, picking up one foot, then another. That incredible forward momentum. The birds were calling to each other, celebrating the weather, the abundance of seeds, their trills and chips and tweeting creating a lovely background music. She didn’t seem to see nor hear nor feel any of this.

She was saying to her friend on the phone, “Dan, that bastard, invited Jane, the little bitch, to the party instead of me. Had you heard? Do you think that they’re sleeping together?” Then the girl went over about all the things that she disliked about Dan. Then Jane. And the lists were long.

And once she’d talked her way through the problem, she’d say it all again. And again. When she got to what we later found was called “the beach” we nearly fell out,

so taken we were with the marvelous ways the water swelled up, formed waves and leapt onto the shore, creating intricate patterns of lovely white foam. We'd never seen anything so wonderful or so vast. Up and down the whole shore it kept happening. The girl barely looked up but stroked some sort of liquid on her arms and legs and lay down on her towel, scowling one minute, crying the next. "Dan, she murmured, "oh, Dan."

And this was the same Dan she'd disliked so much on the way over? We puzzled over that quite a bit without coming up with an answer.

During the next few weeks, we started watching other Earthlings, being with them, listening to them talk. We watched as they surfed the ocean, going fast as they sat on top of waves. Then later, they'd sometimes surf the Internet or play video games. We went to movies with them, to meetings in tall, cold buildings where people sat in a big room filled with little walled off spaces, so each person seemed alone and unhappy. We entered many homes and participated in family meals, arguments, happy times. We liked to go to the buildings with colored glass in the windows where everyone sang together and sat up against each other in long rows. The temples where they go to worship food called grocery stores were the most amazing of all. So much of everything, from every part of the globe. An amazing tribute and offering to their deities.

The more we saw, the less we understood about our mission here. We kept hoping that getting out into the world would be like watching a low-resolution picture turn into high-rez when everything suddenly makes sense. So far that hadn't happened, but we kept going.

-7-

Going Places

“So, how’s the traveling?” Randy asked us.

“Everything is so beautiful to look at, the smells are so interesting, the textures so various, the sounds so absorbing, then there’s taste...not having had anything similar before, it is almost beyond belief that people do anything but eat.”

Randy stopped us there. “Ah, the realm of the senses, yes. Terrific, aren’t they? Especially at first.”

“Why don’t people experience them more? A woman we traveled with ignored the most thrilling birdsong to tell her friend on the phone how unhappy she was. It doesn’t make much sense.”

“People take their senses for granted. After all, they’ve had them their whole lives, not less than a few weeks like you.”

“So sad. Most of the ones we’d traveled with didn’t have any big problems, but they sure made the most of their little ones.”

“And?”

“They all go too fast. Their minds just run around and around in circles. Paying attention to all the wrong things.”

“That about covers it.” Randy’s cell phone beeped, and he turned away to take the call.

“Got to go,” he told us, one foot already out the door. “You’re doing great. Keep going. Still lots to learn.”

As we’d been told, we found that the easiest way to enter someone was when they sneezed, giving us a great jump start, so to speak. Many things make Michael, the waiter at Yakety Café, sneeze, so he is super easy to enter. One time though, he sneezed at the same time his cat did and we ended up in Persimmon instead of Michael. We

knew we weren't supposed to travel with animals yet, but we stayed a little while anyway. Sitting in the sun with Persimmon, we experienced clouds of energy—different colors, different textures—sweeping through her body. She didn't do anything to either resist or hold on to them. Just let them float through, some soft, some fuzzy, some fast, some really, really slow. All with different sounds and smells. When she went to sleep, we left her little body, but it was an experience that we haven't forgotten. We never told Miss Salvatore nor Randy about it, but it still makes us happy whenever we see a cat sitting in the sun.

It left us wondering about the difference between animals and people. If cats feel things as they happen, why don't people? Are cats smarter?

-8-

Q & A with Miss Salvatore

“So, my little podling. What have you learned as you’ve traveled around?”

We told her a little of where we’d been, what we’d seen, then had a question of our own.

“Miss Salvatore. Our question is about a name. It’s not one that we have on our world.”

“What name is that?”

“It’s called ‘I.’ It seems the most popular name on this planet. Must be very meaningful.”

Miss Salvatore blinked. “That’s not really a name, it’s more of a pronoun.”

Blank looks.

“Remember to turn on your grammar program when you get fully wired up. A pronoun is a word that stands in for a name.”

“Oh.” More blank looks. “How do we get one?”

“A name?”

“A pronoun like everyone else.”

Miss Salvatore didn’t think this was the time to explain that people’s obsession with “I” often made them act as if they were the center of the universe. Which they weren’t. Nor was this little planet itself near as important as everyone seemed to think it was.

“You already do. For podlings, the pronoun is always ‘we.’”

“Oh.” That we understood. “We” just meant us and all the ways we’re connected to the world, gathered together at this space in time. “I” must be the opposite of that.

Miss Salvatore considered us for a minute, then said, “OK. Next question.”

“Does Earth have podlings?”

“No, not exactly. They have children that grow into adults. They are carbon based, so it is different, but that’s the nearest they come.”

“Well, how do podlings pod here?”

“They don’t call it that, but it’s a little like what we do. Also takes a long time. For example, if a person Here wants to go into medicine, they go to school, study for years and years, become an intern in a hospital, pass various requirements and so forth. Finally, one day they have a graduation ceremony and after that everyone calls them ‘Doctor.’ As you know, we have a similar ceremony that ends with a Council member saying ‘Well done.’ After you finish your fieldwork, once we agree that you’ve earned podhood, then you’ll hear those words yourself.”

“And we earn it by helping to understand how to create positive change here on Earth?”

“Well. Yes, but not just the things you learned in school, but by learning to do so on your own, on the fly. You’ll see.”

“On the fly? Why not a grasshopper. They would be bigger, easier to catch.”

“Quit trying to be cute. It’s wearing thin.” Miss Salvatore frowned and started to leave. “Begin making a list of the biggest problems Here. Try to find solutions. On the fly.”

-9 -

Going Places

We like traveling with Michael who has lots of friends in different places. He goes to his community garden every few days. We love it when he digs around in that wonderful smelling dirt. Or when he rearranges the zucchini vine or pats the vegetables. The best is when he picks tiny tomatoes off the vine and pops them in his mouth still warm from the sun.

Sometimes we take a shower with Michael. How can people be unhappy when there is so much hot water just coming right out of a tube on the wall? When those things called shampoo or soap smell so good? It's a puzzle to us. We especially like the music Michael makes when he's in the shower. He sings and tones until his chest hums. We enjoy that very much, humming along with him in the hot water with soapy smells.

When Michael's boyfriend comes over late at night, we don't stay. We don't want to be impolite.

We sometimes visit with the Williams who live next door to Michael, especially when Mr. Williams watches the evening news. "Did you hear that?" he'll yell at his wife who is sitting right next to him. How could she not have heard? "Did you hear what that son of a bitch did now?" We've learned a lot about the planet from watching the news, but much of it is beyond us. The problems are so big and complicated, too confusing to follow. And we are so little and without resources or understanding. Mrs. Williams often cries during the evening news and so do we.

Sometimes we try to figure out what causes the most trouble to Earthlings and we think maybe it is clocks. For one thing, they are everywhere. Big ones in towers along the street in flashing letters. Little ones in every cell phone, every computer. Even strapped onto people's arms. People get all anxious looking at them. Creates unhappiness.

Or maybe it's not the clocks themselves, but the invention of clocks. Or maybe even the invention of time that only goes forward and backward.

Whenever we discover a problem, we are trained to find a solution but the more we thought about it, the bigger the problem got. Too many clocks to get rid of them we

decided. But maybe design a clock that went slower but kept the same numbers. Give them an extra minute here, another there. Then introduce a new kind of clock that did something besides just go tick-tock, tick-tock, forward and back, forward and back. More like real time that sometimes stays still, sometimes zig zags, sometimes jumps up and down or does back flips. Make the changes gradually until all the Earthlings kind of calmed down.

-10-

More Questions Than Answers

After we'd traveled for a while, we had a lot of questions for Miss Salvatore as you can imagine. The first thing we asked her: "Given the fact that fuckers are the way they are, how do we go about changing anything Here?"

"Well, to begin with, they aren't all fuckers, that's just Randy's word for all Earthlings. Some are brilliant, many are compassionate and helpful. A lot of variety out there. As are their hybrids. Natives can also be exceptionally smart and caring. Thing is, these qualities are innate to all Earthlings but can be locked up until they are activated."

"Like how?"

"Well, if I'm consistently kind to a student, in time they become familiar with the nature of kindness. A sort of spark lights up inside them. Then they begin to be kind to others in turn. Kindness begets kindness.

"But ignorance also begets ignorance. In the West, Earthling are taught to look outward rather than inward, to value thinking over feeling, and to develop knowledge rather than wisdom. The way their economic and social systems evolve reflect this mindset, especially in the West."

We thought that was enough to think about, but she went on. After all, she's a teacher and likes to explain things.

"In addition, there's their biological inheritance to take into consideration."

"Biological?" We wanted stop and look that up, but she kept on talking.

"Over a long period of time Earthlings evolved from primates who lived together in groups or tribes. They protected their tribe by throwing sticks or rocks at other troops to chase them away. Now there's the same impulse, probably fueled by the hormone called testosterone, to defend and protect their own. But now they throw grenades and deadly bombs instead of sticks. Gotten completely out of control."

She started talking about something called the culture that we could only partly understand. When she stopped to take a breath, we broke in with a question.

"OK. Then there are the Earthlings and this thing called culture that makes them do things?"

"It's not like the police. More like something in the background that influences the way they act and react."

“Like our datapak?” We suddenly understood. “It’s always there with information on how to do stuff, but they don’t force us do anything.”

“Sort of, I guess. Anyway, here’s an example of how popular culture works: Gene Roddenbery was assigned to Earth to find an image of cooperation that was general rather than local. So he invented a TV program called Star Trek. Did a brilliant job. No one even noticed how much influence he was having on young minds. Even now some dismiss it as ‘just TV.’ But there’s no such thing as ‘just TV.’ It changes people.”

“A lot of the time Earthlings just do what everyone else is doing without thinking too much about it. We try to sprinkle new ideas here and there that help reshape their ideas about the world for the good of all.”

“And?”

“Now kids watch TV and all they see are people getting shot or knifed or strangled or maybe just beaten to death. Why be surprised at so many school shootings or acts of random violence?”

“Can’t we just invent another good TV program?”

“We try, but right now things are very lopsided. Our methods are too slow and the world is moving too fast. Earthlings can invent and innovate no problem. They aren’t wrong about what they know, but they are ignorant about how much they don’t know.”

“Like what?”

“They are convinced that something is true just because they think it. That they are the center of the universe. In short, too many lack empathy and a sense of connection, not to mention good sense.”

“Does that mean we aren’t doing any good here?”

“Not true. Up until recently, the arts have flourished in amazing, inventive ways. Rock music changed an entire generation for instance. Technology is another great success story. Look at the Internet. But that took a whole bunch of people — some of us, some hybrids, some natives. Steve Jobs did spectacular work. I think we told you that he also invented the hidden network that Central still uses. This was all before the Darknet, of course.”

“Darknet?” We’d never heard the term.

"It's the shadow side of Earthlings that they don't mention in the classes at the Academy. Along with a lot else. But let's get back to you.

"Right now, Randy and I are just doing what we can to provide something of Orientation and Training for you. You're doing great with that. Really great."

She paused, then went on. "Even so, you need to know what's been going on. I wish I could tell you that all is well with us here on Earth and with our home planet, but that's not true."

"It's not?" We started to feel afraid.

"I've hesitated to tell you this, but recently this planet is being invaded by something strange."

"How could that be?"

"We don't know. But we're increasingly aware of this dark force alive on Earth, fracking up everything."

"Dark force? There's a dark force? You mean like the Darknet?" Silence. "More than that?"

"The Darknet is a part of it that we see, but the dark force itself is bigger, more pervasive and much meaner. Lots of people now are getting jumped and not by us. Furthermore, they don't mean us or the Earth well."

"Really? Can this be true?" We had never heard anything like this before.

"Yes, all too true. They come from elsewhere and walk into and out of humans all the time, especially these days of massive political change. They walk in or jump just like us, but without the intention of helping the planet. Just the opposite."

"Have you seen that happen?" we asked.

"I don't see them, but can feel their presence, like a stale tobacco smell that lingers long after the smoker has gone."

"Then what?" `

"A lot of what we are doing here for the past few years is just trying to keep them at bay, but now they're popping up everywhere."

"Where do they come from? These others?"

"Wish I knew."

We had been looking forward to sharing our list of proposed solutions with Miss Salvatore, but now didn't seem to be the time. In fact, we never got the chance to do so.

-11-

In Which Things Happen Very Fast

We were at the Yakety Cafe, tagging along with the waiter Michael. Miss Salvatore sat with a man we'd never seen before, and he sure didn't look local. They had their heads together and started off whispering intently but gradually raised their voices enough so that Michael was able to listen. Eavesdrop we think is the correct term but what this has to do with dropping from eaves, we have no idea. Michael was standing right by the table.

"But how can they?" he heard Miss Salvatore ask the stranger.

"There've been big shifts. Huge upheavals. And not good ones. Earth isn't the only planet in crisis these days."

"But the Earth Initiative has been such a big part of our world, our past."

"Things change."

"Don't answer me with platitudes." She looked at him crossly, then relented. "I know things change, it's one of the universal truths. But the Initiative?"

"Its influence has been dwindling over the years," the man told her. "You know that. We came in teaching Earthlings how to work with their minds, but now we are starting to think that from the beginning, we should simply have taught them to love, to open their hearts, to accept things as they are. Or at least to be kind. Instead, especially in the so-called developed nations, they've gone overboard with thinking and become self-conscious and self-involved, divided against themselves and others. And so proud of their analytical minds that it's increasingly hard to be helpful when everyone is so enamored of their own opinions. But I mustn't get lost in that sinkhole. Moreover, it has nothing to do with today's troubles.

"No?"

"No," the stranger told her. "It's much worse than that."

Unfortunately, the people next to them started talking and laughing so we couldn't drop from the eaves again that day. Michael didn't remember any of this for long, but we did. And added it to a growing number of items that made us feel as if we were going up in smoke.

Later, when we went to Miss Salvatore's office, we saw this official looking paper on her desk and were able to read the first paragraph:

Good news! The Earth Initiative Program, in the interest of Global Security, is currently being repurposed to become the Balance Initiative. This Initiative, unlike the Earth Initiative Program, will not be a drain on our economy, but supported by Corporate Sponsors here on Earth. All current activities in the original Earth Initiative Program are to be concluded as quickly as possible. The goal is now to secure donations from these sponsors. Fundraising Specialists, with contacts throughout the corporate world, will soon be arriving to actualize this objective.

Shocked, we slipped out of the room and went looking for Randy, hoping he could explain what this all meant and why it was labeled Good News!

-12-

Miss Salvatore & Randy Confer

"Bad news. Terrible news." Miss Salvatore, who generally moved slowly, rushed into Randy's garage and pulled him into the office.

"It's all much worse than we thought. Just had several long talks with the Rep. It's awful."

"Slow down," Randy took her hand, pressed his forehead to hers.

They took several long, slow breaths together.

"OK?"

"OK."

"It all began back home when a returnee from Earth started talking trash about the Earth Initiative in his report. Said we do nothing but blab on and on about kindness and other bullshit. Called us 'those goody-goody do gooders' "

Randy made a dismissive noise. "Sounds like a tweet, not a report. Who was this?"

"Unclear about his history. Nobody had ever heard of him until he came back from Earth and started strutting around, talking big. At first everyone thought he was a joke, but somehow his very outrageousness fascinated people. Like watching a pig dance."

"Or a slow train wreck," Randy added, shaking his head.

"Pretty soon he started up an anti-Earth Initiative campaign. Right there in the Council meetings! Said the whole notion was outdated."

"How in the name of the Seven Sisters can helping a planet survive be outdated?"

"Said the name itself is old-fashioned. Sounds like fusty old men with top hats and silver tipped canes made it up."

"But..." Randy sounded like a car that wouldn't quite start.

“Right. Everyone laughed at him, but he said it so often, to so many different networks that it began to sound just a little bit true. He kept saying that on Earth, people had started using a more modern term like ‘Balance’ rather than Initiative. An outright lie as you know.”

“Balance? Sounds like a new diet.”

“It’s not a term we’ve ever used, hinting of dualism as it does. But this guy kept on and kept on until the Earth Initiative Program itself began to include ‘Balance’ in their directives.”

“Tree me now!” Randy hit his forehead in frustration.

“Eventually, the Council got all huffy and started pushing back, but it was too little, too late. He’d gotten a tiny toe hold of power and worked it like a jack hammer. In the end, through whatever means, he even got a seat at the table on the Council.”

“Unbelievable. He’s able to vote?”

“Yes. Soon enough he started another of his long campaigns, this one asking that the restrictions on immigration for hybrids be lifted. For ‘balance’ in the homeland, he said. Up until then, no one fully realized that he himself was probably a hybrid, not one of us. And they’d voted him in themselves.”

“A hybrid on the home world? He could infect us all. How is that even possible? Aren’t there tons of safeguards.”

“Not anymore. Apparently. Remember, that son of a bitch snuck through, no one is sure how.”

“What’s his name?”

“He dropped his native name and has started calling himself Mr. Foxx.

“Gets worse and worse. While we were working away down Here, trusting that all was well back There, they started cutting back on the Earth Initiative Program. Again, the campaign initiated with Foxx.”

“So they just let him? Like a fox in a hen house? ”

“He’s crafty, I’ll say that for him. The Council members just aren’t used to underhanded power plays. Foxx and his followers would snip away around the edges

of an issue, shooting down seemingly unimportant items that no one cared about. Then, when the issue was completely unsupported, he'd sort of casually axe it."

"Wouldn't the Council object?"

"They would, but then Foxx would say or do something completely outrageous on a different front to distract everyone's attention."

"Just like...."

"Exactly."

Randy got up and poured out two shot glasses. "What do we do?"

"Wait. Let me finish."

"His agenda went into high gear not long ago. Not only did Foxx insist that the Initiative bring in more hybrids but, again in the name of 'balance,' that our planet should stop dispatching any more of us here."

"No! Never!"

"That's what the Council finally said, but a directive had already gone out to cancel the last scheduled export. The vice-chairman of the Council, good old Marzel2C89, wasn't having it. He launched the last shipment to Earth by himself."

"That's why PODxyz ended up alone in the broom closet?"

"Exactly. But there's more. He was interrupted before the export was complete and their data packets didn't make it through."

"And the rest of his pod?"

"Unknown."

"Oh, my dear little innocent podling, so full of hope and helpfulness. No wonder it's had to struggle so."

"Unclear what we're to do with it now."

"Horrible. Horrible situation." Randy put his head in his hands. "What did Central say?"

"That's what I've been trying to tell you, Randy. We've been cut off from Central. By Executive Order."

-13-

Randy & Miss Salvatore Face Facts

“Randy,” Miss Salvatore said over her phone in a tight voice, “it just gets worse. Listen to this last directive from the Council:

In light of these changes, Council has decreed that all former Earth Initiative members still active on the planet Earth, except those proficient in fundraising, be advised that their replacements will be arriving soon. All other former Earth Initiative staff are to report to Montana for re-assignment.

Any remaining pods or podlings left in the program are considered redundant and, immediately effective, should be denied access to our programs and resources. Please supply Council with their last known location so we can be there to assist them as needed.

An hour later Randy, Miss Salvatore, and the Rep sat down together.

“What to do?” Miss Salvatore spoke first, but it was the question on everyone’s mind.

“I’m barely getting any news, but some is trickling through,” the Representative from the Council told them. “They don’t know that I’ve flipped. Although they may suspect that I’m delivering a lot more than their ballistic missives to everyone.”

“What are the others saying?”

“Organize. Arrange to quietly go back and fight. Stay far, far away from Montana.”

“But what do they want? Those who are suddenly making up all these rules?”

“Money. As I understand it, they plan to take over our whole non-profit infrastructure and good name, then start a big fundraising campaign. But the money from the corporate sponsors will be channeled into their pockets instead.”

“What can we do?”

“Fight it at the source. Find out exactly who is doing what.”

“But how do we return to our beloved planet without this new group knowing?”

“An underground system has sprung up. Uber-Lyft Intergalactic Cruise Lines are the safest right now. They’ll take you at least halfway then you can figure out the rest. They’re too small to bother crushing. Take longer than the official transport services, but amazingly they are still pretty much off the official radar. At least for the present. Randy, you sign up as a Mormon missionary. Wear a suit.”

“No way.” Randy was adamant. He held up his scared, grease-stained hands. “These paws belong to a working man, not a Missionary. I’ll go as me. Nobody will suspect a mechanic in dirty overalls on his way to work for the Antique Wheels Museum.

“Well, just be unpleasant and swear a lot to keep others at a distance.”

“Won’t be hard.”

“And you, Miss Salvatore, you’re to join the Happy Face Tours. Get a big hat with floppy flowers, carry a stuffed shopping bag decorated with bunnies or puppies. Smile incessantly. Tell everyone how much you love them. Here are your tickets and papers.”

“When do we leave?”

“Tonight.”

“What about the podling? We’ll have to tell it.”

“Of course. Here are the search forms about the podlings for you to fill out to sign. Or rather forge. Whatever you do, do not give a last known location. Make one up.”

“Alaska?”

“Too far away. Too obvious.” the Rep warned.

“How about saying Las Vegas?” Randy suggested. “Place hopping with off-worlders. Keep them busy looking for a while anyway.”

Miss Salvatore realized that if she lied on the official search form, she would be committing the first act of sedition in her entire long history. It was not to be her last by any means in the long struggle that lay ahead. “Okay, Las Vegas it is. Perfect.” She signed the form and gave it to the Rep.

“The worst thing, the thing that hurts the most,” she sighed, “is that I’ve started to think of the Council as ‘They’ and not ‘We.’ How in the name of the Seven Sisters did we get here?”

-14-

We Get the Bad News

"We're sorry you're sad, Miss Salvatore." We had never seen her cry before. "Can we help?" That just seemed to make her cry harder.

"Turns out you're a very special podling," Miss Salvatore began cautiously. "The first in a new series. More hands-on. Less theory. Not as reliant on the usual step-by-step guided approach and more like..." She faltered.

"Throwing you off the deep end." Randy added.

"Is that because they're closing the Earth Initiative Program back home?" we asked.

"You know?"

"We eavesdropped though the waiter. Saw some papers on your desk."

"Yes, the Earth Initiative Program is undergoing a great many changes and has been taken off-line for now. It's not good. We don't know for how long. In the meantime, we need to face a few unfortunate facts."

"Most unfortunate," Randy echoed.

We waited.

"There are dangers to all of us. Randy and I are joining a resistance group and are going back home to stamp out the infestation that apparently is in the process of trying to take us over. We leave soon."

"Can we come with you and help fight?"

"We wish you could, but no. You must stay here until we come back. It may be a while. In the meantime, you are in danger. Apparently, there's a search out for PODzyx."

"That's us! But we haven't done anything."

"You weren't, um, fully authorized."

She told us the whole story, leaving us more stunned than a tasered bat.

"We're going back," she continued, "but we'll return when we can. We hate to leave you here like this but will give you some contacts. In the meantime, you need to learn to survive without us."

"But we're just a podling!"

Miss Salvatore looked at us askance. "One thing you should have learned is that you're not 'just' an anything. A drop in the ocean doesn't say 'I'm just a drop.' It says we're all part of the ocean. Each part does what it can, no matter how small. Even a tiny bit of kindness can help."

"We're sorry, my dear little friend, Randy added, "although we're always interconnected, for a while, it will seem that you're on your own. You'll just have to step up to the plate."

"What? Wait a minute!" Nothing was making sense.

"Since your codes went missing in transit, you can't access these programs as you normally could. We're not sure exactly what that means, but we want you to be extra careful until we find out. So hop-jump lightly."

"Very, very carefully." Randy put in. "Don't try anything fancy. Never, ever, do anything but tag-along for now."

"Why?"

"You may unpod completely."

That sure scared the shit out of us. Unpodding, like biological death, is not reversible.

Randy and Miss Salvatore gave us some instructions and contact information. She told us that Michael was going up north in about an hour and we should travel with him. He's meeting his friend Marc at a campground up the coast. "Lie low," Randy said. "Stay in the grounds. You'll be safe there, at least for a while. Eventually, not yet, try to get to Oregon to this address. You'll be protected there and given updated information when it is safe."

And just like that, Orientation and Training was over.

-15 -

We Do Something Right

As we travelled north up the California coast with Michael, we had time to absorb all that Miss Salvatore and Randy had told us and to go over everything that had happened to us on this strangest of planets. Not that we had that much to compare it to except the Cultural History of Planets series they showed us at the Academy. One thing we'd learned was there is a whole lot of difference between a DigiPrint of a planet and the place itself. No smells for one thing, no feeling of the wind or rain, no excitement of surfing in the water or watching movies. The DigiPrints revealed little about how humans thought, just how they looked and acted from the outside. Little was said about mental inconsistencies, illogicalities, or absurdities. But on this planet, we soon found that contradictions in the human mind are as common as grains of sand on a beach.

Orientation & Training had taught us a lot, but much more was still wanted and needed. What were we going to do now without Randy and Miss Salvatore?

We weren't used to feeling sad, but as we cruised along the coast, we realized that our mission on Earth hadn't been to hide or even to survive, but to help people understand how to save their planet. Teach them things so they could do it themselves. At first we were supposed to create positive energy, prevent suffering and harm wherever we could. Even though nothing had gone right and a lot gone wrong since we'd landed here, we still wanted to stick with that as a reason for being Here. Ever since we were in our little podling pens, we'd wanted to be part of the Earth Initiative Program. But now? It seemed that our being Here had just been a waste of time. We'd done nothing but be confused. Miss Salvatore was so nice to us, but sometimes we'd act a little dumber than we were just to make her smile. But that wasn't what was wanted or needed. We should have been more respectful.

Even when we'd hop-traveled, we just went where we could enjoy ourselves. Just like humans. How much time had we wasted in the shower with Michael when we should have been doing real research? Or finding solutions? For all the time we spent with him, did we ever do anything to help him in any way? Even when he had long arguments with his father over the phone, we paid more attention to his cat than to him. Was watching the news with the Williams useful in any manner except to learn how big

and complicated the world was? And how completely insignificant the Earthling race actually is. We hadn't even become a real Pod. We hadn't heard those magic words, "Well done." And how were we to do so now with most of us still missing and no one to track our progress and give us directions? We were nothing. Just feckless little podlings who'd failed at our mission, botched our training, and been tossed out of the program with nothing to show for it.

And now we were on the Council's wanted list? How did that happen despite our good intentions? All we could see before us was years, maybe decades, of hiding and being sad. How disappointed our teachers would be in us. How disappointed we were in ourselves.

We were feeling very low when Michael finally pulled into the campground. But seeing a beautiful grove of redwood trees cheered us up. More than anything, we wanted to shout "Tree me now" and jump into one of them for the next hundred years until the present problems faded away. But we were afraid to try that serious a jump without our datapaks to guide us. We'd been warned that it might not turn out well. Better to stick with the plan, depressing as it seemed.

Michael met his friend Marc at an outdoor table near a big pavilion where some sort of event was going on. We could hear children squealing and making happy kid noises. With regret, we left Michael and began drifting around the campground. After a few days, he'd be gone and we'd never see him again. We'd better get used to it.

We started feeling really, really sorry for our little podling selves when we felt drawn into a negative energy field at a nearby table of a frenzied looking man sitting near a stone fountain. We didn't exactly decide to tag along with him, so much as we got vacuumed up into a jagged, disarranged mind. But it got us out of our self-pity in a hurry. Here at last was perhaps a chance to do some good.

When we probed his mind, we almost jumped out in alarm. It was like the most violent video game ever. Body parts flying everywhere, arms ripped off, legs cut in half, guts exploding. Children bleeding. Brains dripping from trees, teeth and eyes littering the sidewalk. Bright red blood spattering all over. These images looped over and over,

with more and more gruesome variations. Gradually it became clear to us that he wasn't just playing a video game in his head, but he was imagining his future.

He had on a big flak jacket and kept touching something under his coat. Something long, made of metal and wood. Something with a rounded handle and a curved sort of metal stick. It took us a moment to realize it was the trigger on an assault weapon like the ones we'd seen on the news.

This wasn't in our manual.

Randy's words came back to us. "Get off book. Act on your own. Step up to the plate, swing at the ball." The one speeding right at us.

The man was waiting for something, watching the door of a nearby building, like a cat about to pounce. "Come on out bitch. Waiting to teach you a lesson. You and your precious little brats. Slam the door in my face, will you? Tell me to stay away from the little piss-ants. Show you I will. Red headed bitch. Show all of you." He muttered these words over and over, his face getting redder and redder, meaner and meaner.

Suddenly, the door opened, children started streaming through. He waited until he saw a red-haired woman at the back, herding them out, then raised his weapon, his finger tightening on the trigger.

We didn't think after that, we just moved. Forced ourselves into him, entered him fully, pushing him aside. We became his arms, his legs, his grip on the weapon. We took him over just nanoseconds before he raised the rifle and started shooting. Forgetting that we weren't supposed to do this, ignoring the fact that we might unpod completely, fighting him all the way, using strength we didn't know that we possessed, we raised his arms, spraying round after round of bullets skyward, causing a rain of shattered roof tiles and bits of wood. Enraged, he tried to force the gun down again, but we held strong, keeping it aimed above the terrified children. We were aware that Michael and Marc were circling around to rush him from the side. Michael caught him in a sudden leap, throwing him hard against the stone fountain while his friend kicked the assault weapon away.

As the gunman's head hit the concrete, we ejected, shooting up and out. Over the crowd of screaming but unhurt children, beyond Michael and Marc, into the forest beyond. We barely had time to think "Tree me now" before we did just that.

Epilogue

All the excitement is over now. Things have at last settled down and life has gone on. But we'll never forget how, in the space of a few minutes we'd gone from a despairing little podling, afraid that we'd ever be able to help anyone, to saving the lives of a crowd of school children and their teacher. And before we could even stop for a round of applause, we'd found our true home as a big, beautiful redwood tree. We'd broken all the rules, but given the state of things, that didn't seem at all important. We'd taken huge chances, but this planet is a little bit better for our having been on it and that's the only thing that counts. At last we'd done something right, on our own, on the fly.

Best of all, we'd helped to make Michael a hero. Michael's picture was in the papers and on TV, his arm around Marc, both smiling like maniacs. Lots of headlines like "Mixed Race Gay Couple Proclaimed Campground Heroes." Even Michael's father managed to say something nice on TV about him being "a hero and a real man." Strangely (or not, who can tell about these things?) the White House tweeted, "Well Done!"

Our tree, relatively young for a coastal redwood, only a few hundred years old, stands enjoying the sea mist and coolness of the forest. The other trees had welcomed us into their community as part of their pod from the very first, their vast underground connection of roots and fungi humming with the news. Say what you will about human bodies and their excited and exciting culture, we much prefer being part of a forest. Surrounded in the deep stillness of connection, for the first time since coming to Earth, our confusion and bewilderment had disappeared. We felt the profound satisfaction that comes from feeling part of the Big We. Finding it again in ourselves makes it possible for us to share it with others as we were trained to do. Day after blessed day, we now breathe out kindness, harmony and infinite varieties of positive energy to all those who pass by.

May we live long and prosper.

And you, too, reader. Live long and prosper. Do whatever you can to help save this crazy world of yours before it is too late.

The End