

You Can Find Me in My Church

John Slade

Part One

Coming Out of the Darkness

Chapter One

I was seated in my church, feeling very peaceful and clear about what I was going to do this evening.

I don't go to people's churches anymore. I love to sit quietly in the Creator's church, where the world is close to what it was before we made such a horrible mess.

I sit on a bench at the end of a T-shaped pier, looking out at a lake entirely embraced by forest, without a single building in sight. My bench is on the left wing of the T; a second bench is on the right wing. Near each bench is a metal ladder which enables swimmers to climb in and out of the lake.

I occupy only half of my bench; the other half is always available to anyone who wants to sit quietly, looking at the lake or reading. No noisy chatter on a mobile telephone. I am very strict about that.

I treasure the summers, when the lake is warm enough that I can swim across to the far shore and back, sometimes twice. I swim backstroke so that I can look up at the white puffy clouds in the blue summer sky.

In the autumn, the birches turn bright yellow. I love to walk through the small pointed yellow leaves on the smooth gravel trail that follows the shoreline of the lake. I feel as if I am walking through a moment in time, inside a clock that has kept perfect time for thousands of years.

In the winter, my bench is covered with snow, and the lake is covered with ice, so I put on my ice skates and sail like an angel on the long oval rink that reaches from one end of the lake to the other, carefully maintained by a special plow that clears a path ten meters wide through the snow.

And in the spring, when at last I can sit on my bench again, I love to gaze at the pale green of the birch trees along the far shore of the lake, especially in the morning sunshine. My grandmother knit a sweater for me with that same pale spring green, and gave it to me as a Christmas present. I wore her beautiful sweater so much that the cuffs were ragged, the elbows were stretched, and the entire shape was baggy because that poor sweater had been in and out of a backpack so many times.

My grandmother is gone now. I keep her worn-out sweater in a drawer in my bedroom. I would never, never, never be able to throw it away.

The lake is like one of those books that you read again and again, discovering something new each time. Last summer, I was sitting on my bench late one afternoon when the sun had swung far to the west and now hovered above the trees right across the lake from me. The day was perfect, with crystal clear air drifting on a breeze from the north. The sun cast a broad sheen of sparkles across the black water of the lake, sparkles that almost reached the pier. With sunglasses on, I can stare at those dancing sun sparkles as the long sheen—a great sweep of glittering light—billows and shrinks and suddenly reaches toward me as the shifting breeze stirs the ripples which catch the light from the sun.

And then I thought . . . I opened my notebook and began to write . . .

Sunlight glitters on the water.

The breeze sweeping across the lake plays with sparks of energy
that have just spent eight minutes and twenty seconds traveling from the sun.

Dip your cup and drink from the mystery
that gave you life.

Yes, here I was, in my church, reaching back eons of time to that extraordinary moment when light touched water on a tiny planet circling a star in the vast expanse of the universe . . . and somehow, *somehow*, light touching water created life. Little green cells which were able to feed from the light of a star, from the *energy* of a star, began to fill the seas of that tiny planet.

By an intricate process which we today call photosynthesis—photo means “light,” and synthesis means “the combination of components or elements to form a connected whole”—those little cells took the atoms which had been created eons ago in the heat of a star and combined them into starch, into sugar, into cell walls and vacuoles, and even . . . into genes, so that the cell could not only live, but pass on the gift of life to the next billion generations of little green cells.

Well, I had a plastic cup, which I unscrewed from my coffee thermos. Then, wearing a still-damp bathing suit, I descended one of the blue metal ladders until I stood on the bottom rung, waist-deep, able to dip my cup into the lake and drink the cool clean water.

But that was not enough. I set the cup on the pier, let go of the ladder and splashed backwards into the lake. Rolling over, I began to swim breaststroke toward the glittering sheen ahead of me. Of course it always retreated, so that I

was never able to swim *in* the dazzling sheet of sunlight. But I knew that the sun was shining on the water all around me, so as I swam directly toward the sun, I sipped a bit of cool water—a bit of water *and* sunshine—which I swallowed with all the eagerness of little green cell. I was swimming in the moment of creation, cupped by the hand of the Creator.

And so, half a year later, on that winter evening in December, when the girl who had reached eighteen years of age could no longer live in a world which people willfully destroyed with their wars and their oil, I sat on the snowy bench in my church and felt absolutely peaceful because I was about to sleep for a thousand years.

My doctor had told me that I was depressed and so he prescribed a certain dosage of a certain medicine, but I told him that I was not the one who was sick.

I never took a single pill.

I was a stranger to my family, with whom I became as quiet as a ghost.

I was a stranger to my high school classmates, who had no use for a Creator as long as they held their mobile telephone clutched in their hand.

I was a stranger to my teachers, who struggled to reach a girl who had once been a top student, but who now turned her back on them.

Only when I walked along the shore of the lake on a trail that wove among the giant trunks of the pine and spruce and birch at the fringe of the forest, able to see the lake to my left in all of its moods, and the jutting slabs of granite in the hill to my right, did the depression dissipate and I began to be able to breathe again.

My mother and father and older sister were spending the Christmas holidays at the “family home” in Spain, a place which I visited only once, burning jet fuel all the way across Europe, and then all the way back again, so that we could take selfies of ourselves while lounging on our new patio furniture.

I was eighteen years old now, able to take care of myself in Norway during the Christmas break, and so off they went to Spain, immeasurably glad to be rid of me.

I had two packages of sleeping pills, forty pills in all, which my doctor had prescribed on two separate occasions over the course of half a year.

I had not touched a single pill.

The plan was very simple. I would sit on the bench at dusk—on an evening when crystal clear air drifted on a breeze from the Arctic north—watching

patiently as the first stars appeared in the cloudless sky. On a Tuesday evening, few people would be walking along the path in the glow of the LED lamps on their poles. Even fewer would walk out to the end of the pier to take a brief look at the lake and the sky, before they shivered at the chill of the cold breeze on their faces and hurried back to the glow of the lamps. I would be alone; or, from another viewpoint, I would no longer be alone, but now in the company of a frozen, snow-blanketed lake, glowing faintly white in the light of a thousand stars.

When I was good and cold, I would stand up and say a final prayer, then walk the length of the pier to the trail, on which I would walk to the right about a hundred meters to a wooden bridge over a stream which now flowed beneath a lumpy sheet of ice. Most people just walked across the bridge. I always stood at the railing and listened; during the winter, I could hear, faint but distinct, the gurgle of the stream flowing beneath the cap of ice.

Once across the bridge, I would turn left, away from the lake, and follow an uneven, snow-blanketed path into the forest—I had a small flashlight which I could use if I needed it—to a particular boulder, where I would leave the path and walk a bit further among the enormous spruce trunks to a flat spot beside the stream. During the summer, I could lie hidden on that mossy patch and look up at the towering trees while I listened to the stream gurgling beside me. On a winter's night, I would look up at small clusters of stars between the dark crowns of the trees, while I listened to the very faint gurgling of the stream, keeping me company close by.

There I could sleep for a thousand years.

I would take off my winter jacket and lay it in the snow. I would swallow forty sleeping pills with cups of hot cocoa from the thermos, then I would lie down on my coat. I would take off my knit wool cap and use it as a pillow over the snow, so that my head, my brain, would cool very quickly.

Once I was unconscious, hypothermia would finish the job.

I would be in my church, with snow and trees and a gurgling stream, and air drifting from the Arctic north . . . and stars, high above the ghosts of trees, beckoning me home.

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Chapter Two

Well, the Old Girl is making her last trip in an ambulance. Next time it will be in a hearse. No more empty, endless, boring, tedious, ghostly days in a nursing home, where I am supposed to be thrilled by a ten-word SMS from a great-grandchild who wants to cheer me up.

My doctor says that he wants me to have a Pacemaker installed, to bolster my poor old worn-out heart. “What for?” I asked him. “So that I can watch daytime television while seated with an audience of warm cadavers? So that I can listen to the evening news about so many wars I can’t keep up with it all? So that I can stare at pictures of forest fires that are burning on every continent of the planet? I should have a Pacemaker . . . so that after eight-four years, I can watch the end of the world?”

They put me in a room with two beds on the second floor of the hospital, with windows looking out on a snowy courtyard and large black leafless trees. The other bed, near the window, was empty. The surgeon came to visit me, a nice fellow who no doubt has years of experience keeping people alive. He told me that they would do some tests on me tomorrow, and perhaps—he had not yet made the decision—implant the Pacemaker on the following day, Thursday, December 21.

“Think of it as a Christmas present,” he said cheerfully. “You’ll start the new year brimming with fresh energy.”

“Hmmm,” I said, and could have asked, “Fresh energy for what?”

Off he went with his clipboard, and then a nurse came in with dinner on a long narrow table on wheels that reached across the bed. She pushed a button on the wall; a motor lifted me up to a sitting position with the dinner right in front of me.

She asked helpfully, “Do you want me to turn on the television?” She pointed at the screen hanging from the ceiling beyond the foot of my bed.

“Absolutely not,” I snapped. I could have explained *why* I did not want to watch another barrage of the brain-dead madness which people now seemed so addicted to, but with a little wave she was out the door and gone.

I was awakened in the middle of the night—the world outside the windows was black—by hushed voices and the mechanical sound of someone lowering the safety gate of a hospital bed. In the dim light from a ceiling lamp, I could see, as I raised my head, a new patient being lifted from a gurney onto the second bed in the room. The teenage girl was unconscious, so they held her head carefully while they lifted her, then gently set her head on the pillow. She was wearing a blue hospital gown, as I saw before they covered her with blankets. A nurse put a white knit wool hat over the girl’s head, snug over her ears. She was connected by several wires to a screen on an elevated stand which monitored her heart with a green zigzagging line that pulsed, so it seemed to me, a bit slowly.

The three nurses, two of them men who had done the lifting, conferred with a fourth person, dressed in a gray sweater and corduroy trousers, who nodded with understanding. The nurses wheeled the empty gurney out of the room and closed the door.

The fourth person sat in a chair beside the new patient, turned on a pole lamp beside the chair, then began to read a book. He, a gentleman with the white hair and intelligent face of a retired professor, was clearly keeping watch over the girl whose upturned face was slack and puffy.

He noticed that I was looking at him, gave me a nod, then went back to his book. The screen beeped quietly. He would glance up at it now and then. The girl seemed to be stable.

I lay back on my own pillow and closed my eyes. I had spent a long and rich career as a teacher, a profession which requires the mastery of a certain subject, in my case history, and something more. A teacher must be alert to the talents—the often *still hidden talents*—of every student, so that she can encourage her flock of delicate teenagers, guide them, kid with them and make them smile, as they go through those difficult years of trying to discover who they are, and who they might become . . . in a sometimes cruel and hostile world.

The textbook and the lectures and the exam are not enough. Some students are remote, and some sail along with a healthy dose of confidence. But some of them, those who had been hurt as a child, those who had been hurt as a teenager, or

—in some cases—those who were so gifted, so bright, so intelligent and yet so fragile . . . yes, some of them needed a teacher to reach out to them in some special way.

A teacher could not rely on a screen with a zigzagging green line as she tried to reach a troubled heart. She could rely only on the lifetime of battles which she herself had fought, battles that left their scars, as she tried to give her guidance and strength and compassion, and maybe even a measure of love, to a fledgling just learning to flap her wings.

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Chapter Three

I was sitting up in bed eating breakfast—the coffee was so good that I asked the nurse if I might have a second cup—when another nurse walked into the room with a breakfast tray for the girl still sleeping in the second bed. The courtyard outside the windows was dark, for long are the nights of December, reaching far into the morning. The nurse set the tray on a long slender table which she wheeled into position with the table extended over the center of the bed.

Then she tapped the girl's shoulder and asked brightly, "Laila, Laila, would you like some breakfast?"

The girl did not respond. The white-haired man stood up from his chair and closed his book. He had watched faithfully through the night, and now the nurses would take over.

The nurse gently shook the girl's shoulder. "Laila, we need you to wake up. We need you to get some good hot oatmeal down in your stomach."

Watching from my bed, three meters from the sleeping girl with disheveled curly blond hair, I saw her open her eyes. She was groggy at first, but then she lifted her head and looked around the hospital room, at the nurse, at the screen that showed the beating of her heart, and at me, an old lady sitting up in a hospital bed with a piece of toast in my hand.

And then I saw the first flash of anger in her eyes.

She looked again at the nurse and stated with vehement conviction, "I want to be dead. Why am I here? How did you find me? I want to be *dead*."

I understood that she had tried to kill herself. The man in the chair had been a suicide watch, making sure that she did not awaken and try somehow to hurt herself.

The nurse said calmly, “Now Laila, we need you to eat a good healthy meal. You have an appointment at ten-fifteen with the therapist. He will be very glad to listen to what you have to say. I’ve given you *two* glasses of orange juice—”

Laila demanded to know, “What right do you have to make me live in your hideous world? Do you think I want to watch the forest burn right down to the shore of Sognsvann? You have no right to make me watch the end of all that is good and beautiful and sacred.”

The nurse, making no progress with her orange juice and bowl of hot oatmeal, took her mobile telephone out of a pocket of her white nursing trousers, touched the screen, then turned toward the door and spoke quietly.

The girl tried to sit up, though she was clearly weak and unsteady. She pushed the breakfast table away, toppling both glasses of orange juice. She tossed the blankets aside and shifted her feet in wool socks toward the edge of the bed. The suicide watch quickly stepped forward, grabbed both of her arms just beneath her shoulders and pinned her to the mattress.

Laila shrieked at him, “I want to be *dead!*”

A young doctor walked hurriedly into the room, stood on the opposite side of the bed from the man holding down the kicking girl, pointed his finger at her and said sternly, “Either you behave yourself or I will give you a sedative that will knock you out for twenty-four hours. We will feed you intravenously, and we will keep you very much alive. When you wake up, you will be in the psychiatric ward, which is a prison with doctors, steel doors, and guards.”

He paused, then he added with a faint smile, “Though your brain was a bit cool, I don’t see any dulling of your mental capacity. Congratulations. You were very close to becoming a semi-frozen vegetable.”

Laila glared at him, but she stopped kicking.

She did not give up, though she lay helpless in the grip of two men who were clearly in control. As a teacher, I had spent a long career watching the faces of young people, and I now watched the face of a mature, intelligent, fiercely motivated girl—at the brink of becoming a young woman—while she calculated her options and planned her next move.

“All right,” she said, “I’ll eat your bowl of oatmeal.”

The doctor nodded to the suicide watch, who let go of Laila’s arms but stood close by, his face filled with deep concern.

The nurse pushed a button and raised the end of the bed so that Laila was sitting up. Laila adjusted herself while the nurse pulled the blankets back over her, up to her waist. She straightened the breakfast table over the bed, then lifted the tray, covered with a layer of orange juice, and said calmly to Laila, "I'll bring you a fresh tray, with a cup of hot cocoa." She walked in her white shoes with professional grace out the door.

The doctor held out his hand to Laila. "I am Doctor Nils Hansen, not such a bad fellow if you give me a chance. We are scheduled to meet in my office at ten-fifteen. I promise you that you will have ample time to tell me about your Sognsvann. I know this lake very well. I learned to swim there when I was a boy."

Laila reached up her hand and they shook, no longer adversaries, though not yet friends. She was not a bitter girl, filled with accumulated poison. She loved her lake, and probably much more than just that lake. And she had tried to take her own young life, before she had to witness the destruction of all that she loved.

She was a teenager, filled with contending tidal waves of emotion, before she had fully learned who she was, and who she might become. And . . . before she had learned *to fight* for what she loved, something that no one bothers to teach in a high school classroom.

As we were both, side by side with three meters between us, eating our oatmeal, I said to my fellow patient with my teacher's voice, strong and vibrant, pronouncing every word clearly, "You are absolutely right to feel the way you feel. I myself have stood at the black ragged edge. Several times. It is because we love so deeply. We care so strongly. Which is absolutely right."

She looked at me, seeing me now for the first time, not as some old lady in the next bed, but as someone . . . her blue eyes studied me.

I told her, "I was born eighty-four years ago, in the merry month of May, 1940, one month after the Germans had invaded Norway. I have a few dim memories of the war, but I do remember quite clearly the flags that people waved when the war was over."

I paused for a moment, knowing that some ancient war meant little to young people today.

"What I want to tell you about . . . is the world I grew up in when I was a teenager. Norway was rebuilding after the war. We had Marshall Plan money from America, and so we could build new factories, new housing, new hospitals,

new schools, new universities. But we were doing something more. We had a very special Prime Minister, a working class man named Einar Gerhardsen, who was in office during three terms between 1945 and 1965, a total of sixteen years. He had a vision of what Norway could become, if the people worked together to build a country in which we all took care of each other. We would make sure that everyone had a good, solid job, with a good, solid income. That meant that everyone should be able to get a good, solid education, as preparation for all of those modern jobs. The workers needed to be healthy, and the workers needed to live in good homes. There was nothing revolutionary about all that. It simply made good sense.”

Again I paused. A teacher knows that the flow of information must be mixed by an occasional pause, so that young minds have time to think.

I asked this girl whose eyes stared at me with such close attention that I would have noticed her eyes even had she sat in the back row of the classroom, “How old are you?”

“Eighteen.” She spoke as if she began to realize, Eighteen, and still alive.

“Well, when I was eighteen, in 1958, I felt that I was living during an extremely exciting time, almost as if I was part of a Norwegian Renaissance. We were truly building a new future for our country. We had new laws, and a new economic system, both of which benefited the common people. The University of Oslo, which I attended when I graduated from high school, had new buildings, new courses, new ideas that kept us up talking late into the night.”

I paused. I wished that we didn’t have to keep looking sideways at each other, from bed to bed. How much better if we could be facing each other. I searched for the red call button, found it clipped to the sheet at the edge of the mattress, and pushed it to summon a nurse.

Then the history teacher continued her lecture, condensing the next half century with a few broad strokes.

“Following the exuberant 1960s, when students around the world rose up and roared, Norway discovered oil in the North Sea. The first successful well was drilled in the Ekofisk field in 1969. Full production began in 1971, launching the oil boom which provided great wealth not to a limited number of tycoons, or oligarchs, or financial sharks, but—in the Norwegian tradition—to the people of Norway. The oil money built new universities in the remote northern regions of the country, thus opening educational opportunities to people in the Arctic. The oil

paid for new hospitals, new homes for the elderly, new roads, new bridges, and a pension system that was far superior to pension systems in most countries around the world. The oil was a huge blessing for Norway, and Norway used that blessing extremely well.”

At no point did Laila stop me to tell me that she already knew all of this. She did not wave away my old folks’ history lesson. She seemed to understand that I was leading toward something, something of importance to a girl who had just tried to kill herself.

“But . . . something happened to us, to the people of Norway, during that half century of oil wealth. Two generations, including your generation, have been born into a world where people spent less time staying up late talking about new ideas, and more time shopping for new telephones and televisions and the latest fashions, and for plane tickets to second homes in Spain and France and the Canary Islands. We went from a nation of pioneers to a nation of consumers, which has changed our Norwegian culture far more than we realize. And that makes me, a child of the Renaissance, very sad.”

A nurse came into the room and asked both of us, “Do you need something?”

“Yes,” I said. “I would be very grateful if you would turn my bed around so we are facing each other.”

“Turn your bed around?” The nurse frowned at such a strange idea.

“I don’t have any tubes attached to me yet, so it’s just a matter of disconnecting the call button from the mattress, then pulling me into the center of the room, turning me about, and then parking me so that we can have a face to face conversation, perhaps with a glass of red wine.”

“A glass of red wine?”

“Please ask an orderly to make a simple rearrangement of the furniture, and then we won’t bother you any further.”

“Well, I’ll . . . Let me check at the desk.” The nurse departed.

I said to Laila with a laugh, “Beaujolais Villages. My favorite French red wine. We shall toast to our health.”

Laila smiled, the first smile I had seen in her intense young face. She did not say anything, but at least she smiled.

We paused in our conversation so that we could finish the remnants of toast and oatmeal on our trays.

A cheerful orderly arrived. He immediately understood that of course two people did not want to spend the day talking sideways to each other. With his white shoe, he released all four of the brakes on the legs of my bed. He disconnected the call button and hung its coiled cable from a hook on the wall. Then with a “Here we go!”, he pulled me into the center of the room, swiveled me around, then pushed me so that Laila and I now faced each other at a comfortable angle with about two meters between us, room enough for the nurses.

“Shall I take your trays?” he asked.

“Yes, please,” I said. “And you could be so kind as to bring us a pot of coffee and two cups?”

“A pot of fresh coffee and two cups. I’ll be back in five minutes.”

While we waited, first the young lady, and then the history teacher, used our shared bathroom to freshen up. Laila called through the closed door, “May I use your hair brush?”

“Of course,” I called back.

When she emerged in her blue hospital gown, she gave me a smile of gratitude. She was absolutely lovely, with soft curly hair around the face of one of God’s most precious angels.

The history teacher did her best to make herself presentable. By the time I was back in bed and pulling the blankets over me up to my waist, our orderly—who would have made a superb waiter at the Café de la Paix, Place de l’Opéra, in Paris—brought a tall white hospital coffee pot and two white hospital cups, which he set on our slender tables with a flourish.

“Merci,” I said.

“Il n’y a pas de quoi,” he replied. He was not Norwegian, of course, but, as I had learned yesterday when we chatted, a young man from Morocco who was earning money in the hospital before he began his medical studies at the University of Oslo next September. He gave us both a handsome Moroccan smile, which pleased the history teacher, and, as I noticed, captivated Laila, the girl who, last night, was ready to say good-bye.

Marcel filled both of our cups, gave us a gracious bow, and hurried off to . . . perhaps a bedpan in the next room.

I raised my cup of steaming hot fresh coffee to my roommate, who raised her cup to me. “I propose a toast,” I said, savoring the moment.

She nodded, with genuine happiness in her eyes.

“I propose a toast to a new Renaissance, so that your young generation can love deeply, and care fiercely, and talk about new ideas late into the night. And so that we, all of us together, can find it in our hearts to see all that is good and beautiful and sacred in a lake wrapped by a forest, on a very troubled planet.”

Now Laila said, her first words to me, “That lake is my church.”

Her eyes shone with peaceful conviction.

“Then a toast to your church.”

She leaned forward and I leaned forward, then we clinked our white cups. We savored our cups of coffee, on a morning when, despite certain difficulties, we were both still alive.

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Chapter Four

With a nurse as an escort, Laila—wearing a blue robe over her blue gown, with blue hospital slippers on her feet—went to meet Dr. Hansen in his office for her first consultation.

A short time later, I—wearing a blue robe over my blue gown, and blue hospital slippers on my feet—was accompanied by a nurse as we walked to the CAT Scan room where the surgeon would test my old battered heart, to see if it was worth the time and money to implant a Pacemaker.

I was beginning to see this Pacemaker in a new light. Yesterday he had told me, “Think of it as a Christmas present. You’ll start the new year brimming with fresh energy.”

I could have asked him, “Energy for what?”

Today, I knew for what.

When I returned to our room, Laila’s bed was empty. The courtyard outside the windows was lit by the mid-morning sun shining down through thin clouds. The black branches of the trees were graced by a layer of fresh snow which had fallen during the night.

I took off my slippers and robe and sat in my bed—the end was still elevated—with both a feeling of excitement, and a deep pang of fear. Dr. Engelhardtson had told me that my heart, though somewhat weakened, would surely benefit from the steady electronic support of a Pacemaker. My arteries were clear, my valves

were operating properly, but the rhythm of my heart contractions was not steady. Not enough blood was getting to the lungs. That's why I was so tired all the time.

A Pacemaker would induce a good steady heartbeat. My body would greatly benefit from a higher level oxygen. I would feel noticeably better.

However, every surgery had its risks. The cutting and limited bleeding can be a shock to the system. In some cases, the body rejects the implantation of a foreign object. At the age of eighty-four, my resilience is limited.

"In the final analysis," said Dr. Engelhardtson, "you've got to really want to do this. If there's a bit of a battle ahead, you've got to be ready to fight that battle."

I knew what he meant. Many older people, especially those without the support of a loving family, were ready to give up. Especially if the spouse was already gone. Death beckons as a release from the loneliness.

That made me a prime candidate for . . . saying good-bye to the loneliness. Karl had been gone for seven years. The three children were scattered, busy, leading the lives of modern Norwegians, beneficiaries of the oil boom. Families weren't what they used to be, fifty years ago.

So I balanced between the small glow of excitement at the thought of having more energy to get me through the day, and the heavy gray leaden weight of dread at the thought of having to fight another medical battle, one which I might well lose.

I closed my eyes, and was slipping into the peaceful oblivion of sleep, when I heard my roommate say, "I don't know your name."

Opening my eyes, I saw her climbing into her bed, facing me with eyes that were filled with a newborn friendship. Clearly, she wanted our conversation to continue.

I told her, "Birgitte. It was my grandmother's name. She was a great knitter of sweaters."

"So was my grandmother. She loved to wrap me with beautiful colors. The pale green of fresh birch leaves in the spring. And my other favorite, raspberry red."

"Do you knit yourself?"

Laila shook her head. I wanted to see her outside, where her soft curls would be lit by sunshine. "No, my specialty was helping her in her garden. My

hands weren't made for knitting needles. They were made for planting seeds in the dirt."

Already I was taking measurements: she was a slender girl of medium height. I could knit a turtleneck perhaps, with thick warm wool, raspberry red.

Laila looked at me with a touch of wonder in her eyes. "Do you know what Dr. Hansen told me?" Clearly, she wanted to tell me about her consultation.

"What did Dr. Hansen have to say about you and your church?"

"He told me that a dog found me where I was lying in the snow in the dark forest. A woman was jogging on the trail in the light of the lamps, and her dog was running with her. He was ahead of her, so she saw him when he left the trail and disappeared into the trees beside a frozen stream. She called to him as she ran across a wooden bridge over the stream, but he did not come back. She kept running, because he was a smart dog and never ran off, but always joined her again after he had followed the scent of something in the woods. But this time he did not come running up the trail behind her."

Laila paused, pondering the mystery of that moment.

"Then the woman heard the dog barking, fifty meters deep into the dark forest. She called to her dog again, but she heard him howl, a long howl, and she stopped running. The dog would not come, but kept up a strange, unrelenting howl. She had never heard such a howl before. She ran back to where the dog's tracks in the snow—and now she saw human tracks—left the trail and disappeared into the forest."

Laila stared at me.

"The woman took out her mobile phone from her jogger's backpack and shone its light on the tracks ahead of her. The ground was uneven, rising uphill beside the frozen stream. She called to her dog, letting him know that she was coming. The dog kept howling. Then she saw, twenty meters ahead of her in the faint glow of the light, someone lying on the snow beside the ice of the stream. Her dog barked now, calling her to come the final distance.

"She found a girl—me—lying on a blue jacket, with her head on a green knit cap. In the snow beside the girl were an empty bottle and an empty thermos. She knelt and felt the girl's cheek: not warm, but not frozen. She pressed her fingers against my throat—my carotid artery—and felt a definite pulse. The woman had no coat, for she had been jogging. She took off her knit cap and put it over the girl's head. Then she tried her phone and got a signal. She called one one three,

the number if you need an ambulance. A man answered right away. The woman reported that she had found an attempted suicide in the forest near Sognsvann. With her phone, she gave the GPS location. She told the man about the stream and the bridge. He said he had the location on his map, and that an ambulance crew could be there within twenty minutes. Had the snow on the trail been plowed? Yes, she answered, she had been jogging on a well-plowed trail. The man told her that the ambulance crew would have her phone number, and would call if they needed to locate her. The woman said fine.

“Then she waited. She and her dog both waited. She lay down on one side of the girl, and the dog, without any instructions, lay down on the other side of the girl, trying to keep her warm.

“She heard the brief wail of the ambulance siren when the crew reached the southern shore of the lake. She could see the headlights through the trees as the ambulance was coming up the trail. The lights stopped at the bridge. Then three bright flashlight beams came bobbing toward her through the forest. She called to the ambulance crew. They called back.

“They arrived in orange suits, carrying multiple duffel bags and wearing backpacks. They had blankets, chemical warming pads, and a device that measured her temperature and pulse, and sent the readings to a hospital in Oslo. They found the girl’s wallet in a back pocket of her jeans, found her name, found her identification number, and sent the information to the hospital, where in half a minute her electronic medical record was located. When she arrived at the hospital in the ambulance, the staff would already know who she was, who her doctor was, and what medications she was taking. A bed in the emergency room would be waiting for her, along with staff who dealt with suicide attempts by overdose, and hypothermia.”

Laila paused, then she said, “This is Norway. This is the country that I love so much.”

Yes, I thought with gratitude. Helping people, taking care of people, *that* is part of the Norwegian bedrock.

“The ambulance crew bundled the girl in blankets and then carried her on a stretcher through the forest to the ambulance. As they loaded her inside, one of the crew asked the jogger for her name and contact information. Then they each, one by one, knelt beside the dog and let him know that they were grateful.”

Laila stared, not at me, but at that scene in which she had been an unknowing participant. She held up a slip of paper. “Dr. Hansen told me that the woman wanted to visit me in the hospital. She said she would bring her dog. He gave me her name and phone number. Her name is Marit. Her dog’s name is Scout.”

“Then I think you should call her, maybe during lunch, when she has a break from whatever work she does. Invite her to come visit you this evening. Ask her if Scout likes ice cream.”

Laila was quiet for a long moment. Then she asked me, “Birgitte, what does it mean, when a dog can find you in a black forest in the middle of the night? What does it mean, when you lie down to sleep for a thousand years, and you wake up still alive, still an eighteen-year-old girl, with a new friend in the bed beside you?”

“It means, Sweetheart, that you were in your church, and that your church was taking care of you.”

She nodded. “It means I have a big job to do.”

“A very big job.”

“Well at least I don’t feel so alone any more. I can do a big job if I don’t feel so alone.”

“We’re already a team of two. By this evening, we might be a team of four.”

“Were you serious about the ice cream?”

“I’ll talk with Marcel. I think he can arrange with the kitchen so that they will prepare four large portions of chocolate ice cream for dessert. Scout will have his own bowl.”

We did not talk about the rest of Laila’s consultation. Nothing about her family, about school, about previous bouts of depression. Nor did we talk, yet, about what sort of Big Job might be waiting for her in the future, nor about what sort of education would best prepare her for that big job.

We did not talk about whether I would or would not have a Pacemaker installed. I had made my decision. Dr. Engelhardtson was an eminently competent surgeon. There would be no complications, no medical battle. I would begin the New Year brimming with fresh energy.

Which was good, because I too had a Big Job to do.

We talked instead about Laila's favorite summer, when she and a dozen friends from high school spent the summer camping in the Lofoten Islands, north of the Arctic Circle, for a full six weeks. They slept in tents beside streams flowing down from the towering jagged mountains. The sun never set, but circled above them in a golden ring, higher in the south at noon, lower in the north at midnight. They swam in the sea so cold that "our toes turned blue!" And though she lived now in "a very boring town" just south of Oslo, she dreamed of returning to those mountains by the sea.

* * * * *

Chapter Five

During lunch—which we ate in our little café, facing each other—Laila looked at the slip of paper which Dr. Hansen had given to her. She tapped the phone number on her mobile telephone, then looked at me with slightly apprehensive blue eyes while she waited for Marit to answer.

"Hello? This is Laila calling from the hospital. Is that you, Marit?"

She listened.

"Yes, yes. I am doing very well, thanks to you and Scout. I'm calling to thank you."

She listened, and now smiled.

“Yes, of course. I would love to meet you. And to thank your wonderful Scout. Seven o’clock this evening would be fine. Are dogs allowed in the hospital?”

Laila gave me a thumbs up. “Good. A friend of mine here would like to treat us all to a bowl of chocolate ice cream. Do you think that Scout might be interested?”

She laughed. “Yes, when he finishes his bowl, he can lick all the other bowls!”

She listened for a long while. Marit was clearly saying something to her about something important.

“All right. I won’t forget. We’ll see you at seven, Marit. Thank you so much.”

Laila touched her phone to end the call, then set it on the table beside her tray. She looked at me as if she were trying to comprehend something.

“Marit told me that when she found me, she could see that I had been crying. The tears were frozen on my cheeks.”

Laila stared at me.

“She also said that the worst is over. She said that I will get stronger and stronger. She said that I’m just getting started on an entirely new life.”

Maybe, like Laila, like me, Marit too had stood at the black ragged edge.

And had fought her way back to solid ground. And then . . . had found the path which began to climb a granite mountain.

I asked Laila, “Do you have any appointments this afternoon?”

“No, I see Dr. Hansen tomorrow morning at nine-thirty. He told me that we’re done looking at the past, and that tomorrow, we’re going to look toward the future.” She laughed. “Until then, I’m ‘under observation.’ They want to be sure that my half-frozen kidneys are functioning properly.”

“Good. I like your Dr. Hansen.”

I had been thinking. I did not know how Laila would respond to what I wanted to tell her, but the teacher in me wanted to give it a try.

“Laila, you told me that you have a big job to do.”

“Yes, but I don’t know what it is.”

“Most eighteen-year-olds have no idea what that big job will be. Especially when the adult generation is guiding you toward a job as a dentist, or an accountant, or a niche in IT.”

She nodded. “My father works in digital marketing. If you’ve got a product, he’s got the promotion. He wants me to intern at his company next summer, before I start in September at some university.”

“Terrific. But I’ve got something else in mind. We need to take three big steps. Are you ready?”

“Birgitte, I am ready.”

And so, while the sun, very low in the pale blue winter sky, sent its beams through the branches of the bare black trees into our little café, two ladies talked about the enormous untapped potential which had been waiting for thousands of years to go to work.

“Laila, you are concerned about your lake, about your church. This morning you told the nurse, with a very angry voice, that you did not want to live to see the forest burning down to the shores of Sognsvann. Do you remember?”

“Yes. If California can burn, and Australia can burn, and Hawaii can burn, and Canada and Greece and Congo and Siberia can burn, then the forest that wraps like a horseshoe over Oslo can surely burn too. So far, we have been lucky.”

“What we are talking about is not just your lake, Sognsvann, and the forest, Nordmarka. We are talking about life on planet Earth.”

Laila looked at me with immediate understanding. “Yes, and that precious life is dying. Coral reefs are dying, rainforests are dying, kelp forests are dying, birds are dying, frogs are dying, the air is poisoned, the ice is melting, the rain has vanished.” She stated not with anger, but with outrage, “Birgitte, this beautiful planet, the Cradle of Life, is *dying*.”

I could hear the Voice, urgent, passionate, fierce, speaking from the heart.

“Laila, at some point, way back when, life appeared on our tiny ball of dust. We may never be able to understand—beyond the workings of organic molecules, and photosynthetic energy cycles, and genes in their helix—how, and especially *why*, that unprecedented life first came into existence. What mysterious force gave the gift of life to the churning empty oceans? What force watched over this gift of life, *nurtured* this gift of life, until it crawled out of the sea onto the land? Until it grew wings and flapped up into the air? What force built the church that you love so much?”

Laila was listening. She did not raise her hand, as if in class, ready to offer an answer which she had read in a textbook. She was listening.

I continued, “One thing we do know. From the absolute very beginning, life was able to create more life. Life itself was able to pass on the gift of life.”

I paused.

“As life developed, it became more complex, more clever, more capable, more gifted, more ingenious . . . until it became, in part, a lovely young woman with curly hair and blue eyes and a very bright mind. And guess what else? This creature, which had inherited three and a half billion years of evolving life, could herself, when the time came, bring new life into the world.”

I added, “We are speaking now, Laila, woman to woman.”

I did not need a Pacemaker to induce the energy I felt surging within me.

“When a woman—the most beautiful and complex biological miracle on planet Earth—feels that the life which she is ready to bring into the world . . . is threatened by men who must have their wars, by men who must plunder the forests and the seas, by men who will pocket every petrodollar without the slightest regard for the Cradle of Life . . . Yes, when a woman feels that her future child is threatened by the forces of madness, then does she not have the right *to fight back?*”

I paused, then I added, “But if she feels helpless, if she feels that she has no way to fight, then she sinks into what we call depression, the black ragged edge, until she can bear the loneliness and the despair no longer . . . and she wants to kill herself.”

The sunshine from the star moving westward outside our window now shone on Laila’s soft curly hair. The Creator reached out and touched one of his angels.

“But what if she finds a way to fight back? Not alone, Laila, but with a growing multitude of women who are not going to let three and a half billion years of life come suddenly and pointlessly to an ugly, brutal end.”

I paused, not for a number of seconds, but for a number of heartbeats.

“Laila, that is Step One. That is why you sit on your bench and look out at your lake on sunny days and misty days and rainy days and snowy days. You are gathering your forces. Your instincts are deepening. Your heart is growing. You understand that you have a covenant—a covenant granted only to women—with your Creator.”

I could hear her breathing, slowly, deeply breathing.

“Laila, that is Step One. Step Two is the simple recognition that after several thousand years of so-called ‘civilization,’ half of the population on planet Earth has never had the opportunity to show what we could do, because we never had the chance. The men strut and shout and launch another war, while we women struggle to survive. Imagine what *we* could do if we had twenty-five years of genuine peace on this planet. We might even try for *another* twenty-five years. So that for the first time in human history, history books would not be filled with chapter after chapter about men and men and men. Oh, how profoundly tired I became, as a history teacher, of trying to make sense of tragedies instigated by fools.”

I paused, then I said with bedrock conviction, “Laila, I firmly believe that if those who bring new life into the world were in charge of governing the world, the planet would become healthy again, and the human spirit could flourish.”

After a long moment, Laila quietly asked, “And what is Step Three?”

“Step Three is how to bring about not a revolution, but a Renaissance.”

This was my favorite part. To Theory, we add Action.

“The ladies go to law school. In part to study laws already written, and in part to create an entire new system of laws, which protect the Cradle of Life.

“Our planet is infested with criminals, with few laws to stop them from earning their profits while they poison and plunder. We cannot wait for this country and that country to incrementally update a few old statutes, while corporations manipulate the legislatures. We need a group of lawyers, women primarily, from countries around the world, who work with climate scientists from around the world, to formulate a powerful system of laws which protect the multitude of biospheres on this planet.

“We create a green legal system, which we urgently need in order to achieve a cooling planet. We do not go baby step by baby step, but create the *final product*: A comprehensive system of binding laws in every country, which will enable all of us—*all* of us—not only to survive, but to flourish.”

Laila posed the question, “But how do we enact these new green hypothetical laws into legally binding actual laws? Nobody is going to like them in Texas.”

“Nor in Moscow. Thus we try an unprecedented strategy. We do *not* go to congresses and parliaments around the world, asking for a vote. Instead, we organize a global plebiscite, asking the people themselves—everyone ten years of

age and older—whether or not they would agree to a new legal system designed to bring them a healthy and peaceful world.

“And here’s the key. During the six months leading up to a global vote, when roughly seven billion people will cast their ballots, we *educate* those people. The entire planet becomes a classroom, with climate lawyers and climate scientists as teachers. *And* with young people, who will live their lives in the 21st Century, as teachers.

“In addition, we invite the clean energy industries around the world to provide the voters with their detailed and comprehensive plan for a planetary network of clean energy . . . within the next twenty years. No more incremental baby steps, but *a final global blueprint* for 100% green energy.

“Now the voters—in every country on every continent—can study both the green laws and the green energy which will work symbiotically to free us forever of climate criminals, and enable us to care for those beleaguered biospheres which had been dying. Financial investors will appreciate the stability of a comprehensive legal system, coupled with a dependable energy system . . . which does not wildly fluctuate, as do oil prices in today’s chaotic world.

“You see, the beauty of a global referendum is that educated people demand educated legislation. They want intelligent laws. Intelligent energy systems. So when they vote a *second time*, in local and national elections, they know just the sort of candidate they will vote for. Green, baby, green.

“Laila, this is the foundation for cooling our burned and battered planet. This is the foundation for prosperity which is far more democratic than the 1% swindle today. And this is the foundation, my precious girl, for peace.”

Had I said too much? Was it all too complicated? To idealistic?

“Where,” she asked, “do I fit in?”

“Four years at a university studying the biospheres of the world, with summer research projects in several of those biospheres. Then three years of law school studying environmental law, with summers spent wherever such laws are most needed. So that you can become a biologist, and a lawyer, and something more.”

“Something more?”

“Yes. I heard a very feisty girl stand up to that poor nurse, telling her about your rights, telling her about the rights of your lake and your forest. We need a Voice, Laila, a Voice which is free from scientific jargon, and free of legal jargon, a

Voice which can reach out to seven billion voters who are learning to be *educated* voters.”

She shook her head with doubt. “My father calls me The Silent One. And you want me to be The Voice?”

“Tell your father to turn down the volume of his TV football game. He might learn something.”

Laila considered. “This is my Big Job?”

“Once they let you loose from the confines of this hospital, you go back to your church and have a long talk with your lake. With your Creator. Ask them what they think.”

I added, “You won’t be lonely any more. You will be part of a growing team of Those Who Bring New Life into the World.”

Well, the Old Girl had stated her case. Without one single interruption from a nurse who wanted to take my temperature.

Laila smiled as she told me, “You must have been a wonderful teacher.”

“Thank you, Laila. I hope this new Pacemaker will enable me to cheer for you on your next three graduation days.”

* * * * *

Chapter Six

Birgitte and I had finished our dinners, and then had pushed the bed tables aside so that we could talk to each other, sitting up in bed, face to face, with a comfortable open space between us. We were waiting for Marit and Scout to arrive at seven. Marcel, who assured us that four bowls of chocolate ice cream were safely stored in a kitchen refrigerator, was going off his shift at seven. But he said that he would be glad to do some paper work at the nurses' station until 7:15, in case Marit was a bit late.

Birgitte was telling me about hiking when she was a girl on the Hardanger Plateau near the lodge at Finse . . . when a dog—an English Setter, white with black spots—came prancing into our room, stood in the space between our beds, then leapt up on my bed, bounded into my waiting arms and wet my cheeks and one ear with kisses.

“Scout!” I called through my laughter. “I am so glad to meet you!”

A slender woman with a big smile on her Asian face walked in through the door and told us, “He picked up your scent when we were walking down the corridor.”

Scout now swiveled around in the bed so that he sat beside me. He pressed tightly against me, as he had pressed against me in the forest to keep me warm. The rescue dog was still on duty. I wrapped my arm around him and squeezed him, and discovered that I was a target for more kisses.

Then I looked at the woman, perhaps thirty years old, with long black hair falling to the shoulders of her red winter jacket, and said, “Marit, thank you for finding me. Thank you, thank you, to you and Scout both. I . . .” I remembered the blackness of the night, the deep cold, the silence in the forest as I lay in the snow, the faint trickle of the stream beneath the ice.

Marit looked at me with probing eyes. “When I felt your pulse,” she touched her fingers to the side of her throat, “your heart was still strong. Your cheeks were very cold, almost frostbitten, but your heart was strong.”

Birgitte said, “Marit, we thank you for keeping that strong heart beating. Now we’re working on how to make it even stronger.”

“Oh,” I said, then I gestured with my free hand. “Marit, this is Birgitte, who has become a wonderful friend. Birgitte was a history teacher, but now she is more focused on the future.”

Marit and Birgitte said hello to each other.

I added, “Birgitte is the one who suggested chocolate ice cream.”

“Ahhhh,” said Marit. “We shall have a celebration.” Marit spoke not with a bubbly voice, anticipating a party, but with a professional voice, expressing her approval.

She was taking off her red jacket and hanging it from a hook near the door when Marcel—the ever capable Marcel—wheeled a rolling table in through the door with four bowls of chocolate ice cream and three spoons. He greeted the three women with his handsome Moroccan smile. “Bon soir! Bon soir! I bring you lovely ladies a little sustenance while you plot the next revolution.”

“Renaissance,” said Birgitte firmly.

“*Renaissance*,” replied Marcel in the word’s original French. “Many bright new ideas, and no guns.”

“Exactement,” said Birgitte with a nod of approval.

Marcel moved the two slender tables over our two beds, then paused while he considered Scout, who had caught the scent of the chocolate ice cream.

“Marit,” he said, as if he already knew her, “shall we set a bowl on the floor near the window?”

She replied, “On the floor near the window would be perfect.”

With a flourish, while Scout watched very closely, Marcel set one of the bowls on the floor beneath a window which looked out at the blackness of night.

With my arm still wrapped around Scout, I could feel him trembling. I released my arm, but he remained tightly beside me . . . until Marit whispered, “OK.”

Then the dog bounded off the bed, scooted up the space between the beds—past Marit’s feet—hooked to the left around the end of my bed and, clearly a well trained gentleman, did not wolf down the three balls of ice cream, but began to lick them while his tail swept back forth with its long white fringe.

Marcel now, with a gesture of grandeur, placed a bowl of ice cream on my table, on Birgitte's table, and on the very end of my table, where Marit could eat while standing. He placed a large spoon beside each bowl.

Then he said to the three of us with a conspiratorial whisper, "As far as the kitchen knows, the fourth bowl went to Aunt Tilly, visiting from Drøbak."

"Ahhh," we said, nodding with conspiratorial whispers.

Marcel wheeled his empty table out the door and vanished into the night.

* * *

Following our feast, four well-licked bowls sat in a row on the floor beneath the dark window, while Scout lay down on the bed beside me. Marit sat in a chair between the two beds, with Birgitte to her left, the two of them facing me. Thus our café had expanded, and our discussion expanded as well.

Marit looked at me with her probing eyes.

"Laila, depression, especially the severe depression which held you in its grip, has two sides of the same malevolent coin. On one side is sadness, so that you spend an entire day wanting to burst into tears. But on the other side, often unrecognized, is anger, anger which is never released, so that it churns in you, gnaws on you, and forces your mind to think in a pattern of loops: the same thing over and over again. The anger may be caused by some event in your life which hurt you deeply, or it may be caused because you feel trapped by the conditions around you, as if in a prison. You see no way out, and thus your sadness deepens into despair. You feel increasingly exhausted by the mental turmoil, until you are ready to reach for a bottle of sleeping pills, so that you can escape into oblivion."

I nodded. "I wanted to sleep for a thousand years. I felt very peaceful as I walked through the dark forest and lay down beside the stream. I was finally, *finally* going to be done with it all."

"Yes. You did not want to hurt anyone. You did not seek revenge. You simply did not want to live in this world anymore."

"I did not want to watch my church burn down."

"Your church?"

"The lake, and the forest wrapped around it. Or on a larger scale, the entire planet, the Cradle of Life. I did not want to watch the final destruction of a dying planet. I did not want to be a witness any more to the madness."

I wondered how I could best explain how I felt.

“I remember a sermon in a Lutheran church when I was about ten years old. The minister read from the Book of Genesis, moving day by day through the Creation. And at the end of each day, ‘God saw that it was good.’ It was good. It was good. And at the end of the sixth day, ‘God saw that it was *very* good.’”

I paused for a moment, then I explained, “We never went to church much in our family. We certainly never discussed religion or God or Jesus. So I had no one to talk with, no one who could answer my questions. In a way, I was like an orphan growing up in a house with other people, but not in a home with a real family.”

Yes, there was the beginning of the loneliness.

“Well, I understood on that day when we happened to be in church that life had been created by God, and so life was sacred. It was only when I became older, in high school, reading about climate change on my laptop, and watching a YouTube of Greta Thunberg speaking in New York at the United Nations, that I began to ask the obvious question, ‘Who are we to destroy all that God created? Who are we to destroy all that is ‘good’? Who are we,’ I could feel the anger rising, “to plunder and poison and pollute the oceans, which are sacred, and the forests, which are sacred, and the lakes, which are sacred?”

I looked at Birgitte, who gave me a nod of encouragement.

Then I looked back at Marit, who was somehow guiding me through a darkness even darker than the forest where I lay down to sleep.

“Marit, I think that I finally snapped at the end of the last big climate conference, COP28, when they argued about whether or not they would even mention ‘fossil fuels’—the *burning* of fossil fuels—as the main cause of global warming. We have had twenty-eight major climate conferences, going back to 1992, and thus for over a third of a century we have been talking and talking and talking, and yet some of the delegates are *still* trying to hide the burning of oil.

“We all know that the year 2023 will be the hottest year on planet Earth ever recorded. Few people pay much attention to the Arctic, because it’s so far away and not a part of our daily world. But I am a Norwegian girl, and a third of our country reaches up above the Arctic Circle, so *I* pay attention to the ice cap and the tundra and the permafrost. The Arctic ice cap is melting at an accelerating rate, exposing more and more open water to the light of the summer sun, which thus warms the Arctic Ocean at an accelerating rate. Winds blowing over the warming ocean become warmer, and then they blow across the tundra, which wraps like a

wreath around the top of the planet. The snow on the warming tundra melts earlier in the spring, so that the dark land warms even more. As a result, the Arctic—the top of planet Earth, which directly affects the weather in the northern hemisphere—is warming *four times as fast* as we are down here in Europe. 2023 was the sixth warmest year in the Arctic since people began to record Arctic temperatures in 1900.”

Yes, I could rattle off the facts. I could *shout* them, if anyone cared enough to listen.

“During 2023, the Barents Sea north of Finland, at the bottom edge of the Arctic Ocean, was five degrees Celsius, or 9 degrees Fahrenheit, warmer than the 1991-2020 average. That means that a *huge* amount of heat has been stored in the Arctic waters. A huge amount of *energy*, which is going to flow in the ocean currents around the planet for decades, disturbing everything it touches.

“The wildfires in the Northwest Territories in Canada during 2023 were the largest on record. The huge, vast, unrelenting black clouds of smoke, *rivers* of black smoke, reached all the way down to the windows of skyscrapers on Wall Street in New York City and shouted, ‘Hey, wake up!’

“The smoke of course added to the already thick blanket of greenhouse gasses around the planet, trapping more and more heat from the sun. And thus the tundra becomes warmer at an accelerating rate. The layer of ice just beneath the surface of the tundra, the permafrost, thaws from solid ice to rotten ice at an accelerating rate. And then the ancient carbon dioxide and methane gasses which had been trapped beneath that ice since the beginning of the last ice age . . . now rise up through the rotten ice into the atmosphere and add *their* share of greenhouse gasses.”

I let out a long breath of exasperation.

“Meanwhile, the level of carbon dioxide emissions from fossil fuels continues to rise—*continues* to rise as a spike on the chart—to which we pay little attention as we purchase yet another plane ticket to our holiday destination in Spain. Oil companies, including those in Norway, are planning to drill more wells for oil in the Arctic, which is a clear and blatant sign of our final suicidal madness.”

My hands were shaking.

“My father calls me The Silent One. But I am either silent, or I scream.”

I could see the pain in Marit’s eyes. She had been there.

“Suddenly, a few days before Christmas, when we’re supposed to be singing Jingle Bells, I’ve had enough. My mind, very clearly and very peacefully, plans every detail of the final hour. I have been standing at the black ragged edge for a long, long time, and now I will take the final step.”

I smiled, and ruffled the fur of Scout’s ears. “But I hadn’t planned on Scout, and I hadn’t planned on you, Marit. You were out jogging on the lit trail around Sognsvann Lake. Scout was running on the trail ahead of you. And then suddenly he turned and disappeared into the black forest.”

Marit said quietly, “He caught your scent.”

“Yes, he caught my scent. And I am profoundly grateful.”

I ran my fingers through Scout’s soft fur.

“So,” said Marit, still guiding, “if we can channel your understandable and legitimate anger into some constructive activity, the sadness will diminish.”

Birgitte said with her firm and confident voice, “Laila and I have been talking about her becoming a lawyer, in two related fields, human rights and biosphere rights. And beyond that, we have discussed building an international team of lawyers who would develop an entirely new system of green laws, with the intention of restoring the health of our very sick planet. Laila would thus be a pioneer, writing laws for the 21st Century, and then enforcing them.” She thumped her fist on her table. “*Then* she could put her anger to good use.”

Marit nodded with approval. “Mother Nature needs a good lawyer.”

The two of them looked at me, still a kid in high school.

“Well, I . . . want to go back to my church at the end of the pier and think about it. I had never before considered becoming a lawyer.”

Marit said with emphasis, “You would have a *purpose* in your life. Something that most young people today do not have. What a difference it is, to wake up in the morning with a purpose.”

Then she looked at her watch. “I very much hope that we meet again. But right now, I’ve got to be going. Let me give you each my card.” She pulled her wallet from the back pocket of her jeans and took out two cards. She handed one to me, and one to Birgitte.

I read, “Marit Nguyen Counselor Norwegian Therapist Association.”

“Laila,” she said, “you phone me any time. Even at three in the morning. I did not plan to find you in the cold snowy forest at night. I was simply out jogging

with Scout on a quiet Tuesday evening. But now that we have met, let us continue.”

She paused, looked at Birgitte, then looked back at me.

“Laila, I am the child, born in Norway, of Vietnamese parents who fled the war in their country on a fishing boat. The people of an entire village fled together, in a cluster of boats that managed to survive the storms and the pirates until they reached a refugee camp off the coast of Singapore. I won’t bother you with all the horror stories which I learned as a child growing up in Norway, stories which are forever imbedded in my soul. But I will tell you this.”

I could see tears welling in her eyes, the eyes of the woman who had seen the frozen tears on my cheeks.

“This world, with its unrelenting wars, now in Ukraine and Gaza, and a dozen other places which never make the front page, is not going to last much longer. What you said about the Arctic, the tundra, the permafrost, and the methane rising up into the atmosphere, is all too true. We don’t have time for any more wars. We’ve got something far more important to do. We need you, Laila. We urgently need you.”

Marit stared for a long moment at the black windows.

“I once lived in an ocean of sadness, mourning so many who had died in the madness of that American war. Mourning an infant who died on a refugee boat and who was buried at sea. Mourning elderly people who did not survive the four years in a refugee camp. Mourning—even though I was born in Norway—the loss of my country, the loss of my culture. Mourning my own lost identity, especially when the children in school bullied me with all of their ugly names.”

I saw the anger that flashed in her eyes, anger that never fully went away.

“But then, with my family’s help, I made a decision. I would become a counselor, with professional training, so that I could help other people who had no identity, no purpose, no home, no future on a dying planet. And I discovered that there were many Norwegians who were just as lost as I had been. They were certainly not ever going to find their way by watching war game videos, or apocalypse movies, or black leather porn.”

She added. “Some are willing to try a new strategy, a new way of thinking, a new career in life. And some have cold cheeks and a weak heart.”

Now her eyes, her dark Vietnamese eyes, hardened as she said to me, “You, Laila, will one day walk through the rainforests and the jungles and the savannahs

and the tundra with the people who have lived there for thousands of years. And then you will speak in the courtrooms of the world. You will teach us a new way of thinking, a new way of understanding this Cradle of Life, as you call it. And you will codify those innovative principles with a system of laws made of steel. And more rapidly than you would ever have imagined, you will find a growing majority of people who support you every step of the way.”

I stared at this woman who had could speak with such confidence about my future.

She smiled. “I’m sorry, but I’ve got to borrow my dog back.”

I gave Scout a nudge. He looked up at Marit, then hopped down from the bed.

Marit looked at Birgitte, then at me. “Let’s get together in a month, so that we can monitor your progress. You pick the spot. When spring comes, we can have a picnic at Sognsvann.”

“That’s right,” said Birgitte, who was facing surgery tomorrow morning for the implantation of a Pacemaker. “When the birches are pale green in the springtime, we’ll pack a picnic basket with potato salad and a bottle of Beaujolais Villages.”

Marit laughed. “Scout loves hotdogs roasted over a campfire.”

Just twenty-four hours ago, I had sat on that snowy bench, looking out at the frozen lake lit by starlight, ready for my final walk into the dark forest.

Now, in the care of a retired teacher who never retired, and the child of refugees from one more mad and pointless war, I was back in my church.

Marit put on her red coat, gave us a wave and a smile, then she and Scout disappeared out the door.

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