

The Awakening

Nick reached his fingers to the typewriter keys and poured out everything from the terror in Leroy's eyes, to the day when Leroy should have returned home from the war, and Nick should have been the one who was dead.

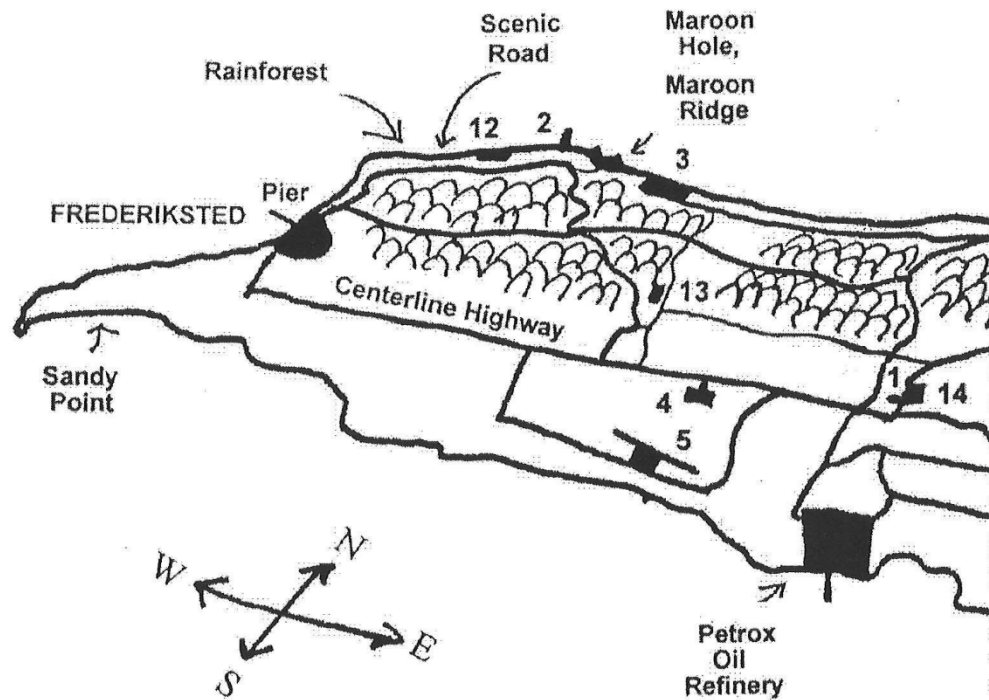
He put it all into a sort of poem. Not an essay, not a story, not a regular chapter. He wrote a sort of poem—it was his first poem—which was much like what a Vietnamese soldier would write, or a Russian soldier, or a German soldier, or a French soldier, or a Greek soldier two thousand years ago, or a soldier in the time of Moses, or a soldier in the first bloody battle on God's beautiful Earth.

For it was all the same, because no one ever said, "Enough!"

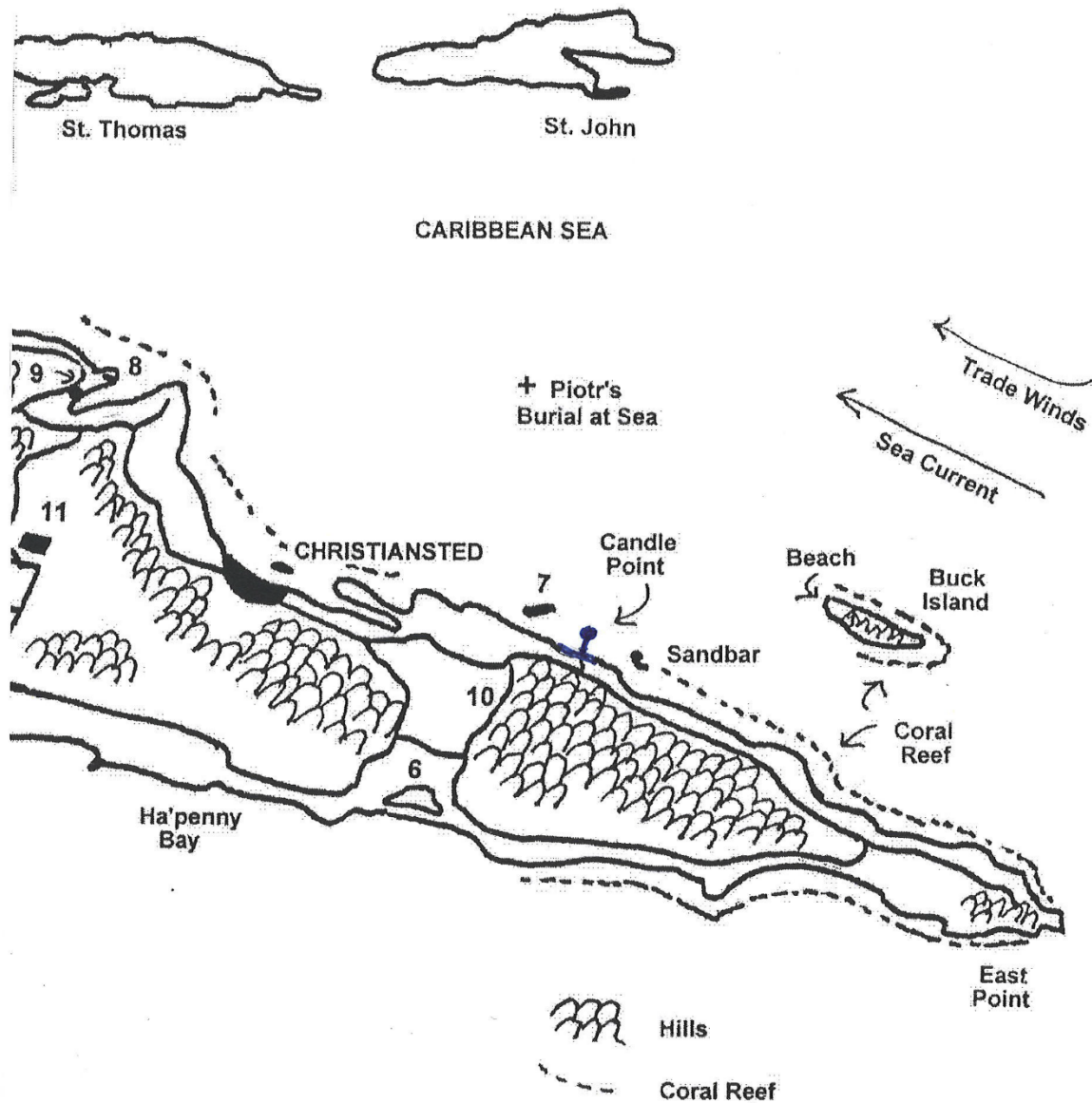
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John Slade

Map of Saint Croix



- | | |
|------------------------------------|--|
| 1 Fitzroy's Hot Spot | 8 Salt River Bay (Columbus Landing Site) |
| 2 Lighthouse | 9 Witherspoon's Home |
| 3 Casa Columbus | 10 Seven Hills |
| 4 University of the Virgin Islands | 11 Sunny Isle Shopping Center |
| 5 Alexander Hamilton Airport | 12 Twining Vine Restaurant |
| 6 Great Salt Pond | 13 Holy Cross Episcopal Church |
| 7 Green Cay | 14 La Reine Shopping Center |



ST. CROIX
UNITED STATES VIRGIN ISLANDS
 (23 miles long)
 Candle Point: Latitude 17° 45', Longitude 64° 40'

Introduction

You see, it doesn't have to be this way.

There is no law, no religion, and nothing in your genes, that says that young people must grow up so deeply worried about their future.

No Commandment in any Scripture states that you must live with a deep, dark, heavy sense of dread every day . . . because the Climate Crisis is going to destroy your world.

No destiny ever declared that your generation is doomed to live in quiet but constant fear of nuclear weapons.

No curse was ever placed upon your generation, declaring that "Thou must live and die in war upon war upon war upon war unto eternity."

You were born as perfect little packages of exuberant life. Before you could speak, you could smile. You were engineered so that without any special training, you could lie on your back and kick your feet; and then you could roll over and crawl; and then you, with a bit of help from your mother's and your father's outstretched hands, could begin to walk; and soon in your funny, bumpy way, you could run.

And then—there was no stopping you—you showed the world that you could dance! By the time you were a teenager, you were a Dancing Phenomenon.

Without any special effort, you began to speak, at first with simple words, and then with sentences of growing complexity. By the time you were a teenager, you were Super Cool, ready to take on the world.

You were more than just a kid growing up. You had these hidden treasures inside you, called Talent. Each kid had different talents. Some could run faster than anybody else. Some could sing better than anybody else. Some always got an A in mathematics class, while the rest of us stumbled and bumbled through algebra.

Some could speak in front of the class with a voice so clear and compelling that you understood something, crystal clear, that you had never even thought about before.

Some were so gentle, so thoughtful, so caring about other people, that you found yourself beginning to care a little bit more about the people who maybe needed some help.

Yes, by the time you were a teenager, you were blossoming with multiple talents, and wearing just the sort of clothes that suited you, and . . . without any special effort on your part, you were ready to fall in love.

Your first dance together was . . . magical. Your first real conversation made you so deeply happy because you could actually really *talk* with each other. And your first kiss . . . well, you would remember that forever.

So, who on earth has the right to come crashing into your world with the Insane News that the planet is so polluted that the oceans are dying and the glaciers are melting and the tundra is warming and the permafrost is thawing and massive amounts of ancient methane—from before the last ice age—are about to rise into the atmosphere as The Most Hideous Greenhouse Gasses Ever? Planet Earth now warms at an accelerating rate, getting hotter and hotter every year, so that by the time you graduate from college and get your first job and marry the Love of Your Life and bring your own perfect little package of life into the world . . . farms are parched by drought, agriculture collapses, climate refugees roam every continent in search of water and food, the Climate Wars slaughter people by the millions, and whatever survivors are left become victims of a global plague.

Who on earth has the right to come crashing into your world with nuclear weapons from the 20th century, the bloodiest century in all of human history?

Who on earth has the right to come crashing into your young life—you are just getting started—with the racism and the greed and the corruption and the violence and the sexual arrogance which they have clung to for centuries?

Who are these Old Bastards who poison us with their small-minded hatred for everyone on the planet who doesn't wave their puny little flag?

You see, it doesn't have to be this way.

We do not need to destroy planet Earth, the only Cradle of Life in our corner of the universe.

We don't need to keep paying massive subsidies to the oil industries year after year, while they build their palaces and poison our planet.

We do not need to sacrifice a hundred thousand young lives on a devastated battleground so that some Macho Politician can keep his fancy office.

We do not need to cling to this notion that women—who bring new life into the world—are somehow deserving of our scorn.

We do not need, at the age of eighteen or twenty-one or twenty-five . . . to stop believing in ourselves.

Every teenager, bursting with energy, filled with dreams, is a miracle that should be able to flourish in a healthy and peaceful world.

* * *

So how do we change the course of our long human journey toward a far better future?

The good news is that we have already begun. Teachers and students around the world are working together to develop vibrant new courses that prepare young people to tackle the great challenges of the 21st Century. Clean energy companies are advancing rapidly in the transition from coal and oil to the sun and the wind. A new green spirit grows stronger every year.

But we are moving too slowly. Young people around the world are not nearly as engaged as they could be. The endless wars divert our attention from the work that we *should* be doing. Some of us still hope that the problems will simply go away.

As a teacher of many years, I believe that young people—who will live their lives in the 21st Century—must not wait any longer, but must *determine for themselves* what sort of education they need in their schools. They must determine what sort of careers, some of them in entirely new fields, they will pursue. They must reach out to their fellow students—and soon their fellow colleagues—around the world, so that they form the First Global Generation in Human History. They must work together to formulate a final goal, which they will reach within 25 years: 100% clean energy, so that the Earth can begin to cool before climate catastrophes overwhelm us.

Every cathedral, every mosque, every temple, every shrine, built centuries ago, began with a *blueprint*, a plan for building something which had never been built before. We need to do the same now, with a *blueprint for a Global Green Grid* which will wrap around planet Earth and bring clean energy to every city, every village, every farm, every child.

Young people must of course work with clean energy engineers, forming a team with an urgent mission. Climate scientists will be part of the team. Green

lawyers will be part of the team, as well as green economists. Indigenous peoples from around the world will be an essential part of the team.

In all of human history, we have never had such a team. Here is the foundation for a Renaissance in the 21st Century.

We need to think about the Big Picture. What sort of schools do we need in the 21st Century? What sort of *purpose* do we want in our lives? Are we responsible for protecting *life* on planet Earth? How do we free ourselves from the curse of war?

How do we enable ourselves to look back at the ripe old age of 80 and say, "I lived my life in the best way possible. And I feel great about that."

What can we accomplish, in our minds and in our hearts?

Welcome to a tropical island in the Caribbean Sea, in May of 1990.
Nicholas and Jasmine and Rose and Charlie are waiting to meet you.

* * * * *

2026
Ås, Norway

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Part One

Casting Out the Demons

Chapter One

The Writer

On Friday, May 25, 1990, his last day of spring semester classes at the University of the Virgin Islands, Nick sat in the back row of his Caribbean History class while his teacher, Dr. Moorhead, walked up and down the aisles, returning the term papers with his corrections and comments. Nick was nervous, because his essay for a history class had evolved into a political statement, which perhaps would not be welcomed by his professor, a man roughly sixty years old with a distinguished career at the University. Perhaps Dr. Moorhead did not approve of some crackpot radical in his class.

Nick had ended his essay, “Christopher Columbus Visits Saint Croix”, with the statement,

In conclusion, it is clear that the Americans have transformed our West Indian island into:

A white man’s paradise, and a Black man’s dead end.

Maybe he had flunked the assignment. Maybe he would not be welcome to come back to the University in September.

Maybe this whole thing about becoming a teacher—Angelique’s idea—was just one more failure in a long line of failures.

That’s why he sat in the back row. As invisible as possible.

Nick watched Dr. Moorhead as he spoke with students almost twenty years younger than he was. None of them had a touch of gray in their hair. None of them drove a taxi. None of them had come home from a war with a heart filled with shrapnel.

Nick was Dr. Moorhead’s last student on his tour of the classroom. He held one term paper in his hand, Nick’s, as he stared at Nick with a fervent look in his

eyes. His hair was completely gray, his face lined from years of hard work, as if, were he not a teacher, he might have been a fisherman.

“Nicholas Cruz,” he said, quietly, just between the two of them, “how much training have you had as a writer?”

Uh oh, thought Nick. Ah flunked.

He froze, unable to speak. He would never come back to this University, never, never, never.

Finally he said, “Well Ah . . . wrote some papers in high school. But that was a long time ago.” He played basketball too, but that didn’t mean anything to anybody now.

Dr. Moorhead handed him the term paper, with a large A+ in the upper right corner. “Nick, Ah have given three A pluses in my career, and this is one of them.”

Nick held the paper in both hands. It had a lot of comments on the first page, written with a red pen, but they did not seem to detract from the large red A+ in the top corner.

“You are a writer, Nick. Gifted with talent. You took a history assignment, and could have responded as a student writing an academic paper, but instead you responded as a mature man who cares deeply about his island.”

Dr. Moorhead paused, staring at Nick with admiration in his eyes.

“Your research is excellent. Your writing is crystal clear. The step-by-step development of your theme is laid out with architectural precision. But above all,” now he smiled, as if he had made a wonderful discovery, “your writing is filled by the thoughts and feelings of a vibrant soul, a *passionate* soul, who cares deeply about the people who live on this island.”

Dr. Moorhead pointed at the essay in Nick’s hands. “That’s the beginning of a book, Nick. A book which needs to be written. Not by some academic visiting from Harvard, but by a native Crucian who can combine extensive research, and years of experience, with an enormous talent that is just getting started.”

Nick managed to say, “Thank you, sir.”

“Ah showed your essay to the Dean of Studies, with the request that you can work with me, starting in September, as a teaching assistant. A *paid* teaching assistant, developing your own lectures, working with students in small seminars, in the field of Black literature. The students will do their own writing as well.”

He paused, then he added, “A teaching assistant is usually a graduate student working on a masters or a doctorate, but in your case, I think you are ready to tackle the job.”

For the first time in his life, Nick could feel it, could *really* feel it: a door was opening. All he had to do was step through, out of the darkness and into the golden light on the other side.

“Thank you, sir.”

“I would like to get started this summer, if you are available. We’ll set you up with an office here at the University, get you acquainted with some of the staff, and I think, above all, work on your writing. I’d like you to read *Black Boy* by Richard Wright, and his stories, *Uncle Tom’s Children*. Then his classic novel, *Native Son*.

“We’ll follow with *The Fire Next Time* by James Baldwin, who, like you, writes with a sense of history in his narrative. And I want you to get your hands on some Toni Cade Bambara, an extraordinary woman who combines literature in various forms with genuine activism. She has edited some anthologies and can introduce you to a broad range of Black writers.”

Was he . . . was he somebody who could become a Black writer? Could he do with a typewriter what he had once done with a basketball?

“Then I’d like to branch out to some of the international classics, so that you can study various approaches to fiction, to essays, to poetry. *Hiroshima*, by John Hersey. *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovitch*, by Alexandr Solzhenitsyn. *All Quiet on the Western Front*, by Erich Maria Remarque. The war poems of Siegfried Sassoon. *Street Without Joy*, by Bernard Fall, a French journalist in Vietnam, a place where I believe you have been.”

“Yes sir. Ah have been in Vietnam.”

“Given what I see in your essay, Nick, I think you probably have a deep and powerful book about Vietnam, waiting to be written.”

He froze. Could he do such a thing? Leroy would be in it, Leroy who wanted to be a marine biologist so he could take care of the coral reefs. Leroy, who wondered from the very first day in Nam what they were doing there.

“We need you, Nick. This University needs you. This island needs you. Your people need you. We need your voice. We need you to speak for us. We need books by Nicholas Cruz on the library book shelves.”

“Ah . . . Ah would like to give it a try, Dr. Moorhead.”

“Excellent. Today is Friday. Next Monday is Memorial Day. Why don’t you write something for me, fiction or prose, three, five, ten pages, then bring it to my office here at the University on Tuesday morning. Ah’ll read it, then treat yo’ to dinner at the Chart House in Christiansted on Tuesday evenin’ so that we can really talk.”

He held out his hand. “Is it a deal?”

Nicholas Cruz stood up from his desk and reached out his hand. “It’s a deal. And Ah am deeply grateful, Dr. Moorhead.”

“Yo’ can call me Rod.”

“Thank you . . . Rod.”

Dr. Moorhead returned to the front of the classroom and addressed the students with a summary of what they had covered this semester.

Nicholas Cruz sat at his desk and savored the deepest sense of peace he had ever felt in his life.

He was a writer. A talented writer. He could fill a whole lifetime doing the research and writing the books that would reach the hands, and the minds, of so many people.

No more dark of the moon in June. He had come very close. But . . . no more.

Angelique was right. He needed a woman who was not Leroy’s sister. He needed a fresh start, with someone entirely new.

He would need to buy a notebook in the University bookstore, so that he was ready to write about two boys who left the island together, but only one came back. Yes, he would begin the book that he would write for Leroy. He would write a powerful and *honest* book, as a tribute to Leroy. As a tribute to *every* soldier who fought in that hideous war.

As a tribute to every soldier who fought since the very beginning of war.

He had three days to get started. Saturday, Sunday, and Memorial Day.

Can do, Leroy! Can do!

* * * * *

Chapter Two

The White Headstone at an Empty Grave

Nick stood in the corridor outside the classroom door, immobile in the flow of students. He looked at his watch: three-oh-five on Friday afternoon. What would he do now . . . now that a whole new life had begun?

He had a couple of hours before dinner, followed by Friday evening. Then three days—Saturday, Sunday, and Monday, Memorial Day—before he met Rod in his office on Tuesday morning. So he had three days to put together some sort of writing—An essay? A story?—which would have to be neatly typed by Tuesday morning.

He remembered something that Angelique had once told him: “Nick, yo’ got to believe in yo’self.” That was back when she was trying to convince him to sign up for courses at the University.

She had always believed in him. And now Dr. Rod Moorhead believed in him.

But what could he possibly write in three days that was . . . worthy of this new person he was supposed to become?

Then he thought, Ah go see Leroy. Ah gon’ let him know about de good news. And Ah gon’ tell him, “Leroy, Ah need yo’ help. We got to do this together, Brother.”

He parked his taxi—which was no longer a taxi—near the archway to the cemetery on the east side of Frederiksted, not far from where Leroy had grown up on Hospital Street. Not far from where, nineteen years ago, when he returned

alone from Nam, he had stood at the door, facing Leroy's mother and father, and the little girl Angelique, telling them that he had tried and tried and *tried* to find Leroy, but that their son was Missing in Action, and never could he find even a clue of what had happened on that night in the jungle.

They did not blame him. They invited him to come into the house, but he hung his head and refused. Then he just turned around and left, utterly broken.

Not long after, he had headed up to New York City, where he drove a taxi and tried to start a new life. That prolonged effort had failed as well.

He walked under the arch into the cemetery and followed a lane to the spot where he had stood so many times alone, usually at night when the cemetery was empty, facing a white headstone with the name and date carved on it:

Leroy Beaumont Nielsen
1952-1970
U S Army, Vietnam

A nearby flamboyant tree, just coming into bloom in late May, formed a canopy of radiant red-orange in the late afternoon sunshine. Nick remembered how much Leroy had loved the trees that blessed his island every summer with their frilly leaves and exuberant flowers. The tree had already dropped a few red petals on the ground around Leroy's empty grave.

Speaking aloud, Nick told his best friend, "From 1952 to 1970, just eighteen years. And now, 1990, twenty years later, yo' been gone two years longer than yo' been here with us. We should both of us have families now, livin' next door to each other, me with yo' sister Angelique and yo' with one of the so many girls who thought yo' been the smartest and best-lookin' boy on the island. Yo' been dead twenty years and Ah been almost dead twenty years. Thank yo' thank yo', Uncle Sam."

He paused, then he shifted into what he really wanted to say. "Leroy, Ah got some good news. A teacher at the University liked meh essay. He thinks Ah got talent as a writer. As a *Black* writer. He wants me to work with him as his assistant teacher, startin' in September. Ah will have meh own office, Leroy. Can yo' imagine Nick with his own office! Ah gon' teach seminars, with small groups of students, in Black literature. Ah got to read and read and read all summer to be ready to teach Richard Wright and James Baldwin. Dr. Moorhead, he gon' teach

Black history, and Nickolas Cruz, he gon' teach Black literature. He t'ink Ah can teach not as some academic, but as a Black mahn who really *cares* about our own Black voice. He wants me to fire up them students so they can be writers too."

He paused, believing more and more about this opportunity, this gift, as he talked about it.

"But that ain't all, Leroy. Dr. Moorhead, he wants me to write a book about Vietnam. About yo' and me in that war, not from some newspaper viewpoint, not from some Washington viewpoint, but as *Ah* seen that war and all its insanity. So yo' got to help me, Leroy. Because Ah got to go back and remember that night patrol when yo' disappeared. Ah got to go back and remember Sergeant Ackerman, who said yo' had to be 'point mahn' that night, leadin' the patrol into that black, black jungle. Ah tried, Leroy, yo' *know* Ah tried to get Ackerman to let *me* be point mahn, not yo', not yo', but he saw yo' been scared, and he *liked* his niggers scared. So he ordered yo' to be the first down that dark path, where the Cong, of course, been waitin' for the American fools."

He felt a surge of the old outrage, still as fierce as it always was, but now he had to write about it. Now he had to be the master of that anger, not the prisoner any more. That's what a Black writer was, someone who was angry, ferociously angry, but now he had a typewriter, and someone who wanted to read what he would write.

"So yo' got to help me, Leroy. Yo' got to make me strong, so that Ah can go back to all that shit and get it on paper."

Could he do that? Could he really do that?

"Leroy, from the very first day in Nam, when we got off that plane from Hawaii and suddenly we was in a swirl and commotion of soldiers and trucks and helicopters and officers shouting at us—like some bizarre other planet where we had suddenly landed—yo' kept askin' me, 'What are we doin' here?' We come from a peaceful ahland where Black folks live with white folks. We work together, go to school together, play basketball together, go to dances together, and now suddenly yo' and me be killin' machines in a war against Gooks and Commies. We been trained to *hate*, and we been trained to *kill*. Ain't no George Washington in Vietnam. Ain't no Thomas Jefferson in Vietnam, tellin' us that all men been born equal. And yo' kept askin', 'What are we doin' here?'"

He remembered Leroy's young face, just yesterday full of smiles on his ahland in the sun, but now, as the nightmare wrapped around them, with fear in his

eyes, and bewilderment, and helplessness as the two young soldiers were assembled into a platoon under the command of Sergeant Ackerman, the man with weasel eyes from Mississippi.

“And then, yo’ remember, Leroy, the radio mahn in our platoon, the quiet white mahn who watched and watched and never said a word. He began to talk to us one evenin’ in the bush after a long day on patrol. His name was Johnny Johansen—John Edward Johansen on his dogtag—and he said to us, just the three of us together on that hot muggy night, “You want to know why we’re here? I can tell you. I can tell you because I’m from Dallas, and I was there in Dealy Plaza watching the President and Jacqueline as they were driving past. This war began on the day they murdered John Kennedy, the President who had signed an executive order during the autumn of 1963, stating that he was going to pull out the first one thousand American ‘advisors’ from Vietnam by the end of 1963, and all Americans from Vietnam by the end of 1965. If you don’t believe me, you haven’t done your homework.”

Nick paused, then he said to his friend, as he spoke to the white headstone above the empty grave, “Well, no one had ever told us *that* before.”

Johnny, the white man from Dallas, became their best friend in that platoon. He loved to hear Nick and Leroy talk about their tropical island in the Caribbean, where folks had their own music, and their own food, and you could swim in the warm sea even at Christmas. Johnny said again and again how much he would like to visit us on our island, and meet our families, ‘once this crazy war is over.’

But he also said so much more, just among the three of them, because he had *been* there on that day, fifty feet from the President’s car when the first bullet—a bullet shot from in *front* of the car—hit him in the throat. And then, moments later, a second bullet hit him in the forehead and blasted out from the back of the President’s head, tossing his head back with a violent jerk and splattering the back of the car with President Kennedy’s brain and bits of his skull.

Jacqueline, in her pink dress, immediately and instinctively climbed out of her seat onto the back of the car, where she tried to gather the bits of her husband’s brain into her hands. Jacqueline in that moment showed the entire world that her husband had been shot from *in front of the car*, not from some window six floors up *behind* the car. But a lot of people in Dallas that day did not want to hear one word from Jacqueline.

“Leroy, the more we listened to Johnny, the Texas teenager who did not need to read a newspaper to know what happened in Dallas that day, the more we understood that we were trapped inside an enormous crime. That *America* was trapped inside an enormous crime. Johnny been drafted just the same as yo’ and Ah been drafted, just the same as peasants had been drafted into wars for the past thousand years. Sometimes he talked like a revolutionary, and sometimes he talked like the one and only mahn who made sense.”

Nick remembered Johnny’s face, the face of a man a few years older than they were, and many years wiser, a man who knew about evil, and who also knew that there wasn’t a damn thing he could do about it.

Where was Johnny now? He had survived and finished his tour of duty a month before Nick had finally been released from that utterly mad world. Released, but with a pack of demons swarming in his brain.

“Johnny said to us again and again, ‘If you don’t believe me, you haven’t done your homework.’ Well, Ah done meh homework durin’ this past semester at the University. Just on the side, while Ah was takin’ a course in Caribbean history. Because it’s all, yo’ know, *American* history, from slavery when our people was brought from Africa . . . to the Civil Rights Movement when we been clubbed in the streets of Alabama and Mississippi and Tennessee . . . to the murder of the good people of a little country in Asia who had never, *never*, harmed or even threatened to harm a single American before we began to blow up their country.”

Nick paused, for it all seemed so huge, so horrible, so unbelievably wrong, and yet . . . they had been soldiers in that war, and now Leroy was dead after only eighteen years of vibrant life, and Nick was still trying to crawl out of the wreckage.

“Yes, Ah done meh homework, and now Ah have a University notebook full of facts that confirm that everything Johnny told us was true. Ah read interviews with the doctors at Parkland hospital who tried to keep President Kennedy alive. Ah seen photographs of Secret Service agents washing the blood off the car—washing away the *evidence* of a crime scene, while police officers stood around watching. Johnny kept saying that it was so *obvious* to any witness who was there in Dallas that day that it had all been carefully planned.”

Nick began to see that *here* was the essay which he would write for Professor Moorhead, to be completed on Memorial Day, and turned in, neatly

typed, on Tuesday morning. Here was a sample chapter of his book about Vietnam.

“And Johnny also kept saying that until America really stood up to the truth—no more nonsense about Lee Harvey Oswald—America, the country based on such high moral principles, would continue *to rot* until it wasn’t America anymore.”

A breeze rustled though the branches of the flamboyant tree. A few bright red flowers fluttered down and settled on the ground around the white headstone. And around Nick’s feet. He began to understand that he was doing something far more than writing his own biography as a veteran. He was doing far more than preparing to teach a college seminar on Black literature. He was doing far more than trying to start a new life.

Maybe that’s what a Black writer was: someone who was not afraid of finally standing up to the Sickness. Someone who stood up and hollered that we don’t have to live like this—with hatred and wars and little sisters who never stop grieving. Someone who stands up and proclaims that we can be *better* than this, that we have it in us to be far better than what we are today.

“Leroy, while Ah’m writin’ meh book, Ah need yo’ lookin’ over meh shoulder. Yo’ got to keep me strong. Yo’ got to remember every detail of what we been through. Yo’ got to *encourage* me now and then.”

Nick stood for a long time, his mind quiet.

Finally he said, “T’ank yo’, Leroy. We been together every step of the way.”

As he walked along the lane through the cemetery toward the arch that led to the three days ahead, Saturday, Sunday, and Memorial Day, his mind began to think in a different way.

He thought not in his own Crucian dialect, but in the clear grammatical English which he would have to use when he wrote for an audience that reached far beyond the shores of his island.

Now, looking back twenty years later, I see that I was not to blame that Leroy disappeared, Missing in Action. I didn’t start this war. I did not send bright young men to their deaths as if they were “dispensable soldiers” to be thrown away. I didn’t fatten my wallet, and rise in rank, and command absolute power, by destroying the innocent people of a peaceful nation.

I was not the one who should have been tormented by years of guilt.

Whatever my sins in Vietnam—and they are many, for I was forced to be a soldier—my sins are small compared to the enormous crimes of the monsters who murdered a president so they could have their war.

So they could sell their weapons and their oil.

So they could be *real* men, strutting on the stage of history.

Oh you hideous bastards.

* * * * *

Chapter Six

Memorial Day

“All right, Leroy, Ah gon’ need yo’ help now. Today is Memorial Day, 1990, a good day to go back twenty years to that night when . . .”

He almost said, “Ah should have . . .” But he stopped himself. No, he was not going to blame himself any more. He had Johnny to thank for that.

He stared at the blank page in the typewriter, waiting for words of truth, waiting for words of wisdom, waiting for that last look in Leroy’s eyes before he turned away from Nick and walked—under Sergeant Ackerman’s orders—as point man down that dark trail into a midnight jungle where no boy from a sunny beach ever belonged.

How, Nick wondered, could he ever put Leroy’s fear on that blank page.

Nick had argued with Ackerman, “Let *me* go point man.”

Johnny had argued with his sergeant, “Let *me* go point man.”

But Ackerman *liked* to see the fear in his nigger’s eyes.

It was nothing but a suicide patrol.

The entire war was nothing but a suicide patrol.

Every war since wars began was nothing but a suicide patrol. A crime that spat at the face of the Creator. For Leroy was certainly one of the finest of God's creations. In the prime of his youth, his dream was to become a marine biologist so that he could take care of the life in the sea around his island.

Surely God would look down upon this boy and say, "It is good."

They hadn't walked more than ten minutes—stumbling over roots, brushing vines from their faces—before the night exploded with gunfire. Leroy never even had time to scream. Johnny radioed for air support. Ackerman ordered the platoon to retreat.

Retreat? We can't pull back without Leroy. Nick wanted to go ahead—alone if need be—to find Leroy, but Ackerman had called in airborne strafing and shouted that Nick would be "hamburger" if he didn't get out of the target zone.

Johnny grabbed his arm. "We'll come back and look for Leroy in the daylight."

And so, against every instinct, Nick retreated with the platoon. Jets screamed in the night sky overhead, firing their artillery into the darkness.

But of course the Viet Cong were long gone from the target zone. They would hit and run, hit and run, until they won the war.

And Leroy was nothing but hamburger.

Nick had carried that hideous night with him for twenty years.

He and Johnny were never able to search for Leroy. No chopper was ordered to search by daylight. Ackerman made sure of that. He wrote "Missing in Action" on the report, which sounded better than "one fatality", and then he walked away from that particular incident.

Johnny stuck close to Nick, but what do you say to somebody with a heart full of shrapnel?

The two of them marched through the horrors of war for another ten months. At some point, Ackerman finished his tour and vanished. Their next platoon commander was focused on one thing: survival. And so they survived. Nick was a walking ghost, and Johnny was a walking ghost, but they had survived.

No post-trauma therapy.

No welcome home parade.

Just a visit to Leroy's mother and father, and little sister Angelique. The walking ghost hung his head with shame, refused their invitation to come into the house, and walked away to twenty years of guilt, and outrage, and oblivion.

* * *

Nick reached his fingers to the typewriter keys and poured out everything from the terror in Leroy's eyes, to the day when Leroy should have returned home, and Nick should have been the one who was dead.

He put it all into a sort of poem. Not an essay, not a story, not a regular chapter. He wrote a sort of poem—it was his first poem—which was much like what a Vietnamese soldier would write, or a Russian soldier, or a German soldier, or a French soldier, or a Greek soldier two thousand years ago, or a soldier in the time of Moses, or a soldier in the first bloody battle on God's beautiful Earth.

For it was all the same, because no one ever said, "Enough!"

* * * * *

Chapter Nine

A Constellation of Lights on the Horizon

At the far end of the beach, looking back along the twenty-mile northern shore of his island—no longer daytime green but now the gray-green of shadows at sunset—Nick watched the fat red-orange sun as it touched the horizon far to the west. He felt grateful for the day which had just passed. He had written about that horrible night when Leroy disappeared. He had swum in the sea for longer than he had ever swum in his life. He had thought about Angelique, the woman who had been right about so many things. He had even thought about Karl, and . . . wished him well. So as the red sun touched the sea and began to flatten at its bottom, he felt a deep gratitude, and a rare peacefulness, and a glow of anticipation because this was the first of many days to come.

He walked along the beach in the darkening dusk, listening to the quiet splash of the waves, listening to the peeping of the little birds that ran ahead of him, listening to the dry rustle of palm fronds as the breeze drifted through them.

He was a little chilled now, still in his wet bathing suit, so he stopped on the empty beach—everyone seemed to have gone home at the end of Memorial Day—and, wrapping the towel around him, changed into his dry clothes. He put his wet bathing suit into the plastic bag which had held his picnic. He did not take his shoes out of the canvas bag and put them on; he savored the feeling of walking barefoot on the cool wet sand.

His mind was very clear, and he began to think about this book he was going to write. He had already written about the main themes—the main *American* themes—and now he could describe, with straightforward realism, a dozen distinct episodes that showed exactly what the war had been like in Vietnam. Yes, but he would start with boot camp in the United States, before he and Leroy were shipped over. That's where it all began.

Boot camp had been an extremely intensive school, where they took a teenage boy, or a young man in his early twenties, and turned him into something entirely different from what he had been. They took a lamb and turned it into a wolf. With a high-powered rifle, and the ability to endure extreme physical labor, and the absolute, unthinking willingness to obey orders. Orders which originated with the people who had murdered President Kennedy. He and Leroy had become part of their military machine.

That's what he needed to write about. At the end of boot camp they had been dazed and battered and brutalized, and they had been taught that the Gooks and the Commies were somehow to blame. The only solution was body counts.

And then, once they had been dumped in Nam, he could write about the village which had been hit by incendiary bombs fired from aircraft because the villagers had sheltered and fed the commie Viet Cong. That was the day when he and Leroy saw their first dead children, charred black in the ashes of what had been a thatch hut.

That was the day when Leroy went silent. That was the day when everything they had learned in high school, and everything they had learned in church, meant nothing. That was the day that you would never, never, never talk about when you went home.

And he would write about the people who plowed a rice paddy with a water buffalo pulling the plow—people who knew very little about Karl Marx or Vladimir Lenin or the number of nuclear weapons in the arsenals of the Soviet Union—so that they could feed their families and maybe sell a few sacks of rice at

a market in a nearby town. He and Leroy watched—Johnny was with them now—as a helicopter hovered over the rice paddy and a machine gunner in an open door in the side of the chopper fired a blast at the water buffalo, which collapsed into the shallow black water while the farmer shouted something in Vietnamese and ran toward the shelter of some nearby trees.

The chopper flew away, and the dead water buffalo lay like a monument to a thousand—ten thousand, a hundred thousand—years of mindless cruelty as mighty warriors sought vengeance against the enemy.

Yes, he could write a chapter about that. And about the interrogation of a wounded Viet Cong soldier, filthy with dirt and sweat and blood, his hands tied behind his back, trying to explain to an American who was shouting at him that the picture which the American was holding in front of his face, the picture which the American had found in the Viet Cong's worn canvas backpack, was a picture of his wife and two children.

As Nicholas Cruz walked along the beach in the growing darkness of night, the sea turned silver-black, the beach turned dark gray, and the stars spread across the enormous sky above him. He could see, beyond the far end of the crescent beach, an outdoor light spreading its glow on the steps up to the door of Angelique's house.

He could see, beneath the peak of the second house where the Polish woman lived, a lit round window filled with colors, like the stained glass of a church window.

The rectangular windows of both houses were dark. Maybe Angelique and her Polish friend, and Karl, were with Angelique's parents in Frederiksted on this evening of Memorial Day. Sometime today, they had visited Leroy's grave.

He had been there on Friday evening.

"Ah miss yo', Leroy. Ah miss yo' so much."

Would a moon rise tonight? He didn't know.

Yes, and he could write about the way young women were treated by the cocky soldiers who had money and a little time off for R and R. Eat the banana and toss away the peel. War taught a young man many things, and the lessons were burned deep into his mind.

Yes, Nick would write the book episode by episode, so that the reader could see for himself what was happening on the other side of the world, while Lyndon Johnson and then Richard Nixon stood at the helm of the ship of state.

He was ready now, he was ready to dredge up all that muck, on behalf of the children, on behalf of the women, on behalf of the farmers and the water buffalo.

He was strong now, with at least one professor who believed in him. He would tell the story about what war did to good, decent young men, who were sent home either in a body bag, or as scar tissue. He would tell the story about what happened to good, decent people who were suddenly viewed as less than human. He would write his book through the summer, while he read the stories written by other Black writers, with Rod's guidance along the way.

And so he walked, back and forth along the length of the beach in the darkness of night, alone at the edge of the sea where life had first appeared, alone beneath the stars where the atoms and elements of life had first been created.

He had learned all that back in high school. Before he had learned—had been ferociously taught—that life did not matter.

* * *

Nick looked up occasionally, when he was walking eastward, at the oval moon that was rising in the southeast above the black hills of the island. The beach began to brighten. Moonlight shimmered on the smooth rounded backs of the waves before they broke and cast their faintly white foam up the slope of the shore.

At the far eastern end of the beach, where a barricade of jagged black rocks blocked any further progress, he stood close enough to the water that the white foam wrapped around his feet. As he looked out at the dark sea beneath the radiant sky, he noticed a cluster of tiny pinprick lights on the horizon to the northeast, like a bright constellation which had descended from the heavens to touch the waters of the deep. They were the lights of a large ship sailing west along the horizon: a long low row of lights, with two vertical spikes of lights. He recognized them: they were the lights of the American Navy destroyer that prowled the waters of the Caribbean, and occasionally moored at the Frederiksted pier.

Angelique had told him about that ship, for she had been on the pier one day when it docked. It was armed with cruise missiles which carried nuclear warheads.

Whenever it docked beside the little seaport where she had grown up, it made her island a first strike target for the missiles of any Russian submarine also prowling the waters of the Caribbean. Should a conflict begin between the two superpowers, her little town, and the entire island, could be incinerated within the first twenty minutes of World War Three.

Angelique had told him again and again, “The last war was real,” (meaning the war in Vietnam which had killed her brother) “and the war that is coming will also be real.” She had tried, with her evening class at the University, to wake people up, but most folks liked the tourist dollars, and the Navy dollars, and were not worried about the Russians.

She had reminded the Crucians who bothered to come to her classes about the Navy destroyer in July of 1981 that fired a Harpoon anti-ship missile by accident in the general direction of Saint Croix. The Harpoon missed the island and disappeared somewhere into the sea. It was still down there on the bottom. The Navy of course never confirmed whether the warhead was “conventional” or nuclear. “So it *can* happen,” said Angelique to her audience of Crucians with her stern voice.

“But what we goin’ to do about de Navy?” asked someone in the audience. “They ain’ pay us no mind.” The woman sucked her teeth.

Nick admired Angelique for her courage and her perseverance. But back then, he was still stuck in the last war, unable to bring himself to focus on the next war.

He watched as the constellation of lights made its way slowly but steadily westward, on some mysterious midnight mission. Back in 1986, at their meeting in Reykjavik, Iceland, Gorbachev had tried to get Reagan to agree on a total elimination of all nuclear weapons. That is what the Russians wanted. But Reagan, Mister Good Morning America, wanted his Star Wars, which he knew Russia could never afford to duplicate. Wasn’t he clever?

Now in May of 1990, Angelique might at this very moment be looking out at that warship and sucking her teeth.

He realized that he was not only sleepy, he was deeply tired. He had been a writer today, and a swimmer, and a thinker. Time to go home and crawl into bed.

At that moment, his sleepy eyes—which had followed the ship while it sailed parallel to his island, until it was several miles offshore from the black hump

of the rainforest—saw a spark of orange light, the rising flare of a missile engine, and then the level flight of that flare just above the sea on a path directly toward Saint Croix.

The well-trained soldier wanted to take cover behind rocks, or trees in a forest, but he stood on an open beach, near a ledge of sand above the reach of storm waves, and the sparse tantan bushes behind the beach. His eyes watched the rocket flare—he could hear a faint roar now—until the missile crashed into the island.

Would it . . . ?

The warhead did not explode.

He listened to the huge silence of the night.

So, it had to be an accidental firing. Angelique called them “broken arrows”, an accident involving a nuclear warhead. She told him that she had seen a list of such accidents, in various spots around the world: a missile that dropped from the wing of a plane, a missile with some electrical fault in a silo in Montana. And who knew how many broken arrows the Russians never reported?

The well-trained soldier felt the prickle of fear. Big White Sam just brought his war machine to visit the good folks of Saint Croix. How far was Frederiksted from the site of the crash? How far was the University?

And what if the Old Nick had been in the rainforest tonight? With a Stinger that could greet a Navy search helicopter. With his arsenal of dynamite in crates buried in the rainforest. With his maps of the oil refinery. With his anger and his outrage.

“But here Ah am,” he said aloud, as if marveling at his present circumstances. “Quiet and peaceful on a beach far from all trouble. As if de good Lord plucked me up from where Ah been, and set me down where Ah ought to be.”

Where was Angelique now? Was she safe? No lights in her windows. She was somewhere on her island, probably with her parents, Leroy’s parents, on Memorial Day.

“The last war was real, and the war that is coming will also be real.”

Even if it starts by accident.

What Ah gon’ do now?

Ah got a meetin’ tomorrow at nine with Rod. If we ain’ all gon’ by then.

But the New Nick was just beginning. Just getting started. Ain’ even got an office yet.

He thought of turning on the radio in his car. Maybe there was some announcement. He started to walk, and then began to run on the firm wet sand.

Should he drive home? Should he wait on the beach until he saw lights in Angelique's windows? He did not want to leave until he knew that she was safe.

Suddenly he felt an enormous jolt of love for that strong and generous and beautiful woman who had plucked him up from where he had been and set him down in a University classroom, a classroom which had brought him here to this beach.

Where he was at least ten miles from his Stinger and his dynamite.

Where he was a Black writer with a whole new story to write.

With the canvas bag swinging in one hand, and no weapon whatsoever in his other hand, Nicholas Cruz ran nearly the full length of the beach, hooked left beneath the palm trees, opened the door to his car, smelled the fragrant sugar-and-cinnamon rolls in their bag on the passenger seat, and turned on the radio with the hope that somebody would tell him what was happening on his island.

* * * * *

Chapter Ten

Jasmine, Rose and Charlie

Nicholas Cruz, his heart thumping from his long run on the wet sand, clicked on the car radio.

“—of the island's northwest corner. Specifically, the territory north of Centerline Highway, including Frederiksted, La Grange, Grove Place and Fountain, and west of the highway running from La Reine Shopping Center to Salt River Bay, including Cane Bay, Concordia, Mon Bijou, and the entire length of

Scenic Road, is to be evacuated in an orderly manner. Police and National Guardsmen will provide transportation to those needing assistance. Overnight camps will be established on the southern and eastern sections of the island, their whereabouts announced by signs posted along the major highways. There is no need for panic. We repeat, there is no need for panic. The Navy is presently searching for the missile and will remove it from Saint Croix as soon as possible. A naval spokesman has assured the Governor that the missile can *not* explode, and poses no threat to the island's population. This evacuation has been ordered by the Governor only as a precaution.

"To repeat tonight's bulletin, the Navy has announced that it accidentally launched a Tomahawk-type cruise missile at Saint Croix. The missile, which may carry a nuclear warhead, crashed in the vicinity of the northwest rainforest at ten-forty-five this evening. The Governor has ordered an immediate evacuation of the island's northwest corner. Specifically, the territory north of Centerline Highway —"

Nicholas Cruz, who had lived through nights of extreme danger in Vietnam, clicked off the radio.

So the Navy said the warhead cannot explode. If you can trust the Navy.

The Governor has ordered an evacuation from the western half of Saint Croix, north of Centerline. The University is right on Centerline, not far from the rainforest.

Shit.

Frederiksted is right next door to ground zero. All of those people have got to get themselves to the eastern end of the island, or along the south shore. The airport is maybe safe, maybe not. The Petrox oil refinery is maybe safe, maybe not.

Safe, anyway, from Old Nick tonight.

The roads through Christiansted will be jammed. The road along South Shore, past Ha'penny Bay and Great Salt Pond, might be open, or at least moving slowly.

Overnight camps will be established on the eastern end of the island. Maybe the National Guard will set up tents on the Candle Point beach. Or more likely, further east at the yacht club. Drinking water and toilets. A parking lot.

But that many people evacuating from the western end of the island will be like the Hebrews pouring out of Egypt. Without Moses to lead them.

Will there be riots? Will people carry guns? The Crucian people were not a violent people, but who knows what can happen when Big White Sam drops a nuke into your back yard.

We should have listened to Angelique. When the Navy ships docked at the pier—even when a submarine tied up at the pier—she would lay her stencil on the

concrete twenty feet from the enormous hull and spray paint an orange mushroom cloud while the sailors tried to stop her. For the Crucian families who were watching, she stenciled the bright orange words, “You are standing at ground zero.”

Maybe tonight they would believe her.

He glanced out the car window toward Angelique’s house on the tip of Candle Point, but he could not see it through the palm trees and dark bushes. He wanted to see lights in her windows and to know that she was safe.

He opened the door and got out, then walked through the ragged palm shadows on the pale sand in the moonlight to the open beach, where he could clearly see Angelique’s outdoor light over her steps, and her neighbor’s round colored window. But he saw no amber rectangles along the side of her house, which would confirm that the most precious woman on the island was home and safe.

The lights of the ship had altered. The lights no longer formed a low line with two spikes; the lights were now bunched into a cluster. The ship was no longer sailing parallel to the island, but had turned north and was sailing away. As far away as it could get from ground zero.

He heard a car door open on the road behind him. Looking through the slender black trunks of the palms, he saw that someone had parked just ahead of his car. Other doors opened and closed. Now he could see more cars coming down the hill. They parked behind his car along the back of the beach.

The first of the refugees were arriving.

People began to emerge from the shadows onto the moonlit beach, separate families, carrying bags and bundles. They walked across the sand toward the sea, as if they had come for a day at the beach. As if they wanted to stand with their children near the gentle waves that broke with a quiet splash and spread their mats of white bubbles in the moonlight.

As if they needed to watch something normal, something reassuring, on this night when suddenly they might be incinerated in an instant.

A woman holding the hands of two small children walked toward him. When she stopped walking and stood five feet from him, he could see the fear in her eyes.

He could see the fear in Leroy’s eyes.

He could see the fear in the eyes of a Vietnamese woman who stood with her two children facing soldiers with guns, while their village burned behind them.

He heard the deep fear in her voice when she asked him, “Are we safe here?”

He knelt down on the sand and placed one hand on the shoulder of a little girl, and one hand on the shoulder of a little boy. He told them with a strong voice, "You are safe here. We are a long, long way from that rocket. You are safe here."

He looked up at their mother, who was looking down at him. He told her, "The trade winds blow from east to west. We are upwind from the missile. Any radiation will blow away across the sea."

She nodded. Then she said quietly, "Thank you."

He stood up and told her, "Meh name is Nicholas. Ah gon' be a teacher at the University in September. Ah got some sugar rolls in meh car. Maybe yo' children would like a picnic on the beach?"

Her eyes no longer stared at him with a mother's fear. She even smiled. Then she looked down at her girl, about eight years old, and said, "This is Rose."

Rose smiled up at the stranger.

The mother looked down at her boy, about six years old, and said, "This is Charlie."

The boy stared at Nick with the deep, expressionless stare of a child.

Then the mother added, "And I am Jasmine."

"Jasmine," said Nick, and he felt good that she was no longer so afraid.

She said, "I know who you are. I teach biology at the University. I have seen you in the library. Rod Moorhead told me about you. He says that you are a gifted writer."

He was stunned. And a bit embarrassed. "Well, Ah'm just getting started."

She smiled again. "Nicholas, we are all just getting started."

Then she looked around the beach. "We have a tent and sleeping bags. We've been here before, to watch the leatherback turtles come up and lay their eggs. But I feel so exposed, out here on the beach with just a tent. If that horrid thing does explode, I would like my children to be in some sort of shelter."

She looked at the dark hill on the other side of the road, where scattered lights showed that people were home. Wide awake, listening to the radio. "Do you think anyone would take us in for the night?"

"Ah don' know anyone here." He could not take them to Hard Hat's bungalow, where he had stolen the oil refinery maps. He could not take them out to the dark house on the tip of Candle Point. "Maybe we could knock on somebody's door."

And then they heard a voice, a woman's voice, calling from the road, "Are there any small children here?"

Jasmine immediately called back, "I have two small children."

Someone called, "I have a baby."

Jasmine turned to Nick and said, "Please come with us." He could hear in her voice how much she needed him.

“All right.” Then he looked down at the two children, and reached for Charlie’s hand. Charlie let go of his mother’s hand and took Nick’s hand as the four of them walked, their faces lit by the moon, toward the road.

Two white people emerged from the shadows of the palms, a couple in their sixties. Nick recognized them. He had brought them a couple of times in his taxi from the airport to their home. They had been polite, and gave him a good tip.

The woman, who clearly saw the foursome as a family, said to them as she approached in white sneakers across the sand, “My name is Mary Ann. This is my husband Robert. We have an apartment on the ground floor of our house which is vacant now. It has two bedrooms, one with a double bed, one with twin beds. And there is a fold-out couch in the living room.”

A young couple appeared from the shadows; the woman held a baby. She said softly, “We would be very grateful.”

Mary Ann nodded. She asked Nick, the father, “Can you squeeze four into a double bed?” She looked at the mother with her baby. “Can you and your husband use the two twin beds?”

Jasmine quickly agreed that they could all fit on a double bed.

The young woman was saying a prayer, not in Crucian, not in Spanish, but in some other language. Maybe Papiamento.

Another family appeared from the beach. A young man said, “Meh grandmother does be very tired.” He held the arm of an elderly woman who looked exhausted and bewildered.

“All right,” said Robert, “we’ll find room upstairs in our home.” He looked around at the other families who were gathering. “I’ll phone the neighbors. I’ll tell them to come down to the beach. I promise you, we’re going to make it through the night.”

And so it came to pass, that Mary Ann and Robert led the family with two children, and the family with a baby, and the family with a grandmother who was at least sturdy enough to walk, through the shadows beneath the palms to the road. Nick offered the services of his taxi to the grandmother and her family, then followed the others, who walked the short distance up the hill to a home, like many homes on Saint Croix, with a ground floor rental apartment, and a second-floor home where people from the States could spend their retirement years.

Downstairs, Mary Ann showed the two families with children the two bedrooms in the snug and well-equipped apartment. Upstairs, Robert showed the grandmother and her family of three younger adults the guest room which his children—who lived in Colorado—used at Christmas. Then he began to phone the neighbors.

Despite the seriousness of the night, Nick laughed quietly at the turn of events which would soon put him, as the father, into the same bed with his new family.

He looked at Jasmine and saw the gratitude in her eyes.

While Jasmine and Rose and Charlie took turns in the bathroom—following the young mother with her baby—Nick went out to his taxi parked beside a red Jeep in the driveway and fetched the bag of sugar rolls from the front seat. He had intended, when he stopped at the shop in Christiansted, to buy only four rolls, just for himself, as a sort of celebration at completing his written assignment for Rod. But the fellow in the shop told him that he was closing soon, for it was now late afternoon on Memorial Day, and the remaining rolls would be stale by tomorrow morning. So he put a full dozen rolls into the bag and handed it to Nick. “Find yo’self a party,” he said with a grin.

Returning to the ground floor refugee camp, Father Nicholas passed out sugar rolls to the young mother and father, then to Rose and to Charlie and to Jasmine. They were all delighted.

He went outside again, climbed the steps to the second floor refugee camp, and passed out sugar rolls to the grandmother and her family of three, as well as to Mary Ann and Robert.

The grandmother told him, with a glint of happiness in her eyes, “De Lord shall provide.”

“Yes,” said Nick. “De Lord shall provide.”

He savored the last sugar roll as he stood outside in the cool night looking up at the stars.

May that missile be the first of the last of the missiles on planet Earth. May Mikhail Gorbachev have his wish.

May the sun that rises in the morning bring a new dawn.

May we finally learn that war was never part of the Original Plan.

He looked from the dark hillside toward the two houses on the tip of Candle Point, where no amber windows assured him that Angelique was safe. She was out in that mass of traffic, trying to get her neighbor, the old Polish woman, safely home in bed. Karl was no doubt with them, probably driving on the South Shore Road until he could cross the island to Candle Point on the north shore.

The lights would come on in her windows sometime during the night.

He did not want to go to sleep until he saw those amber windows. But his family was waiting.

“Good night, Angelique,” he said softly. “T’ank yo’, t’ank yo’, t’ank yo’.”

Jasmine looked at him with humor in her eyes as the four of them snuggled into their bed, Rose and then Jasmine and then Charlie and then Nick, with a blue

sheet and a light blue blanket over them, and the windows open to the breeze from the sea.

“Thank you, Nicholas,” said Jasmine, her voice filled with warmth and peacefulness in the dark room.

“Yo’ welcome, Jasmine,” said Nicholas as he wrapped his arm around Charlie. The boy snuggled against him, already asleep.

* * * * *

Chapter Eleven

Sunrise

Nick woke up before his three companions in the bed, acutely aware that he was still alive. The warhead had not exploded. He could hear a dove cooing outside the open window.

Had the Navy removed the warhead from the island? Were people truly safe now?

Was Angelique safe? Was she home in her stone house?

He turned his head toward the window. The red flowers of an hibiscus bush were lit by the first gray light of dawn. He could ease out of bed without waking anyone, slip out the door, then listen to the radio in his car. Maybe people were already heading back toward the west.

He had a meeting with Rod in his University office at nine. He had to pick up his writing assignment, still on the table at home. But . . . could the day after such a night really be just a normal day? Maybe Professor Moorhead had spent the night in a refugee tent at the yacht club out on the east end of the island. How on Earth could Nick phone Rod when they were both scattered like leaves in the wind?

Nick slowly and gently pulled his arm out from around Charlie, who mumbled something but continued sleeping. Nick put on his shirt and trousers (he had slept in his blue shorts), picked up his shoes, then quietly walked out of the bedroom into the living room. He glanced at the closed door to the room where the young couple slept with their baby, and hoped they were sleeping well. Then he opened the front door to the first glow of daylight, and stepped out into the fresh air scented with frangipani.

Glancing up at the windows of the upper floor of the pale blue house, he saw no lights inside. They were all probably still sleeping. He felt a surge of gratitude toward the two angels who had appeared in the night, asking, "Are there any small children here?" He would like to get to know them better.

Then he looked from his perch on the hill toward the black peninsula that pointed north into the sea, with two gray houses set on the flat dome of the

fingertip. With enormous relief, he spotted a car between them. She was home. No lights in the windows, but the round window beneath the peak of her neighbor's roof was dark: her Polish neighbor was sleeping. Angelique was sleeping. Maybe Karl was there too, sleeping beside her. Well, all right, if he had kept her safe and brought her home, then they deserved to be together.

Nick relinquished the last of his jealousy, and wished them well.

He walked barefoot on the cool smooth flagstones to his car, quietly opened the door, sat in the driver's seat and clicked on the radio.

“—congratulates the people of Saint Croix for their excellent conduct during a very difficult night. The Governor hopes that we can all return to our normal lives today, although schools on the island will be closed until tomorrow. We repeat our Citizens Alert announcement: Officials at Roosevelt Roads Naval Base on Puerto Rico confirmed at four-thirty this morning that the warhead had been removed from the wreckage of the missile and air-lifted by helicopter from Saint Croix. The warhead thus poses no further danger to the residents of that island, and they may now return to their homes. The Governor congratulates the people of Saint Croix for their excellent conduct during a very difficult night.”

Nick switched off the radio.

The Governor hopes that we can all return to our normal lives? What is so normal about living in a world with monsters that can incinerate us in an instant?

What did they do with the warhead? They sure won't want it back on the ship. The Puerto Ricans won't want it on their island. Maybe the helicopter set it down on the White House lawn.

The Governor congratulates the people of Saint Croix for their excellent behavior during a very difficult night. So . . . no riots, no looting, no fires, no gunshots in the night. Yes, we are a peaceful people, neighbor helping neighbor . . . until Big Sam teaches us to go murder the people of a quiet little country like Vietnam.

No . . . no . . . Let go of all that. Crucians took care of Crucians, the way they always do. That's why Ah came home.

He walked back to the snug little refugee camp, stepped quietly though the bedroom door and stood watching the three sleeping people who had invited him into their lives last night. Jasmine must have sensed him standing there, for she

opened her eyes and then smiled at him. She asked him, “Is there still a world out there?”

He told her, “There is a very beautiful world out there. The Navy has removed the warhead from the island.” He paused, then he added, “The sun is going to rise in about fifteen minutes. I suggest that we all hurry down to the beach and go swimming, so that we can be out there in the warm beautiful sea when that big red sun pops up to say hello.”

She stared at him, silent for a long moment, until she said, “That’s a wonderful idea.” She tossed the blanket off, shook Rose, shook Charlie—they both grumbled—then she climbed out of bed and disappeared into the bathroom.

Nick lifted Charlie—who protested vehemently—out of the bed and stood him on his feet. Then he lifted Rose out of the bed—she also protested—and stood her on her feet. He was amazed at how light they were . . . or rather, how strong he felt in his arms when he held them, two beautiful children.

Jasmine came out of the bathroom wearing a coral-orange bathing suit that perfectly matched—Nick noticed—her cinnamon skin.

She laughed as she announced, “Rose, Charlie, put your suits on. We’re going swimming!”

Glad that the day would begin with such an adventure, they each opened a school knapsack which they had brought from their car last night—with toothbrush and toothpaste and pajamas—and disappeared, Rose first, into the bathroom.

Within five minutes, they were out the front door. They scampered in sneakers down the road to the beach. After glancing to the east where the glowing red sky announced the imminent arrival of the rising sun, they waded into the warm, crystal-clear water until they were beyond the gentle waves. Then together they dove into the sea that welcomed them on this bright and bountiful morning.

“Hoooooooooooo!” cheered Jasmine when she rose to the surface.

“Hoooooooooooooooooooo!” “Hoooooooooooo!” echoed both children, as if this was something they had done many times before.

“Hoooooooo!” cheered Nick with a laugh.

They swam together further out from shore, then treaded water, facing east, where the first red cap of the sun appeared above the blue-gray horizon.

A flock of brown pelicans sailed over them on steadily pumping wings into the trade winds that buoyed them up on their journey. The pelicans had not been disturbed in the least by the events of the night before.

Now the fiery red disk grew broader and brighter, until, half-way up, it spread a rippling red stripe across the sea toward the four who witnessed the ancient miracle.

As the sun lifted its full self above the horizon—touching the long island to the right of the swimmers with its wand and transforming it from dark gray to green—Jasmine cheered, “Thank you!”

Her son and her daughter echoed, “Thank you!” “Thank you!”

Nicholas Cruz, for the first time in his life, greeted the sun with a jubilant “Thank you!”

He looked at Jasmine, who was looking at him, half of her wet face tinged with red. She was smiling at him, already telling him Yes, and Yes, and Yes.

* * * * *

Chapter Thirty-One

Green Laws for Mother Earth

On Tuesday evening, July 24, 1990, Nicholas met with Maria and a group of students which had grown from a dozen to roughly twenty, all of them ready for a good discussion. He introduced Jasmine Singh, a professor of marine biology at the University, who would speak to them tonight about a new profession, still in its early years, which the students might consider as they prepare for their future careers.

Nicholas also introduced Rose and Charlie, Jasmine's two children, who sat in the enlarged circle around the University classroom, and who nodded shyly when everyone looked at them.

Jasmine addressed the students with her strong and clear classroom voice, "Thank you for coming tonight. It's nice to see a group of high school students already thinking at the University level.

"You are all aware, I am sure, of the bleaching of the coral reefs around the Caribbean, especially during the summer of 1987. You may be aware that satellites have been taking pictures of the Arctic ice cap since 1979, and that the photographs reveal a steady shrinking of the ice cap during the past decade. If you have done any research on this new phenomenon called Global Warming, you may have read that two highly respected scientists, Dr. James Hansen and Dr. Carl Sagan, as well as Senator Al Gore—who has made a sustained effort to bring Global Warming to the public's attention—have all appeared before congressional committees in Washington during the 1980s, in order to present their case, based on a substantial amount of scientific evidence, that Global Warming is absolutely real. These three

experts emphasize that the effects of a warming planet will continue to worsen . . . unless we greatly reduce our use of fossil fuels.”

She paused. The faces around the circle were attentive. No one looked bored.

“As you well know, the Reagan administration during the 1980s has shown little interest in reports about a warming planet. The early initiatives taken by President Carter during the late 1970s—he set up a panel of scientists to study Global Warming, and he provided financial support for the first wind turbines in California—have been quietly canceled by President Reagan. America subsidizes the oil and coal industries while wind and solar wither for lack of funding.”

She added, “We ourselves have the Petrox oil refinery right here on Saint Croix. And not a single wind turbine spinning in the trade winds. Not a single solar farm collecting the abundant Caribbean sunlight.”

Jasmine again looked around the circle of faces. No protests yet. No angry rebuttals from a son or a daughter of parents working at Petrox.

“So . . . what do we do about this unprecedented threat on a planetary scale? If our dead coral is the first red warning light, we have a problem. If we decide to *ignore* that warning light, then we have two problems. Young people around the world will feel increasingly helpless as the planet on which they were born . . . becomes a *different* planet on which their children will be born.”

She paused, then she added, “As the mother of two children, and as a biology teacher who has done a serious amount of research, I can tell you that both of these problems are screamingly real.”

She glanced at her two barnacles. They were listening, they were listening.

“I would like tonight to examine an exciting new field of human endeavor, a profession which even ten years ago did not exist, but which I believe will be absolutely crucial to our survival.

“I would like to look at our legal system, our systems of laws, so that we can ask the question, Are these laws adequate in the 21st Century?

“We can go back to a time, long ago, when Moses came down from the mountain with his Ten Commandments. If we look though them, one by one, we see that these ten laws are concerned with the interactions—especially the conflicts—between people. We do not find any mention of Mother Earth, or of a blanket of pollution around the planet, or of a melting ice cap. Moses did not have a mask

and snorkel, so he was not especially concerned with the health of the coral in the Red Sea.

“We all know the admonition, Thou shalt not kill. But have we ever been taught, Thou shalt not kill Mother Earth? Thou shalt not kill the coral reef, for it is the home of twenty-five percent of the life in the seas. Thou shalt not kill the algae, for our little green friends give to us the breath of life. Thou shalt not alter the jet streams, for they bring rain—or drought—and thus they sustain the crops—or parch the farm land—and thus do they feed us—or cause the collapse of agriculture.

“Thou shalt not kill the bees, for thus do you kill the flowers, and thus do you kill the fruit, and thus do you kill the child.”

She paused.

Then she said with a louder voice, “We have been taught by the Commandments of Moses, Thou shalt not *steal*. But we have not yet been taught, Thou shalt not steal, thou shalt not plunder, the fish from the sea unto extinction. Though shalt not steal the trees from the forest until the last bird has no place for her nest. Thou shalt not steal the ice from the Arctic, nor the snow from the mountain tops, for if these sins do you commit, the currents in the oceans will shift their wandering ways, and the rivers of the land will dry and become troughs of mud.”

Jasmine paused, then she asked while looking around the circle, “Do you see the need today for new laws? Do you see the need today for an entirely new *system* of laws? We urgently need unprecedented laws which protect not only human rights . . . but also biosphere rights. We need a system of binding green laws that wrap around the planet.”

She paused, then she added with a strong voice, “Mother Earth needs a good lawyer.”

Nicholas noticed that Maria stared and stared and stared at Jasmine.

“These new laws,” continued the professor of biology, “will generate more than a healthy and prosperous world. They will generate *peace*, between people who have enough to eat. People who have schools for their children, doctors and nurses for their families, and a multitude of green jobs which promise a secure future.

“We will not need warships armed with nuclear missiles docking at the pier on the doorstep of Frederiksted. We will not need a nuclear missile fired by

accident into our rainforest in the middle of the night. We will not need the suicidal folly of Star Wars buzzing like angry bees around our planet. We will not need scientists and engineers working on weapons of death . . . when they could be working on the medicine and technology which would keep people alive. We will not need to subsidize the poison of oil in our atmosphere, when we could be harnessing the sun and the wind.”

Jasmine looked at Rose and said, “Mother Earth needs a *green* lawyer.”

Jasmine now looked at Nicholas, across the circle from her. He gave her a nod of encouragement.

“If we continue along this line of thought,” she said, “we can take a look at another set of guiding rules, given to us by a speaker who was one of the people of Moses, some generations later. In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus told his followers,

“‘Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the Earth.’ Were Jesus here today, when the future of the Earth is at great risk, he might perhaps tell us, ‘Blessed are those who rise up to *protect* the Earth, for they shall pass this great gift unto their children.’”

She paused. No protest yet. They were listening.

“Blessed are the merciful, who care for the living creatures of the Earth, so that all may escape the scythe of extinction.”

She paused.

“Blessed are the guardians of wilderness, for they shall be called the Keepers of Creation.”

And finally, “Blessed are the peacemakers, who know that peace requires a healthy green planet.”

Jasmine’s hands were trembling. She moved on.

“Some time later, a group of men, many of them lawyers, wrote a Constitution which would guide their new nation, the United States of America. When they sent their document, completed in September of 1787, out to the States for the approval of We the People, the People declared that they wanted a Bill of very specific Rights to be added as amendments to the Constitution. And so the Congress went to work, specifying and clarifying the Rights which Americans would enjoy, and pass on to future generations.”

Jasmine looked down at her notes. “Congress ratified the first ten Amendments to the Constitution on December 15, 1791. These Amendments contain the Bill of Rights, which we, as American citizens in the United States Virgin Islands, can claim as our own rights, protected by law.

“Let me read to you the First Amendment.

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”

Jasmine looked around the circle at her fellow American citizens.

“The First Amendment to the United States Constitution guarantees five fundamental freedoms: **freedom of religion, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of assembly, and the freedom to petition the government for a redress of grievances.** These five freedoms form the bedrock of who we are today, free people in a free nation.”

Never before had she given such a lecture in a classroom.

“But this Amendment was ratified in 1791, almost exactly two hundred years ago. Not only has the country changed, but the planet has changed as well. Might we not ask today for the freedom from living in fear on a dying planet? Or, in a more positive way, might we not ask for the freedom to live our lives on a healthy planet? Might we not ask for the freedom to bring our children into a world where they have a real future? Might we not ask for the freedom to live in the Cradle of Life as it was given to us by the Creator?”

She paused. No protest yet.

One more step. “We were granted the right to petition the government for a redress of grievances. That means we can complain about something. Do we not then have the right to demand a stop to the enormous financial subsidies provided by the American government to the oil companies which are massively polluting our Cradle of Life . . . by the unrestricted burning of their very profitable oil?

“With a quill pen, Thomas Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence, which was adopted on July 4, 1776, as America’s bold statement to the King and Parliament in London, as well as to the world. In that sacred document, Jefferson penned the words,

“‘We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.’

“*Unalienable* means that nobody can take these rights away from us. You and I, and our children, and our children’s children, have the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. What happens to that right if our world is knowingly and willfully and unrelentingly poisoned every day, every day, every day, by companies who make a profit from that poison?

“What Liberty do we have if we are trapped in the prison of a dying planet?

“What pursuit of Happiness do we have if we watch the growing fear in the eyes of our children?

“What we have today is *not* the America envisioned by the Founding Fathers. Our job today is to catch up with our modern times by writing a Green Amendment, and for that we need green lawyers, and for that we need *you* . . .” She pointed around the circle, “to launch a career in a new field of human endeavor, as an advocate for the Cradle of Life. We need green lawyers not only to enforce what few green laws we have, but to develop, *as an international team*, a global network of binding laws which will restore the health, and forever protect the health, of our poor ailing Earth.”

She paused. And then she asked, “Any questions?”

A dozen hands went up.

* * *

Toward the end of their vibrant discussion, the students agreed to meet two weeks from today, on Tuesday evening, August 7, as their third and final Summer Seminar before they turned their attention to their obligations in September.

Nicholas passed out the essay which he had written for them. Perhaps they could discuss some of the ideas when they met in August.

Then they feasted, in high spirits, on Johnny cakes from Fitzroy’s Hot Spot, along with cups of cold mango juice. Several of the students said hello to Rose and Charlie.

Maria and Albert asked Professor Singh to write her contact information on the blackboard. They wanted to keep in touch during their coming year at Howard University, which had an excellent law school.

* * * * *



Human fetus at 24 weeks

Image courtesy of Magnific

Chapter Forty

24 Weeks

On Tuesday evening, August 7, 1990, Angelique came to speak to the group of high school students at the University. The group had grown to about thirty students, who were all accommodated by a circle of chairs, along with Nicholas and Jasmine and Rose and Charlie, as well as Karl, Angelique's husband.

Nicholas introduced this evening's speaker. "Angelique Nielsen is a nurse at the hospital, a midwife who visits soon-to-be mothers all around the island, and . . ." he gestured toward her with a smile, "a soon-to-be mother herself."

She smiled as she patted her Little One, clearly evident beneath her sea-blue dress.

"Angelique grew up in Frederiksted, and so she has been swimming from the pier since she was a little girl. You may know her already as the woman who greets the giant American warships, both destroyers and submarines, by spray-painting a stencil of an orange mushroom cloud, as well as the words in bright orange, **You Are Standing at Ground Zero**, on the gray concrete of the pier."

Maria, whom Nicholas had first met on the pier, led a round of quiet applause.

Nicholas continued, "After the accidental firing of a Tomahawk cruise missile from an American destroyer on the evening of Memorial Day, May 28, a missile which crashed into the rainforest on our island with—although the Navy will not verify—most likely a nuclear warhead, Angelique's message to us becomes all the more screamingly real."

He paused, then he added, "That is why we are here tonight. Angelique has joined us so that first she can speak to us about *your* world and *your* future," he gestured to the students around the circle. "We will then all join in with a vibrant discussion, so that each and every one of you has a chance to speak straight from the heart."

Angelique nodded with gratitude. "Thank you, Nicholas." Then she looked around the circle of high school students and told them, "I am going to show you this evening what is real."

She stood up in her blue flowing dress and held her hands on each side of the conspicuous bulge of her belly. "I, as you can see, am pregnant."

With a smile, and holding her arms out with the grace of a ballerina, she turned slowly around, showing off her treasure.

Some of the girls in the class quietly applauded.

Standing in front of her chair, Angelique continued, “I am twenty-four weeks pregnant, about two-thirds of the way through the nine months of gestation. My baby is about as long, from crown to heel, as a corn on the cob. But of course her legs are folded up, and her arms are folded, so that she fits very comfortably inside me.”

She turned to her husband Karl, who took a large photograph from a brown envelope and handed it to her.

She held the picture for everyone in the circle to see.

“This is not my baby, but a picture of a baby of the same age, twenty-four weeks. You can see a nearly complete little person, with eyelids still closed, and fingers almost ready to play a piano, and ears that can hear her father’s voice, as well as her mother’s voice.

“I would like to pass this picture around the circle, so that each one of you can hold it in your hands. We want you to know that the child in the picture, and the child right here,” she patted her belly, “as well as *your* future children . . . are real.”

She handed the photograph to the teenage girl seated beside Karl.

Then she began to walk in a circle inside the larger circle of her audience, so that she and her baby would be close to everyone here in the room.

“A human fetus at twenty-four weeks has a complete set of almost fully developed organs. Her heart is beating, her lungs are almost ready for her first breath of air, her eyes are almost ready to open, and her brain has developed almost to the capacity of the brain of a newborn child. And . . . if she is a girl, her ovaries already contain a lifelong supply of eggs. Each egg contains half of the genetic information needed to create her *own* child, her mother’s granddaughter. So this little creature, about half a year old, contains a miracle in her brain, where *billions* of neurons are almost ready to go to work. And a miracle in her heart, which will continue to beat, we hope, for three-quarters of a century. And a miracle in her lifelong supply of eggs, where she stores a compilation of genetic information based on the development of the human species over the past several million years.”

She patted her belly. “This child is a bundle of multiple miracles, which did not happen just by accident. Her eyes alone, which are directly connected to her brain by two optic nerves, are so complex, and so efficient, and so capable—for

three-quarters of a century—that our eyes *alone*,” she gestured toward her eyes, “are proof, as a doctor recently told me, of the existence of a Creator.”

She paused.

No one contradicted her. No one started a religious debate. They were teenagers, trying to find their way in a very difficult world.

Angelique continued, “I told you that a fetus who is twenty-four weeks old can hear her mother’s voice, and her father’s voice, and even the sound of someone playing a piano. Some parents play a violin or a cello or a piano every day for their growing child. Or a grandmother might sing the old songs from the village. Here is a way to nourish the child, and to welcome the child.

“We know that a fetus at twenty-four weeks can hear a loud, startling noise, such as the slam of a door. The unborn child may kick so strongly that her mother feels the sudden jostling of small feet.”

She paused.

“About ten weeks ago, when this Little One,” she patted her belly, “was fourteen weeks old, a Tomahawk cruise missile, fired by accident, crashed into our rainforest with a 150-kiloton nuclear warhead in the nosecone of the missile. That nuclear warhead was roughly ten times more powerful than the atomic bomb which destroyed Hiroshima in August of 1945.

“If that nuclear warhead had detonated, do you think that the multitude of unborn children on this island, still in their mother’s womb, might have heard the blast?

“Unless, of course, both fetus and mother were immediately incinerated by the fiery heat of a star brought down to touch the Earth.”

She paused.

“What if the mother had been five miles away from the blast, outside of the evacuation zone? Would she feel the shock wave, the blast of hurricane wind, the heat that would scorch her skin, and of course the radiation which would reach deep inside her ovaries and turn that lifetime supply of eggs into scrambled eggs. The miracle of millions of years of human genetic development vanishes in an instant.”

She paused. She noticed that Charlie had climbed into the lap of his new father. Nicholas wrapped both arms around the boy.

Jasmine held Rose’s hand.

Angelique continued, “The accidental firing of a nuclear weapon is called a Broken Arrow. A Broken Arrow is defined by the American military as ‘an unexpected event involving nuclear weapons that results in the accidental launching, firing, detonating, theft, or loss of a nuclear weapon.’ During the forty-five years since August of 1945, the American military has experienced thirty-two Broken Arrows. Six nuclear weapons have been lost and never recovered.

“We do not know about the number of Soviet accidents. Or Chinese accidents.

“But we do know—approximately—how many nuclear warheads are in our world today. What would you guess, a thousand, two thousand, five thousand? Right now, in 1990, on our tiny planet orbiting a star in the vast reaches of the empty universe, we have 51,864 nuclear warheads, ready to launch, or stockpiled but ready to be loaded onto a launch vehicle, or retired in storage.

“Do you think that over fifty-one thousand nukes are enough to keep the peace?

“Does my child really need an insane arsenal so that she can ride on a swing at the playground?

“Is this the best that we can do?”

She paused.

Her mother’s instinctive anger was beginning to rise.

“Now in 1990, the United States has 10,904 nuclear weapons, some of them on the warships, surface and submarine, which dock at our pier. The Soviet Union has roughly *thirty-seven thousand* nuclear weapons, some of them aboard hidden submarines now cruising in the Caribbean Sea.

“China has 232 nukes.

“France has 505 nukes.

“The United Kingdom has 422 nukes.

“India has 7.

“Pakistan has 4.

“Israel has 53.

“Ukraine has 2,321.

“Belarus has at least 81.

“Lithuania has between 20 to 60.

“For a grand total of 51,864, right now today.”

She paused.

“The child in the picture that you hold in your hands is *real*. These nuclear weapons scattered around our planet—like a plague waiting to happen—are *real*. Your future children will be *real*.”

“And what are we going to do about this utterly insane situation?”

A circle of somber faces looked at her. Nobody said a word.

“Before we begin our discussion, I would like to ask a friend of mine to read a poem. It is a poem about soldiers who have fought in wars for the past ten thousand years, at least. They take a vote, whether to continue this madness, or whether to look for some alternative option.

“The author of this poem has been a soldier in a war, so he knows what he is writing about. He was sent to fight in the war in Vietnam with my brother Leroy.” She looked at the author now with deep sadness, and deep respect. “Nicholas came home. Leroy did not.”

She turned to her husband Karl, who handed her the poem, then she walked across the room and gave the poem to the author.

“Nicholas, will you read to us, please?”

He took the poem into his hands, hands which minutes ago had held the picture of a beautiful unborn child. He had written it on Memorial Day, after he had been thinking about the last time he saw Leroy.

Angelique said to him, “Please stand up. Read with a good strong voice. Do not read too fast. You are a man with many hidden talents, and one of them is your gift for writing.”

Nicholas stood up. Jasmine was watching. Rose and Charlie were watching.

He said with a very small voice, “All right.”

The woman who had always believed in him walked back to her seat.

He looked down at the first poem he had ever written. He had never read a poem out loud.

Nobody in boot camp had ever asked him to write a poem.

When he began to read, he marveled that the voice he heard was his voice. The voice was strong, vibrant, filled with conviction, as if the soldiers themselves were speaking.

He read a line, sometimes two, then paused. His listeners needed time to think.

Even the title, he read in two parts, “A Conference . . . of Veterans”.

His voice took over, rising and falling in volume, rising and falling in pain and anger and compassion.

The Parliament of Veterans

They gathered from hospitals, they gathered from graveyards,
They gathered from beds where they tossed and shrieked with nightmares,
They gathered from yesterday's wars, from World Wars, from Civil Wars,
From ancient wars,
Clad in furs and armor and uniforms and bulletproof vests.

They gathered at Troy, they gathered at Waterloo, they gathered at Verdun,
They gathered at Gettysburg, they gathered at Wounded Knee,
They gathered at Dien Bien Phu, they gathered in Saigon,
They gathered in the harsh mountains, they gathered on plains of endless rocks,
They gathered in Baghdad, they gathered in Kabul, they gathered at Walter Reed,
So that they could speak, and take a vote.

They understood, each soldier, the words of every speaker, though he spoke
In Greek or Persian or Latin or German or Russian or Chinese or Arabic or
English.

They understood as well the anguish in the eyes, the exhaustion in the faces,
The desperate hope in the outstretched hands.

When the last of the soldiers had spoken, with wisdom forged in the fires of war,
A silence descended upon them,
As they stood on a thousand battlefields around the world on Veterans Day.
Until someone asked, "Would you do it again? Would you fight that war again?"

Aye, there were reasons for taking up the spear and the musket and the AK-47:
Defense of the Motherland, of family and church and way of life.
But . . . was bleeding to death in the mud on a smoking battlefield really the best
way
To move people forward on their epic journey?
Were the slaughter at Gettysburg, the slaughter at Wounded Knee,
The slaughter at Verdun . . . really the best way
To build a better world for our children?

They took a vote, by a raising of hands:
 “Those who believe that war is inevitable,
 Those who believe that war is forever a part of the character of man,
 Please raise your hands.”
 They stood, these multitudes of veterans, with scattered hands raised.

“Those of you who believe that war does *not* belong in the character of man,
 Those of you who believe that war is something we have been taught,
 That war is something that has been *forced* upon us;
 Aye, those of you who believe that war can be cast forever
 Into the garbage heap of wretched history;
 Yes, those of you who believe that *peace* is within the reach of our bloodied hands,
 Those of you who believe that all the ancient hatreds shall we bury in war’s final
 grave,
 So that we can be forever free of the plague of war, and live in the sanctuary of
 peace,
 Please raise your hands.”

As one by one the hands went up, the look in their eyes became
 A glint of desperate hope,
 A gaze at a vision of what we might become,
 An upward glance of gratitude because a prayer had finally been answered.

They raised their hands, their arms clad in furs and armor and uniforms and
 Desert camouflage, desert dust,
 They raised their hands, filthy, bloodied, bandaged hands,
 And looking around, they saw that the vote was almost unanimous.



Headstone of mass grave, 1943,
during the Siege of Leningrad.

Nicholas lowered the poem in one hand and stared at the floor, too embarrassed to look at his audience.

Maria began to clap. Charlie, seated beside him, began to clap. Rose and her mother began to clap. Now the room was filled with applause, for both Nicholas and Angelique.

Nicholas nodded with gratitude, gave the poem to Charlie, then sat down.

His heart was thumping, on its way through a very long three-quarters of a century.

* * * * *