

A Community Story

by Alex Guillotte

I'm going to tell you a story that begins as so many do, with a journey. A man was driving down a long stretch of road on an early spring afternoon. Average in appearance and lifestyle, 30ish, slightly flabby, but not fat. He suffers from the occasional lower back pain associated with sitting in a car and at a desk for too many hours a day. His doctor has told him that he needs to get his cholesterol levels down and that he needs to stop smoking. There's constant stress in his life: bills, mortgage, alimony and child support from his second marriage. Being in sales, he's spent far too much time on the road, although it did keep him out of office politics. On top of everything else, that morning's mail had an audit notice from the IRS.

Consistency in his life was important to him and he found that comfort on the road. He pulled into a McDonald's drive-thru and ordered a Big Mac with fries and a Coke. He ate while driving. He thought about how the Big Mac's here are the same as the Big Mac's on the West Coast where he used to live. He passed a WalMart. They had those back home too. A little while later he began to feel tired. He decided to pass the time by turning on the radio. He found a station playing the songs he was fond of, but after hearing the same song three times, he sighed and turned to the news.

He was immediately bombarded by a world in chaos. There's another murder/suicide. Terrorists have bombed an American embassy in a country he's never heard of. The government's budget is still being fought over in the House. Another scandal hits Washington. The state's attorney general is pleased because violent crime has dropped to only 20%. This is seen as some kind of victory for the current administration and the government has just declared a war on cigarettes. He looked down at the pack of cigarettes beside him on the seat and turned off the radio.

Well, now he was tired AND depressed.

He suddenly realized that he wasn't sure where he was. He's been on mental auto pilot, but he suspected that he'd made a wrong turn somewhere. There was nothing but forest as far as the eye could see. Then, his worst fears were realized when he heard a horrible noise from his car's engine. Black smoke poured from under the hood as he coasted into a little gravel lot. He cursed, pounding the steering wheel. He shook off the anger and frustration and picked up his cellular phone. Nothing. It must have been the mountains or he was out of a service area. After waiting an hour for a car to pass by, he decided to walk. Maybe there was something up ahead.

He was winded after thirty minutes and his feet hurt. He wondered if this was such a good idea. Then a faint sound caught his attention. Up ahead a horse and approached. The woman wore some kind of loose clothing and a cloak. Strange clothes, but they seemed practical for riding. She rode up quickly and smiled sympathetically.

“My name’s Willow,” she said, “Are you all right?”

He stretched his back out and said “Hi, I’m David, my car broke down a few miles back and I could sure use a phone.”

“Well, you won’t be able to call until tomorrow morning. That’s when the satellite will be in range.” She smiled. “You’re welcome to spend the night though. We’ve got extra space and you can join us for dinner.”

David thought about this. It sounded a little weird. He had images of some strange couple living in a cabin waiting for the occasional hapless driver to pass by, taking them in and doing unspeakable things to them. Then again, maybe things were different out here. They’re probably just friendly. He decided ‘What the hell.’

“Sure, that’d be nice. Thank you.” A thought struck him. “Um, how far is it?”

“Oh just a couple of miles.” Willow reached her hand down, “Climb aboard.”

“Ugh, well,” he hesitantly took her hand, “I’m a little on the heavy...”

Before he could finish, he was yanked up into the saddle.

“That’s some grip!”

She smiled, not responding to the comment.

“Actually, we’re having a celebration tonight you might enjoy. Unless you’d like to get some sleep?”

“Well, it’s Friday night and since I’m not going anywhere ’til tomorrow, why not. Thanks.”

She looked puzzled. “What does Friday have to do with...oh, that’s right.” She smiled again. “I forgot.”

They rode back the way she had come, then turned off onto a trail that David didn’t even see until they were on it.

“Don’t you have a driveway?” David asked nervously.

“This is the back way in. We have a couple of trucks for emergencies, but we haven’t used them in years.” She paused thoughtfully, then added to herself, “That reminds me, I should remind Tom about taking a look at those soon to make sure they still work.” They’d been passing through the woods for what seemed like hours when David smelled something burning. He quickly recognized it as wood smoke. He wondered if that was their destination.

As if answering his question, she said, “We’re almost home.”

David could not believe his eyes. The trees opened into a clearing near the edge of a small river. Next to it sat what could best be described as abstract sculpture. It was a village consisting of dozens of oddly shaped homes made out of some kind of stucco or adobe. They were rounded and flowing, almost organic, with shingled, cedar roofs. Each profiled a chimney of one kind or another that seemed not to mar the artistic beauty of the structures, but to accentuate it. The streets, if they could be called that, meandered around the buildings and seemed to be paved with stones set into the earth lined with moss and low foliage. There were flowers everywhere. Every place there was dirt, there was some kind of flower, moss, shrub or vine sprouting. Growing along walkways, in planters, holes, cracks and indentations; there were flowers in a multitude of sizes, shapes and colors.

The village was laid out in what seemed to be concentric rings, with decorative archways joining some of the houses. David could see brightly colored cloth awnings and banners billowing in the light summer breeze. From where they were, he could just make out the top of a large dome in the center of the village. This one stood out in that it seemed to be made out of wood and was much larger than the surrounding structures.

The whole scene was a living work of art. David was speechless.

They rode down into the village. Off to the right, David noticed a pond, or small lake. There was an odd little dome beside the water with a small fire near it. All at once, a flap burst open on the side releasing a cloud of smoke or steam. A half dozen or so men came out and stretched to the sunlight. They were completely naked.

Willow noticed his wondering look. She had seen that look before. "It's a sweat."

David was shocked to hear her speak. "Um, I'm sorry a, a what?"

She chuckled. "A sweat lodge, it's kind of like a spiritual sauna, only a bit more intense. They're preparing for tonight."

"What's tonight?"

"One of the boys has come of age. He's having a rite of passage tonight. Although he doesn't know it."

David decided, that for the moment, he wouldn't ask what all that meant. Instead, he turned his attention to a reflection he noticed on the ground ahead. As they got closer, he saw what appeared to be a large sword stuck in the ground.

"Is that there to frighten unwanted visitors?" He asked cautiously.

"No." She giggled. "Someone was probably training out here. They'll come back for it."

"You're not worried it'll get stolen?"

"Goddess, no!" She seemed genuinely surprised that he'd asked the question. "No one steals here. Why would we?"

David didn't really have an answer.

“You see here, because everyone knows everyone else, you can’t think of people as strangers. We’re all dependent on one another for everything, so it’s not in our nature to abuse that trust. It would be self-defeating. We’re all family.”

Feeling David tense-up on that one, she quickly added, “No, not in a literal sense of course. We don’t practice or condone incest. I’m speaking of the family of community.

“Out there,” she pointed back the way they came, “there are very few places for people to find community. Here and there you encounter clubs or support groups that are pale shadows of it, but there’s almost always a lack of commitment. At any time, you can step out of those settings and not look back. It’s not that simple here.”

At that moment a group of children ran across the road. David suddenly realized how peaceful it was. He began to listen to the sounds: children playing, wind chimes singing, people talking and laughing, the faint clank of what David assumed was a blacksmith at work, the breeze and the birds. Then he realized what was missing. He heard no machinery. There was not the background hum of modern civilization that he was so used to, that he was deaf to it. He only noticed it now in its absence. David wondered suddenly if they had technology at all. Then he remembered Willow mentioning something about a satellite, so they must use some kind of technology, but it wasn’t apparent.

Then a thought struck him. “You said that it’s not simple to leave here. You don’t mean to say people can’t leave, do you?”

“Oh no! Everyone is free to do as they please. When I say it’s not simple to leave, I mean that peoples’ lives are entwined in the community. It would be like you saying ‘I think I’m going to become Asian.’ We identify ourselves by our community. It’s not just where we live, it’s who we are.”

David’s head was swimming. It was all like some weird dream. Thoughts of this being some kind of fanatical new age cult ran through his mind. They seemed harmless enough, but maybe that’s how all cults seem when you first meet them. Maybe there was a dark side he wasn’t seeing yet. “Here,” he thought ironically to himself, “have some Kool-Aid.”

“Oh, we don’t drink Kool-Aid.” Willow said.

David nearly fell off the horse. “What?!” “How the...”

“I’m sorry, that was very rude of me,” she said embarrassed. “You’d be surprised what a little fresh air can do for the mind.” She didn’t explain any farther, and David wasn’t sure he wanted to know.

They were at what seemed like a central area or town square. There was a fire burning in a stone basin surrounded by a circular amphitheater-like indentation. Two rows of benches were hewn from the surrounding earth. People were gathered, sitting on colorful pillows, talking in small groups. Most of the discussions were obviously light and casual, but one or

two seemed a bit intense. At one point one of the men at a heated discussion stood up as if he was going to attack another of the participants. But before he could move toward him, the others in the group stood up and stepped in front of him. Although David couldn't hear what was being said, the angry man got a good talking to. The closest analogy that David could think of was an intervention, like when a bunch of people confront one of their friends with a drug problem and force him to get help. This seemed more practiced than that, however. More natural somehow. Then the angry man stepped through the group and up to the man with whom he had had the disagreement. David was waiting for a fight, when the one man sat down next to the other and hugged him warmly. The others followed suit and after the round of affection was over, they continued their discussion, seemingly where they'd left off.

David had never seen anything like it. He was sure that there was going to be a knock down, drag out brawl by the way the men were yelling.

"It must be tough to get police out here when you need them." He chose his words carefully, fearing he might offend his host, but she responded cheerfully.

"Oh, we've never needed police. In fact they seem to just get in the way."

David began to get nervous again. "Then, then how do you keep people from breaking the law?"

At this point Willow had stopped the horse near a small, shell-shaped fountain. David had never seen so many flowers. Moss and ferns grew in and around the base of a low stone wall that seemed designed not to keep people in or out, but to define one place from another. He now heard what sounded like bagpipe music in the distance. It was so soft and melodic, that it could almost be mistaken for the wind. As the tune mingled with that of the wind chimes, the sound was otherworldly and almost unimaginably beautiful.

"We don't have laws as you understand them, David." She turned to face him. "The laws we follow are as natural as the laws of gravity and thermodynamics," she added with a smile, "And equally difficult to violate."

"You don't mean like the law of the jungle, kill or be killed?"

"Do you really believe that's the law of nature?"

He felt a little defensive. "Well, yeah. Isn't that the way the natural laws work? I mean every moment is a struggle for survival."

Willow paused a moment. "You're thinking like someone brainwashed by hours spent watching documentaries on television that show scene after scene of predator killing prey with a melodramatic soundtrack. The natural way is far more complex. Everything kills for food, but you've been separated from it for so long that you've lost sight of that. Everything

out there in your world is sanitized. The burger you get at McDonald's for example, do you think it magically appeared as a round slab of ground meat?"

David responded with a non-committal grunt.

"Believe it or not, David, there is a right way for people to live, and it won't be found on a weekly television show or movie."

She looked around thoughtfully. "Living as part of the world instead of separating ourselves from it is the key." Willow glanced back at David's puzzled face. "Maybe that's enough for now. We can talk more later if you like."

"Do you get many movies out here?"

"Hardly," she said as she dismounted. "Every now and then a bunch of us like to go into Nashua for dinner and a movie. It's fun once in a while." She looked around. "But you get homesick for this place really fast."

David didn't know what to say, so he said nothing. Willow helped David down off the horse. He never realized how much his butt could hurt. His lower back was screaming in protest as he tried to stretch.

"Ugh, give me a bucket seat any day."

A group of children playing nearby stopped to peer at the stranger over one of the low, ivy covered walls. Then, as suddenly as they had appeared, they ran off, chasing a large ball.

"You're just not used to it. Would you like to have that taken care of?"

"No thanks, I've got some pain killers," he thought a moment, "but they're back in the car," he added with a sigh.

"Don't worry, we've got some very good people to take care of that." Willow gestured with her head, "Follow me."

They walked in the direction of one of the clay-like buildings that, upon closer examination, seemed to be sculpted into the shape of a big sleeping cat. The eyes of the 'cat house,' David chuckled to himself at the thought, seemed half open and in the late evening twilight glowed from within. Obviously some kind of windows, tinted amber, were set into them. The effect was really quite startling. As they approached the door he saw that it was constructed of some kind of banded wood with an iron door knocker set into the middle. Willow went in without knocking.

"Tanya?" Willow called out as they entered.

The inside was one of the most unusual rooms David had ever seen. It had the same sculpted stucco look as the outside except it had been plastered. The overall tones were obviously meant to soothe and make those who entered feel at ease. It worked incredibly well. The main room appeared lit only by candles and a warm fireplace set in the far wall. There were soft, pastel-colored chairs about the room. The wall to the far left was some kind

of glass encased shelving system built into the wall. The shelves were lined with what seemed to be glass jars of various sizes, all labeled with the most beautiful lettering he could imagine. To the right was what David assumed to be an examination or massage table molded out of the very floor itself. A soft furry covering covered the top and draped off the edge.

At that moment, a voice called cheerfully down from above, "Be right there!"

David was so enthralled by the main room he hadn't even noticed there was an upper level. Actually, it was more of a loft, taking up half of the ceiling space with a wooden railing overlooking the main room. Then the ceiling caught his eye. A beautiful mural depicting a deep blue night sky with stars, comets, nebulae and other astronomical wonders that at a glance, in this light, looked almost real.

"Wow," was all David could manage.

"Wow is right," Willow added, looking up with him. "I've seen it a hundred times and it still hits me like that."

"I believe it," David responded, not taking his eyes off the ceiling.

The woman who came down the spiral staircase in the corner was barely noticed by David until she spoke.

"Some say that I painted it to get people to visit me. It can be lonely being a healer in a healthy town." Tanya smiled. Her smile was as comforting as the room itself.

"Tanya, this is David. He is staying the night as our guest and he's in desperate need of your services."

"Of course." She invited him to sit. "What seems to be the problem?"

"Well," David began, "my lower back has been an ongoing problem for some time now. My doctor has me on some kind of pain killers, but I don't remember the name. I'm not sure what you'll be able to do for me, I don't have any of my records with me or my x-rays."

Tanya smiled sympathetically. "That's won't be necessary, your body will tell me all I need to know." She gestured towards the table. "Why don't you lie down and get comfortable, and I'll be right over."

David got up hesitantly and walked over to her.

"I'll be back in a half hour or so to pick him up. I'll just go make his sleeping arrangements." Willow headed for the door. "Don't worry David, you're in good hands."

Somehow, David didn't doubt that. He didn't think he could worry in this room if he tried. He lay down, face up on the fur-topped table and settled back. The surface seemed to be well cushioned and mold to his body quite comfortably. A moment later, Tanya came over with a couple of her jars and set them nearby.

“Um, do you need to see my insurance card? I think it’s in my wallet...”

She interrupted him with a stifled laugh. “I’m sorry, David, we don’t accept insurance here.”

“Well, I’m afraid that I don’t have that much money on me right now.”

“David, you don’t understand. We don’t accept payment of any kind.”

“What?”

“Don’t worry about it. Now, let’s see, how about we start with you on your stomach?”

As soon as he rolled over, he fell asleep.

David woke up to Willow’s voice. “David, you’re all set. I’ve got a real bed for you and a place to shower if you like?”

He felt as if he’d been asleep for a week. He sat up and yawned. He felt better than he had in years. Then he realized that the pain in his back was completely gone!

“Hey!” he exclaimed, “not bad.” He twisted and felt no tightness at all. He decided to try it on his feet and stood up straight. It took him a moment to realize that he hadn’t stood upright like this in years. “Wow! That’s amazing.”

Tanya was over putting her jars away. “You were quite a mess, David.” She walked back over to him. “You might need a few more treatments to undo the years of mistreatment, but it’s not irreparable.”

David felt as if he could run a marathon. “Please, Tanya, you must let me pay you something to show my gratitude.”

“That look on your face is gratitude enough, David.” She thought a moment and added, “Actually, if you really want to show your gratitude, you could make sure to come back in a month or so for another treatment,” she added with a smile “and try not to undo what I’ve done in the meantime.”

“Well, I’d love to, but I’m not sure that I could find this place again.”

“Don’t worry, you’ll find it.” Willow said from behind. “I’ll get you directions. Do you have e-mail?”

“Yes.”

“I’d just ask that you don’t give them out to anyone else. We value our privacy. I’m sure you understand.” David nodded. “The directions will be to our public entrance. I’ll show you where it is before you leave.”

They left Tanya’s and headed across the central square to an amorphous group of dwellings. “I’m putting you in with the Celts. They keep pretty quiet at night in case you need some rest.”

“Thank you, but actually I feel awake right now. I’m a little hungry though,” he added sheepishly.

“Oh, pardon my manners. I forgot. We have guests so infrequently in the village. Normally, when people are hungry, they just go eat. Why don’t you clean up first, and I’ll go change. I’ll meet you out here in fifteen minutes?”

“That sounds fine.”

“Oh,” Willow added, “the showers are through the archway on the right.” She cast him a playful grin that he wasn’t sure he liked.

David went into the room that Willow indicated was his and found a bathrobe and two large towels draped across the bed. The room was painted, walls and ceiling, with a decorative knotwork pattern in an azure blue that was complimented by the room’s appointments. An oil lamp and stick matches were on a beautifully carved night stand. On the wall opposite the bed were shelves molded into the wall itself upon which stood a few books, some kind of glass sculpture and a wooden box. There was a small doorway on the far side of the room that led to a half bath with a sink sculpted from the wall, and a simple toilet. The walls also had a few small shelves cut into them with some clay jars labeled with a language he couldn’t decipher.

“This place just keeps getting stranger,” he thought to himself. Not strange in a bad way exactly, but definitely not like anything he’d ever seen before.

He undressed, put on the bathrobe, grabbed the towels and headed off to the showers. He went through the archway Willow indicated. For a moment, David thought he’d made a wrong turn. He entered a circular room of the same curved organic design as most of the other architecture in the village. About ten feet above, the walls became rough, rock-like formations that resembled granite. Water was cascading down them and draining through natural looking openings set strategically in the floor. He tested the waters and found them warm and inviting. The floor was stained the same azure blue as the room, but seemed more unintentional.

David draped his robe and towels over the smoothly carved wooden pegs set in a row on the wall. He noticed there were small three inch alcoves set randomly into the wall, each containing a bar of soap. The same blue stain as the floor streaked down from the openings.

As he began to shower, he could hear voices coming down the corridor. He tensed for a moment, but told himself that he’d taken group showers when he was younger in high school, and later at his local gym. That was years ago though and he was still a little self conscious. “Oh well, I’ll get through it.” he thought.

Just then though, what could only be described a stark raving terror shot up his spine as he realized that the voices he was hearing were female! In a blind panic, he nearly jumped straight into the wall. His most paranoid nightmares hadn’t prepared him for what he saw next.

Through the doorway came a dozen or so women wearing thigh-length leather skirts, studded with brass rivets. Each wore a leather bra of a similar style that connected to a wide, heavy ribbed girdle that protected the midsection and abdomen. Various straps and brass hoops holding the whole ingenious structure together. A dark green woolen shirt, worn under the leather garments, could only be seen from just underneath the upper arm guards. The leather greaves extended to, and half-way up the neck, offering protection, while allowing full range of motion. Sturdy dark boots came up to just below the knee and were wrapped with hide and fur.

Their bodies were painted head to toe in a deep, opaque and very vibrant azure blue. Well, that explained the stains in the shower. As if all this wasn't enough for his stunned brain to handle, each woman wore a sword sheathed across her back.

David thought he might pass out. He almost wished he would.

As the women began to undress, apparently undisturbed by his presence, David tried not to stare. From what he could gather from his occasional sideways glance, these women were incredibly fit. Not too bulky like many of the body-builders he'd seen, but very toned, healthy and all too feminine. They were talking loudly and joking. It reminded him of a locker room after a sporting event. They spread out to various locations and began to shower. Rivers of blue ran across the floor. David tried to remain casual and relaxed.

"Hi, David is it?" David nearly jumped. One of them had walked up beside him without him noticing.

"Um, ugh, yes." He thought about how lame he sounded and wished he was dead.

"I'm Amethyst, Willow told us you'd be rooming here for the night."

The soap flew out of David's hand. "Oh, sorry." He bent down to get it and nearly ran into Amethyst on the way. "Let me," she offered and fished up the soap and handed it to him.

"So, where are you from?" She spoke casually as she washed places that David did not want to think about right now.

"Oh, ugh, Nashua. I'm a salesman. On the road a lot. You know." He smiled weakly.

"Well, actually I don't, but if it suits you that's great."

"I don't know if it suits me, but it's a job. Gotta have a job, right?"

Some of the other women, apparently eavesdropping, stifled a laugh. Amethyst shot them a look. "Don't mind them. They still need to get back into polite mode!" The last couple of words were accentuated and obviously meant for the others. She laughed and threw her soap at one of them who ducked. "Well, at least your reflexes are improving Lise."

As Amethyst turned to rinse off, David noticed blood running from a nasty cut in her shoulder.

“Are you all right?”

“What this?” She looked at the wound. “I’ll get it sewn up after shower. It’s not as bad as it looks. Now Gina over there,” she gestured to a woman nearby, “show David the one from last month.” With that, Gina, who was toweling off, turned her leg to show her inner thigh. There was a well-healed scar that stretched from the inside of the knee across the front to the hip bone.

“That looks like more than a month ago. Lucky you didn’t get anything vital.” David was no expert, but he’d seen enough on television to know a bad wound when he saw it.

“Actually, it did nick the femoral artery, but Tanya does wonders with a needle and thread. I swear she should have been a seamstress.”

“She almost has to be to keep you together,” one of the other women joked.

“Oh, ha.” Gina responded dryly.

“You mean you actually fight each other?”

“Fight?” Amethyst seemed genuinely surprised. “Goddess no. These are from training. Some of the battles we’ve been in are much more intense.”

David began to feel as if maybe he was missing something. “Who do you fight?”

“There’s a neighboring village that we skirmish with once in a while. Seems they’ve been attacking in the Spring more often than not.” She looked to the others for confirmation. They nodded in agreement. “I think next year we’ll hit them first. That’ll shake ‘em up.” A couple of the women high-fived each other.

“I guess I still don’t understand. Don’t people get, um...” He couldn’t figure out how to ask the next question.

“You mean killed? No. That’s not the objective.” She could see he was still dismayed. “We fight to stay on our toes. Healthy competition between the villages. After a battle, we often get together at a feast.”

“It’s a great time,” Gina added.

“Don’t your people do the same with football?” she asked.

“Well sort of, but they don’t use swords.”

“No, but they still get hurt. There’s even been a death or two I believe.”

“I don’t know.” David thought, “Maybe you’re right. The uniforms certainly aren’t as nice.” He added, then wished he hadn’t.

To his relief, they all laughed appreciatively.

“Well, I’m going to get this taken care of,” she nodded to the still bleeding wound. “I’ll see you at the feast?”

“Oh, yes. Wouldn’t miss it.”

“Great!” She gave him a sturdy slap on the back that nearly sent him into the wall. Fortunately, he held his footing. David wasn’t sure he could have lived with that humiliation.

After a while, the women finished drying, gathered their equipment and filed out of the room. David let out a long rattling sigh. He didn’t even realize that he had been holding his breath.

A while later he met up with Willow in the square. As he approached, she was shaking with silent laughter.

“That was just mean,” David said and walked by. She followed and suddenly laughed so hard she snorted. “I’m glad you find it so funny.” David was more embarrassed than angry, but it was almost indistinguishable.

“Oh David, it wasn’t meant to embarrass you. I thought it’d be a nice,” she thought a moment, “surprise.”

“It was that.” He relaxed, “It’s all right, I’m not really that angry. I just wasn’t prepared. I have a question about something actually.”

“Yes?”

“Amethyst mentioned fighting with other villages. What’s that all about?”

“This is one of the most difficult parts of our culture to explain to someone of your culture.” She thought a moment. “Humans have a natural aggressive tendency. It’s what allowed us to evolve; what allowed us to survive. When it’s repressed, as in your culture, it pops up as war, murder, wife and child abuse, a dozen other ways. The battles we engage in are a controlled, healthy channeling of aggression that has worked for tribal cultures for millions of years. It’s a very different point of view than you’re used to.”

“In theory, it makes sense, but I guess I’d still have to learn more about it.”

“Well, if you’re interested, Amethyst would be the one to talk to about it. She’s our resident expert.”

David smiled. “Somehow I don’t doubt it.”

As they were walking, David had this strange feeling of comfort. He couldn’t describe or understand it. He was talking to Willow as if he’d known her all his life. He felt as if he could tell her anything. Maybe it was because he was relaxed and felt better than he had in years. No, somehow it was more than that. It was the place and the people. There was something home-like or natural about the way these people lived. It wasn’t what he’d consider a utopia. People still had their failings and problems, they just handled them

differently. They got angry and upset, but it didn't get out of control. People were there to talk to, and share feelings. You always had support. In many ways it was better than a utopia. This society didn't require that people be better. A utopian society seemed stagnant compared to this. These people were alive and happy.

He came out of his thoughts as they neared what he assumed was a dining hall of some sort. A set of double doors set in a larger building were slightly ajar. Warm light poured from a half dozen windows set in the front. At the door, he was assailed by the smell of wood smoke and food. The food smelled better than anything he'd ever smelled before. He wasn't sure if that was just because he was hungry or the atmosphere, but it didn't matter right now. He was hungry.

When the door opened, the first thing he thought of was a medieval-style tavern. There were tables all around, a dark wooden bar, a massive stone fireplace in the far corner and people everywhere. Some were eating and drinking, there were a few children running around playing, but all seemed to be enjoying the time together. The walls were adorned with paintings and a few photos near the bar. There were chandeliers scattered throughout the room and they were electric, although the light they cast was warm and low. David realized that it was the first evidence of electrical use that he'd seen.

Near the fireplace, a man was seated playing a simple blues piece on a guitar.

Then he noticed his friends from the shower in the far corner.

"Hey David!" Amethyst yelled across the room. "Why don't you and Willow join us?"

The whole room turned their attention to David. "Oh this is good," he told himself. A chorus of suggestive sounds from the crowd followed. David sighed.

Willow whispered in his ear, "You must have made quite an impression. They don't invite just anyone to sit with them." She snickered.

David gave her a glance and decided not to comment. They walked over to the Celts' table and sat. "Thank you."

"What can I get for you?" The question came from a woman dressed in medieval looking clothes with cleavage like he'd never seen.

"Is there a menu?" David asked.

"On the wall, sir." She pointed to a blackboard of items but no prices.

He looked the items over and asked, "How much is the steak?"

"Oh about fifteen or sixteen ounces, give or take."

"No, I mean how much does it cost?"

Willow interjected. "David we don't use money here. Just let her know what you want. Do you drink?"

“Yes, occasionally.”

“Great.” She turned to the waitress. “He’ll have the steak and get him today’s stout.”
Once the table had finished ordering. David asked, “How does all this get paid for?”

“Well, it’s not paid for in the traditional sense. As a community, we all do our part. The farmer supplies the food, someone else supplies the tools, someone the clothes, and so on.”

“It sounds a little like communism,” David commented warily.

“Not exactly. Communism is a large scale redistribution of wealth. We have no wealth to redistribute. This is more like bartering or sharing. Goods and services don’t have a dollar value as you know it.”

One of the waitresses showed up at that moment with the drinks. David smiled at her and watched her walk away. “How do we tip?”

“We don’t tip really, but you can show your gratitude,” said Amethyst. One of the Celts snickered. “What I mean is that you show your gratitude the same way you would if you were invited to someone’s home.”

“What you normally do?”

The question surprised her. “I usually just say thank you. Occasionally I’ll bring a gift or help out if they’re busy.”

“People here are family.” Willow added, “We appreciate each other on a daily basis.”

“Well I certainly appreciate them. I’ve never seen better waitresses anywhere.”

“You’re right about that. Oh, and they prefer to be called Wenches,” Willow corrected.

At that, their wench showed up with the food and refills for their various drinks. David smiled at her, “Thank you.”

While they were eating, a group of three people joined their table. A man and two women. They had their arms around one another and were laughing.

“Well, I see you’ve worked out your problems, Fionn,” Willow said to the man as they settled down.

The three of them looked up as if awakened out of their own world. “Oh, yes! Care to join us?” Fionn said and smiled warmly. “There’s always room for you, Willow.”

“Some other time.” Willow gestured with her head to David sitting beside her. “We have a guest for tonight. His car broke down.”

The three looked as if they genuinely hadn’t noticed him.

“Oh sorry,” said Fionn, “I’m somewhere else today! This is Gwen and Lisa.”

“Hi!” They both said in unison and finding this hysterical, broke into another fit of laughter. “Sorry,” Gwen said, fighting off laughter, “we’ve just made up after a really bad fight, and we’re a little silly.”

David chuckled. "I completely understand. It's very nice to meet you." Their laughter was contagious.

"Well, we must be off," said Gwen. Then turning to her two companions, "Come on you two." They quickly gathered their things together, got up and headed for the door.

"You're leaving already?" Willow asked, turning toward them..

Fionn yelled back over his shoulder, "The master's having one of his affairs tonight." Lisa added after him, "Which one?" And they almost fell down from laughing.

Without a word, Willow shook her head and went back to her meal.

"Well, they're a nice couple." David said making small talk.

"Couple?" said Willow questioningly. She thought. "Oh! I see. They're a triad."

"A what?"

"A triad. The three of them are married."

David pondered this for a moment. "Um, I still don't understand."

"They are polyamorous. That means loving more than one person." She paused to let that much sink in. "There are all kinds of relationships here. Couples, triads, quads, pentads, some are open, allowing for outside lovers and some are monogamous or polygamous. Some just have lovers, not requiring a permanent relationship."

"Isn't that kind of promiscuity a little dangerous in this day and age?" David hoped he wasn't over-stepping his bounds.

"Well, first of all, it isn't promiscuity. People don't just haphazardly sleep around. These are real, viable relationships and are not undertaken lightly." She added, "Especially in a community such as this."

David was silent for a moment. "I don't think I could live like that." He said finally.

"Well good," she said, "neither can I".

David looked at her as if waiting for something.

"It's not required that people have one kind of relationship or another, David. As long as the people involved are consenting adults, and they're not harming anyone, there's no problem." She saw David was still having a hard time understanding the concept. "Actually," she continued, "the percentage of polyamorous relationships in the community has stabilized at around twenty percent. That disproves the theory that if people are allowed to 'run wild', they'll do it."

"I still don't think that I understand it, but I can accept it. It might just take a little getting use to." He shrugged and went back to eating. He began to notice more of what was going on all around him. The different groups and relationships. It was weird to him, but the one thing that could not be disputed, was that they were happy.

He smiled at a couple with a child beside them. The girl; about five years old; seemed to be listening intently to her father who was showing her something in a book. David couldn't help but eavesdropping.

"...So if you look here, the RAM chip installs right behind the..." He waited for her response. Her face lit up suddenly as if she had been given candy.

"I get it!" She yelled excited. "It's hiding behind the Power Supply!"

Her parents shared in her joy. "That's right sweetie. See here..." He turned the page and pointed to something. "Right there." The little girl jumped up and hugged him.

"Um," David tried to sort things in his head.

"That's Tina. She has a gift for computers, so her parents are encouraging her that way. Although she's by no means tied into a career at this age, it's always helpful to know computers."

"Computers? At her age?"

"Well, it's only the basics." Willow smiled proudly.

Something suddenly occurred to David. "Now that you mention it, where do the children go to school?"

"This whole community is a school. Children don't learn about how to talk from a book. They learn to talk from being around people who talk. Other learning is no different. They learn reading through doing it. Mathematics, writing, science, history and computers; it's all taught 'hands-on'. That's how children have learned for millions of years. A child learns to write because he wants to. He or she sees it as a benefit to them in some way. Children will learn by force, but that knowledge never lasts. Can you remember your basic algebra?"

David stammered. "Well, I remember that I took algebra..."

"Children adore their parents and are naturally imitative of them. Haven't you seen a son's face light up the first time he gets to go work on the car with dad?" David nodded understanding.

"Yes, we have some structured learning; reading groups, creative writing exercises and things like that, but it's not school like you remember it. As children get older, they can apprentice in any field they wish."

"Not one child has failed the state tests since the community was founded. In fact, they've scored well above average in all categories. Once, about eight years ago, an inspector came out here because he was intent on proving that we were falsifying our records; that there was no way children could score that well consistently."

"What happened?" David asked.

Willow nodded across the dining hall. "He's over there."

David looked across to a man in his late forties, dressed in very colorful and whimsical cloths, surrounded by laughing children. He was reading from a huge book of bedtime stories.

“That reminds me, tomorrow night is Story Telling at the hall. The place will be packed with children. They’ll listen to the elders; mostly people over seventy; tell stories about their lives. This way not only do the children learn how to communicate, they learn history, public speaking and a sense of community that’s part of their every day lives.

“We’ve found that elders make the best teachers. Besides the fact that they’ve experienced the most, they really seem to communicate with children the best. Plus, it’s important for the elderly to contribute as much as anyone. Imaging looking forward to your ‘golden years’ instead of waiting with dread and fear.”

David looked around. “Well, whatever you’re doing, it seems to be working.”

Willow smiled and rubbed his back.

They finished dinner as the crowd began to disperse. The wenches were bussing the tables and straightening up the place. Willow took David aside.

“Tonight, at the council, don’t be alarmed by anything you see.”

“Now you’re worrying me,” David chuckled.

“I don’t mean to, but you’ll have to trust me that things won’t be as they seem.”

“Why should things start making sense now?” He smiled ironically.

The council chamber was in the large domed structure he had seen when he first entered the village. Now that he stood in front of it, it seemed immense. The top had to be at least three stories high. It was constructed of wood with some kind of panel insets, and upon closer examination, was covered by small arcane symbols. The symbols were unknown to David, but they were about the size of a nickel and they covered every square inch of the dome’s surface. The characters were so small and close together that, at a distance, they gave the appearance of being a solid color. David thought he could see windows in the upper areas of the structure. Through some of these he could make out some kind of plant growth. Perhaps there was some kind of solarium or greenhouse in the upper levels. Before he could see any more, however, Willow tugged on his arm, pulling him in the direction of the main entrance.

The inside was even more impressive than the outside. A huge chamber that stretched the entire diameter of the dome took up what seemed to be the first two floors. A large, eight-foot fire pit burned at its center, vented by an iron hood that disappeared into the roof twenty feet above them. A set of padded benches circled in close to the fire with intermittent

gaps to allow easy access to the circle. Along the perimeter of the room were three rows of bleacher-type seats that afforded a perfect view of the inner circle's proceedings.

People were filing in quietly talking amongst themselves. Willow found a seat for him along the innermost row of the outer bleachers. As yet, no one had occupied the central seats. David assumed those must be for the council, whatever that was. He had images of a sinister procession of black-robed mummers walking into the middle and chanting or some other such weirdness. As it turned out however, the people who entered the inner circle seemed like everyone else at the gathering. That is to say that they were dressed in light, colorful clothes that seemed comfortable. By the time everyone was settled in, it seemed as if there were quite a few vacant seats in the council. David turned to ask Willow if this was normal and noticed that she wasn't there. It was then that the proceeding began with a low, heavy drum beat. One of the council members stood up and moved towards the fire. She stopped and turned. It was Willow!

"The council begins. Let the shades speak, to call the rest to this circle." Willow spoke formally, and with an air of authority she hadn't displayed before. As she finished her words, a tall, lanky man walked in the main door. The white robe he wore, tied with a light cloth sash, contrasted his long, flowing black hair. His appearance was striking. He seemed solemn and purposeful as he looked around the room. Then David realized that the man's eyes were pale and opaque. He was blind. The man walked slowly clockwise around the chamber. Occasionally, he would point out a person from the crowd who would stand up and join the council. As he came to the section where David sat, he paused. He seemed to sense something that no one else could. Puzzled glances moved through the gathering until finally he walked over and pointed right at David.

A collective gasp erupted from the hall. Then all drew silent.

An elderly woman leaned over to him and whispered, "Go ahead. You've been chosen."

"I don't understand. Chosen for what?"

"You just go sit with the council, and when you get your chance, say what's on your mind," she whispered and smiled warmly.

Reluctantly, David excused his way out of his seat and went over to the inner circle. He felt the eyes of the whole room on him as he sat. He was next to a gentleman who looked like someone's grandpa in a granola commercial, who gave him a reassuring pat on the shoulder. David was not reassured.

When the circle was complete, Willow rang a small silver bell. "Let the council commence." She picked up some kind of carved stick, sat down and handed it to the man to her left.

The first hour or so of the meeting could have been from any town council throughout the country. The stick was passed from person to person around the circle. Some spoke on issues that concerned them. One woman spoke of her concerns about the especially long winter's effect on the upcoming harvest. Another spoke about the difficulties of a new home construction on the far side of the village and so on. It was odd to David that no solutions were offered or demanded. David passed his turn this time around.

At the he next passing of the stick people addressed the various problems that had been previously mentioned. Many of the responses offered solutions, but some spoke about the problem from another perspective, others added to someone else's suggestion, and yet others simply offered comfort and emotional support to the individual. "We know you're doing your best," one man said, "You're not alone," another added. At times, it had the feel of a support group more than a council meeting. Only once did David see anyone at the meeting become upset. A woman was working on a solution to stop water seeping into the underground system of power and networking cables and all the suggestions seemed to exasperate her. She fumed quietly until her turn came back around. When she took the stick, she blew up yelling that no one understood the problem and all the suggestions were stupid and time consuming. She apparently had other responsibilities and they were falling behind. No one said a word until she'd finished. Then a small group of people went over quietly, huddled around and held her. She broke down and sobbed uncontrollably. The council patiently waited until she'd regained herself. When the proceedings recommenced, she was inundated with offers to help with her work load.

Then a thought struck David. He knew something about plumbing. It was his business after all, and just recently he'd read in one of his trade journals of a similar problem. When the stick came to him, he took a deep breath and decided to speak.

"Hello. My name's David, and I know I'm not from here, but I think I might have an idea about the network problem. If you haven't been able to track down the source of the seepage, you could try pressurizing the PVC piping with some kind of gas and you might be able to see where it's leaking. The ground is porous enough to let the gas through." David looked around as if expecting a response, then realized that he was still holding the stick. "Oh, sorry." He said and passed it to the left.

Willow stood up and walked over to the center with he stick. "I'm going to open up the discussion. Speak your minds."

With that, a freeform discussion started. People added to David's suggestion and talked about how to make it work. The fire guild offered one of their compressors from the geothermal system to use. The healers' guild suggested the best plant to burn to produce the

thickest smoke possible to use for the gas. Before long a plan was settled on and the woman who'd been so upset, seemed renewed with vigor and purpose.

The business of the meeting seemed concluded, but they weren't finished. The stick was once again passed around the circle. This time, people told about good things that had happened to them this past moon cycle. Lost items that were found, someone helping above and beyond the call, the discovery of a beautiful flower in a nearby meadow, and so forth. When the stick came back to David, however, he realized that he had no 'good thing' to speak of. Slightly embarrassed, he passed his turn, and it seemed to him that there was an uncomfortable moment of silence. He knew he was being paranoid and that it was likely to be just his own imagination.

They hadn't quite completed the circle when there was some kind of commotion in the surrounding crowd. David could see a young boy, perhaps in his early teens, being dragged away by a group of men. They were covered head to toe in some kind of body paint, brandishing swords and . The woman who struggled to stop them, presumably the boy's mother, seemed to calm down after they had left. Things continued as before.

David was terrified. He didn't know what to do. Should he run after them and help the boy escape? Just then he happened to look over to Willow who gave him a reassuring smile to let him know that everything would be all right. He wasn't sure why, but he felt calmer. 'Yes,' he thought to himself 'things will be all right'. Willow had an amazing talent for putting people at ease.

As the meeting adjourned and people milled about for a while to chat with friends and catch up on community news, David worked his way over to Willow. He asked her about the incident with the boy. She informed him briefly that it was a male rite of passage for the boy. His initiation into manhood, that involved a traumatic abduction, physical and mental ordeals and challenges, and a symbolic death and rebirth into the community as a man.

"I don't understand." David had no idea what to think about this. "How does being abducted and put through some kind of bizarre hazing ritual make you a man?" David realized he was raising his voice and wondered why this situation made him so upset.

"David," she reached out and took his hand, "if you really want to know, you can go see for yourself."

"All right, show me..." Willow interrupted him.

"I'm a woman. I can't go. This is for men only." She led him by the hand to the main door and directed him which way to go. The directions led him down a long, dark path through the forest. The fact that it was the new moon made it nearly impossible to see, but he'd seen the path in the daylight and had a rough idea which direction it went. Before long, he'd caught up to the group. They were gathered around the boy who was huddled next to a

small bonfire. He had no clothes except a loin cloth type of thing and a blindfold. He looked terrified.

David knew that the men were aware of his presence, but he chose to hang towards the back of the group and listened.

The apparent leader of the group stepped forward and spoke. "Myrden, son of Lisa, it is now the time of transition, the dark moon waits to be reborn, to begin a new phase. All transition, all change destroys what came before it. The end of one thing is the beginning of another. The end of one time is the beginning of another. You are at such a juncture in your life Myrden. Something must die so that something else can be born."

The men in the circle began to chant in low melodic tones.

"...She changes everything she touches, and everything she touches changes..."

The leader spoke again. "You must go into battle. If you fail, it's over." He handed the boy a spear. Then he took a small wooden bowl of paint and, with his finger, drew some kind of mark on the boy's chest.

"Let the hunt begin!" He pointed the boy in the direction of the woods and shoved him. "Go now!"

Myrden reluctantly headed into the trees, still blindfolded, and obviously scared out of his mind. Then David heard another sound. At first it was just a rustling, then he could hear growls and panting. Myrden cried out and there was a scuffle. The growling and snarling grew as did Myrden's screams. He was fighting something, but David couldn't make out what it was. Then he heard what sounded like a snap of wood and a brief chase. More wrestling, followed by a high shriek from Myrden. Then a dreadful silence.

David couldn't move or breath. He nearly leapt out of his skin when something burst from the bushes. It was huge and covered in shaggy, black fur. Dragging behind held by his foot was Myrden, covered in blood. The fur creature threw back the hide it was wearing, revealing one of the men from the council who had taken the boy. He quickly stashed the fur in a nearby stump and stood with the others. Then miraculously, Myrden moved. He was alive and breathing, nearly to the point of hyperventilating.

The leader helped him up and removed the blindfold. "You are dead," He paused for a long moment, "Now be reborn." The others moved forward and gently poured buckets of warm water over him, rinsing away the blood, mud and sweat. They gave him a large towel to dry off and when he was done, brought out some fresh clothes in which to dress.

"Today Myrden, you are a man. Come and sit by the watchfire and we'll share the mysteries of what it means to be a man." A look crossed Myrden's face that David had never seen before. The closest he could think of was a look of pure joy and love.

A tremendous wave of emotion flowed over David and he burst into tears, sobbing uncontrollably as if releasing a lifetime of sorrow. He now knew why he'd been so angry. Deep inside, he was jealous that Myrden was being given something that he'd been denied as a child. Yet now, through Myrden, he found something missing in his life that he never knew existed. He was crying with the joy of someone who has been reunited with a lost love. He was reunited with himself.

One of the men walked over and put his arms around David. Normally, a guy hugging him would have freaked him out, but things had changed. David had changed. They all went and sat near the fire which was stoked and prodded to a comfortable level. Within this circle of light in an infinite darkness, the men shared the secrets of manhood with Myrden and David. Myrden was given gifts from each of the men to mark this turning point: a large knife, a stone, a journal, a new cloak, a shaving razor, and other such things. Myrden looked at his gifts and thought for a moment. Then he reached into his bag and took out the large blue stone he'd been given. He reached over and handed it to David. One of the men decided now was a good time to tell a story. Everyone listened intently.

They talked through the night about heroes and journeys; of the mundane and the magical. By dawn, they were all feeling a bit tired. They said their good-byes and went off to their respective homes to catch some sleep.

David got back to the village and grabbed some breakfast with the Celts. Willow happened upon them just as they'd finished.

"Ah, David. I got hold of the garage and they said they'd have a tow truck here in a couple of hours. Do you need to call anyone?"

"Uh, yeah actually. I should call the office and let them know I'm not dead."

Willow led him back to the dome and up a spiral staircase to the second level. The rooms upstairs were fairly common and pleasant, done in a light pine. She took him into what looked like a computer center. There were a dozen or so workstations, one of which seemed dedicated to community operations. There were windows monitoring the electrical network, a calendar, news and even the positions of communications satellites. David was impressed.

"Wow. This is incredible."

"Actually, our GEEKs are working on our own computer design. It will, it is to be hoped that interface with anything, Mac, PC, UNIX, you name it. They're getting the raw parts shipped from a couple of places. I'm not sure about the details, it's not really my thing."

"That's amazing. I gather you don't like computers."

"Oh, I think they're great, why?"

“Well, you called them geeks.”

“Sorry, GEEK stands for ‘Green Environment Electronic Knetwork.’”

David thought. “Um, network?”

“Network with a ‘K.’ Their idea.” She smiled and shrugged. “The phone is over there.”

David reached his office, but being Saturday he could only leave a voice mail. It was O.K., he knew his boss would check it today, he always did. Willow suggested that they head down to the stables and ride to his car. It was a little ways away, and the tow truck might get there early.

On the way out of town, David tried not to show how reluctant he was to leave. There was a flurry of waves and kisses from just about everyone they passed. They saw a couple of men digging next to a small plume of smoke coming out of the ground. They waved and gave him a thumbs-up. David smiled back. It occurred to him that he’d never felt so happy and content.

They had just entered the forest trail when he said, “I’m going to miss you...all”

She leaned back and kissed him on the cheek. “It’s too bad you won’t be here for the dance next week. It’s going to be great. We’ve some guest musicians staying with us.”

“Yeah.” David was quiet.

They rode in silence until they reached his car. It was only a few minutes later before the tow truck arrived.

“Good timing,” David said. “I guess I’m all set now. Thanks so much for everything. I don’t know how I can ever repay you.”

She smiled warmly. “Just remember us.”

“I couldn’t possibly forget.” They laughed.

“Good-bye, David.” She turned her horse and trotted off. David felt very alone. He was startled when the mechanic spoke.

“Well, I can’t tell here.” He said with the air of detachment of someone who’s said the same phrase a thousand times before. “We’ll have to check it out back at the garage. Do you have AAA?”

“Oh, ugh, no actually.”

“Well then, I’m afraid I’m going to have to see a credit card and some ID.”

David fished through his wallet. He had a hard time coming up with the credit card and the man was getting impatient.

“Come on pal, I don’t have all day.”

“Yeah, here it is.” He quickly handed over the card. Another fifteen minutes later, they were on their way. The driver didn’t speak except to yell at some “asshole” who was

driving too slowly. The man seemed put out and angry about the whole thing. David remained silent. It took them a couple hours to reach Nashua and finally, they were at the garage. He asked the man how long it would be.

“I don’t even know what the hell’s wrong with it yet.”

“Will you know today?”

“Today?” The man laughed. “What planet do you come from? All I do is tow on Saturdays buddy. Look, I’ll call when I know something. I got your number.”

“Do you know the number for the cab company?” David asked.

“What do I look like, a fuckin’ phone book? There’s a pay phone down the street.”

David didn’t bother to ask about the phone in the office and began to walk.

As he wandered down the street, he noticed that people on the street seemed to avoid each other. They wouldn’t look at each other and barely acknowledged each other’s existence. It was odd that he’d never realized it before. In a world full of people, everyone is so alone. When a small boy did look up at him and smiled, David smiled back and said “hello.” His mother quickly pulled the child close and walked away mumbling something about perverts. David sighed.

When he finally found the phone, it was destroyed; pulled apart and spit on. He turned and was confronted with a huge billboard looming above him. On it was an ad for some kind of runaway hotline. It said: “Lost...Alone...Call someone who cares.” The 800 number was whited out and someone had spray painted over it: “Bullshit! No one cares!”.

David looked down, reached into his pocket and felt the blue stone Myrden had given him. He started walking home.