Lewis pointed at the low-slung ultra-light vehicle. “What is that?”

“It’s an experimental bicycle.” Jade gestured proudly across the polymer cushioned ceramic. “Another collaboration with that retired car dealer from South Africa.”

Lewis nodded. “You’ve worked quality together.” He stroked the streamlined carbon-composite body, stepping closer he gazed into one of the polycarbonate domes. The seat leaned into a deep recline. Pedals reached up from the far floor. “I guess it’s a bicycle.” He peered through the canopy beside it. “A bicycle built for two.” Lewis looked at Jade questioningly. “Just pedal power?”

“Pedal power boosted by pedal power storage.” Jade walked around to the other side and swung his canopy up. “Get in.”

“Ah…” Lewis brushed his hair back. “I need to go slow so I can find any leaks or misdirected spray heads.”

“Perfect. If we use the brakes a lot, we’ll charge these babies up.” He pointed to a pair of golden modules sized and shaped like the fake swiss cheese wheels at Whole Foods, bracketed side by side between the seats. He checked the gauges. “We have good vacuum.”

“Whatever.” Lewis thought they looked more like motors than batteries, but he decided to go along with the idea. “Let me start the test cycle on the spray system.”

“Oh. Right.”

Lewis went to the box fastened to the railing where they came in, sneaking scotch as he turned the dial. A raven cawed. Valves clunked. Water misted the deck, a winter use system intended to produce a skate rink. The banked turns promised to make both sports fun. Lewis thought about all the complicated woodwork beneath the planks that the carpenters could not lay crossways to the traffic as originally planned. Work stopped on it for weeks after the day Jade Misos explained the concept.

The crew had to fasten the boards parallel to the railings, custom curved at the turns so the planks would not cut the riders’ chi. Fortunately, Jade did not have to redraw entire blueprints like Louis Sullivan, Frank Lloyd Wright nor like Rodney Wright would have back in the day. Auto-cad made fanaticism feasible.

The double walled clear partition between their seats. It appeared as if the vehicle resulted from linking two separate units, each side down-curving into its own streamlined wedge. “Can you hear me?” he asked, buckling himself in.

“Loud and clear.” Jade’s voice came from a speaker above and behind.

Lewis brushed his fingers across the T logo on what could pass for the flight yoke from the *Sun Tracker*. He looked through at the handlebar in Jade’s hands. “Who steers?”

“Either one of us.” He twisted his, and the one in front of Lewis turned. “The pedals go straight – no crank, no curve.” Jade pumped his pedals, first the right then the left, and the “bike” scooted forward. “Why is it,” Jade mused. “You just sit in a car and it does all the work, that’s driving, but you work your *ass* off on a bike and you’re merely riding?”

Lewis scratched his head. “Well…”

“Anyway, pedal hard as you can. I’ll keep us slow.”

“Fine.” Lewis was surprised at how hard he did pedal, something about the geometry of the mechanization, most of it hidden beneath the floor. With one thrust of his leg, they leapt forward. For the first time he got how much pleasure the bike roadway would provide his client’s family. “I suppose this *is* a fun house,” he admitted, a sharp break from the bored remarks Lewis made about so many of the unusual features that his client imposed upon the design as they went along. “Look, you’ve got ashtrays and cigarette lighters in here!”

“If more people had fun houses, less people would do without homes.”

“You think?”

“And it’s not just that. A house should be more than fun.” Jade squeezed the brakes and took the speed down a peg. The flywheels whirred almost imperceptibly, bearings protected by two differently charged lubricants, separated into smoothening stratum with a thin layer of air between them, virtually eliminating friction. The flywheels stored power for later use, like stepping outside for a smoke empowers you to skip your commercials later. “Houses should protect people from the elements, right?”

“Right…” Lewis made a point of sounding distracted and a show of scanning the spray heads, looking from side to side with big movements to the spots where clouds of water sprayed out at the base of the railings. Then Lewis got the notion that a knowledgeable response to what his client said might diminish the inevitable ramblings of the widely admired dot com genius, lately labeled narcissist by the tabloids. “Do you mean the materials that won’t toxically outgas?” Lewis asked. “Formaldehyde-free forest products, natural fiber textiles, low VOC paint?”

“I’m thinking of the special window glass and coatings that shield out the electromagnetic energy from cell phone towers, smart meters and the like. Remember Doctor Grimes in Heinlein’s *Waldo* who wore a special suit to protect himself from all the radiant power? He was right!”

“I remember.” He said it politely, but Lewis regretted the day they discussed that novella. Jade insisted on calling the story fantasy because he disliked science fiction. The bike-track wound around the property, games and gardens on the inside, forest and fields beyond the outer railing. Everywhere, the mist looked even and well pointed. And Lewis had come to know the plumber, a man from Baltimore. Deliberate and thorough, he did everything just so. So did his crew. Lewis might have to prefabricate a problem. “I thought the doctor in *Waldo* made his life hard wearing that spacesuit everywhere. He could only relax in his own house.”

“‘The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation,’” Jade said knowingly.

“What?”

“That’s a line from Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden*. True in 1854, it’s true today. His real name was David Henry Thoreau. Henry David was his pen name.”

“Big improvement,” Lewis said sarcastically.

“Kind of like you.”

“Huh?”

“Changing your name from Sulemon Lewis to Lewis Sulemon. Look at your skin. You’re Asian, like me, hundred percent on your mom’s side, not Irish like Louie Sullivan.”

“What’s that got to do with boring me about David Henry Thoreau?”

“Oh yeah.” Jade held up a finger. “He was one of a great line of writers: Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, the romanticists. Some worthwhile thoughts came to them while they reacted to the Age of Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution, emphasizing intense emotion as aesthetic…”

“Have I ever told you that I don’t care about fiction that’s not science fiction?”

“You liked *Avatar*. That’s not sci-fi.”

“It’s fantasy.”

“Right. Regular fiction.”

That did it! Lewis hit the brakes hard.

“You’re stopping? Well. That’s good. It winds up the flywheels.”

“we might have a leak.” Lewis pointed to a spray head on his side of the vehicle, out of Jade’s view.

“Write it on your punch list. Right?”

Lewis held up his credit card thin iPhone 24. “I have a punch list app.” Then he pointed at the torus shaped titanium components, separated by the dividing partitions. “Those get charged up by braking, don’t they?”

“The discs spins comfortably at up to five thousand RPM’s. That’s a lot of power to draw on.”

Lewis clicked his canopy open and swung it up behind himself, stepping out onto the wet surface. “Why don’t you go around once without me, really crank it up and stop hard, give me time to take a good look.”

“You’re on. Close it so it clicks.”

\*\*\*

Half hour ago as Lewis crossed the sprawling grounds to the landing pad – what a relief! His celebrity client had not arrived. Lewis could start his final inspection in peace, free from the sound of Jade Misos’ latest elitist literary rant. Then he heard the whistling blast of electric propellers pointed vertical, never heard the airplane on its approach. Lewis slid the tall square bottle back into his inside coat pocket with one hand, wiped the fire off his lips with the back of the other.

Perhaps the most hi-tech house ever, undoubtedly the quirkiest, constructing it for a single digit member of the Fortune 500, it had its interesting moments. With artfully curved delta wings, sensually shaped fuselage, nose cone rakishly bent down, the solar powered Tesla *Sun Tracker* now landing close enough to blow his hair back currently dominated the internet. Misos had co-conceived and co-funded the development. Last week, despite his partner’s advanced age, they team-piloted it around the world in one day, traveling at over a thousand miles per hour, casting high noon’s shadow all the way.

A panel dropped from the underside of the fuselage, and Lewis saw the client unbuckling his harness through the downward extending scissor linkages. He could not help marveling at how elegantly the mechanism unfolded, but Jade stepped from the floor of his airplane to the floor of his landing pad like you would step from a Carola to the curb. With a tap of the remote over his shoulder, the cockpit retracted, the plane powered down.

“Look at this,” he had said, holding his arms out to the lofty domes of his new house. “Science *ha*s caught up to science fiction. Soon it shall leave it behind1”

“Clearly fantasy is still alive and well,” Lewis drawled. “Because that can never happen.”

“Fantasy! Fantasy is just fiction, and it serves a vital purpose.” Jade came closer and gave Lewis a warm handshake, a hint of sunbreeze. “Mr. Sulemon, that kind of fiction explores the final frontier.”

Lewis looked at him blankly.

“The mind.” Jade laughed. “It’s all in the mind, you know.” He added a Liverpool accent to that last part. Coming from his crisply featured Japanese face, it should have got a laugh.

“Okay then.” Lewis pointed toward the three-mile-round boardwalk that twistingly encircled the developed property. “I was about to walk it a once over, check the spray system.”

“I thought you’d start there.” Jade clapped his hands and smiled brightly. “It’s a beautiful day. Not a chem-trail in the sky. Let’s go!”

“Uh. You know, doing the punch list on a house is not as exciting as you seem to think.”

“You never know what we might dream up.” Jade held a palm up. “Besides, I wanted to visit with you. You’ve worked so hard on my house, built in every custom feature I asked for and now you’re doing the final walk-through.”

“This way then.” Lewis led them down a crusher fines path that straddled a pond with a fountain that pulsed an artistic pattern of water into the sky, stopping when they stopped looking. From there, the path wound through the orchard with the game tables, treehouses, outdoor bowling lanes, lawn snookers and underground ball courts.

“You… uh… you doing okay about your dad?”

Lewis looked back at him. “Yeah. I’m all right.”

“I’ve always had a deep respect for the man.”

Lewis nodded. “Thanks.” And that concludes this cool story’s first dreamlike vignette. Lewis watched the twin-pod leap away fast into the misty evening light, then slow almost to a stop before bursting away into the next turn. He shook his head. This was the best architectural job that ever came his way, without a doubt, but it came with the most stressful client ever. Jade claimed that his “creative role” in the house had him rediscovering all the things he learned before he changed his major from literature to computer science. The media ridiculed his late-night posts about how Mark Twain raised racial consciousness. And “*1984* predicted wrong. Instead of TVs watching us, telephones listen. They get away with it because everybody wants to be heard.”

Sitting on the railing up out of the spray, Lewis found his bottle. The motion sensitive LED lights around him switched off. The air smelled moist and clean. It felt good out in the country. He liked the quiet. Lewis had another douse of good cheer. By the time he heard Jade’s wet wheels coming back, Lewis had a satisfying buzz going – satisfying enough that he only asked Jade to pedal one more solo charging trip while he “inspected” one more sprayer.

When they finally pulled up where they started, the spray system timed off before Lewis could climb out to shut it down manually. The night air cleared. “I booked a hotel in Altoona,” said Lewis. “Just ten minutes away. I’ll be back first thing in the morning.”

Jade looked over at Lewis and smiled. “First, let’s see how fast this baby can go.” He pedaled vigorously.

“You don’t know?” Lewis pedaled half-heartedly, but still they got going fast – fast. Hands resting on the grips, fingers nervously stretched over the brake levers, Lewis already far exceeded the top speed he ever road a bike.

At the end of the straightaway, Jade braked hard, and the wheels skidded into the next turn. “Woo-who,” he exclaimed.

“You sure this thing’s safe?” his passenger asked.

“It has multiple air bags. Anyway, *Walden*’s nothing. For that matter *Waldo*’s nothing compared to the essay Thoreau wrote. It influenced the world like a holy book.”

“You don’t say?”

“I’d say, I do. He wasn’t writing about contrived scientific scenarios. ‘On Civil Disobedience’ was grown up prose with enrolling writing.”

“I read the *CliffsNotes* for a lit class.” Lewis yawned. “Bor-ring.”

“Hey. Gandhi and Martin Luther King both read it and used its ideas to change laws. If you don’t consider a law fair, disobey it peacefully.”

“Is it on video yet?” With the vehicle sitting so low, it was hard to tell how fast. But Lewis thought they had to be going highway speed when they slid around the turn by the birdfeeders, the salt licks and the dovecote. Going through the hairpin turn that followed, Jade used the brakes in rapid short squeezes, like tapping the B button on your video game. Seeing his client so occupied, Lewis turned his head for a quick swallow. The partition would block the smell. “Jade, maybe we should pull over and let the track dry.”

“Nonsense. We’ll drive it dry. Like hiking your clothes dry in scouts.” Jade jammed the pedals hard, and they hurtled down the long gently curved stretch near the dwelling units for staff and visitors. That expression on his face, he looked the man of his reputation, recklessly taking big risks that usually paid off – but not always. “Are you ready for the next level?”

“Next level?” Lewis could feel the power of the flywheel in the stroke of his pedals, like a fire burning out of control. “What do you mean?” Ahead in the distance he saw the roadway widen to soften the turn at the pool house/solar furnace, the sharpest turn on the track excepting the one by the garages and the gate.

“Are you in good shape?” Jade rode the brakes before they got there, but he did not take the easier inside track. When they veered toward the dense foam strips of the railing, Lewis impulsively tried to steer away, but Jade held the bars tight. They hit and deflected, lining straight out the last leg of the turn.

“Remember? That’s what the nerf rails are for.”

“What do you know?” Lewis exhaled. “Nerf rails work.”

“I’m trying to get a read on you. You used to run all the time. Are you still good on a bicycle?”

“Sure. It’s just like riding a bicycle. You never forget.”

“All right, wise guy!” Lewis saw Jade pull a round knob on his control panel. He heard a bang. Jade’s half of the vehicle drifted aside, taking two wheels with it, leaving two wheels for Lewis. “Surprise!”

Lewis felt his stomach drop. He was moving fast enough that the bike felt stable. The flywheel module to his side felt balanced. But that was the thing. Suddenly Lewis had to balance. He gripped the wheel carefully, leaning into the turn by the rosemary maze and the beehives.

“C’mon, man.” Jade goaded. “The flywheels both got the same spins until we transformed. We’re even. Let’s see what you’ve got.”

“Ow!” With a loud snap, toe clips wrapped his feet, strapping Lewis to the pedals. “Seriously?” He planned to take it easy tonight, pass out early in the hotel room in town. Lewis drove all the way from Indiana, and he had drinks along the way. He shook his head in exasperation. But aerodynamic and powerful, the bike called to him. It would hardly be the first time he raced Jade. “Ah, screw it!” He gave those pedals everything he had, shooting out ahead of Jade’s half, front wheel riding air.

“I guess I asked for that,” Jade puffed over the speaker, pedaling hard to keep from losing more ground.

“Question is, are *you* still good on a bike?” Lewis hardly tapped the brakes before he leaned into a gentle set of slalom turns that would lead to the sharp turn by the front gate, keeping his tires on a dry tread-line and extending his lead. He could feel himself settling into the zone, he thought he had it under control. He never considered the possibility of a black-out.

\*\*\*

The next thing Lewis remembered, Jade was swinging the canopy open in the garage, little airbags *Achtung!*ly deployed everywhere. He rubbed the back of his head where it hurt. “What happened?”

“You nerfed off the turn just right, but going so fast you went high, bounced off my hood, over the railing, through the garage window and my Ferrari’s ragtop. You were doing great up until then.”

“Thank you.”

Jade shrugged. “It’s an experimental velocepede. I guess we should expect things like this.”

“Now you tell me.” Lewis tried to stand, but his harness stopped him.

“Here.” Jade unfastened the buckle. “Let me help you up.”

“I’m okay.” Lewis stepped out of the wreckage, working to look steady on his feet. When he planted them on the pavement his feet felt the ground beneath them with a new aliveness. He was winded, but that felt good, too. He slapped Jade’s back. “That *was* fun.” Lewis took the keys from his pocket, looking down the rows of cars toward his old Pontiac *Catalina*.

“C’mon.” Jade put a hand on his arm. “Forget the hotel. You’ll have sweeter dreams here.”

“But I booked a room.”

“I had it un-booked. Just one night, sleep in this house.”

“Just one night, sleep in one of your musical beds,” Lewis grumbled, referring to the mattress with Dream Weave™, nano-speakers spun into the fabric, continually emitting the harmonic tone of the Earth, the digital mattress that made Jade’s Green River dot com everybody’s choice for healthy products shipped everywhere free. “We’d like to rent the Merchandise Mart to hold it all.”

“We don’t need Nano Notes beds in this house because you built the bedrooms with a whole new technology.” Jade opened the side door of the garage and held it for Lewis. “Which is a lack of technology.”

“You’ve got that right.”

“You know, you could count Horace Traubel and Edgar Allen Poe into Thoreau’s chain of writers,” Jade said as they passed the corporate headquarters, a Madole-like structure with colors that picked up the surroundings, clean lines that deferred to the beauty of the residence up the hill. The unit had plush offices and inspiring meeting rooms befitting the Green River empire, landing pad conveniently positioned behind. “Walt Whitman was one of the few people that attended Poe’s funeral in Baltimore.”

“Edgar Allen Poe! ‘Fall of the House of Usher’ and ‘The Pit and the Pendulum,’ right? Now there’s one twisted fantasy writer for you.”

“That he was.” A raven muttered, and they both laughed. Stepping out from under an ancient shagbark hickory, Jade paused on the cobblestone walkway to the house and regarded the view – three immense domes rising from the hilltop with two of the sleep domes below them on the hillside. Ironically, even with the full moon in the picture, it looked like a lunar colony. “Windows by Pamela Anderson,” Jade chuckled.

“Oh. You heard that?”

“I did.”

“It’s a joke our plumber came up with.” Lewis shrugged. “He’s usually pretty serious. See, Pamela Anderson was a movie star back in the late nineteen-hundreds.”

“I know who she was.”

“Well, Anderson windows had a jingle: ‘Windows by Anderson’ and Pamela Anderson…” Lewis cupped his hands over his chest. “… she was known for her ampleness. Anyway, these domes have a lot of windows if you count all the triangles.” With that you would think that Lewis had affectively dissected the joke to death.

But no: “It’s about the shape, not the ampleness,” Jade said reverently. “The sleep-domes, they’re round on top. That’s the right look for a place to sleep. But the big ones. The seventy-footers and the hundred-twenty-footer in the middle, they have just the right balance between rising to a point and getting there with a graceful curve. It’s quite the sight to behold.”

“Thank you.”

“I know. You think all those architects you worship wouldn’t like this house, that Rodney Wright said you can’t arrange furniture in a dome because the walls are curved. But last week a painter made that joke, and I knew he got such a laugh because the men he told it to think these domes have an attractive shape.” He wagged a finger. “Now that’s a *real* compliment from *real* people.”

Lewis just sighed.

“What is going on with you? Today, you seem inordinately more unexcited than usual.” Jade’s eyes narrowed. “Are you and Tala getting along?”

“Yeah. I mean, kind of.” He shrugged. “I’m like any other guy, right?” Lewis usually avoided talking about his problems. Except something in Jade’s concerned look reminded him. This was his friend since kindergarten. They biked, swum, built a treehouse, wondered about girls and all those growing up things together. Before they went off to college, they each developed a three-mile trail for an Eagle Scout project. (Jim Morrison and Steve Young only made Star Scout.) Separately from their projects, they did a one mile stretch of trail to connect the trails, creating the best seven miles of hiking in the Altoona area. Lewis decided to come clean. “I’m about to get sued over a house I built. And it looks to set me back hard, for money and reputation.” Lewis turned and walked on. “It’s a nightmare.”

“What happened?” asked Jade, keeping pace with him.

“I *don’t* know.” He threw his hands up. “The soil was compacted right, and I spec’d enough rebar in the slab, but the walls keep cracking. We send somebody in to patch it, it cracks again.”

“So you think the slab’s broken?”

“Yeah. They don’t want to pull up their expensive yak hair carpet, but I’ll bet it’s covering big problems.”

“I know some good lawyers.”

“One’s I can afford?”

“Mm. Maybe.”

They walked briskly, hedges uniquely sculpted to the shapes of obscure iconography lining their path. When they reached the welcoming steps up to the main entrance, they went downstairs to the passage that circled around the biggest dome, sleeping chambers at the four points of the compass. Non-toxic chemical lamps lit the hall. Curved glass arched a ceiling above stone-crafted retaining walls. (For our farming friends, the glass was fabricated by the Harvestore Company.)

Jade stopped at the first door. “This is your room.” He opened the door, and inside DC lights came on with negligible effect. “They turn off with a clap. I’ll be two doors down. I have to meet a train in the morning.”

“I know, I know and I know. As the architect I know this is the guest sleep pod, I know that you made me spec Clappers, and I know the master bed-pod is two doors down.” He shook his head. “And I know there’s no alternating current on this level.”

“So spirit can come to you in dream time! That’s the way the medicine man explained it to me. It’s why we put the futons directly on the earth. Instead of memory foam we’ve got memory floors.”

“I know that, too.” Lewis rolled his eyes, remembering all the red rock clay augmented with pebble-sized Arkansas quartz crystals, thinking about all the trouble finding the old-timer who could work that costly dirt into an even floor the way they did it in log cabins and sod houses. He stepped into the room, patting Jade’s shoulder as he went by. “Good night. I pray that you sleep well. We’re waiting for you to say amen.”

“That’s a mouthful. Sweet dreams.”

Lewis swung the door behind himself with a deliberately light push and, he had to wait for it, he heard it click gently shut, the perfect action of a perfectly hung door. Jade had read once about a time when NASA encouraged craftsmanship by awarding contracts to the middle bid, insisted Lewis do it here with an openness to approving additional costs for qualitative improvements on the plans. His fault-finding tour of this finely wrought house would bear little fruit.

Lewis kicked his shoes off, tossed his coat on the chair and stretched out on the futon. So comfortable. He looked about the room, the chair, the fire pole and the suspended parachute that made a domed curtain for all the glass – sparce space to encourage sparse thinking. Lewis knew that Jade would have told him to turn off the lights, but he lacked the motivation to clap his hands. And what difference would shutting down his phone make? No malevolent signals could possibly worm through all the shielding paint and glass in this building, especially down here. Lewis felt a wave of satisfaction for this house that he had complained so much about building as the 6-HTP misters invited him to fall into an uncommonly deep sleep. His back cracked relaxed.

\*\*\*

So soft under his back. Lewis opened his eyes and looked at the ceiling, two cracks crossing. It took a moment, but he recognized the place, a luxury home he built in Iowa for a retiring rock star, a man who hired Lewis Sulemon when word got out about Jade Misos’ dome house. But now, instead of glowing reports about his innovative designs captured by paparazzi with long lenses, the tabloids brinked to break bad news about the house that keeps breaking. His head throbbed. How much did he drink? How did he get here? Lewis wanted to get up from the floor, slowly and quietly, let himself out the side door. But he could not move.

When the giant pendulum swung out of the kitchen, Lewis wondered if it could possibly be real. Then the nadir of its arc traced across him, cutting his shirt. The keen edge scratched a line of red droplets across his chest. “This counts!” the voice boomed inside his head. “Die in a dream, die in reality.” The pendulum that swung out from the library traveled a path crossed to the first pendulum. Looking between his feet, sighting down the finely honed blade, Lewis saw it coming. He tried in vain to turn his head sideways or twist his feet out of the path. No doubt, the first pendulum would come swinging back after that. Strangely, Lewis felt unafraid, just painfully saddened about this house and what it meant to his long struggling architectural practice that finally dared to blossom.

His eyes looked back to the cracks above him on the ceiling, a jagged plus sign twain cutting the house twice. Now a still small voice spoke in his mind: “A house divided against itself cannot stand.” Lewis dreamed a memory, standing there talking to a subcontractor before all the exotic imported carpet and bookshelves got there, before the walls went up. Lewis considered himself about as psychic as a brick – as likely to get an insight as a goat is to fly a saucer into space. But he could tell the journeyman concrete-crafter was proud, watching his son saw channels into the slab for expansion joints, precisely placed notches running the entire length and breadth of the house, crossing where he lay. It seemed a lot of dust for the two shallow kerfs that he specked.

Lewis opened his eyes and looked up at the parachute. He felt so good, with less than an hour of sleep, filled with excitement. He knew what his dream meant. Young and inexperienced, the contractor’s son had set the saw with too much reach. The blade that can cut concrete just as easily mills through the steel rebar binding it. Sadly, the litigious nature of the world makes fixing the problem less important than fixing the blame. Now Lewis could fix them both. Tough luck. He liked the contractor. The kid was all right.

Lewis put on his coat and shoes and went to the fire pole, one of the many innovations that Jade’s kids suggested, and he stepped onto the escalator board that set low around it. This called for no electricity downstairs. When Lewis put his weight on the board, a cable running through the pole engaged a motor upstairs. A pump hydraulically transferred power downstairs to push the escalator board upstairs. As he neared the ceiling, cords opened a hole in the parachute, a hatch slid up the pole making way, and he rose to the guest sitting room. Purging ultra-violet lights turned off, and full-spectrum lights turned on. Reflected in the waxed brass pole as he stepped off, Lewis saw it, the blood on his shirt.

The kids envisioned the fire poles connecting the bedrooms to the bathrooms, but Jade nixed that idea. A house like this, it took remediations everywhere to get the feng shui right. But using bathrooms as passageways to the great house, you cannot fix Chinese geomancy like that with baguas and mirrors. Therefore, the fire pole went from sleep-pod to a sitting room with an adjoining bathroom – unconventional two story three-room apartments. Mentally continuing his punch list, Lewis, checked the tub and shower valves, opened all the cabinets. He tested the odor-free composting toilet, the Clivus Multrum. The stained-glass windows that would bring daylight into the space looked perfect. He washed his face and rinsed his mouth at the sink. Straightening up, his head spun, and his stomach took a few turns.

Back in the sitting room, Lewis found his client perched on an ergonomic chair wearing pinstriped pajamas. “What are you doing up already?” Jade asked.

“I had a weird dream. What are you doing here?”

“Good question.” The entrepreneur waved an arm. “Never been any arguments or fights. Totally clear energy. But when I sleep here, I get up and wander around.” He put a hand to his chin and shook his head. “Such a remarkable house.”

“Tha…”

“People lead lives of quiet desperation because they don’t have a passion. When we were kids and I told you someday I wanted you to build me a house. It was because you had a passion for architecture, just like I have a passion for discovering healthier lifestyles. I learned the outlook from you.”

“Well.” Lewis shrugged. All the alcohol, then that strange sleep, he felt foggy, if not plastered.

“The balance between good recreation and good living, you did such a job on this house.” Jade shook his head. “You did it all dispassionately.”

“So?”

“Horace Traubel said beautiful surroundings bring beautiful thoughts. You work in an uninteresting space. Somehow you made something beautiful.” The client clapped his hands, and the hatch slid up. The escalator board had dropped, leaving a naked pole. Standing up, Jade pointed at the faux painting on the wall next to the door. “Okay then. There’s no TV in this house to hypnotize you, but you can dock your phone to the monitor, and it will hardwire you to the internet. (That was something Lewis did not know.) Jade reached out and grabbed the pole, and his pajamas slid it well. “Be well and mean well,” he said.

Lewis looked at the monitor, even took out his phone. He *could* check his e-mails. Instead, he walked out the door and into the weather of the Yakima Valley. They say Katherine the Great had fruiting cherry trees carted up to her wintery palace for parties, and the peasants watched the procession go by in awe. Similarly, people dropped everything to watch, even followed, the giant bing cherry tree that reclined on a wide-load trailer from Washington State to Pennsylvania. Standing at the center of all the other mature trees transplanted from the windward side of the cascades, it crowned the main dome’s forested feel.

As Lewis stepped out, the rain stopped, lights came on here and there to augment the moonlight, but not because of motion sensors. A team from MIT had linked the household attributes with proprietary domotics. Artistically noninvasive, nobody noticed it because it got everything right. Jade tweated that “It wasn’t a smart house. It was a wise house, and it will never use your words against you like a smartphone can.”

 Lewis took in the space, as if for the first time. The bedroom suites all backed to the base of the main dome, so an angled portion of the little buildings protruded outside of the dome. The dining room/kitchen, the den, the spa, and the living room stood free as complete buildings of their own, arranged about the domes with roofs of sod, excepting the palm thatch in the tropical dome. The extensive library was hidden far overhead on cast acrylic bookshelves. The moon slipped in and out of marbled clouds.

Walking along the curve of the dome Lewis studied the cascading watercress garden. The water moved strong and evenly, ionizing while moistening the air. He dipped his hands in for a drink and dried them on his pants. The geothermal heat exchange had the water like a cold mountain stream. Lewis considered how much warmer it felt in this environment than it had outdoors when they came in. The geothermal wells, despite the cost and time putting them in, they would faithfully provide the varied temperature needs of the entire property for generations to come.

\*\*\*

As he passed the low archway to the Los Angeles bio-dome, Lewis peaked in at the tall lemon tree, the mature hass avocado, and the other fruit and nut trees selected from that mild Byzantine climate. A man in brown Carhartt pants and a blue jeans shirt came toward him from the spa. Taking off his red cap as he came near, he smiled broadly. “Well, if it isn’t the architect!” he taunted, voice spiked with respect.

“What do you think?” Lewis waved a hand over his shoulder as if to include it all, a shyness to the gesture. Lewis had worked for this carpenter back in his early days, and he respected Liam’s work and his work ethic — his cooperative temperament, his love of science fiction and speculating undiscovered possibilities. They used to bicycle together, and the old fart usually left him in the dust. As he came closer, Lewis smelled it, that spice aftershave Liam always wore. “What do you think about the house?”

“It’s certainly futuristic.”

“Jade Misos says that science has finally caught up with science fiction.”

“That’s a good one.” He smiled knowingly at Lewis. “Like that can ever happen.”

“Right?” Liam looked stronger than the last time Lewis saw him, no oxygen hoses hanging off his ears, more like the man who pounds a framing spike in with two blows of the hammer, one to set it, one to send it home, a 2/2 time signature. “You want to walk it around a bit?” Lewis asked.

“I already have. Unreal! You hit it out of the park, Sol.” The old trim-fitter smiled slyly. “Any chance you can find us a few bikes to try out the track?”

“Oh, I don’t know.” The memory of his race with Jade made Lewis flinch. Then he remembered. “Hey. There’s a way we can bike inside these domes.”

“Really?” Liam looked about at the pristine forest floor. “Won’t we muck it up?”

“Not down here.” He pointed above. “Up there. C’mon.” They followed the trail past the cherry tree, across to the brick building near the entrance to the tropical dome. A squirrel followed them, tree to tree, chattering the backsides. Walking around, Lewis climbed the ladder bolted to the back wall, stepping carefully onto the sod, turning to wait. Starlings murmerated above.

Climbing up onto the roof, Liam stepped around him to examine the plexiglas contrivance that hung from above. “That’s a bicycle?”

“Yeah. Weird, huh?” Lewis shrugged. “That’s how you access the library.”

Liam put his hand on the clear director’s chair of a seat, pulled at one of the arm levers and the cycle moved back. He turned the plexiglas crank with the clear pedal, and it moved forward. Liam looked closely at the slender rare earth magnesium bands wrapped around the long edge of the crank, also set in a groove wrapping around the edge of the pedals, invisibly strengthening the construction. His eyes followed the thick tube encasing the drive shaft up to the dome. It powered the tandem gears that rode the plexiglas cog rail track along the curve of the dome. “All that plexiglas.” He turned to look at Lewis, shaking his head. “Why not just make it out of metal?”

“Mr. Misos wants to avoid distracting from the nature scene.” Lewis smiled. “Riding over the radar, you might say.”

“But you’ll still see the fellow pedaling the thing.” Liam shook his head. “Seems more distracting that way.”

“Well…” Lewis opened the brass box on the sod beneath the bike, pulling out the edge of something fabric. “We don’t have to wear these, but he’s got cloaking robes.”

“Really?” Liam held out a hand. “I’d say we do have to.”

“Okay. Guess so.” Lewis handed him one of the robes, and slipped the other one over his coat, watching himself disappear. Looking up he saw Liam smiling, and that was almost all he saw of the man. He had his hood up. When Lewis fumbled in the pockets of his robe for the gloves and booties, he felt the three discs.

Liam already had one of his frisbees out. “You know what this means?”

“Yes. I know.” Lewis sighed. “This means War.”

“That *is* what Jade had in mind?”

“Probably. Just like when we played War in scouts.” He stepped closer to the rail-cycle. “Then let’s get the rules straight.”

“Yes. Let’s do that.” Liam held his hands up. “If I hit you with a frisbee,you’re in my army. If you catch my frisbee, I’m in your army.”

“Either way, with just two of us, it’s sudden death.” Lewis pointed at the button on top of one of the hand levers. “This, like the label says, is the power button. It’s for people who need some help or don’t have any strength at all. I’d say you can’t use that to move you while you throw at your enemy.”

“Fair enough.”

“Fine. The other bike will cue up automatically after this one rolls out.” He looked at Liam questioningly. “You want to go first or second?”

“Age before beauty.”

“Saddle up.” Lewis strained his neck looking to the high reading deck across the dome, a point that the rail eventually reached. “All we need is the moonlight,” he called out to the house, snapping the safety arms down around Liam’s waist. “Go.” As the older man pedaled up into the dome, the lights dimmed, and Lewis watched him slipping into darkness.

When the next bike pulled up, Lewis hopped on, sweeping the safety arms down around his waist. He flipped the pedals with his toes and tucked his feet into the clips. It was on. He wanted to catch up and attack from behind. Using the arm levers, like punching right and left, gave him the extra strength to climb steeper. The cogs locking the wheels to the rails gave him the traction. The reciprocal movements of arms and legs felt balanced like hands flying fast running on turf. The bearings and gears made a delicate sound.

The air changed as he entered the portal to the tropical zone, crossing from a clockwise rotation to a counterclockwise dome rotation. The moon went behind the clouds. Lewis knew the library hung within easy reach, but he could not see it. Although, by now, he could see it in his sleep. Working this high up took remarkable craftsmanship to produce such a perfect ring of clear cabinetry. Counterbalanced doors secured a steady seventy-degree book storage at forty percent relative humidity. If you could not find a book, the house would override your bike and take you to it.

The moon came out from behind the clouds, and Lewis looked down upon the trees this job had made him learn: banana, mango, papaya, kiwi, acerola cherry, monk fruit, the trees that bore the large smooth skinned avocados and all the others. He looked to where he thought Liam might have got, maybe a quarter orbit ahead on the rail, watching for a robe-ripple or glint of moonlight on lucite. Glowing frisbees flew at him fast, out of position to catch one. Leaning back in the seat, Lewis locked the pedals to a stop, and they spun close by his face. The moon went behind the clouds.

Lewis cranked into the darkness with everything he had. Those frisbee came from halfway around the dome. He had to pick up the pace! Keeping a realistic mental placement of Liam in the dark, when the moonlight filtered past the clouds, he saw a moving reflection of its light. Lewis fired a frisbee, but he heard it smack against glass. “That was close!” Liam shouted, and that was it. Liam would have left the tropical dome now, and Lewis would have to wait for another shot.

Crossing back into the center dome, climbing steeply, Lewis pushed himself to catch up. Looking to the heights as the moonlight momentarily filtered down, fading to black, he wondered. Could he use another sense to locate Liam on the rail. That was the kind of thing Jade would contemplate, maybe even talk over with a psychic. Lewis kept cranking, pointedly not looking down. Then he smelled it. Ever so faintly – Liam’s spice aftershave. Lewis pumped the levers with a frisbee clamped between his fingers and the grip. As he climbed, the scent grew stronger.

The moon came out and there it was, the reading platform, coming up on the right. Suddenly the smell of cologne got shaking-hands strong, but in the bright moonlight, up that close he ought to see and hear Liam’s bike. Lewis set his hand to curve the frisbee out the rail route in front of himself, but impulsively he spun it sideways. A subtle shift of the light on the platform in his peripherals prompted a hair trigger response. He still had it! As Lewis heard his frisbee thunk off a digitally invisibilized body, Liam’s last frisbee dinged his forehead.

Lewis set the parking brake and cut loose, stepping onto the platform. Liam took his gloves off to lend a hand. Then they sat back in comfortable armchairs and debated who landed the first shot, in the end calling it a tie. Liam had pushed his hood back, but his robe made it easy for Lewis to look through him at the compressed seat cushions of his chair and the unabridged dictionary on the table next to him. Up that close, he saw the ripples.

 “House. We need to see better,” said Lewis. Meticulously placed lighting displayed the vastness of the main dome – the trees, the buildings and the waterfalls.

Liam took his hat off and whistled. “This is a lot of house!”

“It sure is.” Lewis nodded. “The media makes like Jade is bad to build this because there’s people without housing.”

“As builders we have let those people down.” He wrinkled his forehead. “How high did you put this platform, Sol? Like a twelve-story building?”

“Yeah. New construction. Ninth floor on one of Sullivan’s Chicago buildings.”

“Ah, yes. Taller ceilings back then.” He scratched his chin. “It helps that you’ve got the safety railings on the sides, and thank God this floor’s not plexiglas, but if we hadn’t both worked construction, we’d be scared.” He leaned forward. Then he leaned back. “Wait. I am scared.”

“Yeah. Back when I was framing for you, I didn’t mind getting up on a lam beam or walking the top of a stud wall. One foot in front of the other, right?”

“Right.”

“But I’m not exactly your eat a box lunch on the girder kind of guy.”

“I know that old picture. One of the hardhats has a whisky bottle.”

“Speaking of which.” Lewis reached under his robe and into his coat pocket. “Can I offer you a drink of scotch?” He set the bottle on the table between their chairs.

At the back of the table were some bottles of local spring water. “I think I’ll have one of these instead.” Liam opened it and took a drink. “I’m Irish. I had to take Bob and Bill’s cure.” He twisted the whisky bottle around so he could see the label. “But I remember. That *is* some good hooch.” He thumbed through the book on dreams left on the table between them, careful of the bookmark. “If you sell your soul during a black out drunk, it still counts,” he mused.

Looking at the bottle, Lewis realized he was still strongly under the influence. “Water sounds good.” He opened one and took a long drink. He was parched.

“Yes. Water is good to drink.” Liam took another swallow and set his bottle down. “But I’ll tell you, I was a strong swimmer.”

“That’s what I thought.”

“Yeah. Those times I swam across the Ohio River as a boy. In the back of my mind, I was always afraid.”

“Really?”

“Really. I mean, kid you not, if I ever get cremated, I don’t want my ashes to go into a river. Drowning scares me way more than heights.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Lewis smiled wryly.

“*Sure* you will.” Liam laughed. “Hey, when… you know… when my condition made it so you and Tala took me in for a while?”

“Yeah?”

“I logged some hours zoning out in front of your TV. With so many things I forgot, I still remembered about sci-fi and fantasy.” He shook his head, looking upward, to gather the memories. “I noticed that the commercials were mostly fantasy.” He looked at Lewis and smiled. “Inanimate objects, animals or tiny people telling you what to buy. Fantasy became reality’s paying partner.”

 “I wish I’d had more time to watch *The Twilight Zone* with you.”

“You were busy. Tala made sure I had everything I needed. And she was sweet about it.”

“You’re kidding. She’s been so grumpy for so long.”

“I remember when that started.” Liam shook his head sadly. “You asked her if she ever wondered what things would sound like without her voice.”

“I was joking!”

“Okay. Well, after that she clammed up around you.”

“Serious? I didn’t notice.”

“Yeah. I know. You had something going on with your phone. All your lists.” He held his hat in his hands. “It’s good to be with someone, Sol. To have those moments together.”

“I’ve been so short of time.”

“Schedule it in. Just like anything else that matters.” The older man looked down at his hat, turning it upside down. “I have to tell you something that you might not like so much.”

“What?”

“One time I walked in on Tala in the bathroom with her robe open.”

“Huh? That was an accident, right?”

“I was in a bad way, no reaction time at all. I didn’t look away. I just stood there like an oaf.” Hand over his mouth, Liam shook his head. “Tala had her back to me standing at the mirror, and I could see, y’know, in the mirror. Then she saw my reflection, and she closed her robe fast. I startled her, and I felt like a creep.”

“So you’re worried about what she thinks of you?”

“Well, looking back on it now, Tala must of seen I was embarrassed. She smiled and opened her robe again for a quick fpeak. We both laughed at the same time. ‘I thought you were still in there,’ she said. I nodded yes.

“I went back to the kitchen to wait my turn for the bathroom, sitting there with my coffee. She laughed, and I did, too. From down the hall we laughed together. The way she said it, Tala was so funny. I know you think she doesn’t understand things because she grew up overseas, but that was just as smart as it was kooky. Made me feel okay.” He sighed, and he nodded at Lewis. “She’s a good soul, your wife.” Liam stood and stepped to the relief globe, giving it a spin. “I guess we should get going.”

“We can leave the robes here.” Lewis took his off and put it on his chair. He put his bottle back into his coat pocket, patted the canister in the other pocket. “Hey! Where *is* your bike?”

“I hopped off here and used the power button to send it on.” He held his hands wide. “You said I can’t use the power button to move myself while I throw at you. I didn’t.”

Descending from the reading deck, automatic brakes doing the work, Lewis looked down on the fountains, trees and roofs. Circling around the Los Angeles bio-dome he admired the ring of books that appeared to float in the air. Perhaps the artificial smog caused it. He sneezed a supremely “*Salud*”-worthy number. Riding the track on the downhill side of the big dome, stepping off to the sod roof, Lewis felt as if he were in a video game. He pushed the power button and sent the bike back, fully intending to wait for the man.

\*\*\*

“Lewis. Come with me. I have somebody you must meet.” The look in Jade’s eyes, the excitement in his voice, Lewis let himself get ushered off the roof, coaxed into the hole hinged beneath a convincing fake rock. Polished chrome plated, strategically lit with LED’s, the slide started out gently. Lewis had a chance to get himself arranged on it before it went nearly vertical, and then it curved up and out, leaving his feet on sand like in a playground.

Lewis stepped out of the sandbox before his esteemed colleague came down head-first shouting “Rumspringa!” like Russell Gransten. He used his arms to crawl through the sand and drag his legs down off the slide. Standing, he brushed off his knee flannel. “I keep doing it and doing it.” He pointed. “That’s still a rush!”

“Yeah. That was all right,” Lewis said, although it upset his stomach. Nonetheless, steady on his feet, he knew where he was, the tunnel veered north to the greenhouses one way, the solar furnace the other. The network of tunnels provided a way to travel the land when chem-trails cross the sky, and that mattered to Jade. Couldn’t commercial airlines make all the prophetic webs in the sky with massively unlikely amounts of flights? Even though the space had good illumination, without looking at his drawings Lewis could not say what letter a compass would indicate. He and Jade went down one of them.

“Coleridge, an English romantic said we need ‘That willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith.’” Jade paused before stepping onto the walkway. “That’s the secret to getting out of the ‘quiet desperation.’”

“You give the tabloid-mills more fodder than Grandpa Kanye’s toxic posts about ageism.” Lewis turned to face Jade. “It’s not like you to stick to one theme for so long. Are you saying all this stuff about a chain of writers to get me talking about the chain of architects I used to dream about joining?”

“‘Used to dream about?’” Jade shook his head.

“Yeah. ‘Used to.’” Lewis made a few frustrated hand movements, looking for the words. “In case you hadn’t noticed, my office isn’t exactly on Michigan Avenue overlooking the Chicago.” He laughed hollowly. “It’s in Indianapolis, which has no navigable rivers. Ask Vonnegut. The Wabash doesn’t even come home to Naptown.” He stepped onto the moving floor.

 Jade always reversed the walkway at full speed. Lewis had tried it like that a few times. Another day he could have handled it fine. But when Lewis started walking, he got dizzy, then nauseous. “Why do you run this thing backwards?”

“To stay in shape. If you take care of your body now, it can take care of you later.” Write that down! Really. Kid you not.

“Sorry. I’m not up to it. You gotta give me a pass this one time. House, slow it down, please.”

“House, ignore that. Maintain protocol!”

Lewis struggled to keep up. Something about losing half the ground that he took, it made the walk psychologically harder. The tunnel walls were lined with custom shaped concrete blocks, an homage to Frank Lloyd Wright. One of the blocks on Jade’s side of the corridor had a speaker hidden inside it: “Mr. Misos?”

“Yes, House.”

“You own me, that is, you own this house, so you determine the floor direction in a situation like this. But honoring your guest’s request could be good for your friendship and ultimately your conscience.”

Jade turned and looked at Lewis, eyes wide. “The house understood what I didn’t hear you say.”

“I said I’m not feeling up to it.”

 “Stopping the belt would be a compromise,” the house said wisely. “Going half speed forward would be a kind gesture.”

“That’s smart. Make it so.” The moving walkway came to a stop, and then slowly moved forward. Jade walked at a leisurely speed. “This better?”

“Thank you, Jade.” Lewis said it sincerely.

“All right. Thank you, House. You have created harmony.”

“That’s what I am here for, Mr. Misos.”

“If only every house thought like that.” Jade patted Lewis on the back. “See? Suspend your disbelief. Reading a book or watching a movie, choose not to poke holes in the story.”

“Sure. As long as it makes sense. Where does that leave you?”

 “It’s the same with life.” Jade gestured emphatically. “Consciously use your imagination, like Tom Bleasedale. You have an office in the Wrigley Building. You’ve believed that since childhood. So willingly suspend your disbelief, and you shall have the office.”

In real life that came off a lot more condescending than it reads off the page, irking Lewis. “How does suspending your disbelief work with the militant minimalists that come out here to protest every Saturday morning?” he snapped.

“I shelter my imagination against their ideas.”

“Even when they predict that your den of iniquity will usher down upon you?”

“Hey, go easy. I’m just talking up your prospects. You don’t have to talk mine down.” Jade stepped off the belt as they came alongside an alcove with a staircase. A fire extinguisher hung next to the elevator. The walkway stopped. “House, elevator Mr. Lewis to the roof.”

“I’m just messing with you. Your house *will* stand the test of time.” Lewis shook his old friend’s hand. “Life is good.”

\*\*\*

The door opened with a ding. Riding to the observatory, Lewis might have thought about the construction of this multi-purpose building. Continually poured in place, it took months to fabricate the forms that shaped such a perfect dish-faced concrete tower wall. All the cement would not completely cure for decades. The structure went up on the outside of the bike track, facing away from everything else because the parabolic reflector focused so much light after the stretched polyethylene terephthalate skin went on. Although most of the light hit the smaller secondary concave light condenser, the area stayed off limits during daylight hours. Nights, the small amphitheater out there had a fine sound system for watching films projected onto the curved wall. Days the solar furnace powered everything and charged batteries. Lewis might have thought about all that.

Instead, while riding to the top floor, Lewis considered Liam complimenting his Tala. He remembered how his wife waited tables while he maxed out the loans on a prestigious five year degree. The one that Weston Wright aced. What a sacrifice! How did he ever tell her she talks too much? With this job, they finally had all the bills paid, even his loans. Lewis had excellent insurance. He knew he would be doing the right thing. Make it look like an accident, Lewis would finally be a good provider. He had another place in mind, but as he got off the elevator, Lewis wondered if a fall from up there could seem plausible. As high as the tallest dome from top to ground, the tower had the long observation deck, with chest high railings. He shook one, and it felt solid.

It occurred to Lewis that rather than scaring him, the idea of jumping from this high felt freeing. Lewis considered the way he used to walk the narrow tops of walls with his hands full. Guys always say, no matter the height, if you can walk it, you can walk it. At Jade’s behest, the carpenters planed and rip-cut wood to non-standard dimensions, a declared attempt to break free of the visual paradigm of sameness in modern construction. As the cap to a sturdy steel railing, the blueprints called for a flat strip of water-resistant cypress, two inches thick by five inches wide, actual size. That looked far easier to walk than a three and a half inch wide two by four, so Lewis swung a leg up on it, got himself up and crouching.

Lewis looked down the sloping glass wall, looked all the way to the ground, nary a drop of adrenaline. Lewis stood up and walked the rail. As he neared the narrower middle of the long observatory walkway, the retractable telescope turned. Moonlight flashed off the lens. A man stepped back from the monitor and came toward him, grey beard without a mustache, tweed cap. Not a tall man, he had a smile and a presence of significant stature. “Sulemon Lewis!” He tipped his flat cap. “I’m Rodney Wright.”

Crouching, Lewis shook hands reverently, the man who pioneered the intentional use of color and space in childcare. “I thought you were…”

“Your client got it in his head that I should talk to you.”

“What about?”

“I’ve said critical things about domes, that arranging furniture and hanging pictures gets difficult.” He rested his forearms on the railing and looked uphill to the domes shining in the moonlight. “Putting sub-structures inside the domes, what an artistic solution.” He nodded approvingly.

“Thank you.” He tried to think of something to say. “Building inside a biosphere got the client talking about working fun things into it.” Lewis put his hands on the railing, worked himself around to sitting, his legs hanging off the risky side. Putting the view and danger out of his mind, he looked over at the man who followed Frank Lloyd Wright’s suggestion, skipped college and got his architectural license. The classified work he did in Germany had taught him people skills. He learned about construction growing up with his contractor father, back in the days two-by-fours measured two inches by four inches.

How surreal for Lewis, respectful comments from his idol: “All the ancillary structures, and so many mature trees.”

“Most of the trees were here,” said Lewis. “We moved some.”

“It looks like a town.”

“See, the media has made such a big stink about conspicuous consumption. But people from my client’s corporation will stay here to work and for vacations. Misos says that visiting here can help employees who run into problems coping with life.” Lewis took his hands from the railing to make a gesture suggesting nonattachment. “Who knows? Anyway, Mr. Misos says that they’re all his family, a multinational corporate commune he’s calling it – like Mountain Forrester.”

“That’s the spirit.” Wright looked off wistfully, perhaps remembering the years spent working the civil rights movement or opening the Design Center, giving free architectural services to people on tight budgets in the inner city; the waiting area had steel tractor seats, painted red; red super-graphic arrows crossed the walls. His son helped build it out. This was the man, when asked to build a colonial style house said: “Fine. We’ll build you a log cabin. “Do you remember the time your father brought you to my office so you could meet me and Syd?”

“Some of it.” Lewis nodded. “Was your office by the Chicago River?”

“The office I had on Ohio Street was by Lake Michigan about a mile north of the Chicago River, near Al’s Fishery.”

“Maybe that was it.”

“No. When your father brought you to visit, we were in Kentucky.” He lowered his voice as if to tell a secret. “We saved a lot of money putting our offices in small towns or out in the country.” He smiled at the memory that brought. “When I shook your little hand, you said you would open your architecture business as soon as you finished high school. You already had the T-square.”

“I remember that. You gave me some triangles and a set of Suites Catalogues. You told me I’d better go to college first because times had changed.”

Wright groaned at that comment. “Have they ever. It’s a shame how codes, HOA’s and laws have taken building a house out of the hands of the common man. When I was a kid, I saw farmers fill a coke bottle up to the line with water and use it as a level. They built houses that said something about them, about their family, initialing the fresh cement.” He shook his head. “Now, kids grow up in uninteresting houses.”

“My house is uninteresting.”

“Do you have a family?”

“Well.” Lewis thought about how to answer. “I’m on the road so much that my wife’s pretty cross with me.” He looked down. “I haven’t acted so nice either.” He put a hand to the side of his head. “You and your wife went to job sites together. She was your creative partner.”

“Yes, she was. But it took a learning curve. Syd had a literature degree before she went to IIT.” He smiled. “She knew how to not split an infinitive.” Wright stroked his beard. “Tell you what, now and then when you visit the job site, take your wife with. Let her catch the excitement of a building going up.” He pointed to the small spruce fastened onto the railing near the telescope, a Scandinavian practice intended to mollify tree spirits the building may have disturbed. “Let her top off a house.”

“I don’t know.” Lewis shook his head no, but then he shrugged maybe. “Yeah. I could try it… if she wanted.”

“She’ll help you figure out what your clients need,” said the older architect. “And you’ll get better work out of the guys.” He walked to the railing on the other side. “You know how women are.” Thinking that he did not know how women are, Lewis spun around, jumped down and followed. The man who made the Chicago 7 news with the solar collector atop his Clark Street rooftop, Rodney Hugh Wright, leaned over the railing sighting across the giant reflective dish. “Look at this thing.” The mentor turned and patted Lewis on the back. “You built a solar town.”

“Nothing new,” Lewis said blandly. “You built the first solar town a long time ago.”

“That and a neckel will get me a cup of coffee.” He shrugged. “I walked the job site earlier, and I noticed something. You built with brick like Sullivan, stone like Frank Lloyd and…”

“I know. And SIP’s panels like you.” Lewis felt so humbled by the visit, he spoke candidly. “I don’t have a ‘thing’ of my own. I use the things that have worked in the past, make sure the work gets done right and then everybody’s happy.”

“I wasn’t thinking of the SIP’s walls for me. Every house I built, I looked for ways to make it fun to live in.” He looked off to the side, thinking up an example. “I built a horseshoe shaped house in Kentucky. If you stood at one end of it, you could see across into the other end.” He looked Lewis in the eye. “It may have taken your client to get you on the right track, but fun is your thing, too, taken to the next level.” He took off his hat revealing his wavy silver hair. “Look at you, walking a railing this high up for the fun of it. My sons never did get the knack for driving a sixteen-penny nail in with two swings, but I’ll bet you could.” He shook hands. “Be well and mean well.”

\*\*\*

Had Lewis begun to sober up, or had the positive feedback done some healing? He stepped inside the elevator and stood next to Jade, glad to see his friend, completely unannoyed that he had dogged him all night. “Who’s next?” he asked. “Le Corbusier? He drew beautiful plans using a pencil and a string for the compass in his early years.”

“Lewis! The house made a disturbing observation.”

“Or Mies van der Rohe, the Bauhaus guy? ‘Glass and steel, that’s the deal.’”

Jade tapped a button. The elevator stopped. “You said ‘Life is good,’ but you don’t believe it.”

“That so?” Lewis turned and looked at him. “Then what *do* I believe?”

“I don’t know. Try saying ‘Life is bad.’”

“Whatever. Life is bad!”

“He was strong for that.”

“Thank you, House.” Jade regarded Lewis appraisingly. “Down inside, you believe it.”

“Fine.” Lewis reached past Jade and pushed the arrowed button. “Maybe life *is* bad.”

“It’s like your battery is hot on the black terminal, cold on the red side,” he attempted to explain. “Good things make you feel bad. You think bad things will make you feel good. Your polarity is reversed.”

The door opened. “You think your house knows everything.”

The shady side of the tower wall sloped, making the pool that filled the first floor much wider than the walkway on top of the tower. The pool water stayed a brisk temperature. Here and there, jets streamed heated water up from the bottom like hot springs. From the elevator alcove, Lewis could see somebody treading water near the edge of the pool in a steaming spring.

It seemed that building two different complicated houses, driving two directions from his house, had set a rift in Lewis’ home. He worked hard. Tala took up the slack with the housework, house and home. They did not get out much. The time they spent together mostly happened in the kitchen or the living room where he had his desk, the D-sized vectographic plotter and the couch where he usually slept and might even be sleeping right now. Was it the alcoholism or the workaholism? He knew he had screwed things up with her, and it had got to where Lewis felt himself tense up whenever he saw his wife. But something about that long, black hair of hers, shining wet, her smile and the sparkle that he had not seen in her eyes for so long, it was so pleasant to find her there.

“This pool is delightful,” she told Lewis as he came near. Tala ducked her head under, and popped back up, spraying water. She pointed toward the changing room. “They have an assortment of suits you can choose from. I got a one piece.” She paddled back from the pool edge, so he could get a better look at her red bathing suit. “With the circle cut out in the middle it’s a little sexy, right?”

“Is it ever!”

“Good answer.” She thrust her palm through the water and splashed him. “Go get a suit, so we can swim.”

 Long day, Lewis needed a shower, and he had to use Jade’s sci-fi story of a walk-in fixture. The moving spray-heads probed his back, then gentle splashes cleaned the sensitive spots like deft fingers. A little creepy. Lewis pulled on some black trunks. Walking down the steps, the pool water felt cold, but good. When did he last go swimming? It felt like years. No, it *had* been years. He kicked off from the bottom step and held out a hand to catch the pool edge, pulling himself along to the warm water.

Tala put her arms around his waist and kissed his cheek. Then she let one arm go to point where the pitched wall of glass looked out across the bike track and the trees in the moonlight. “It’s a lovely night for a swim, isn’t it?”

“Hmm.” He looked around the pool house, such a tall ceiling and all the glass on the non-dish side of the structure. It felt like outdoors, and the garden spaces and rocks and trees, the handmade tile enhanced that affect. For the second time tonight, Lewis allowed himself a wave of satisfaction over what appeared to be a job well done. (Knock on divergently dimensioned wood.) “It is an excellent night for a swim.”

“Marco!”

“Polo.”

Tala wrinkled her nose. “For such a rich man, I’m surprised the pool is so… well… so not so large.”

“You haven’t seen the half of it.”

“What do you mean?”

“Take a deep breath and follow me.” Lewis inhaled a lungful and dove, stroking his arms to his side and kicking through the rings that lit up to mark his way through the tunnel. It was a short distance, just enough to give a touch of adventure. When he came out the side of the pool sheltered beneath the wide stretch in the bike trail, the lighting came on, first underwater, then above. Lighting is everything. Lewis stood and turned around as Tala came out of the tunnel. It had been some time since he saw that much of her perfect skin at once, and he caught his breath.

Tala stood, elbows tucked in, wiping her hands down her face and laughing. She looked *so* happy. “*This* is the half of it?” A finger held up, she prepared her critique. “Oh Sol, you’ve done wonders with this space. It’s amazing what you can throw together with a few timbers and boulders.”

“Artificial boulders.”

“Good enough. Probably saving the lives of countless *real* boulders.”

“Rest assured.” Lewis forgot how much fun he and Tala used to have just talking to each other. “I love the sound of your voice.”

“Don’t distract me, you flatterer.” She giggled. “Tell me. Have I seen the half of it, now? I mean, I’m not big on math like you.” Tala gestured to where the water lapped at her belly button. “It’s nice, but it’s a mite shallow.”

“It gets a smidge deeper.” Lewis pointed with a flourish. “This way.” He turned and strode toward the deeper water that cut a line beneath the inside edge of the bike track. The sides of the pool had the look of rocks along a mountain river, and the channel had the same material for a lining. A rack housed refreshments and inner tubes. Lewis handed one to Tala and took one for himself.

“Don’t you want a beer?”

“Maybe later.” They sat back on their tubes and paddled into the deeper water. Lewis put a hand on Tala’s and got them pointed in the right direction. “House, let the river roll.”

“Plasmic!” Tala exclaimed when the water rushed in behind them.

“Hold on. It gets better.” Lewis still had a hand on Tala’s tube, bobbing along together. But when the waterway narrowed to match the changing width of the bike path above it, and the exactingly placed rocks proliferated, he knew he had to keep his hands on his own tube – or lose it. Besides, Tala had it under control. Gracefully curving her body, stretching a long leg to counterbalance, she looked serene, losing herself in the dance.

Lewis tried to follow her lead, mimicking, it felt like the thing to do, mimicking her moves. Rolling up and down the foamy waves they found the twisting path of least resistance through the rocks, sought the water course way. Briefly, the water got deep, moving slowly. “The way we move,” Tala said, flashing her smile back over her shoulder. “I feel like we’re connected.”

Lewis nodded. He felt the same way. At peace and present. He thought about where they were in relation to the bike path. “Hold on tight,” he warned. He heard the turn by the front gate coming, the toughest rapids in the river. Water splashed over his face.

Lewis had made fun of the rubber rocks, made from the same stuff as the “nerf” rails, over five hundred unique shapes repeated into the river-way, a verisimilitude of randomness. But when they splashed into the simulated class four rapids, the roughest waters sheltered beneath the toughest bike turn, and his head bounced back hard against a boulder, Lewis knew by how much the rubber compressed what a real rock would have done. The river stopped immediately.

Was this ticking off a punch list or was it a performance test? The plants checked out, realistically located in disguised planters with drip lines and adequate drainage. The narrow strip of shallow water designated for people who lost their tubes looked realistic. Everything looked right. The beaver dam placed by a recording of rapids strengthened the next rapids.

He saw Tala walking back from downstream. He waved at her and grinned. “You lost it too?”

She held up her tube.

“Oh.” He hung his head in shame. “Thanks for coming back for me.”

“Sure. I was just sitting there.” Tala brushed her hand down his side. “We need to find you another tube.”

“Over here.” Lewis led the way through a stone archway. “When Jade told me how rough he wanted to operate this stretch of river, I suggested it would make a good place for a hot tub and…” He sidestepped the steaming, tiered pool and went to the rack in the corner. “And replacement tubes.” Lewis took one down.

“I don’t think you need that just yet,” Tala stepped down into the spa. “With a few quick moves of her arms, she darted to the other side and sat down. “C’mon in.” She could not have found a better swimsuit. Combining that with the lighting, the happy pose, Lewis saw a dream cover for *Architectural Record*.

Stepping down into the spa, he sat across from her. “Now you’ve seen all the halves of it.” Lewis put a hand to his mouth, faking a yawn. “Your basic pool.”

“Basic! There’s nothing basic in this whole house, is there?”

“Umm. Not really.”

“Misos made you talk to his kids and his wife about their ideas and drove you up the wall with his.”

“Did he ever?”

“Called you at three in the morning to run ideas by you.”

“Yep. He did that.”

“And you built something truly unique. Something beautiful.”

“Awe…” Her praise choked him up. “Thank you, Tala.” He wiped a tear. Tears of emotion release toxins. The tears you cry over onions do not.

“You built this house from the dreamy ideas of children, mixed with the dreams their parents abandoned long years ago. That sounds magical.”

“If somebody said that to me while I was designing this place…” Lewis slapped the water in front of himself. “But, you know, there’s something to what you’re saying.” There it was again, a wave of satisfaction.

“I want one.”

“Uh, Tala....” He fanned his hands out and shook his head. “You know this house, quite literally, cost a fortune, right?”

“The avocado trees, the bikes in the belfry, all that sounds fun. But the one thing I must have, it’s the river rec room.”

“Serious?”

“We’ll get a place out in the country and start all over. You always said you wanted to build your own house someday. Learn to hammer a big cement coated nail with two blows like your dad did. Have a garden and some chickens. The river will be easy.” She leaned forward and made a shoveling motion with her arms. “We can dig it by hand.”

“That would be a lot of work.”

“There’s something you don’t know about houses, Mr. Architect.”

“Oh really?” Tala had that joking tone, and Lewis began to wonder if he should take anything she said seriously.

“Really. Being stuck at home, and doing all the housework, I got this idea from your computer guy here in Altoona, Ron Gordon. You can use your home as a good mood storage bank. You make things nice when you’re feeling good, like when I painted the kitchen or the time I shampooed the carpets.”

“Thank you for…”

She held a hand up. “Now, if I’m not feeling so good in the morning, I sit in the kitchen with my tea and look at my trim-work. That cheers me up.”

“I get it.”

She nodded. “If we have an argument in the living room, I look at the carpet, and that helps.”

“That example makes me feel bad, but…”

“I’m just saying, think how good we would feel living in a house that we built with our own four hands.”

“You’re serious.” He poked at one of her feet with one of his. “I wouldn’t think you’d want to be around me that much. I’ve been so busy, and such a jerk.”

“I got pretty grumpy, myself.” She slid forward on her seat and put her foot on top of his. “Schmooze me a little and back off the sauce. We’ll be okay.” She curled her fingers and made a shape with her hands. “It’s all in the heart, you know.”

“This seems too good to be real.” He pushed his thumbnail into his fingertip and felt pain. “If you’re a dream, I don’t want reality.”

“I feel real to me.” She gazed off thoughtfully. “I’ve read some books about dreams, and…”

“So, you do think this is a dream?” Lewis looked around, and still everything appeared so woken.

“But so amazing, I think I astral traveled here.”

“O-o-oh.” That put everything in a different light, a dream taking place in the real world. “And I astral travelled here from up at the house.”

 “You could be sleep walking, which still means you’re dreaming.” A concerned look darkened her face. “They say it can get dangerous, waking a sleepwalker.” Tala shook her head. “Phew. Lucky you didn’t breathe water through your nose.”

“If only, somehow, we could remember this.”

Tala looked at him with a sly look on her face. “If we make mad, passionate love, you’d think at least one of us would remember that.” Then she put her hands up. “Down boy. That would wake you up. And if it didn’t, I’d slap you for sleeping through it.”

“Sometimes you have such a naughty sense of humor.” Lewis shook his head. His side ached from all the funny things Tala had said. Then he held up a finger. “Hey! Did you flash my dad?”

At first Tala looked embarrassed, turning her head away, but then she smiled. “I did the right thing. He saw them anyway.” She tugged her top down a moment, including them into the conversation. “I wanted Dad to know I didn’t think he was a pervert, and he got it.”

“Yeah.” Lewis put his hand on his chin. “I think he did. Thanks for being so nice to him. I mean, all the other ways.”

“I love you, Lewis.”

“I love you, Tala.”

She dove into the steaming water and came up beside him, a wet kiss for his cheek. “Do you know who the first carpenter was in the bible?”

“Well…” Lewis stroked her arm, thinking. “Noah built an ark. That should have taught him some skills.”

“Nope. Adam.”

“What did he build?”

“The first doghouse.” She winked. “Move over little dog, the mean old primogenitor’s movin’ in.”

\*\*\*

It was the goofy way she sang it. The laughter woke Lewis with a choke, and he worried for a moment. But, no, the laughter had not awakened him from a sleep-walk. He safely lay in the sleeping pod and had slept there for a generous portion of the night. Hmm. Maybe Jade had a worthwhile idea with this bed. Lewis had not slept *so* deeply in *so* long. He ached, and he knew why. For the first time since breaking ground on this house, his muscles stopped the constant clenching manifestation of stress that filled his every working moment. And they were all working moments, even when he slept. His newly relaxed muscles felt sore after letting it all go. It felt good.

But what a night, even the flywheel bike race with Jade, he did not know for sure if it happened. It all felt *so* real, some of it just had to have happened. But dream or real, drunk or blacked-out, he knew it know, it all counts. Sitting on the edge of the futon, Lewis put on his shoes. He took his coat from the chair and went out the door to the hallway, leaving the sleep pod door open behind him.

He felt more like going outside to a shrubbery than up a fire pole to the bathroom. It was a chilly March night, nearly full moon overhead, overcast like parallel feathers of a wing. Some witches had a talk going on at the Hampton Inn. Friday the thirteenth coming up. Lewis thought about how every bed on the property lay directly upon the earth, a place for naturally regenerative sleep. Down the hill, Lewis could see the domes, reflected as if by a mirror on the glass of the pool house, a cover for *Dwell* if he ever saw one.

He looked beyond at the bike track, happy he got to race it. Once younger visitors clanked their skateboards down on it, scheduling would get tricky, finding the skate track open and un-stunk by stash. That got him thinking. Lewis reached into his coat pocket, put the bottle to his lips and tipped it back.

Going down, this time it hit him so differently. Lewis held the bottle where he could see the label. He started drinking the brand months ago, but it seemed like the first time he tasted it. Twelve years old. “That *is* some good hooch,” he muttered. “Maybe too good.” And Lewis hid it under a hemlock for some lucky and more restrained soul to find someday. Ordinarily, ravens keep to themselves at night, but the moonlight shone through brightly, and one of them felt compelled to quote: “Nevermore.” That was how it sounded to Lewis, anyway. How it sounded to Sulemon, that is. He had to get his name back in order. Lewis gazed up at the moon, wondering at the night.

“Look. It’s the architect.”

“Oh. Hi Jade.” Lewis did not hear his friend walking up. “How are you doing?” When he asked, he cared. Was it because he had nearly completed the house? The pressure was off? Gratitude for what his old friend had done to improve his life welled up. After all, there were plenty more qualified firms. Big rooms full of computer draftsmen.

“I’m okay. How about you?”

“I’m feeling a lot better after sleeping. Like I’ve got my polarities right.”

“You think so?” Jade looked surprised. “Listen, as long as we’re both up, I have a room to show you.”

“Oh? What room is that?”

Jade pointed down the brick avenue that led to the front gate. “It’s in the office building. Come on.”

“Why not.” Together they walked. Jade had his sub-zero jacket and insulated gloves. Lewis had his coat open, no gloves. He felt the chill and could care less. “Is it one of the teleconference rooms? I thought we might have some things to work out with them.”

“Well.” Jade spoke matter of factly. “This is a room you don’t know about, Lewis.”

“Please, call me Sol.”

“Huh? All right. Just like old times.” Malibu lights guided their steps through the moonlight. Lewis slowed the pace, looking off as if to study the hedge shaped like a Mahikari chon. “In a way, our situation reminds me of an Edgar Allan Poe story.”

“How so?” Lewis asked, refreshingly unperturbed by the prospect of another literary lecture.

“Fortunaro insulted his wealthy friend, Montresor, with his biting humor.”

“Wait. I made jokes about the unusual stuff you wanted in this place. I even put some words into the Pamela Anderson thing. But did I insult you?”

“Not much. In the story, Fortunaro gets progressively drunker and drunker. Montresor bricks him into a wall to disappear and die.” He patted the empty side of Lewis’ coat that had held the bottle. “You’ve been getting soberer and soberer.”

“I have,” Lewis said quietly, ready to admit his drinking problem and willing to change the subject. “The clouds look beautiful,” he said.

Jade looked up at the skies, and his face turned serious. He walked faster. “Chem-trails at night!” he said. “We can finally put an end to them.”

“I thought they were trying to put an end to you.”

 “Good point. Let’s get inside! I’ve got a nice wine for you.”

The door opened in front of them. Behind the reception desk, responsibly forested shelves displayed various Green River products. A custom built C sized etch-a-sketch depicted the Jade Misos *Rolling Stone* cover from last January. “Hello Mr. Misos and Mr. Lewis,” the receptionist said. “Welcome to Green River.”

The sign on her desk said Jeanie Reardon, the pretty lady at the reception desk, wearing only glasses, shorts and a hat. Rodney and Sydney Wright would be happy to hear, the Dream property is clothing optional. They liked that kooky stuff. One winter Waukegan day they married in a church of Rodney’s design, still under construction. For a ring, he wrapped a bandaid around Syd’s finger.

Jade looked up at a speaker. “Hello, House. We’re here to see the secret room.”

“Very well.” Lights went on in a hall to their right.

“Keep an eye on the chem-trails,” he told the house. “Let me know before it’s too late.” Jade started them down the hall with a tilt of his head. “What I think, Sol, instead of becoming a shaky financial instrument some bank might take away, a house should be a given. You build your hut. Then you go out and do the stuff you do, instead of spending all your time doing stuff so you can afford the hut.” He stopped by a door on the left at the end of the hall and smiled. “Then you can spend more money on my products.” Jade moved closer to the door and it hissed open sideways, like Captain Kirk entering Bones’ clinic.

Stepping inside they regarded the giant panel, closely matched to the width and height of the room, pulled out on one side so you could walk around behind it. “What are you doing with that SIP’s panel?” He looked at Jade, stepping back. “Are you going to push that in and block off the back of the room?”

“Exactly. Then I’ll have it dry-walled over and match up the trim. I can get away with it because I’ve got a window on this sidewall, wouldn’t you say?”

“Yeah.” He considered the scenario. “It seems you could do without the full layer of urethane sandwiched between two giant pieces of strand board for an interior wall. The insulation value and the sturdiness, even today, few homes have exterior walls this good.”

“Call me spoiled.” Jade went to a corner on their side of the unfinished room, picked up a bottle and filled a glass. “How does some fine Italian wine sound to you?”

“Well.”

A voice spoke from across the room. “Mr. Misos.”

“Yes, House?”

“I see how you and Mr. Lewis have worked together, and it seems that you could share other mutually beneficial projects in the future.”

“It seems that way to me, too, House,” Jade smiled at Lewis while he talked to his house. “So sweet. Thank you for that vote of confidence.”

“Then why do you want to seal him behind a false wall for disrespecting you with his insulting jokes?”

“What?” Jade looked at his architect with disbelief.

His architect pushed the wine away. “I was wondering the same thing.”

“You’re kidding. What makes you say that, House?”

“You have faulted him for testing positive to negative statements. You compared the moment to the Edgar Allan Poe story with that ending. And you mentioned getting away with it.”

“You sounded awfully happy when you talked about it,” Lewis agreed.

“Because I like literature.”

“As long as it’s not science fiction,” Lewis muttered. “Why is this room a secret?”

Jade sighed. “That’s why I brought you here. I have something I must keep from the world. But I shall come clean with you.”

“Yeah?”

“I’ve got a *Star Trek* room. I brought it here from my old house.”

The space behind the partition went deeper than Lewis expected. The bridge of the starship *Enterprise* faced the monitor that introduced the world to Klingons and Romulans.

“I have a problem.” Jade cast his eyes down.

“Mr. Misos. You must leave within five minutes to match the chem-trail portal timing.”

“Thank you, House.” Jade shook his head sadly. “Sol, I’m a closet Treky.”

“That doesn’t seem like a problem,” said Lewis, walking by him on the way to the big chair. “Let’s watch the Ahura episode mentioned in *Sky Tower to Mars*.”

 “Not on your life. You’re quitting your addiction. I’m quitting my compulsion. Fresh start for us as friends.” He walked out from the partition. “Help me out with this.” Together they pushed the structurally insulated panel into place. Jade handed Lewis a hammer and two framing nails. “Could you nail it in at the corners?” Merely angling the spikes through the strand-board of the new SIP’s into the side walls, it took embarrassingly many swings to get it done. Jade gave him a knowing look. “Sometimes a reversed polarity in your thinking can throw you off your game.” He held a finger up dramatically. “But sometimes it can enable a man to do unusual things.”

“Like what?”

“Like solving a problem we have with our air quality.” He zipped his coat. “Come with me to the *Sun Tracker*.”

“But the sun’s not out.”

“That’s where you come in.”

“Thanks Jeanie. Thank you House,” Jade said at the front desk before going down the hall to the exterior door to the landing pad. “Mind the fort.”

“Good luck.”

It startled Lewis, the way the Rolling Stone cover was morphing into a picture of himself, dream house domes behind him. “Now, that’s a clever invention,” he muttered, tracing his fingers down the USB wire to CPU, leading to the hardware turning the etch-a-sketch draw wheels, instructions coming from Green River™ one-line drawing software.

\*\*\*

“Do you think the house is too controlling?” Jade asked as the cockpit lowered in front of them, scissor linkages unfolding.

“Maybe.” The beam fastened underneath the descending fuselage panel, apparently a retrofit, made quite the distraction for him as an architect. It extended out beyond the craft. “The house is courteous and wise,” he managed to say.

“Reminds me of my wife,” Jade chuckled. They sat down and ascended.

“Mine, too.” A happy thought. “Where are we going?”

“Up to where portals open into a planet that’s in the same location as Earth but in an alternate reality. With a sun and climate much like ours, it rotates more slowly.”

“So, is this sci-fi or fantasy?”

“Hearing nothing about this in the media, doesn’t make it false. By the way, now and then the shadow planet wobbles.”

“Perfect. It wobbles, too!” He shook his head. “You’ve got bi-locating planet in another dimension, like that stationary reality story. It rotates slow, and it has portals connecting here. That’s one complexly convoluted sci-fi scenario that few people would have the patience to read. You know it. And you’re loving it.”

“All right, all right. You saw my *Star Trek* room. I *do* like science fiction! Sci-fi is fun. It’s like candy. But hardly anybody watches anything else, now. And people can learn so much from regular literature. That’s the stuff that keeps you healthy – like a hearty stew.”

“How does this work, Jade?” He pointed at the console.

“That’s the power switch. Steer with the yoke. Pull toward you for up. Push forward to descend. “If your polarities are reversed right, it will power up with energy collected from the moon.”

“That sounds awfully farfetched.”

“You ran the jets for the river with moonlight.”

“Really?” That sounded true. “How do you know that there are portals up there?”

“It took us a while to figure it out. My people talked to every country or corporation on Earth that could do something on this scale to our air.” He shrugged. “Nobody knew anything about it. So I started looking above for the answer. I had the house monitor the chem-trails, and it took pictures with the tower telescope. We found enough of a pattern to predict when I could sit down and watch some telling moments, live.” He paused, then spoke with a hushed tone. “I saw through to the other side!”

“Really?”

“Sometimes it’s daytime here, and it’s dark over there. Sometimes we’re the same.”

“Weird.”

“Right? And sometimes, at night, if you time it just right…” Jade paused dramatically.

“Yeah?”

“There’s a comments board.” Jade pointed to the controls. “Start it up.”

Lewis tipped up the switch cover. “Here goes.” He flipped the switch. Motors came on.

“We have power.” Jade started to pat his pilot’s back but thought better of it. “Ease back on the yoke to lift. Hold it steady.”

As they climbed, the entrepreneur explained the situation. “For a long time now, somebody has been dumping aluminum into our air.”

Nervous about the controls, it took a moment to respond. “Dumping aluminum?”

“Historically, frogs, cats and dogs have all dropped out of the portals, so why not aluminum?” Jade validated the plausible scientific scenario. “You see, samples taken from mountain snow-masses suggest a concentration of aluminum in the air when the snow fell. Further proof, independent laboratories analyzed hepa-filters placed in cities during peak chem-trail times, and they documented alarmingly dangerous levels of aluminum.”

“Why would anybody do such a thing?”

“Seriously?” Jade very nearly scoffed at him. “Isn’t it obvious?”

“No.” The whirly-bird had climbed enough to make taking a sideways look reasonable.

“The planet we share space with doesn’t recycle its cans!” Jade said damningly. “Sure, we flatten cans, but they flatten them into powder!”

Sideways through the canopy, yellow lettering warned to “Open hatch only in emergencies. Alarm will sound!” The uncommonly artistic shape of the wing with photovoltaic lines silkscreened onto the black composite, it looked like the wing of a raven, cawing garbled syllables.

“Look alive, Sol.” Jade pointed at one of the throttle levers between them. “We’re going to stay in helicopter mode. You can use that lever to hover forward when we get near to the portal. It operates a fixed rear propeller.”

“Got it.” He looked at the altimeter. “Are we getting close?”

“That cloud in front of us.” He pointed at the switch that drops the cockpit. “Push that button. Ease us forward. Yep. That’s it.”

The wind blew past them as the cockpit scissored down from the airplane. Counterfeit clouds crossing the sky indicated the difference in planetary rotations. Then they could see into the portal, see the message board, paper scraps flapping in the breeze. Rusty staples. Sighting the beam, Sulemon wondered at the unfamiliar metallurgy. Light enough, was it strong enough?

“Bring it to where the beam touches the post below the board.”

“Check.” But before a hand touched the throttle, the portal dropped from sight only to come back up and disappear from view above them. Up and down it went, lines of trail crossing the horizontal lines, a toxic checkerboard pattern. “What’s going on?”

“That’s the wobble.” He shook his head in disgust. “The Aluminumnati! How can they stand living on such a planet?”

“Might make bicycling interesting.”

“Hm. That’s an awfully positive statement.”

“That’s good. Right?”

“Don’t,” Jade cautioned. “Go changing your polarity just yet. You can move forward now.”

A few gentle touches of the lever brought them close enough that Jade signaled to stop. “Now what?”

Jade handed him a piece of paper, two sixteen penny nails and an Estwing hammer. “Just sit on the beam and slide yourself out. Post our cease-and-desist.”

“C’mon. Do you really think this piece of paper will make a difference?” For all the legal phrasing, it said little more than “Stop the Chem Trails!”

Jade nodded solemnly. “There’s no extradition between dimensions and you’ll never get a penny out of them for patents or copyrights, believe me, I know.” For a moment he looked frustrated. “But inter-dimensional recycling mandates, that’s serious.”

“Okay then.” Sol stood and stepped to the front of the floor, studying the beam, a touch of adrenalin, enough to keep him cautious. “I have to tell you something.”

“Now?”

“Science fiction has prepared people for the natural and environmental disasters that have happened. That was important!”

“You need to crouch down,” Jade hissed urgently.

“It has prepared ordinary people like me to do things like this.” Sol stepped down onto the beam and walked it.

“Sol! Be careful.”

Sulemon looked into the portal, and he could sight down the post that held up the comments board, sighting down toward the lush purple landscape below. He had to lean back, the spewing aluminum fumes watered his eyes so. Nail in his mouth, Sulemon put the point of the other against a top corner of the notarized notice, pressing it against the board.

It felt as natural as riding a bicycle, one blow set the nail. One blow drove it home. The other nail went the same way, just the way his father would have done it.

Jade started singing: “No chem-trails, sky blue. We breathe clean air again,” like *Happy Trails.*

Sol steadied himself against the post with his hammer and took the canister out of his other coat pocket. The ashes fell to the Earth and to the other dimensional planet, perfect for a sci-fi guy. “Thank you for being my father. May Heaven accept you!” His eyes teared up again, this time releasing toxins. “I didn’t drop you in water.”

\*\*\*

This architectonic story’s last dream-like vignette, Lewis drives into a town where, instead of homogenous colors and restricted heights, signage fabricated from wood, stone and iron, moves with the wind – hippy stuff that feels right. Fountain and flame embellished written messages. Reflecting the establishments’ personalities, the signs gave the town a unique charm that made it fun for the whole family to visit. It took civil disobedience to change the town, but it was worth it. A happy dream!

The townspeople build their own dwelling units with innovative methods and materials, judged by a jury of their peers. They might put an engineer on site to run numbers and set safety requirements. Rarely, a court appointed counselor reins the builder in to keep things okay for kids. Architects have more work because deregulation sparked a building boom.

These principled people, if somebody regularly scribbled on their sky and the news never said a word about it, they would get the word out themselves, writing on subway walls and tenement halls, and spraying beneath the drive-thrus at Starbucks.

\*\*\*

Sulemon thought the dawn filtering through silk seams awoke him. Then he felt his covers move. Rolling over, he saw his dream girl. “Hi.” He rubbed his eyes.

“Hi,” Tala said, under the covers next to him. “I hope you don’t mind me barging in on you at work like this.” She traced her finger across the cut in his shirt, the dried blood.

“How did you get here?”

“By train. Jade talked me into coming, but I was afeared.” Tala put a hand on his side. “The way we’ve been getting along and all.”

“It has been rough.”

“Mr. Misos booked me on the sleeper car, and I dreamed that we can work things out, you and I.”

“I think we can, too.” He patted the futon. “I finally got a good night’s sleep. I… I dreamed about you.” He put a palm on Tala’s cheek. They leaned close. “Do we want some light?” He pointed toward the crank that could raise the parachute and show them the clear blue sky.

Tala let her arm slip down behind his back. “Maybe not yet.”

“Yeah. Maybe not.”

“This is like a glass igloo.” Tala had that look. “Do Eskimos have to get a permit before they can build?”

Sol rolled his eyes. “Don’t laugh. Jade likes igloos. He says houses should express their occupants.”

“I think he has the right idea. This place is amazing. But if there were just one feature…”

“You’d want the artificial river?”

“Oh. Maybe that. But I want a bedroom like this.” She kissed him. “And I want you in it with me, happy ever after.”

“Amen!”

Thank you for reading. Let people say: “You were well. You meant well.” The end.