

## I

“Dr. Arvah, we need your help. I’ve found something peculiar, and nobody here in anthropology will even hazard a guess. Ever seen a symmetric field in the crown of a skull?”

“No, Michael, but I suppose you're about to show me one. Fossil or bone?”

“Both. Could you come over to Anthropology 213 and do a sanity check on these readings I’m getting with your new gradiometer?”

In later years Ruth Arvah would reflect on this moment, how she had almost rebuffed Michael Epps by saying she no longer made house calls, how his innocently baffled voice had tipped the balance.

“Intriguing,” Arvah responded after a pause, “I could use a break from refereeing this latest batch of journal submissions. Sometimes engineering is more barbaric than those brutes you gravediggers study. I’ll be over in ten minutes.”

Ruth Arvah, Professor of Electrical Engineering, M.D. and Ph.D., donned her parka and boots against the New England winter and braved the Cambridge snow. *Symmetric fields from a skull? What on Earth could that be?* At thirty-six she was the youngest full professor in the department, a result of several major breakthroughs in the design and application of bioelectromagnetic detectors, increasing their accuracy while lowering their cost. Her magnetocardiography equipment was rapidly replacing the older EKG technology. The medical electronics industry lavished support on her and her group of twelve post-docs and thirty graduate students. Her trusted stockbrokers had quietly husbanded her substantial patent royalties into an adequate and stable fortune.

Bustling into the lab, still shaking off the cold, Arvah found Howard Harmon and his student, Michael Epps, mesmerized by a large color monitor cabled to a computer that drew data from an oversized helmet-shaped dewar with a gaggle of electrical components. The instrument surrounded a prehistoric skull resting on a wooden table.

“Hello, Ruth. Thanks for trudging through the snow to get to us,” Harmon greeted her, “let me take your coat.”

*Who are you Howard Harmon? Ruth thought. No ring on your finger. Are you single? Why? Why am I, for that matter? Why am I even thinking about this?*

For years she had systematically avoided dwelling on thoughts of relationships, family, loneliness or men, putting every ounce of time and energy into her research. Now unbidden and unwelcome thoughts and feelings insistently clamored for center stage. Involuntarily she noticed children everywhere, beautiful children, cute infants, cherubic toddlers with beaming mothers and fathers.

“Howard. Michael.” She nodded and smiled to each of them. “What have you cooked up this time? I told you not to use those horseshoe magnets for calibration.”

“Right,” Michael laughed, “we’re almost going to stick a magnet in this thing. We did use the calibration dummy, though. Wasn’t there a time when field-free rooms were the way to measure these minuscule fields?”

“Ancient history, Michael, but now we can compensate for the background fields as long as they’re not too wild. Well don’t keep me in suspense, let’s take a look.” Ruth hated above all to waste time.

She stepped briskly over to the twenty-four inch flat panel monitor, which presented a three-dimensional wire-frame outline of the top half of the fossilized skull.

“What the ...! What on Earth is that?” Ruth’s words trailed off, leaving her stone still, her active mind halted.

“We were hoping you could tell us,” Harmon responded, staring at the monitor.

Anthropology, not as well funded as Engineering, sometimes suffered from using outmoded equipment. But Ruth had loaned Howard her latest model brain magnetometer. Howard Harmon, an Assistant Professor, attracted a dedicated group of students, half of whom provided their own support just to study under the great fossil analyst. Other anthropologists were known as fossil hunters or diggers or classifiers or theorists. But analysis is where Harmon had made his reputation.

The image showed violet, mottled with irregular black areas and a few blue spots. The scale legend indicated violet as one to five hundredths of a picotesla.

*If this is for real, what could it mean? Something totally unknown for sure.* “Sorry, but this is a new phenomenon for me. Besides, our applications don’t call for reading steady fields, much less such weak ones. Fields that size are typically down in the noise of what we look at. I suppose the process of turning that skull into a fossil could have laid down some iron compounds entrained by the Earth’s magnetic field.”

“Unfortunately, it’s not that simple.” Harmon answered. “Michael has already subtracted out the basic paleomagnetic field in this fossil. What you see there is what’s left over. In fact, this field is showing what you might call cranial

symmetry: it points directly into the cranium everywhere. It's perpendicular to the skull at each point."

"Could have been some anomalous magnetic material in the ground next to his cranium," Ruth offered.

"Quite right, Ruth, but it's long gone. So we took a shot in the dark and checked a skull that isn't fossilized. Michael, would you put our more modern ancestor on the table."

Epps gingerly removed the precious fossil, returned it to the fossil vault and placed a human skull of more recent vintage on the table.

"How old is the old one?"

"Around a hundred-fifty thousand," Harmon answered as Epps adjusted the equipment.

"Neanderthal?"

"I didn't know you engineers were educated."

"Just a lucky guess, Howard. Women intuit these things."

"Could this cranial field be an artifact of your cancellation algorithm?"

Harmon asked.

"I sure hope not. But validating my equipment is one of the reasons I'm so generous with you."

"Ready." Epps motioned them over to the monitor.

"Same distribution." Ruth Arvah spoke aloud to herself as she mentally noted the information offered by her experimental apparatus. "Symmetric and uniform. But slightly stronger. Why?"

She strolled to the far end of the lab and stood by a window, watching the crystalline flakes fall chaotically deeper in thought. Harmon and Epps waited, glancing in her direction occasionally, not wanting to disturb. At length, or rather at the depth of another inch of snow, she accepted her intuition, broke from her contemplation and purposefully strode back toward the anthropologist and his apprentice.

Ruth Arvah embraced them with her smile. "I think you're onto something significant, but the what and why of it eludes me right now. We do know about magnetoreceptors in some animals. We even know about magnetite in human brains, but its function isn't known. I don't recall anything like your discovery. I'd like to work with you. You'll need a more sensitive detector, which I'll have my team develop. But it'll cost you."

"Ruth, you know we're on a shoestring here," Harmon replied despondently.

"That's not what I had in mind, Howard. I want you to include me as a co-author in your papers on this. Not some dinky little acknowledgment hidden in a footnote to the last paragraph. But I'll earn my keep. Besides the detector, I'll try to help you plot and navigate a research path."

"You are proposing a collaboration?" Harmon asked in wonder that the powerhouse Ruth Arvah would personally involve herself in his work.

“You’ll need me on this one, Howard. If you really want to unearth the meaning of those fields, you’ll never do it on your own.”

“As usual you’re right, Ruth. When can you start?”

“How about right now?”

Alexander Kismet braced himself for the solitary hunt, wishing more for retreat than engagement, driven by his commitment to proceed, wondering at the strength of his reluctance, knowing the consequences of failure, the pressure of necessity. And so he emerged into the wilds of suburban Washington and stepped the fifty paces to the mall entrance. *Why do I feel more at home in an African savanna or a Mongolian village than I do four miles from my own house?*

Immediately confronted by a Babel of blaring accompaniment to the games in the overcrowded arcade, he peered with care at its entranced denizens while his pace involuntarily accelerated past the confusion, the well-trained eye of the anthropologist ever-vigilant in observing the myriad manifestations of human culture. While Kismet’s background mind pondered the mesmerizing scene of visual and auditory cacophony, he turned his attention to the task at hand, finding a birthday gift that would tickle Magg’s fancy. Nothing practical, of course. The lukewarm reception of a painstakingly wrapped and expensive espresso machine during their courtship Christmas had taught him that lesson. A sudden inspiration moved him toward an elegantly understated department store, prepared to sniff perfumes and ogle earrings.

“They just don’t make them like they used to.” The sixtyish saleslady observed in lieu of a more customary greeting.

“The perfumes have gone down hill?” he asked.

“No, silly, not the perfumes! They’re better than ever! Exquisite fragrances, long-lasting, real value. It’s the people that’s the problem.”

“What’s wrong with the people?” Kismet turned a perplexed expression toward the impish smile of this feisty woman.

“It’s the Rodney Dangerfield syndrome.”

“The who?”

“You know. The comedian. He’s the one who first articulated it when he complained about not getting any respect. People today don’t appreciate or respect anything.”

“Such as?”

“Perfume! I’ve been in the fragrance business for thirty-six years, fifteen of them as a buyer. Last year I decided to go back into sales because I got sick of traveling. Paris is nice, but home is better than any hotel. Well, was I in for a shock. People can’t smell any more! Their noses don’t work like they used to.”

“How do you know that?” Alexander inquired, professional instincts suddenly aroused.

“I just know. It’s my business to know these things. People today can’t discriminate the fine shades of difference; they can’t pick up the nuances of the

delicate scents. You have to give them something that knocks 'em over the head, something gross, something with a big advertising budget. They have to be told it's sexy, they can't smell for themselves. Oh, our better lines still sell but it's based on name recognition rather than olfactory response. When I started out, my customers taught me to notice the subtleties. Now, they might as well be wearing clothespins on their noses. Maybe everybody has a permanent cold or they're just not patient enough to feel the magic of our finer scents.”

After answering a few questions about his wife, Kismet plunged, nostrils flaring, into a brief lesson on the niceties of perfumes and bagged his first checkbook-snared trophy of the day.

Onward he strode toward the earring counter, which bustled with the eager attentions of bargain hunters at a sale. Kismet joined the fray, getting jostled more than once. Suddenly, a woman with a surgically de-wrinkled face and a fur coat started screaming.

“Where's the sales people? Can't we get any help here? I'm in a big hurry...”

Alexander yielded the salesfield for the relative calm of gift-wrap.

Back home, Kismet settled down to his Saturday brunch over the Post. The front page described how the bullet-riddled bodies of three young women had been found dumped on a desolate road in a nearby county. Disgusted, he tuned in a radio news channel which happened to be in the middle of a report on how candidates of all political persuasions in all major democratic nations readily make promises to win votes and just as readily renege once elected, how image overshadows substance in elections, and how sound bites had shrunk to ten seconds. *Whatever happened to the Lincoln-Douglas debates?*

Scanning stations, he heard an African-American leader objecting to how the people of the nation wanted to cut welfare to the poor while lowering the crime rate and how this could only be accomplished through a police state and regressing to the ancient Greek democracies with equal rights only for certain classes. Could a return to slavery be far behind? he asked. Is that what the Alabama chain gangs signify?

Yet another channel had a psychiatrist discussing the burgeoning numbers of children and adults suffering the scatteredness of Attention Deficit Disorder. *I wonder if that's strictly an American disease, or are we exporting it along with the rest of our culture.* Alexander pressed the seek button.

“...And now they're all crying because we, along with the sometimes rational part of the other side, are talking about putting them to work. Work! Can you imagine the terrible fate of having to work for a living, instead of merely having to make an effort once a month to get out of bed to go look in your mailbox for your hand-out from Big Brother?” Tom Grandbush, the garrulous radio commentator on everything current or political sat in his New York studio,

winked through the glass wall at his buxom, tight-sweatered, miniskirted, blonde-haired producer as he launched into yet another damn-the-liberals tirade on his nationally syndicated talk show.

“There’s a weeping and gnashing of teeth in the liberal community today. They are wringing their hands in liberal disbelief that we, you and I, would have the audacity, the temerity to demand that able-bodied adults earn their keep in this country. America wasn’t built on laziness, my friends, but by the sweat of hard labor and intelligently taking risks. If a man or woman can work, if their body functions more or less normally, I say they work before they get my tax dollars. Let them sweep the streets or clean up the parks or flip burgers, instead of turning our hard-earned tax dollars into funny money by trading food stamps for drugs. That is what they do you know! I’ve heard estimates as high as sixty percent of food stamps going for drugs or alcohol, sixty percent! Can you abide that? Our money feeding their habit. Wonder of wonders. It’s an abomination, my friends, and it’s time we stopped it...”

“Alec! Why are you listening to that trash?” Margaret Buerline Kismet, the other half of the almost-famous husband-wife team of cultural anthropologists, gave her husband of twenty-four years a friendly peck on the cheek.

“Field study and comic relief. What a clown.” He reached over to the radio and found some Bach. “Sleep well, Magg?”

“Except for a horrific dream.”

“What was it?”

She stood at the coffee maker in jeans and a colorful bulky sweater, a pained expression in her intense blue eyes. “A bunch of different groups all decided to stage rallies at the Washington monument at the same time. I think you had Immigrant-Americans, Hispanic-Americans, African-Americans, Evangelical-Americans, Generation-X-Americans, Environmental-Americans, Rancher-Americans. Thousands upon tens of thousands of them. They all started shouting at each other to get out of the way. Then one of them leapt onto the podium, grabbed a microphone and pulled a Rodney King, yelling, “Hey, I’m a Generation-X-Environmental-Rancher-Evangelical-Hispanic-African-Immigrant-American. Can’t we all get along here?”

“The crowds turned in anger, surged forward and trampled him until there was nothing left. I woke up out of breath and sweating and couldn’t get back to sleep for at least an hour.”

“Wow! Quite a dream. You could write it up as an event paper and call it *Fragmentation of a Culture*.”

“Alec, if it was only a dream, that would be acceptable. But I lay awake for an hour fretting about its resemblance to reality. I’m worried that there’s something seriously wrong here. Subjectively, I sense too many long-term,

seemingly irreversible destructive trends. The fabric of American society, and others, is wearing thin and breaking.”

“Pretty heavy for a sunny Saturday morning, Magg. We've seen a lot of destructive trends in our lives. They come and go. It's the natural tides of history.”

“But this is worse, Alec. I just know it. Something's going to break. You know what it reminds me of?”

“Uh, oh. You've got that smug I-just-discovered-a-new-theory look again. What is it?”

“It's a mirror of the sudden ascent of the Cro-Magnon. Then we had an across-the-board creative explosion in every department of life and we still don't really know why. Forty thousand years later we're in the early stages of an across-the-board destructive implosion, and again we don't really know why.”

“Look, Magg. The supermarket is still full of food. The shopping centers are brimming with ever-better quality goods at stable prices. The world's economic system is humming smoothly. It even responds to glitches resiliently, like Gaia herself, because it's so decentralized. Interdependent, yes, but its strength is in all the far flung independent communities. Democracy still stands, even if you and I don't always like the results. In fact, you could argue that things are looking up since democracy won the Cold War and is spreading far and wide. The threat of nuclear holocaust is receding. The proponents of apartheid acquiesced to a peaceful transformation. The water and air are cleaner. Life spans are increasing.”

“All that sounds great, Alec, but I'll remind you that Rome rotted from the inside. The empire fell before they could see the causes. The economy will be the last place our problems surface, because everyone has to eat and so we all keep working and buying. But the economy depends on cooperation and people don't respect each other any more. Even back to the early Neanderthals, people have always been able to count on each other for help or else how could they have survived broken legs a hundred thousand years ago. But now, as soon as you step out the door, the barest hint of a miscue and people are in your face. Neighborliness, the Good Samaritan and plain old civility are less common. America's supposed to be the melting pot, not the boiling pot.”

“What a minute, Magg. People still help each other. We often hear about kind and even heroic deeds whenever there's crises like blizzards or earthquakes or major accidents.”

“But Alec, those are exceptions in exceptional circumstances. There's growing cynicism, antagonism, strident attitudes, hurrying and worrying, economic insecurity and deepening personal stress. Prozac alone has a two-billion dollar a year market, not a sign of a healthy society. And we're growing more selfish. Just look at the move to decrease government support for the old and the poor.”

“When I'm out there in the marketplace,” Alexander replied, “I get along rather well with the people I meet. And as for Prozac, its success is a sign of healing.”

“Anecdotes about your personal relationships,” Margaret retorted, “aren't necessarily representative of society as a whole. You know full well that situations can build until they break in a sudden catastrophe. Then it's too late. I'm feeling driven to look at the big picture.”

Debate edging toward argument, they paused.

At length, Margaret broke the silence. “There's something else, too. I don't quite know how to put it. It's just a feeling. Life is growing shallower. All our material comforts aren't yielding real meaning. Families are breaking down. Religion has scant impact on general attitudes. Deep down we're empty, hungry and scared. We compensate by grabbing still more toys, indulging in adrenaline or testosterone entertainment, pushing even harder for social status and grasping at the political power to give less. We even try to deny death by using medical machinery to keep our bodies alive well past our time. We're a race of adolescents thrust into adult powers, out of our depth and floundering.”

Alexander said, “I'll grant you there's a background of insecurity and alienation. Things change so fast you have to run just to keep up. Much easier to give up and simply disengage.”

“OK, Alec. Now you're starting to look for reasons, which is exactly where I'm moving. Why is all this happening? Our serious problems are so diverse they can hardly be solved piecemeal. I keep wondering if there's some underlying basic cause of all this malaise and trouble. The acceleration of history could be a candidate, but there are others.”

“Such as?”

“Such as the frustration of our age-old tribal psychology in the face of the enormous size and complexity of modern civilization. But I'm not ready to make an argument for any particular basis, because my intuition tells me there's a fundamental source of our ills and that I have yet to see it.”

“Magg, speculating about the causes of this slow rolling crisis you see would be fascinating but probably fruitless, boiling down to matters of opinion. You need proof, scientific proof, at least as good as the kind of studies sociologists and psychologists do. Even that may not be good enough to be convincing. And be convincing you must. First you need to show that there really is a crisis and not just a natural, self-correcting ebb and flow. Then you need to prove the cause. And even if you can, it may be impossible to rectify.”

“What if the rapidity of change proved out as the basic culprit?”

Alexander continued, “What could people do about it? Outlaw new inventions? Freeze fashions? Disallow the creation of new art? Elect permanent leaders and never let them change their political views? Hardly.”

“Alec, I don't expect the rate of change to be the core issue. But if it were, we could try training people to deal with it.”

“And what if it's tribalism? What do you then, Magg? Break up every city? Become a civilization of village states? Prevent corporations from hiring more than a hundred-fifty people? Ban all gatherings of over two hundred people? Impose strict limits on travel? Yes, I'll admit you could encourage village living and telecommuting, but it's up a steep hill.”

Margaret responded, “Let's not prejudge whether a solution can be found, when we have yet to form a clear picture of the root of the problem.”

“I'll agree to that,” Alexander's voice softer now, recalling the abusive relationship his daughter had refused to give up for two full years. “It's all the rage nowadays for politicians, religious leaders, columnists and commentators to make the same indictment of society that you've been making. But their solutions are pretty iffy at best: return to religious values, be role models for our youth, give our children love and discipline. All very well and good until you get to the implementation. How do all of us psychologically scarred individuals suddenly turn into kind, loving, responsible parents, reject the sex and violence in the entertainment media, and love our neighbors? That's no solution; it's just ineffective preaching although it may have the effect of winning a few votes. You need a real solution that will carry all of us along.”

J. Walter Harbison's limousine pulled up to an inconspicuous townhouse in the early morning snow in Seattle's Capitol Hill district. Approaching the hour, he nearly ran up the aging concrete steps to the front porch. Some forty-odd pairs of shoes placed him near the last to arrive. Leaving his own pair among them, Harbison gingerly opened the door and squeezed into the crowded living room. He breathed a sigh of relief to see the diminutive, upholstered bench at the far end of the room unoccupied. A rainbow of people sat waiting in every nook and cranny, like species filling each ecological niche. But they welcomed one more, shuffling to fashion yet another space in their midst on the carpet.

As he sat down, the hallway door opened and an octogenarian woman, with a nearly permanent slight smile, slowly approached the red velvet bench and assumed her seat.

“Today,” she began in her reassuring voice of calm, “we will be blending the energies of the latifas. Begin with the usual preparation.”

The room grew yet more still and for the next hour she prompted them from time to time through the steps of the meditation.

Afterward, Harbison stood in line for a brief audience with her.

“Good morning, Walter.” She offered her hand, which he gently kissed.

“Hello, Aziza. I'm heading back to Virginia this afternoon after the board meeting.”

“It's always a pleasure to see you, even if only for a few days.”

“I keep threatening to open a plant in the Seattle area so I’ll have a better excuse to be here with you.”

“Come, Walter. You’re not dependent on being here with us. Your inner life has progressed to the point of having your own access. That month you spent here two years ago established you. Now you can continue on your own or with others.”

“Do you need anything?” Harbison always offered. He had made a standing offer to buy her a large house or even an estate so that she could touch more people. But she had replied that if more people came she would not have enough time to know each one as well as with her current circle. Further, Aziza Hamadani never accepted gifts or donations from her spiritual friends, as she liked to call her students. She claimed her small pension adequate to her material needs. All of which meant that Harbison’s vast empire, nearly six billion dollars’ worth by **Fortune**’s last estimate, was of no account in this room.

She looked into his eyes with a gaze both strong and gentle. “All I need is for you to continue your own inner work in earnest. You are fifty-four now, correct?”

“Yes.”

“Well, don’t waste time and don’t rush it either, just be steady in your steps. Sooner or later, you’ll find God. Listen to your heart and you’ll recognize the opportunities to serve. How are Rebecca and your children?”

“Fine. All fine. Rebecca sends her love.”

“Please thank her for me and return mine to her.”

“I will.” Harbison took his leave, buoyed by the sitting and the short interview. His whole body bristled with energy. *Incredible*. He slowly shook his head in wonder. *Don’t waste time. In earnest. Listen to my heart. I wonder what opportunities she foresees. Her remarks are rarely idle*. He found his driver brushing snow from the car.

A few miles north of Howard Harmon’s laboratory on another Cambridge campus, the eminent historian, Wilbur Torrence Toog, expounded the joys of historical understanding to a classroom full of eager graduate students in an ivy-mantled building of aging brick.

“...We see the snow falling outside these windows and it affects our mood in subtle ways, as do so many other events in our collective life. Multiply such individual mood swings, small though they are, across a continent or a society and they may reinforce each other in a positive feedback loop, changing the course of history. The anthropologists, who are really just the historians of prehistoric times, tell us that the ice ages profoundly influenced the development of our species. My claim is that these effects are not merely through the rigors of physical survival but also through psychological impacts. Just think how you would have felt when the immense glaciers that constrained your ancestors for untold generations suddenly melted over a period of twenty years. How liberating

it must have been! The mood of sudden freedom carries a new creative spirit, driving events as inexorably as the advance of the glaciers.

“Why am I telling you this? Am I just an old professor in his dotage? Don’t answer that. No, I simply want to motivate your appreciation of psychological pressures on history. You well know that your personal psychology drives so many of your choices. The same holds for nations and civilizations. We call this study of history from a psychological viewpoint ‘psychohistory.’”

“Dr. Toog.” Eleanor McKinney, one of Toog’s doctoral students, raised her hand.

“Yes, Eleanor.” Toog found it difficult to look at her, because of her simple and elegant beauty. A happily married man, he felt it inappropriate and inwardly embarrassing that he should be so powerfully drawn to this woman half his age. But with the smile of her blue eyes as wide as that of her perfectly formed lips, her innocent cheeks framed by her flowing flaxen hair, her incisive mind, her demeanor a symphony embodied, his response was natural. The sudden sight of a new engagement ring on her finger brought him relief.

“Isn’t psychohistory considered to be a fringe discipline by many in the history profession?” she asked.

“Quite right. But tenure is a license for the full exercise of academic freedom. As for all of you, if you want to pursue a career in the study of history, don’t start with psychohistory, or at the very least don’t call it that. The mainstream, of course, is the political history of governments, rulers and wars. Toynbee lent some legitimacy to the religious slant. Other subspecialties include the history of art, music, philosophy, science, medicine, particular races, and so on. But a civilization is shaped by the hearts and minds of its individuals, and vice versa. So I am confident that the study of psychological factors in the formation of historical currents will one day come to the center stage of our profession.

“In the early days of psychohistory, Freudian psychoanalysis was used to examine the lives of historical figures. A dubious task at best. But the discipline of psychology has advanced light-years since Freud. To me it seems only natural to incorporate the psychological perspective into the study of history, especially on the level of whole societies rather than individuals, to look at the dynamic interplay between the average individual character and collective civilization.

“However, I now sense that the miniature society of this class has snow in its psychology or, to be more accurate, concerns about the level of difficulty of negotiating your path home through weather which appears to be expeditiously transforming toward a blizzard. It wouldn’t be the first time I’ve slept on my office floor. See you Tuesday.”

After class, Eleanor approached Toog.

“Are congratulations in order?” he asked nodding toward her ring.

“Yes, he finally committed,” she blushed.

“Is it that Michael?”

The mention of her lover's name brought a smile to her face. "That's the one."

"Lucky man. Anthropology grad student, right?"

She nodded.

"I can see the reason for his hesitation. An historian and an anthropologist. Not exactly an economic powerhouse career couple. He was probably worried about supporting you when the young ones appear on the scene."

"We'll get tenure first."

"A reasonable plan. But that's not what you wanted to talk about. What can I do for you?"

"Did you know I had a double major as an undergrad, the second being in psychology?"

"No. I must have seen it on your vitae, but I had forgotten."

"Well, this psychohistory sounds truly fascinating. I think so many of our problems today are reverberations of our psychology. The psychological study of past societies could help illuminate present day issues. I'm wondering if I might be able to incorporate it into my research."

"Certainly, Eleanor. If that's what you want to do, I'd be open to sponsoring you. I think I could assemble a non-hostile committee for your dissertation defense. Think it over carefully, though, because it will make it more difficult to land a tenure-track position when you're done."

"You mean brilliance isn't enough. They want orthodoxy, too?" Eleanor laughed.

"Oui, mademoiselle. Take some time to consider the specifics of how you'll bring psychology into your work. Let me know where it leads you."

"Thanks, Dr. Toog."

"Rough day?"

"Yeah," Jared Constantine sighed after reading a bedtime story to his daughter. "I mean no. If it were just one day's issues, I could deal with that. But my whole practice is discouraging."

"What do you mean?" Her husband's remark worried Sara Rosetta. The family needed the income from his successful clinical practice. They wouldn't starve on just her salary. But their lifestyle and their Georgetown townhouse would definitely suffer. The image of a "For Sale" sign in their postage stamp front yard presented itself. "Are you burning out? Does the psychotherapist need therapy? I thought you typically see marked improvement in the majority of your patients."

"Improvement, yes. But toward what benchmark? The norm of this society is to walk around with your shields at full power, your phasers charged, and your radar tuned to recognize potential enemies or sex partners and ignore everyone else."

“What do you expect, Jared? That’s our evolutionary inheritance. The part about sex is obvious and no cause for concern. But we’re also built for survival through aggression against our enemies.” Sara dipped selectively into her wealth of research as an evolutionary psychologist.

“But haven’t you told me we’re built for cooperation. And doesn’t that require recognizing potential friends. In fact, tentatively presuming friendship even with total strangers, until proven otherwise?”

“Right. So?”

“So there’s something missing. Do you remember the old people you knew when you were a kid, Sara?”

The faces of three grandparents and her great-grandmother fluttered before her mind’s eye, softening Sara’s worried state. Her great-grandmother’s timeless solidity, the gaze that welcomed Sara to the corridors of joy and peace.

“My great-grandmother especially. She insisted on drinking her half shot of whisky and smoking her pipe every day, despite the doctor’s entreaties. Yet her health was legend. She was the matriarch of our whole clan, not through domination, but by wisdom. She had seen so much; she seemed to see all the possibilities and could guide you toward what you really wanted. And she was big enough to respect you, regardless of your age or your goals or lack thereof. I was very fond of her and a little awed.”

“Do you know anyone like that now?” Jared inquired.

“No. I don’t know anyone who’s ninety-five.”

“Well I do. And my patients do also. And precious few of the old folks even approach the quality of your great-grandmother.”

“She was unique, Jared. Plus, she came from a different time.”

“Exactly! That’s what’s bugging me. In these times, people just aren’t what they used to be. Today, people generally don’t possess the strength of character and compassion that the old people of my childhood had. The general tenor of society seems to be deteriorating. There’s less self-transcendence and more self-preoccupation. I’ve always operated on a tacit assumption that humanity would continually evolve toward a more enlightened state. As a therapist, I felt privileged to offer my own small contributions toward that evolution. That’s why I chose this profession to begin with. But now it’s turning to ashes in my mouth. What’s the use of my helping some totally self-absorbed person become slightly better adjusted? So they can go out and indulge themselves more effectively? What’s the purpose or usefulness of such a life? And why should I help promote it?”

“Holy cats, Jared! This is serious. What about love? Isn’t every life precious?”

“Yes, yes. But is every life useful?”

“Useful to whom? To the person who’s living it? Useful to what?”

“A lifetime of experience of the pleasant, the painful, and the boring - is that useful to the person living it? I don’t know. Is it really a worthwhile endeavor

for me to help them live it less painfully? I don't know. Is everyone's life useful to God? I don't know. Maybe I'm losing my faith."

"Jared, the question of the usefulness of an individual life is a question that I don't recall having been asked very much. The closest are questions about the meaning or purpose of life. And the answers usually come down to love. You seem to be asking if a person doesn't love, and isn't going to grow any closer to love in their lifetime, and isn't going to help other people except through the necessity of earning a living, then is that life useful? I'm sure most people would say their own life is useful to them, especially as opposed to the alternative. Isn't that good enough?"

"Not when you multiply it by six billion or whatever the number is now." Jared responded. "Each one of us crowds out other species, many of whom we're destroying. Is human life useful to the rainforests we destroy? To the millions of animals who could have lived in all the habitat we've claimed? Of course, that's survival of the fittest. But how many billions of us do we need to assure survival of our species. How many other species is it right to destroy? How many thousands of rhinos is one human life worth forgoing? I'm not talking about someone dying, rather someone not being conceived in the first place."

"I'm sure most people would argue that individual human lives are worth more than any number of animals, from a moral standpoint." Sara said. "But that we have to be careful because human life depends on animal and plant life."

"Well, Sara, none of this would bother me as much if I thought humans were worthy of the tradeoff. But now I'm beginning to wonder whether our species as a whole is progressing. When I compare people today to the older folks I knew as a kid, it seems that we're going backwards. People are growing more vain and heartless and petty.

"I remember my father's father," Jared's tone shifted from waxing stridence to wistful affection. "You felt blessed just being around him. So kind and gentle, like a warm summer breeze. Firm and strong in following his conscience underneath that shock of white hair and weathered skin. And when he came to die, he did it without complaint in the face of considerable pain, with gratitude for all that life had brought him, and with concern for me and the rest of us he left behind."

"You must have loved him deeply."

"Not only him. My other grandparents were equally wonderful people. And so were some others I knew: great uncles, friend's grandparents. Now maybe I'm painting a falsely rosy picture through the memories of a naive child. Granted, that's possible. But when I try to view it more objectively I still get the impression that we have a society-wide character issue. And the therapy which people come to me for doesn't address character. We're working on the level of dysfunction, that is, dysfunction with respect to a norm which itself seems like a rather hollow standard: make the severe neuroses milder."

"Jared, you're starting to sound like the transpersonal psychologists."

“Believe me, I’d consider training in it, but there’s little or no respect for it in society at large. The standard is just too low. People’s goals are not about developing qualities of character; they’re about material satisfactions primarily. Secondarily they’re about a personality flashy enough to attract and keep an optimal mate.”

“Those are both deeply rooted biological drives. No shame there,” Sara replied.

“Shame on us if that’s all we’re about. Our potential extends far beyond merely material considerations and we are squandering it. Every single one of us, unless mentally handicapped, needs to develop our character. But we’re copping out by merely going for cars and status and entertainment and minimizing pain. And that’s what my whole clinical practice seems to support!”

“Maybe our civilization is not as bad as you’re making it out to be. Maybe you’re getting a false impression from the small sample you deal with in your practice. There are plenty of fine people around who command respect.”

“They are rarer than they used to be. As a nation we no longer respect politicians. A few of our sports heroes are about character, but more are about greed. There’s a quality that’s disappearing. You take a look around for a while and then tell me what you see. I didn’t notice this as being a problem until just recently.”

“Did something particular happen?”

“Yes. I guess you could trace it back about two months. A new patient came in. An older gentleman who reminded me of my grandpa, at least in his appearance. Turned out the guy was a niggardly whiner, complaining nonstop about how his children wouldn’t do this or that for him, about how his doctor wouldn’t give him more pain pills, about his young neighbor’s girlfriends, about his mechanic, about the grocery clerk, and on and on ad nauseam. He was one of the most negative people I’ve ever met. And the contrast with my grandfather was startling. Since that day my indictment of society has mushroomed into a conviction. You think I’m just complaining and whining?”

“No. Not if what you’re saying is balanced and true. You haven’t convinced me yet, though. How about this? For the next couple of weeks, I’ll start making my own secret, subjective, skewed-sample, unvalidated, anecdotal survey of the character of the people I have contact with. Then we’ll compare notes.”

“OK, Sara. And if you find you agree with me, then what?”

“Then? I haven’t got a clue. We can’t very well leave the planet or move to a deserted island. Why don’t you think about the consequences while I do my little survey?”

“It’s a deal, sealed with a kiss.”

“So what’s the big news?” Eleanor McKinney asked Michael as they sauntered arm-in-arm along the Charles on a sun-glass day with an eleven-inch comforter of fluffy snow spread under a brilliant blue sky.

“You want the good news or the bad?”

“Bad?! What? Tell me right now.”

“I’m going out of town for a few weeks. Business.”

“What kind of business?” Eleanor asked doubtfully.

“That’s the good news. Or at least potentially good news. I’m going to some museums to measure magnetic fields in hominid skulls.”

“What for? And what’s so great about that?”

“Yesterday we discovered a magnetic field in a Neanderthal skull and a similar one in a thirty-year-old human skull.”

“So?”

“So, no one has ever reported such a thing before, probably because the field is so weak and the detectors are just now getting sensitive enough.”

“I still don’t see the significance of it,” Eleanor objected.

“Harmon’s not sure what it means either. Same for Ruth Arvah. But they both want to find out pretty badly. Arvah’s going to have a new, more accurate, portable, steady-field detector ginned up for us over the next week. Meanwhile, Harmon’s contacting his buddies all over the world to arrange for me to come in and do the measurements on their hominid skulls. I’ll have three days to get thoroughly familiar with the new detector. Then I’m off.”

“Where will you go?”

“Africa and Europe, but it’s not totally set yet. Probably Germany, Kenya, Tanzania, Ethiopia, and South Africa.”

“Tickets for two?” she smiled hopefully.

“Arvah’s footing the bill and I don’t think she’d spring for two. Now if it was up to me, then of course. But don’t you have classes to deal with?”

“You’d think my Profs wouldn’t mind me doing some field work.”

“As long as it’s not on their time.”

“I suppose you’re right.”

“I’ll miss you, Eleanor, and I wish I didn’t have to go. But this could be something big and I’m lucky to be right in the middle of it. In fact, I’m the one who first noticed it.” Michael released the last statement with a strong note of pride.

“And you really don’t know the source of this field?”

“Well, it’s got to be some magnetic material laid down in the bone or fossil. But why it’s there, what its function is, we don’t know. Live people probably have it, too. Arvah’s team’s going the check that out. By the way, it’s all hush, hush. They want to keep it quiet until we publish.”

“Why?”

“Competition, mainly. They want to make sure we’re first if it’s for real. And if it isn’t meaningful, then they’d just as soon nobody else knew we wasted our resources on a wild goose chase. The public posture is that I’m simply going to do some new analyses on these skulls, without being more specific about what or why.”

The guard waved them through the wrought-iron gate and they drove the half mile to the sprawling mansion outside Middleburg, in the midst of nine hundred ten acres of pristine farmland in rolling meadows, gardens, old trees in an extensive woodland, streams and a lake. The Kismets, always a little awed to be at Heartland, as the Harbison estate was known, drove past the guesthouses and stables, and parked on the circle near the welcoming two-story brick manor house. Passing the trimmed and tasteful morning garden, they entered the flagstone foyer through an elegant pair of French doors and were led through the Chinese Chippendale main-entry door into the front hall.

Two farm boys from different sections of Iowa, Alexander Kismet and J. Walter Harbison had grown up with wildly divergent interests. Kismet had always been fascinated with tales of Indians and photos of indigenous tribes everywhere. For him, National Geographic stood in the place of comic books and Playboys. In childhood Harbison loved to tinker with all the gadgets in his uncle's medical office in Des Moines. Kismet and Harbison roomed together for their four undergraduate years at Michigan. Kismet had gone on to graduate study in cultural anthropology, while Harbison founded an empire based in medical electronics. Yet their friendship held vibrant throughout the intervening thirty-two years, sharing their joys and cheering each other on through the trials of adult life, each being best man at the other's wedding and godfather to the other's firstborn. They had stayed close enough for the friendship to survive the inevitable personal changes in direction and interest. And their wives and children had expanded their circle.

After dinner in the spacious, intricately molded dining room, they relaxed over coffee and liqueurs in the tastefully appointed comfort of the Harbison's drawing room.

"So, Magg, besides the political interference in your work with the Smithsonian, what else has been going through that fertile mind of yours?" Harbison began.

"The degeneration and decay of our society, of Western culture, Walter. I'm becoming more convinced by the day that the wellsprings of goodwill are drying up and the cultural water table is sinking. We're growing shallower, more self-absorbed, more exclusively oriented to material values, more antagonistic and cynical. Instead of the Golden Rule of doing unto others as we would have them do unto us, we play tit-for-tat; do unto them what they do unto you. First get revenge, then sue. If that doesn't work, buy a gun. Two hundred million of them at last count, in one country. Amazing. All this on top of the older trends of alienation, cynicism, and loneliness."

"You sound like some of the people on the right decrying the breakdown of the family and of values," Harbison replied.

"I agree with a lot of what they say. The problem is that too many of them extrapolate that position into condemnation and rejection of people who don't

subscribe to their view of morality. That just adds to the divisions, to the centrifugal forces. No room for 'love thy neighbor.' There are no evil people, just evil deeds."

"Well, how do your views differ then?" Rebecca inquired.

"I've got a hunch, an intuition that there's some basic over-arching cause that we just don't recognize."

"Any ideas as to what?" Harbison asked.

"Oh, there's no end to the candidates, but so far nothing has jumped out of the pack."

"What do you think about this, Alec?" Rebecca turned toward Alexander.

"When Magg first raised this with me, I didn't buy it all. I argued that the economy is working fine; democracy is sprouting everywhere, et cetera. I said that for every negative symptom like crime, we could balance it with a positive one like the advances in medicine. But since then I've started to give it another look and I'm coming around to her view. The thing that has tipped the balance for me is the downside potential. I'm afraid the glue that holds society together is weakening and that it really is conceivable that the whole thing could fall. I'd hate to see the hominid line die out as a failed branch of the tree of life on this planet."

"What about the single basic cause theory?" Rebecca pressed Alexander.

"Could be. Could well be. I don't believe you can put the whole blame onto Madison Avenue and Hollywood. Yes, they may be inflaming atavistic greed and aggression, but why are the more wholesome qualities of human nature in retreat, which apparently they are? There's more going on here than meets the eye, a kind of emotional dumbing down."

"Fascinating," Rebecca burst out. "Just two days ago I was in a weekly group session with some of my psychotherapist colleagues. One of them spoke at some length, questioning the value of our work with our clients, saying that lack of character is a growing problem for society, that people have less character now than they did a generation ago. Some of us wondered whether this was just a subjective impression due to burnout on his part. He said his wife had at first thought the same, but that she had agreed to work with him to try to develop a character assessment test. She's apparently a research psychologist at the National Institute of Mental Health. But the two of them are having a hard time defining character, much less testing for it. He ended by asking for help from any of us interested in developing the test."

"Yes, of course," Margaret said immediately. "Makes good sense. The question of character is an elegant way to encapsulate the whole issue of the decay of society. And developing a character assessment test might give us a tool to start digging for the causes of that decay."

"I can see their trouble in doing it," Alexander responded, "since character is what a person does when nobody's looking."

"Alec! Really," Magg protested.

“Seriously, though,” Alexander continued, “we have such a diverse society with so many subcultures, that the test, to be valid, would have to work across cultures. Not so easy to do, but certainly worthwhile to try. Can you put us in touch with these folks, Rebecca? I suspect Magg and I both might be interested in joining their team.”

“Absolutely. I’ll let them know about you and give them your number.”

“Would you keep me posted on your progress?” Harbison asked Alexander.

“Don’t tell me our gloom and doom has affected the great optimist.” Alexander replied.

“I like to think of myself as an opportunist, in the best sense of the word. To be fully prepared I’ve got to weigh both the rosy and the dark scenarios. Then I go for what’s possible. Focusing so much on my companies tends to keep me in a rather uniform social circle. If both of you are so concerned about the direction of our society, then I intend to take your concerns seriously. After all, my family and my employees are part of this American scene. If there really were some force driving us toward ruin, then it would be incumbent on us to pursue it with all vigor. Maybe your research will reveal it.”

“Fair enough, Walter. We’ll stay in touch on this one. Research! I hadn’t thought of it that way, but I suppose it’s true. Magg, we’ve got a new research focus: the suspected, impending decline of civilization as we know it.”

“Even if it’s not that dire,” Rebecca offered, “there’s plenty of room for improvement. So your effort won’t be wasted.”

“You hear that, Magg. Maybe I should go to a therapist. Do my old gizzard thumper of a heart some good.”

“No doubt, Alec. No doubt.” Margaret observed dryly.

“All right. You didn’t have to agree so quickly.”

“You have my sympathy, Magg,” Rebecca interposed. “These guys are like two peas in a pod. Sometimes I think they still haven’t really left that dorm at Michigan.”

“Hey,” Harbison replied. “Do you know what we used to do with persnickety women back in Ann Arbor?”

“No. What?”

“We’d buy them all the chocolate cake, ice cream, and hot fudge they could eat. Then they’d be so worried about gaining a few ounces, they’d forget about harassing us. What d’ya say we head into town for a late dessert?”

“No fair.” came Rebecca’s mock complaint.

“Fair.” Margaret surrendered. “I love chocolate.”

“See, Alec. Unexpected tactics can still turn the tide. Even when you tell exactly what you’re doing.” Harbison crowed.

“Walter, I believe you underestimate the adversary. Underneath these pretty coed exteriors lie the hearts of wily women. They may just have their cake and insult us, too.”

“I’ll take my chances. Besides, you can help defend me, while we observe the sin of gluttony in the flesh.”

“Well, feast your eyes,” Margaret winked at Rebecca. “We want our cake.”