

The Blue Tent

By Carla R. Herrera

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Dedication

For Charles B. Herrera
If I could say it I would. Because I can't, I write.
Miss you.

Acknowledgments

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and characterization; both of which helped me move ahead with this story.

One

The air crushed down, hot and humid. Breathing felt akin to a chore, difficult and laborious. Light skin suffered in this weather, but through painstaking attempts to avoid the sun and a constant application of sunscreen, she remained nearly unblemished. Her dark eyes and short, dark hair caused most to take more than a second look. A couple of men nearby shot knavish glances in her direction and she thought about pulling up her tent and moving elsewhere. She checked the back pocket of her shorts making sure the Inprod was still there.

Satisfied by the feel of the device, she glanced around the campsite and saw other women she had not noticed before. Still early, she guessed they had probably been inside other shelters. She counted four women. Two were seniors, one was a bit older than her with tattoos on nearly every part of exposed skin, but her face. Another was much younger—she guessed probably still in her late teens.

Dwellings scattered throughout the camp in no particular order. High traffic areas where people walked frequently were dust zones. She noticed most people set their shelter away from those areas. Shelters ranged from discarded plywood to abandoned vehicles, pup tents and recycled cardboard. Someone had even made a tent from a blue plastic tarp, held down with rocks, structured loosely with sticks. Loose areas of the tarp would catch a breeze on occasion and flap loudly.

She had set her own small tent near a tree. It was a cheap, red, two person model that could be set up in a flash. Shake it out and voila! Insta-shelter. Still, she was not going to knock it. It was a roof over her head and kept the bugs from her when she slept.

Most campers lounged under the oppressive heat. Like other places she had stayed, the season dictated behavior. Summer had turned them into children of the night. They would rise at sundown, pattering through daily tasks, cooking if food was available. As the night wore on, some would scavenge, beg, or look for hourly work.

She had watched from the trees for a couple of days before deciding to join the camp. Stragglers, male and female had come and gone, but most stayed to themselves. Occasionally, a few would get together, but this was not a tightly-knit group.

So far, she had seen no children in camp. She had seen many succumb to the harsh conditions in one way or another. Malnutrition, heat exhaustion and abuse, mental and physical, were killers of the young. If they did manage to survive, they became meaner versions of their parents. Cruel and savage. Sometimes they traveled in menacing packs, wreaking destruction whenever possible; beating and torturing those they found alone and vulnerable.

She had set up her tent and had a walk through before the sun came up. A food preparation area sat at the west end, with a large make-shift grill put together with stones and pieces of scavenged metal. A few yards from the camp and to the north were bathroom facilities, if you could call them that. A couple of lean-tos over deeply dug holes. Pieces of fabric covered open doors. A few people still retained some form of modesty, though most could care less.

Grateful for the shade of trees, she knew if a storm blew in they would have to find other cover. An urban cave of some sort; overpass or tunnel. She had not seen anything like that nearby. Across town, on her way in, she had noted a freeway overpass, but it was too far to be convenient.

Moving into her tent, she pulled the Inprod from her back pocket, closed the flap and hung it from a ring she had attached to the pole running along the top. She pushed the velcro on the back of the device against the flap, made sure it stuck and then pushed a tiny green button to insure protection.

Anyone attempting to get into her tent would be in for a shock. For that matter, anyone even brushing up against the small structure would receive a jolt of ten-thousand volts. She felt fine with that. Remorse no longer belonged in her vocabulary.

Laying down, she listened to the sounds around her. People shuffled through the camp quietly, talking in hushed tones. Metal scraping against stone, the creak from a car door. After awhile, she drew an electronic pad from her satchel and placed the bud in her ear. She turned it on and hit play.

A dark-haired woman danced in the middle of an apartment living room. A small voice behind the camera, "Mom, do the twirl." Laughter as she twirled around, once, twice, three times, almost falling.

The camera turned, showing a television in the corner of the room, the dirty carpet, toys in the corner, the bar separating the living room from kitchen, then a small face, close to the screen. "That's my silly mother." Touching lips to the screen, pulling back. "I love you this much," the camera went wide, showing the kitchen. More laughter.

Discontented whispering caused her to stir awake. She removed the bud from her ear and sat up listening. Outside, a male and female argued. "If you would..." Then, "I'm so sick of..."

Shuffling of feet outside the tent. Gravel crunched underfoot. "Um, I'm electrified. Might not wanna do that." She drew the line as a warning. She didn't have to, but thought that since she had so recently come into the camp, she wanted to extend the courtesy.

It was the male who answered. "Whatever." A rough, smoke-laden voice. Middle-aged, she guessed.

They moved away. She wanted to think they were just looking for food, but knew it could have been anything. People were strange and despite her nearly forty years, she still had not figured them out.

Pulling a black glove from her satchel on to her hand, she parted the moon flap above her head to see the time of day. The sky was not dark, but the sun had moved to the west. She began folding things into her satchel, pulled a small hand-lettered sign from the pouch and set it outside the flap. The sign warned the tent was electrified, though once she disconnected the Inprod, that was no longer true.

Disconnecting the device, she placed it on her belt and felt an almost pleasant tingle. She stretched, placed the satchel over her neck, let it hang on her hip and moved outside. Others had begun to move about. A couple sat together near the grill, a sack nearby. They glanced in her direction, but looked away, whispering.

A line had formed near the bathrooms and a few people were heading in the direction of the stream. Probably to wash. She disconnected the Inprod and removed the glove, shoving it into her back pocket, then moved toward the stream. Signs along the bank warned not to drink untreated water. Another asked people to bathe and wash clothing downstream.

Laughter greet her as she moved down the bank. A couple of women, younger than her, swam in dirty clothes. "We can bathe and wash clothes at the same time," said one of them.

She smiled, kneeled on the bank and splashed her face. "Probably a good policy," she answered. "Might wanna stick together here."

The girls glanced past her, somewhere over her shoulder, eyes wide, nodding. She dried her hands quickly, used her t-shirt to dry her face and shoved the glove back on to her hand, re-connecting the device. She smiled at the girls and moved away.

"Hey, what's your name?" One of them yelled.

"Tele," she yelled back.

Two

Neon and halogen fall off lit the night. Like most other cities, this one hummed with activity. Many people rode bicycles and scooters, but smaller hybrid vehicles filled the roadways. Honking, braking, drivers yelled at one another, in a hurry to get from one place to another.

Scavengers had begun their rounds. A few used shopping carts, but those who had been doing it for awhile knew better. They never approached customers and always attempted to blend into the landscape.

Tele became a shadow. Like her vulturous brethren, she dressed in dark colors, using the night to her vantage. Moving through downtown slowly, she paid close attention to and made mental notes of alleyways, empty lots and abandoned buildings.

She made her way behind a grocery store. Most of the stores locked dumpsters to discourage the practice, but on occasion she would get lucky and find one open. Someone would set the padlock so that it appeared clamped and most scavengers would pass by without checking, but she checked all of them.

Since she had started scavenging, she had not went hungry. Some nights were leaner than others, but most nights she came away with at least a full bag of food.

The large receptacles were placed two together at convenient intervals. She counted six stations, which meant twelve dumpsters. Checking five before she found one unlocked, she opened it and found items from the deli on top. Working quickly, she pulled a plastic sack and a small penlight from her satchel and began gathering, checking expiration dates and the look of the item. When the sack was full, she shut the lid and replaced the lock. The last thing she wanted was to make it obvious that scavengers were about.

Scavenging for two years, Tele felt as if an entire life had passed in that short space of time. Before exile, she had been average; a regular job, happily married with one child. Philip, her husband, had been an electronics salesman. They had been happy.

Then she had joined a protest. The facade of a democratic republic remained, though most knew, but rarely spoke about the infringement of rights, lack of private enterprise and laws that favored corporate rule over individual civil rights.

The Corporate States did not like criticism. Tele had not been a leader in the protest she attended. She had held a sign, sung a few songs and handed out literature. But she was one of the many people singled out and maliciously attacked. Private life became public and the company she worked for terminated her on grounds of public embarrassment. Not long after, her husband's job threatened, parenting skills came under scrutiny by the state.

She learned a valuable lesson: those who participated in a movement against the state would pay for their crime. Despite the mythos of freedom, they struck down anyone asking for economic justice, or protesting rigged elections.

Salvation came in the form of Joseph, one of the movements leaders who had changed his identity. He had approached her as a journalist. Shoved a note into her hand as she attempted to dodge a slew of camera wielding, angry reporters. It was simple, clichéd, cloak and dagger. 'Call if you want to save your daughter,' it read. She called.

Philip talked to him. They met under the guise of an interview. The recorder remained off during most of it and Joseph informed them she would have to disappear alone. The state would hunt a whole family. But one lone, disgraced individual... Who could blame her for disappearing?

She made contact through Joseph from time to time to find out how they were doing. Kelly was getting big. Philip was doing fine. He assured her that one day she could come back. when things settled down. Philip did not want to speak to her. It was too hard and someone might find out.

Life had changed since the United States had become the Corporate States of America. Few could truly be called middle class. Those considered that category of citizen were professionals, constantly

competing against a glut of low wage workers. The low wage workers were referred to by most as slave wagers. They earned almost nothing from their labor. They were unskilled, low-tech and usually lived in vehicles or shelters provided by the companies they worked for. Benefits were non-existent. Everyone else was destitute or wealthy and the wealthy were exclusively those individuals who headed major corporations. Nearly everyone worked for those overlords.

Tele had joined the rag and bone population, It was the easiest way to survive without detection. Joseph had helped at first. Financially during those first months as she learned her trade and about the life she would be living. He avoided talk about the future, but tried to keep her hopes up and constantly reminded her the coming years would be rough. She had to prepare mentally, change her name.

Tele was born and she had taken to the lifestyle almost immediately. She had thrived, partially, because she had protection. Without her Inprod, she would be as vulnerable as any other woman on the street. The device had given her the confidence to go into places she never would have gone. Better, she had put it together herself through scavenged pieces of old technology.

As the night wore on, Tele made her way back toward camp, stopping along the way to search alleyways that looked promising. Most were inhabited by panhandlers who made their living from the business class.

Half of the population now fell into the category of homelessness. They no longer had the brick and mortar home, though some had become quite creative. She heard of one camp in Florida that had built a whole community of tree houses. Some created underground dwellings and lived like hobbits. She had even heard of whole underground communities that tunneled from one place to another.

In one of the alleys, three older men sat smoking foul smelling cigarettes, playing a game of dice. They barely gave her a second look as she passed them going straight for the office bin.

Sifting through old technical manuals and office papers, one of the men, a grizzled old guy wearing jean shorts and a T-shirt with a yellow smiley face asked, "You looking fer sumthin specfic?"

She shrugged. "Old wireless stuff. I'm trying to rig a communication device."

One of the other men chuckled, shook the dice in his hand. "Yoo one a those who c'n do 'at huh? I heard uh y'all. Perty weird, but kinda cool."

She smiled, continued sifting, almost ready to call it a night.

A moment later, "Watcha self girlie." The man in the jean shorts gestured down the alley. He brushed his long hair away from his face, glancing back behind him. "Sum kids comin o'er. They be looking you way."

She glanced up the alley and saw a pack of four young men at the entrance. They were talking amongst themselves, squinting into the alley. Weighing the situation. One woman, three old guys. Would it be worth the risk? That's what they were asking themselves.

She glanced over at the men sitting nearby. "You guys have to deal with this regularly?"

The one in jean shorts seemed to be the more talkative and spoke up again while tying his hair back with a band. "Nah. Usally dey leeb us alone. When dey do come round dey jus insult us. Call us 'ol geezers. See what dey can get. Can't get nuttin from us. We don't got nuttin." He laughed at that and the other two nodded, chuckled, but threw worried glances toward the pack of boys.

Looking around the alley floor for a weapon did not provide many options. Cardboard, paper, an old broom handle. She picked up the latter and examined the end of it. Inside the plastic outer sheath was a metal rod. Taking a small knife from one of her pockets, she cut through the plastic quickly pulling it away from the rod on each end.

The boys moved into the alley and the old guys moved behind her. She noticed a small gap between one of the buildings and the chain link fence.

"Might wanna come dis way girlie," said the jean short guy, gesturing for her to follow.

She shook her head keeping her attention on the boys. "No way," she answered. "Not gonna let anyone push me around. Besides, they'de come after and what'cha wanna bet they move faster?"

She moved to the middle of the alley, glanced back at the men moving into the gap and winked at

the one still watching.

The situation reminded her of a documentary she had once seen about wolves. They would surround their prey before they took it down. They always preyed upon the most vulnerable.

She grasped the metal end of the broom handle firmly. Tapped it on the concrete and watched as the boys separated, two to each side of the alley, moving slowly against the side of the buildings.

"I think you boys better go back the way you came. There ain't nothing here for you."

"I think they's plenny he fo us Missy. Why yoo not wanna gib up a lil' fo a cuppa boys. We gib yoo a good time."

She gave no warning, but struck out at the first boy to her left, heard the buzz and felt the jolt move up both arms. It happened too quickly, but both boys on her left were now writhing and screaming on the concrete. She was ready for the others.

The other two moved back, "What yoo do ta my brudda? What yoo do bitch?" asked one of them.

She smiled, beckoned and then made a move toward them. They fled. Behind her, a burst of laughter caused her to turn.

The jean short guy stood looking down at the two boys, shaking his head. "Yoo 'lectricuted 'em, huh?"

She smiled and let the rod rest against the floor. "Had to do something. I wasn't gonna let 'em take what I'm not willing to give. By the way," she glanced behind him, toward the two men emerging from around the corner, "You guys hungry?"

Three

Tele made it back to camp as the sun peeked over the eastern horizon. Quiet murmurs from various corners greet her. People spoke in low tones so as not to disturb those already in slumber. She went to her tent, snatching the sign from the front of it and separated the foodstuff from the plastic sack. She placed a few choice items back inside, disconnected her Inprod and removed the glove.

Walking around the camp she handed out items from the sack to grateful and hungry hands. A few who saw what she did made their way to her and she gave them remainders. Kindness and generosity went far in the camps. People did not forget and were always on the look out for more where that came from. After a week of this, no one would roam near the tent as she slept. A few would bring her bits of useful information, things they thought she might be able to use.

Most days were spent sleeping and working on another Inprod and glove as backups. Nights were given over to exploring the city and scavenging what she could. She had stayed in four camps so far and felt compelled to make her way west, toward the ocean. She imagined life would be easier, the weather more amenable.

A month into her stay, the jean short guy she had met on her first night scavenging moved into the camp. "Eyyy, I know yoo," he said, coming upon her. "Yoo dat bad ass tech girlie."

She had gathered brush and dried wood for the fire and had brought a few vegetables to the grill. Small chunks of squash, wild onion and greens were ready for the metal, when he approached. She glanced up, recognized him and grinned. She waved the stick currently being used as a utensil. "Hey, I know you too!"

He held a cracked, plastic platter with two gutted fish upon it. "I got me sum fish. Dint know dere were fishin here til yestaday."

She shook her head surprised, but pleased. "Me either. I thought all the fish were poisoned." She smiled, "This is a good thing. You want me to scoot over?"

He sat on a chunk of log nearby, setting the platter on the ground. "Nah, I cn wait. How ya doin' here?"

She considered her answer, nodded. "It's okay. I find enough food and I'm working on some gadgets," she smiled and shot him a knowing look. "Still working on that communication device."

He nodded. "I tink da mos' difcult ting bout da camps is mos' don' stay up long. Da city say, 'We gotta get rid of dese here people, so den day drive us all out and tink dey did a real gud job fo' da people. Nex' 'lection dey do da same ting."

Tele nodded and shrugged. She turned the squash letting it brown on the other side. "I don't usually stay any one place too long, so I guess it doesn't matter."

"Yoo get tired of dat? Movin' from one place ta 'nother?"

She glanced at him, saw he really was interested. Expectant. "Sometimes. I don't see any other way right now." She began poking the vegetables with the stick and dropping them into a cup she had on hand.

"It's not like I have anyone to look after and even if I did I feel like I'm looking for something right now." She paused at that. Before she had said it, she had not realized she had been searching. For what, she had no idea.

"Wat yoo lookin' fo?" He grinned and she wondered if he knew something she didn't.

She shrugged. "Not sure."

"I tink mos' a us is looking fo' sometine we had. Like the place dat used ta be called da United States." He shook his head, looking at his sandaled feet. "Is all gone. Dey took it fom us 'n we let 'em. Hell, we gabe it t' em."

Moving away from the grill, she gestured toward it. "It's ready if you want."

"Nice talkin' ta someone fo a change. Not like sum a da guys. Dey don wanna talk bout anytin' dat meen sumtin'. Know wat I meen?"

She nodded, smiled. "What's your name? I'm Tele."

He grinned at her, "everyone call me Bufo. Like da toad. I just a big ol' toad."

She grinned back at him. "I think you're probably more than just a big old toad Bufo. But that's for another day I guess." She looked around noticing a few others had come closer, listening to their conversation. She knew some waited for a handout.

"Get the hell away!" An older man stood outside the blue tarp shelter gesturing wildly toward a lanky, young man,.

The younger man had what appeared to be home-made tattoos all over his arms and chest. He pointed toward the shelter. "You have more than you can eat in there! Why not share?"

Reaching inside the the slit of the shelter, the older man pulled out a long, sturdy looking stick. "I'm the one collected that stuff. If you not be so lazy you'de have your own stuff. My stuff is my stuff, that's why."

"Don't pay 'tension to that ol' guy," said a woman Tele guessed was in her fifties. She leaned against one of the trees. She said it loud enough for everyone to hear. "He's crazy and always thinks people stealing from him."

Tele noticed Bufo had moved near her, but kept one eye on the fish he had laid on the grill. "Looks to me like that young guy is trying to take something that isn't his."

The woman glared at her. "Mind you own business. That old guy's greedy. He got at least ten cans of corn beef in that ol' tent and won't share."

"So what? He should go find his own food instead of trying to rip off old people."

Others who had gathered around shook their heads. "Why he trying to take Ol' Garner's stuff?" asked someone. "Dat's his stuff!"

A couple of men had moved in toward the action. A tall, skinny guy with a shaved head, had taken up a spot behind the man they called Garner. He pointed to the younger man. "You better stay 'way. I kick you ass you try to take his food."

The young man finally stalked away into the trees. Tattoo woman sprinted away to join him, but glanced back at Tele and held up her hand in the gesture of a gun, as if to shoot her.

The sun had begun its descent and though the day had been a scorcher, the temperature had dropped at least ten degrees in the past hour. It was now tolerable. She sat down on the log Bufo had moved from and watched him cook the fish.

Pulling a small plastic container from the front pocket of his shorts he sprinkled something on to the meat and gestured toward the ground near her. "Yoo 'and me dat?"

She glanced down and saw a small, sharp piece of metal with a piece of rubber attached as a handle. She handed it over. "So what do you do most days Bufo? You a scavenger?"

He shook his head. "I don' call myse'f such, but I fin food where I cn. Yoo guys lucky." He motioned toward some of the people who had moved closer watching and listening. "Got fish in da stream dere and got plenty of wile greens. Dis iz heben compared ta sum place I ben."

He diverted the conversation away from himself easily, but not without her notice. The smell of fish had brought more people. A few stood nearby with angry looks. The feeling this could turn ugly crossed her mind, but she attempted to stamp the thought out. "How did you catch those fish? You have a pole?"

He shook his head and glanced at her knowingly. "Nah. I foun sum string wit a hook an 'tached it to a stick. I dug sum woms. Dats all dere is to it. Anyone cn do it."

She glanced around again and stood up. "I might give it a try. That fish smells awfully good."

A few people nodded and moved away toward the stream. She noticed clouds had gathered overhead blocking out the moon. "Looks like a storm's coming," she said. "We might wanna find some other cover," she warned.

She moved as if to go back to her tent, but stopped when Bufo gestured to her. "If yoo wait fo' me I cn go wit yoo ta fin' dat covah 'n maybe sum scabengin'."

Four

Under an umbrella of trees and the cover of a concrete passageway they listened to a symphony of wind and rain. The weather had not dropped the temperature much, but compared to the heat wave over the past month, they felt comfortable. Someone had brought a camp stove and another produced a small bag of ground coffee snatched from a local market. Bufo shared a couple of styrofoam cups and they took turns using them.

There were only six people in the tunnel-like enclosure including Tele. She and Bufo had tried to convince others to join them, but most refused to leave the camp, despite the danger of falling tree limbs.

She sat opposite Bufo, sipping from one of the cups. Her glove and Inprod tucked safely inside the satchel pocket, she felt no immediate need to don them.

Backs to gray walls, they spoke in hushed tones wondering how long the storm would last, discussing the graffiti sprayed on concrete. 'Corporate rule = end of democracy' read one of the sprays. 'Corporations value dollars not people,' sprayed in red.

"Don' matta what dey do ta dis country," said Bufo. "No one gonna stop 'em. What c'n anyone do?"

Tele nodded, but disagreed. "I don't think one person can do anything but inspire others. But I think if a lot of people get together they can accomplish something."

She wasn't sure how many people it would take to change things when considering her last experience. Everything she had heard lately about protest and movement against corporate rule had come to nothing. People may express discontent, but they were penalized, sometimes eliminated for that expression. The only thing people like her and Bufo could do was spread ideas. "You know what a meme is?" she asked.

He shook his head, brows raised. A girl, just the other side of teenhood and lodged between a couple of middle-agers spoke up. "I think it's an idea that spreads. Like religion, right?"

Tele nodded, "That's right. An idea that passes from one person to another."

She had read that the meme was defined as a cultural counterpart of genes and it reminded her of the idea of corporate growth. Everyone had believed for capitalism and democracy to grow, the corporation had to grow; though that was wrong, the idea stuck. Democracy was the meme, but corporate growth was an idea imbedded into that meme. Hard to shake one from the other.

Say for instance, you," she pointed to a middle-aged man sitting near the camp stove. He grinned at her showing a set of yellowed dentures. "You decide to create a religion based on the idea of freedom rather than the afterlife."

Bufo nodded. "Yoo need histry fo' dat. someting dat go back a ways. A good story."

"I used to be christian," said the man. He shook his head, chuckled. "We thought we was gonna spread the word. Make a better world. It's all business now. God is good money."

Bufo leveled his gaze at her. "Yoo saying we need ta make a new rallijun?"

She shook her head. "No. I said you could create one and allow it to become a meme. 'The Word' would have to spread. That 'Word' could be 'Freedom' or from the voice of a martyr."

"People are afraid to do that," said the girl. She shook her head, "It's too risky."

"Yoo c'nt stop ideas tho," said Bufo, looking at the girl. "Dat's what she sayin', right?" He glanced at Tele for confirmation.

She nodded again. "If an idea is powerful enough and takes hold, it spreads like a virus. There is no stopping it. But corporations know this," she said. "They would try to counter it with another idea. It would have to be something powerful. Something already imbedded in our minds."

She thought about Christmas ten years past. Her and Philip had decided not to purchase gifts and they wanted to insert some kind of meaning into the holiday. Get away from the idea that purchasing extravagant gifts expressed how much families cared for one another.

The idea had worked until they went to her in-laws for dinner. As soon as they had pulled up in the

driveway, they were assaulted with an excessive display of multi-colored lights, a Wally World snowman in the yard waving mechanically with several cute penguins skating around him.

Inside, Philip's mother Gladys greet them wearing a Santa hat, ushering them into the kitchen for warm food and hot cocoa, but not before she made them check out the tree.

It was the Christmas tree that thrust Tele over the commercial edge. Like a trooper, she had held out until she saw the seven foot beauty of brightly lit fir. It had been an artificial tree, but no less beautiful for it. Each green plastic limb was bedecked in white light and crystal ornaments, reflecting prisms of various colors on to the walls around it.

In their own little apartment they had a small tree, a real one cut from the side of a mountain road. They had avoided the light display and instead had used ornamentation handed down from Tele's mother. The comparison was sad, if not difficult.

"Like, America iz ded," said Bufo, interrupting her thoughts.

"No," she said. "like Democracy and America is still alive."

Tele glanced at him and saw a light had come on. He looked around and repeated it, his head bobbing up and down. "America iz alive."

"Yes it is," she said, a flutter of something in her gut, a lump in her throat. "They tried to kill it." She tapped the side of her head. "But it's still here."

The man sitting near the camp stove nodded and pointed to the concrete wall, "We need another slogan up there."

"There has to be more to it than that," said the girl, standing now. Hands fluttering in the air as she spoke. "How is it still alive? Why can't we see it? How did it get this way?" There was a note of anguish in the questions and an older woman who sat next to her reached out as if to draw her back.

Overhead, lightening cracked nearby. It sounded as if something had been hit. A moment later the rain began in earnest drowning out all other sound. Though it had been loud before, it was almost deafening now.

Tele recognized the woman from one of the vans in the camp. She appeared to be in her sixties and physically disabled. She walked with a limp beginning in her hip and used a stick as a cane. Despite her age and disability the woman appeared to have taken care of herself. Her reddish hair had little gray and her skin still looked well conditioned. Tele thought that she might be new to the situation.

She glanced in Tele's direction and raised her voice over the cacophony, "Maybe this isn't a good time. Perhaps we can talk about something else."

"Watcha wanna gab bout? How great yoo life iz?" Bufo asked harshly.

The woman glared at him and then looked at Tele for help. Tele shook her head, but waited a few moments until the tempest outside calmed. "Honestly, if you think this kind of talk should wait for another day then perhaps you belong on the other side of the fence. Ignoring reality and hoping it will go away is part of what got us here."

"I used to be a teacher--" started the woman, but the girl interrupted her and shoved the woman's hand away. She took a couple of tentative steps closer to Tele and Bufo.

"I don't want to be protected. That's not it at all!" A sob escaped her. "I really want to know how it came to this. My parents killed themselves. Druggies like nearly everyone else we knew. I'm only here by the grace of some slave wage trucker..."

She had spoken quickly and suddenly stopped, looked around, then down at the ground. "I've had to do things that I shouldn't have..."

Bufo held up his hand. "We don' care 'bout dat. No matta what people do ta survive. We gotta keep goin'. No reason fo' yoo ta feel bad 'bout it."

The girl glanced up at Bufo and forced a smile. "Yeah," she said, disconsolately. "Doesn't make me feel any better 'bout it." She moved to the camp stove, though it was no longer burning, sat down crossing her legs. "Does anyone know how it got this way? I mean," she paused as if to choose her words carefully. "Is there a web page or a news article about it?"

The teacher raised her hand and cleared her throat to get everyone's attention. She cocked her head sideways and almost shyly said, "I think I can help in this area."

Bufo glanced at Tele, who grinned back at him and nodded. "Please..."

"There are articles going back to the 1980s that show a direct link to the political situation we have now. I would suggest you check out books and articles that deal with the conservative right beginning in that era, but then move on to subjects like the food security issues some environmentalists were talking about in the late 1990s and the commercial takeover of the agricultural industry."

She stopped to draw a breath and grinned. "I've done a bit of reading on this and a few people were pointing their scholarship in this area."

Bufo grinned back. "Yoo iz a teacher. Wat yoo name?"

"I'm June Davis. I taught high school at Cleveland..."

"June, how did you get here? I mean to the camp?" She was not sure the teacher wanted to share and felt a little callous for asking, but at the same time thought it was important to hear.

"That's a good question." The older woman said, looking out the tunnel entrance. "I had a heart attack about ten years ago and I had insurance... I couldn't go back to work for awhile and the system is set up differently than it used to be. I didn't understand... Didn't realize I only had a certain amount of time. Once they think you're in declining health, they want to get rid of you. Can't be insured anymore."

The man sitting near the camp stove nodded. "Same here. Only for me it was I got hurt on the job. Not any big deal, but I guess they thought I might do something 'bout it so they found a reason to fire me. Couldn't find work after that." He shook his head, looking at June. "Nothin'."

"I was always a dedbeat," said Bufo grinning. "I wook wit paint wen I c'n fine it. But dat's da only ting I eber wanna do. I do good lettas on signs... no one use dat no moe."

Five

Most people bought the corporate party line. Experience and wisdom needed to make way for youth and beauty. The more people consumed, the better off was the economy. Newer. Bigger. Brighter. These were the things sought.

Replacing the idea of family and community was a vast consumer psychology that advertised the corporation as warm and friendly. One could depend on the corporation in a way they could not depend on people. The pseudo-science of poverty touted the idea that street people and the unemployed were unsound or mentally ill remnants who refused to contribute to society and buy into a better America.

A few people challenged that, cautiously. Tele began to see more protest stickers on buildings, light poles and even on some bumpers. Graffiti artists seemed to have become more active, spraying curses against corporate rule not only on the sides of buildings, but on store windows. On one night she happened upon a large spray depicting the outline of an United States map inside the outline of a person's head. Across the thing was written, 'Democracy is alive.'

It was still dark when she made it back to camp and found Bufo and June near the grill. Concerned, she told them about the graffiti.

"Don tink 'bout it Tele. No worries. Peeps gettin' sick a all da crap," said Bufo.

They sat near the grill watching June heat leftover coffee. She glanced at the older woman, but the woman looked in a foul mood. She raised her brows and shook her head. "You're the one who said that we needed to face this reality, remember?"

Her own words thrown back at her. "I just don't want any negative attention. That's the last thing any of us need. Agreed?"

They nodded, agreeing. "But you can't tell me it's okay some of the laws just passed. Did you know we're not allowed to collect rainwater now?"

"What? What do you mean?"

"Just what I said, Tele dear." June removed the small pot from the grill and poured the contents into a cup. She brought it to her lips, testing, then took a long drink.

"I managed to get some web time from the library. One of the ladies there knows me..." She sat on a large stone someone had moved near the log. "Anyway, the utility company here owns the water rights. In New Mexico no one is allowed to collect rainwater, because it's now considered theft. We're stealing services and property if we collect so much as a glassful."

"Can they do that? I mean, isn't that illegal? How did that pass? Who made it law?"

"The state legislature made it law. How did it pass?" She put her cup down on the ground, Tele noticed she was shaking.

"It passed because the major shareholders of the utility company also happen to be major shareholders of Wayne Electric. If you look at some of the companies that are affiliated with these guys, you'll see it's one huge machine. They even own food companies. That's how it passed Tele. They own the legislature." June hissed the last sentence and looked away.

"I tink we shood let udders know," said Bufo.

"Let others know what?"

They glanced toward the voice and saw a dark figure ambling toward them slowly. Tele squinted, but knew from the voice it was Garner.

He moved closer, breathing heavily and plopped down on the ground nearby. "What're y'all gabbin 'bout? I hear you from my tent. Best be careful. Doan know what ears 're listenin'."

Tele thought there was something strange about his movements. Rather than just moving his head when he spoke, his whole upper body moved.

"I gotta helluva ache," he said. "Tink I slept wrong."

June dug in her pocket and produced a small vial, popped it open and shook out a couple pills. She reached toward him, "Here. Take these."

"What's that?" he asked.

"Sum peeps way to spicious," Bufo chuckled. "Jus take it, Garn. Goddam."

Tele grinned watching the older man reach out his hand tentatively, taking the proffered medicine.

"It's Ibuprofin," said June. "Quite a bit of it left over from the old days and it's still good. I checked the dates."

Bufo and June attempted to inform Garner about water rights, but realized he was too preoccupied with his suffering to be much interested in the new laws. Even as he sat there, he seemed to get worse. A fever appeared to make its way through him in the form of a foul-smelling sweat and he attempted to lay on the rough gravel floor.

Tele and Bufo helped him back to his tent and she noticed a pile of canned goods at one side. She wondered where he had scavenged them from. "Y'all take some of that corned beef. It good stuff," he said, pointing to a few cans he had put to the side.

Bufo shook his head in protest, but the older man waved at him. "I ben eatin the stuff for days. I'm sick of it. You go ahead. It's good cooked or not."

Tele and Bufo gathered a couple cans each, said their thank yous and left the man to rest. Outside again, Tele took out her pen light to examine the cans and check the dates.

"I'll bet this is why he's sick," she told Bufo as they made their way back to June. She held up one of the cans and showed him the expiration date. "He said he's been eating this uncooked."

He shook his head. "I 'ope 'e get over it soon. Might need a doctor. 'Ospitals don' take people no moe witout insurance."

"What are the symptoms for botulism?" asked June, when they showed her one of the cans.

Tele had not heard the term in a long time. She knew from historical references that people died of the disease after eating uncooked food from tin cans. She hoped it was not that serious.

She shrugged. "Don't know, but I hope it's not that. Maybe a slight case of food poisoning. Someone should check on him tomorrow--or later today. Make sure he's okay."

Bufo nodded. "I keep an eye on 'im. He be fine."

Tele nodded, but shot a worried glance toward the blue tent knowing if the man did have botulism, he had little chance of surviving.

Six

Some truths from habit are not meant to be heard. Those that depict a reality in which one does not want to live, but does exist. Rather than utter facts that accompany such a reality, most tend to blame themselves for some inherent flaw in their own makeup; immigrants for lost jobs or dwindling resources; an inept politician for bad policy. It's rare an individual will look at and point to the true source of that reality, because with acknowledgment comes responsibility. Few can carry that responsibility alone. The source of that reality is usually much larger and more powerful than the individual. An overwhelming burden of disappointment, regret and hopelessness accompanies such acknowledgment.

Such was the case in the camp after Bufo found Garner in his tent, unresponsive. People blamed themselves for not seeking medical attention. Others just shook their heads sadly and said no one should live in a world where they have to eat bad food from trash cans.

Tele, June and others watched as Bufo and two male campers alternated digging amongst the trees. Though it was illegal to bury bodies outside a cemetery, most felt this was where Garner could be memorialized. Paupers were cremated, their ashes trashed if family members were not present to receive them.

June purified water and took a jug of it to the men. "This is the least I can do," she said as she limped through the camp, shaking her head at offers of help.

Everyone seemed to want a part in the service. Even the young man who had given Garner a hard time over the cans of corned beef stood nearby looking grieved and anxious for something to do. He offered to help dig several times, which the men refused. Eventually he sauntered off and disappeared into the camp.

The service was a somber one. Someone produced a large scrap of metal that Bufo wanted to use as a grave marker. June had written an epitaph that Bufo promised to paint on to the marker later. A small fire and a couple of lanterns illuminated the scene as they lowered Garner's body into the grave. People spoke about what they knew of Garner. Some said he was kind, but grouchy. Others said they wished they knew him better.

"Fum dis day on," said Bufo, speaking loud enough for everyone to hear, "anyone dies a food scabenged will be ded of Garner Syndrome. Dat is 'is leg-assy ta us."

The few people standing nearby nodded agreement. Tele smiled and thought June had probably come up with the idea, because behind it, there was a subtle nudge allowing those who heard Garner's story to understand the system no longer cared for its more vulnerable citizens.

Garner's body had been wrapped in the blue tarp and his possessions disappeared quickly. The camp returned to its daily routine, but the season had begun to change. Nights grew colder, leaves began to change.

June told everyone who would listen about the new water right laws. Bufo told them about Garner's death. People talked late into the night about a ruined nation, a disgraced people and families dispersed like dandelion fluff.

Tele spent more time scouting further from the camp. She avoided the organizing efforts at the camp as often as possible, but knew the word had spread through talk of other scavengers she spoke to and the graffiti sprayed throughout the area.

Garner was becoming a legend. One young woman, another scavenger she had met, told her a story about 'Old Man Garner' who single-handedly fended off three attackers who attempted to steal his canned corned beef. The very food that killed him. "And to top it off," she said, excitedly, "the old guy was in his nineties."

Bufo stopped her one morning as she made her way back to camp. She strode quickly to her tent, hoping to avoid detection when he intercepted her. "Tele!"

She pretended not to hear him, but he sprinted over before she could make it inside. "Tele lissen

girl," he began excitedly. "June got a 'puter. She making a ting online fo Garner an' some 'un gabe her a video 'bout da water rights. Peeps gettin' involved."

She had removed her glove and threw it inside the tent, disconnected the Inprod and shoved it into the pocket of her satchel. She nodded, smiled. "That's good Bufo. I can't do anything right now. I'm really tired. Had a rough night."

He stood quietly looking at her for a moment. "Wat wrong Girl? Wat goin' on wit yoo?"

She shook her head, "Nothing. I'm just tired." She lied, "I'm not accomplishing anything on the communication device I've been working on and need some rest."

He nodded, but looked doubtful. "Maybe we c'n talk latah, huh? Come get me wen yoo up?"

She nodded, moved to go inside her tent. "Tele."

She glanced at him. "What Bufo?" She meant to keep the irritation from her voice, but he heard it.

"Don sey nuttin to 'nyone bout da 'puter stuff 'kay?"

She straightened up, hand on hip, clearly irritated. "Who do you think I'm going to tell? You think I got a corporate agent inside the tent or something? Wanna take a look?"

He stepped back, brows raised. Then turned around and moved off without a backward glance.

Inside, she removed the Inprod from her satchel and attached it to the flap. She sat with her head in her hands for a moment. She had not meant to snap at Bufo. At first she felt that he had wanted something from her. The organizing bothered her. It was attracting attention and she knew he and June wanted more involvement from her. Then asking her not to say anything was like a slap in the face. As if she needed to be told.

Laying down, she willed herself not to think about it and pulled the electronic pad from her satchel, cursing under her breath. She knew there was something in this behavior. Whenever she needed a reason to feel lousy, or beat herself up a little more she would watch the images. Listen to Kelly tell her how much she loved her.

She shoved an ear bud in one ear and lay down, closed her eyes and listened to Kelly laughing. The familiar ache was there in her stomach and chest. She wished for peace and longed for the day when she would feel nothing for any of this. Just as drilling for oil had come to an end, so too would this seemingly endless pain. There was always a limit. That point in which resources were exhausted. Hers would be reached soon.

A flapping sounded louder than it had to and Tele thought about asking Garner to turn down the volume. *Garner? Garner? Wasn't he dead?* She stood in front of the blue tarp tent. A rock had rolled away from one side and the noise came from that loose section. She could see him moving around inside, probably looking for something.

Then he popped his head out the small opening peeking at her. He shook his head, "Girl, you 'bout got it all wrong."

He had changed. His long, unwashed hair was trimmed and clean. He had shaved. He stepped out and it appeared he had a complete makeover. Stylish clothing, good shoes, a com-pad hung from his pocket with an ear bud in his ear. She wanted to clap, to tell him how great he looked, but nothing came. Still that feeling of relief that he was okay filled her.

The noise grew louder and she had to strain to hear him. "No mattah how much we change, we still da same Tele." He stepped closer and she could smell his minty fresh breath, his clean scent. Suddenly, he had a firm hold of her upper arm, pulling her closer and he had changed once again.

A stench came from him now. His teeth yellowed, flecks of something almost alive moving there. She looked away, attempted to pull from him, but he moved closer and she could not help but look at him. The wild look in his eyes. "Don't do it!" he screamed.

Tele cried out upon waking. Attempting to get rid of the filth from the dream, she clawed the empty air in front of her. She heard someone shout something, but could not quiet Garner's words from her mind enough to concentrate on it.

It took a couple moments to realize Bufo and June were shouting at her from outside the tent. She

shoved her glove on her hand and still on her knees, opened the flap and disconnected the Inprod.

“Are you okay?” and “Wat wrong Girl?” came together.

“I'm sorry. I had a bad dream. I dreamed about Garner. He was still dead.”

“Uff.” Bufo rolled his eyes and glanced at June, who was bent over, looking concerned.

“I heard you scream,” said the older lady. “Do you want to talk about it?”

Tele shook her head. “I'm fine. I think it's just been the stress of the past week and I've been so tired and trying to get a communication device to work. Not having much luck.”

June straightened up, putting a hand to her back. Tele realized that the older woman now had a real wood cane. “Well, I'm going to be in the van if you want to talk,” she said. She turned away, “You can come talk anytime Sweetie. My van's always open to you,” she shot back over her shoulder.

Bufo stood looking at her, grinning. “Yoo shoo got some voice.”

Tele grinned back, waved him away. “I'll be out in a bit. We'll talk. Sorry 'bout earlier.”

He shook his head and moved away. “No prob Girlie. We gotta talk doe.”

She took her time getting herself together. She changed clothes, thinking about the dream. She had lied to June and Bufo about the communication device weighing on her, when really it was their organizing that had her on edge. Trouble from the corporate sector did not come in small packages. It came in densely packed clusters. Miniature booms that would take out everyone involved.

She wanted to discourage their efforts, though something told her that this might work against the state. Politicians would have to listen. They would have to cut their connections to the corporations if enough people became active participants.

Regardless, she could not risk her own position. If she was found to be involved, her chance of reuniting with Philip and Kelly would be zero. Even though she believed there was little chance of connecting with them again, she could not risk it.

She packed a few things into the satchel, removed her glove and went to find Bufo.

Seven

They sat in the back of June's van with the back doors open. It was an older model brown behemoth with a FORD logo on the back. A couple of battery-powered fans ran on high, but the dense air weighed heavily on them. Soaked with sweat, Bufo looked miserable in the dim lamp light. Though June sat directly in the path of the one of the fans, her hair lay flat against her head and she continually wiped sweat from her face and neck with a small white cloth.

The day had been a scorcher for early autumn. Someone said the temperature had reached a hundred and ten and the heat wave would not break for another week. Even the evening temperature would not dip below a hundred and Tele would not scavenge in this weather. Instead she would rely on the small reserve of food she had stored inside her own tent.

"I think we've been stuck in this van long enough," said Tele. "Let's go to the stream and cool off. We can continue this conversation there if you want to."

Tele had told them about Kelly and Philip. Though she had hedged with the idea, she finally came to the conclusion that this would be the only way to resolve her disquiet. She wanted to be honest about her situation and her identity and she knew she could trust them. The dream about Garner had pushed her in this direction; though she wasn't sure why.

"I think that's the best suggestion I've heard all night." June said, brightening.

Bufo jumped from the van. "Come ladies. I takin' yoo swimmin'."

The cool water had an immediate refreshing effect. June had sat her cane on the bank, moved into the stream and sat in the shallows. Bufo ran and jumped in, splashed them a bit then swam off when Tele threatened dunking.

Tele floated awhile, then lifted her head and opened her eyes when she thought she heard June say something. The older lady sat in the same spot. "Did you say something?" she asked.

"Yes. I said that this place is beautiful. I love it here. We used to come here when I was younger—me and my brothers."

Tele was at a loss. Somehow the understanding that June was from the area had escaped her. But of course, when she thought back on conversations, June had told them that she had taught at a nearby school.

"I didn't realize you were from here." She made her way closer to the bank and sat near June, staying just under the bank.

June nodded. "I've lived in this area my whole life. It's a shame things have turned out the way they have."

Tele nodded. "Yes it is."

"I'm sorry about your family Tele, but we can't stop organizing. I think we have to do something if we want things to change..." She seemed about to say something else, but then seemed to think better of it.

"I know June. Believe me, I understand. I'm going to have to move somewhere else though. I can't stick around."

"We be sorry ta see ya go, Girl." Bufo startled her, coming up from behind. "I felt like we 'as becoming like famlee. Almos'." He plopped down in the water near them.

"You know that you're taking a risk," She said to June, then turned to Bufo. "So are you." She wanted to emphasize the danger they were putting themselves in. "From the information I get, they've gotten tougher on anyone organizing. There are stories about people being tortured."

June nodded. "I've heard the same. There have been a couple people I've talked to who have known others who've suffered. One of the stories I heard, a woman died during questioning. They said she did it to herself, but the body had bruises, she had been beaten to death."

Tele nodded. "I don't doubt it."

"Wen ya leevin'?" asked Bufo.

“Soon.” She hesitated. “I don't want any teary goodbyes. One evening you'll wake up and I'll be gone. I'll have just been a ghost. Barely even a thought.”

June smiled sadly at her and shook her head. “No Tele. You'll have been our friend.”

Eight

She made her way down the dimly lit hallway and came to the door she had been directed to. Taking a breath, she turned the knob and pushed the door open. Two men in suits stood just inside waiting for her. One was a short, heavy-set balding man she had known for too long. The other was younger, with a kind face. She nodded to them, but they remained quiet and turned their attention back to the room on the other side of the one-way mirror.

She heard the woman before she saw her. A deep sobbing came from the other room and she felt she might get sick, but moved to the window anyway. She deserved this. She needed to watch.

The man closest to her touched her elbow and leaned over to speak into her ear. "I don't know why you would do this to yourself. Why?"

She shook her head, but remained quiet. There was danger in answering the question. As fragile as she felt right now, she might break trying to answer that.

The woman lay strapped to a bed naked, alone in the room. She had become emaciated over the past month. Blood, sweat and other bodily fluids had soaked the sheets long ago. She stared at the wall, one eye open, the other swollen closed. There was an occasional burst of involuntary sobbing that issued from her, but otherwise she was quiet.

The sight revolted her. "You guys like to watch?" she asked with some acid in her voice.

The younger man who had remained quiet until now, spoke up. "No matter what you think, there is no ideal way of being human. Humans are a disgusting species. Men watch things like this because there's something about seeing a woman broken that appeals to us. Go to the nearest sex store and find out which videos are the most often purchased..."

"We're going to start again in a few minutes." Said the older man. It sounded like a warning. "You have your home back. Go enjoy your life," he said.

She could take no more and turned away. "She was my friend..." she sobbed, hand on the doorknob. She waited just a moment for some kind of response, when none came she stepped out of the room and back into the hallway, breathing the fresh air.

"She brought it on herself," she said into the empty hallway. "She knew the risks."

Her vision blurred and she knew she would need to sit down in a few moments. She felt sick again, bile burning her throat. Her hip ached and she limped her way toward the bathroom wishing she would have brought her cane.

~fin~

About the author

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