

A photograph of a pond with several green lily pads floating on the water. A single raindrop has just fallen, creating a series of concentric ripples in the dark water. The text is overlaid on the image in white.

LIKE
Raindrops
ON
Water

The Novel that
Wrote Itself

As strange as it sounds, LIKE RAINDROPS ON WATER wrote itself.

Many of the characters and ideas arrived during Ayahuasca ceremonies.

The story line arrived while working with the sacred Andean coca leaves (not to be confused with the cola drink or the white powder derived from these mystical leaves).

And the jungle adventure was delivered by the magic of the Peruvian jungle which breathes inspiration with every gust of air.

It came together as a collaboration of a group of friends from around the world, each adding their own special input.

At one time, it was even being edited by candle light, in a hut, in the middle of the Amazon jungle!

My part was to coordinate the things that happened, and to bring it into being, for you to read.

Jann Di Paolo

LIKE
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A LOVE LETTER TO THE WORLD

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WHAT WAS IT LIKE, MOLLY?

Jonathan swung gently in the hammock, leafing through one of Molly's antique books. It had an old smell about it and he liked the feel of the paper pages. Almost everything he read these days was on a flat electronic screen but holding the book he felt he was living a part of history. It was a book of Shakespeare's sonnets and love quotes. Molly was now convinced he had fallen in love with his very beautiful and intelligent girlfriend, Belle.

It was a Saturday morning and they were sitting on the balcony of her small, third floor apartment that overlooked a magnificent park. On the balcony was a tiny but flourishing garden of edible plants with a splash of colorful flowers. One little bush was covered in tiny white flowers and buzzed with bees collecting pollen.

Molly was sewing, making a small alteration to his favorite shirt. She had just turned 105 and had lived through many more years than Jonathan, who was just 23. But, to him, she felt more like an older sister. She had been a friend of Jonathan's family since before he was born and, after his parents died so suddenly, they had always spent time together. There was a strong bond between the unlikely friends.

"These textiles are terrific. So soft, but this shirt will be good for years," she said.

He looked at her face while she concentrated on her sewing. It was a face that had seen many smiles, but she had surprisingly few lines, and her skin was bright and full of color.

"What was it like, Molly, when you were young? Tell me more. I love hearing how things have changed."

He often asked this type of question. He was always researching and studying, but what he liked best was to hear the stories from anyone who had lived in the time before so much had changed.

His parents had been investigative journalists. It must have been in his genes. His mother was the writer, his father the photographer, and together they had exposed some shocking human and animal rights issues. They were courageous and fearless about what they brought to light. But it often took them to dangerous places. When they found out they were expecting Jonathan, they hung up their traveling hats and worked close to home and concentrated on raising the boy. It was a cruel twist of fate when a huge landslide at a nearby beach engulfed them both. The horrible irony was they were researching an article on whether or not the beach was safe when the sands collapsed on top of them.

Jonathan was nearly four at the time and went to live with his grandparents. They loved him dearly, and many of his parents' friends stepped in to help raise the boy and share with him what they knew. That's when Molly started seeing more and more of him. He was taken under the wing of many talented and clever people, from many walks of life. It was a rich and varied education, but nothing could fill the place of his parents.

His grandfather taught him how to work with wood, and Jonathan was fascinated by objects with moving parts. In his teens, a musician friend taught him how to play the guitar, but music wasn't one of Jonathan's greatest passions. He set about building a robotic guitar player that would play the instrument for him. The final version was a beautifully constructed piece of art made of wood. His grandfather taught him how to select the finest pieces of timber, how to carve and polish it to create a living artwork from the precious material. The mechanical fingers formed the notes and plucked the strings. They moved like the legs of a huge insect, and it was mesmerizing to watch the wooden creature play. It was also the start of a promising career in robotics for the young man. He built a mechanical drum and various wind instruments, but the guitar player was the most beautiful to watch. Jonathan was never much of a talker, but the music helped him to socialize and was a big success with his friends. The family room became a music studio. It accumulated all sorts of instruments and became a favorite place for friends to gather, talk and play together. His grandmother often joined in playing piano, but "in the traditional way," she always said.

Jonathan had been coached, inspired and encouraged by some exceptional masters who had taught him how to learn and think for himself. He had won a place at Sean's Academy, considered the most innovative college in the world, and after graduating, was now teaching robotics there. He had an

inquiring mind and listened well. "It was in his genes," his grandmother would always say. She felt deeply for her grandson, growing up without his parents.

He was especially fascinated by Molly's stories. She was from a different era from many of the other friends who had formed his family. And she shared with him the stories from her travels, which gave him a sense of the world and a taste for adventure.

"What was it like? Well, once upon a time..." Molly laughed, then paused and reflected on a world that she had seen change dramatically. She put down her sewing on the small bamboo table by her side.

"In many ways, life was pretty much the same as now. Human beings have done much the same for millennia. We eat, sleep, chat to friends, watch the sun go up and down, fall in and out of love, have babies, wash the dishes.

"There was so much that was good, in so many ways. But all sorts of things were going wrong with the world. The weather, our animals, our forests, rivers, seas and lands. It seemed like an endless list.

"And things were far from perfect for the human race. Many people seemed to have everything they needed and lived well, but too often it was a stressful life full of drama and panic, disconnected from what was really important. A huge number lived in poverty. Millions didn't have enough food to eat or clean water to drink. There were people who were homeless, without security or shelter. There was disease, crime and corruption, and horrible wars were still raging. The quality of our food had dropped, and people got sick from preventable diseases like diabetes. And it wasn't only the poor. It affected everyone.

"Our environment was toxic: the air, the water and the way we lived. The plastics that we used for so many things were poisoning us. It had been marvelous at first, of course. We thought it very convenient and used so much of it to store and serve food. But the news started to spread that our precious plastics were toxic and linked to all sorts of illnesses. It was causing infertility, problems with our immune systems, asthma, diabetes. There was a whole list of horrible illnesses. The toxins were leaking into our water and our food.

"And the pesticides that we'd used for years to produce such quantities of food were turning against us. The chemicals were destroying our bees. We nearly lost them, and many other insects for that matter. Without bees, much of our food wouldn't be pollinated. And if the bees were suffering, what were the pesticides doing to us?

"There was such resistance to change. Research was gagged, and evidence ignored; so much was controlled by a few. The bees were a close call, Jonathan, but we saved them. It started with a few that spread the word, and it gathered momentum. People started to take action and have their voices heard to make changes. It seems incredible that it was all kept secret, but of course when it all came out a few years ago, the situation had been corrected in any case. And our precious little honey bees were saved."

As if on cue, a honey bee landed gently on Molly's hand. She greeted it with a smile.

IMAGINE THE FIRE FOR CHANGE

“It had seemed like an overwhelming, impossible task. Some thought it would just fix itself. Some thought it was already too late. Many people found it hard to imagine how things could change, really change in the way that, deep down, we knew it had to. It was easier to get on with our lives and leave it to our leaders, although they seemed to be a big part of the problem. Many of those who could make the changes did nothing, or worse still, took actions out of fear and self-interest. I guess we will never know the full story behind it all, but at the time, it certainly seemed that many solutions were being ignored.

“But something happened. There could have been many reasons. We were obsessed those days with looking for reasons, or better still, THE reason.

“Humankind had been set on destruction. We resisted making the changes for too long, so it was forced on us. It was a turning point that could have gone either way. Thankfully we evolved in a constructive way. The mystical laws of the universe, as always, were in charge.

“Maybe enough people came to believe in the possibility of a better world, creating a critical mass that made the shifts happen. Maybe it was the new generation, or intervention from beings from other galaxies, something in the drinking water or music in the air. Who knows?

“It seems so difficult to explain. But it’s because there are no words to describe it. It came from something that has no words. We had been looking and waiting for a dimensional shift, an enlightenment. We thought it would feel like an awakening. But it was different, and none of our words can describe it. The moment we tried to explain or understand it, it disappeared. We had to hold onto something completely new and inexplicable to retain it. All we knew was that it felt right. Comfortable.

“And it happened quietly, within people. More and more of us started to see that everything in the world was connected. We changed our own small worlds, little by little. It was subtle and in some ways we hardly noticed it, but we saw the effects. Outwardly things seemed much the same as before. But slowly, people seemed to gain a new perspective both of themselves and the world. We started to understand what was behind energy and vibrations.

“It started with a few, and spread, like raindrops on water that ripple out gently. And it was a fire that soared high and strong, like an eagle lighting up the sky.” Quietly Molly started singing.

They both gazed out over the park.

A grand old tree just inside the gates of the park caught Molly’s attention. She had been watching it over the last few weeks and couldn’t understand why it was dying, and why it was dying so quickly.

“Let’s go outside for a walk. I want to have a look at that tree over there,” she said. “And I’m going to introduce you to the Professor. He’s bound to be in the park at this time. He can tell you more about all sorts of things!” said Molly, rising gracefully.

Jonathan followed and, on the way out, picked up both his own electropack and hers, in case they decided to glide round the park.

WALK IN THE PARK

The spring morning was starting to warm up, and people were out and about in the street. A few glided or cycled past, while community buses on the outer lane took people further afield. The buses and electropacks were silent and there was only an occasional squeak of a bicycle due for a touch of lubricant. They could hear the birds in the park, the whistling of a man walking in front of them and the wind rustling the top leaves of the trees.

Jonathan swung the electropacks over one shoulder, faced the solar panels outward to give them extra charge, and lightly took Molly's arm as they walked down the street.

"So tell me," said Molly. "How is young Belle?"

"She's wonderful. We're going to a ballet performance tonight with some of her friends. I must admit I'm not sure about ballet, but she loves it. I do think she is so very beautiful." he said and then suddenly looked embarrassed by his declaration.

"What's she doing today?"

"Experimenting with her latest snacks. Maca-rooms! They are so delicious and give you such an energy boost. She wants to take some with us to the ballet for taste-bud testing on the final six in the range."

They waited briefly for a break in the transit lanes, then crossed over and walked through the park gates. The park had been there for hundreds of years and was full of beautiful old trees. There were many new areas built in the last few decades that were used both for recreation and growing food. Molly loved this park. It had a small community area for fast-growing foods, but was mainly a place to relax, take in the sun and pass the time of day. She had lived in the area a long time and knew many of the people in the community. She liked to introduce people to each other, and especially liked to present her favorite people to Jonathan whenever she had the chance. Molly worried about her young friend. He was sociable and had plenty of friends, but he was reserved, as if he was waiting for something. She often wondered what else she could do to help him break through whatever was holding him back.

They stopped at the dead tree. It had been beautiful, one of the largest and oldest in the park. But now there was a large sign on it, saying that it had been poisoned and asking for information on who could have done it.

Molly was shocked. How could someone poison a tree on purpose? She looked back and saw the terrace of an apartment block right across the road from the tree. From the terrace there would be a magnificent view of the whole park with the city landscape as a backdrop, once the huge old tree was gone. It reminded her of a beachside suburb she had lived in years ago, where trees had been poisoned to allow a sweeping ocean view from a residential building, and it saddened her deeply that this could be the same reason for the fate of this tree.

Jonathan had recently bought a new camera made by his favorite inventor, Merlin, one of the early graduates from Sean's Academy. It was lightweight and small enough to fit in his pocket, but with such a strong zoom lens it doubled as binoculars. He pulled it out of his pocket and took pictures of the tragic tree from different angles. His love of the camera was more than a hobby; it gave him a connection to his father. And he felt secure behind the camera lens. He could look without feeling self-conscious and disappear for a moment into a world where only he entered.

"I'm worried, Jonathan." Molly said. "Life has been good, really good, since you were born. But lately I'm seeing and feeling things that haven't happened for years."

GLIDING

“Shall we glide?” Molly suggested.

“Yes, I’d love to” replied Jonathan.

The park was big, with a huge variety of plants and trees. Molly always wanted to see as much of it as possible. She also loved to glide, just for the sake of it.

The Glide was one of the most popular inventions from Sean’s Academy. The small solar panel on the electropack provided power to a set of rollers in the Glide soles that were strapped on to the wearers’ regular shoes. The stop, start and speed controls were held in the hand and the rollers adapted to uneven surfaces, so it could be used almost anywhere. It was cheap to buy, cost nothing to run and needed little maintenance. It came with a Carry-Glide, a collapsible basket with wheels that could be hooked on, to easily transport small items. The best thing was that the Glide was light enough to be carried, so it took a huge weight off the transport system. Walking and gliding had become great pleasures for most people.

Jonathan strapped the small panel onto Molly’s back and helped her slip into the Glide soles. He made sure the brake was on and plugged in the cable. Then he did the same for his own Glide. He took her arm and they both switched on. Gently increasing their speed, they joined the other gliders.

“Oh, this is glorious!” exclaimed Molly, as they passed large trees, flower beds planted with color, and a small lake full of birds. Jonathan clicked the camera to catch a few images as they moved.

At the far end of the lake they met Henry’s great grandmother. Henry was a longtime friend of Jonathan’s. He introduced her to Molly and they chatted briefly.

“Isn’t she amazing, Molly? She’s 120 next month. She puts it down to good food and a young husband. It’s so sweet. Her husband, Henry’s great grandfather, is 115! He’s still very fit too and walks everywhere. He says it’s all due to having such a gorgeous wife! Wonderful to think we can live such long and healthy lives. You’d like him, Molly. We’ll have to visit one day.”

COMMUNIPLUG

In the middle of the park was a collection of buildings. Its official name was The Service Station, but people had jokingly taken to calling it The Gas Station, as a reference to the old service centers that sold gasoline for the now-defunct petrol cars. Some people also joked that it was because people stopped there to talk. There you could recharge your electropack, collect messages, stop for a juice or a light snack, and pick up groceries and fresh produce from the small shop. It had its own multi-story greenhouse growing fruits and vegetables, both for sale and for the juice bar.

They stopped at the CommuniPlug to pick up messages on their wrist-cells.

Years earlier, cell and mobile phones had been phased out. Scientists had finally proved that it was harmful to hold receivers so close to the body. And there was conclusive evidence that the frequencies of the radio waves that were emitted, over the huge network of towers and masts, had played a part in the disappearance of bees and other insects.

A new technology emerged where messages were relayed via shielded cables. It was a return to 'wires' and used fiber optic cables. Airways were reserved for messages marked as urgent. People plugged in their devices to send and receive all other communications as and when it was convenient. Except for emergencies, the days of instant messages were over, and people started to enjoy the more relaxed way of communicating. Being constantly contactable and 'on demand' had been stressful, and everyone was happier communicating when they had time to concentrate properly.

Molly and Jonathan plugged into the fiber optic cables and unrolled the retractable screens on their wrist-cells. Molly's wrist-cell was so old there were now retro versions that looked the same. It had been one of the first, but still worked perfectly for everything Molly wanted.

"I'll leave it to you in my will," she always told him.

"Dah, you'll outlive the lot of us" he always replied. He knew that Molly could easily expect to live another 15 years or more. But he also knew that one day she would be gone, and gliding round the park with her would be a memory.

Jonathan downloaded a message from Belle, a reminder from his calendar about the ballet at 7:00 pm that evening, and a snippet of the latest song from his friend Henry Hatsoff and his band Mickey Mad Hat.

"Message from Henry. What a coincidence; we've just bumped into his great grandmother!"

Henry Hatsoff, his stage name, was a crazy musician who had been Jonathan's friend since their early school days. Jonathan had been one of the first to buy crypto-shares in Henry's band to help launch them. It was always good to hear what the prolific band was up to. Their latest was a glorious mash-up of traditional African rhythms and trombone, combined with a triple-tone acoustic flute invented by one of the band members, all mixed up with the distinctive Mickey Mad Hat up-beat Latin tempo.

Molly hummed along, completely out of tune, bopping her head and smiling. She liked Jonathan's taste in music and it kept her up to date with what was new. She read her own messages. A parcel had arrived at Centro for a hat ordered as a surprise gift for Jonathan. Mickey Mad Hat were playing their first important live show, and all the crypto-shares supporters of their initial launch had been invited to the "Wear a Hat" party afterwards. Jonathan thought it was a bit silly. Hats were the band's special trademark. He hated wearing them, but Molly said it was a good party ice-breaker. She had ordered a collapsible top hat that he could tuck away if he wanted to. She thought he would look splendid.

There was a message with an interesting recipe for stuffed caigua, the vegetable they call the slipper cucumber.

"Jonathan, we need to pick up some things at the shop. I'm going to try out a new recipe. If you like, drop by with Belle for an early dinner before the ballet."

Jonathan messaged the invite to Belle. She was home so bounced straight back, "I'd love to, Molly. See you at 5. I'll bring some of my new Maca-rooms for you to try."

All the messages were done. Molly said, "Let's have a juice while we're here."

They glided over, braked at the door and switched to walk mode.

JUICE BAR

The juice bar was a bright, friendly place, full of natural light. They sat at a small table near the door. The menu changed often depending on what was ready in the greenhouse for harvest, but they always had a good selection.

Molly chose a carrot and beetroot juice from the electronic menu and tapped in her order for the shop: six caigua, a small packet of macambo and some crusty bread rolls. Jonathan ordered what he called green slime but that the menu showed as “Greens of the Day”. You never knew what would be in it until it arrived. They read through some online publications and talked while they waited.

The young waitress brought over their drinks. Only minutes before, the vegetables had been growing. They'd been pulled from the ground, shuttled through to the kitchen, washed, juiced and delivered. She also brought over the groceries Molly had ordered from the shop.

“Hello Molly, hello Jonathan. How are you both?” The waitress, Jeni, bent to give them both a kiss on the cheek.

“Jeni, hi! What's in the slime today?” Jonathan said, laughing.

“Today we have lots of spinach and celery and, of course, spirulina. It's Popeye day today,” she beamed and made the strong-arm imitation of the recently revived cartoon.

“We grow our own spirulina now. It's a huge success!” She loved working in the juice bar and was involved in the gardens, and the new ideas for improvements. She was part of the collective that had started the whole thing five years ago.

While she chatted, she carefully packed the groceries in Molly's Carry-Glide. “There you go Molly. What are you cooking?”

“Thanks Jeni. Stuffed caigua, but you know me, I never follow the recipe. How are the new purple carrots going?”

“Ready next week, we hope. Interesting strain of purple *daucus carota*. The leaves are especially delicious. You know the origins of our cultivated carrots are rooted in the purple carrot. Rooted in. Hee hee hee,” she laughed at her own pun. “All we've done is let our orange friends lapse a few generations and they've reverted back to their ancestral types. Wonderful, hey? They are so sweet. They'll be a big hit, Molly. We had a bit of a setback when the main greenhouse was broken into and the control panel and front wall were smashed. Who would have done that? Anyway, we've repaired it more or less. Drop by next week for the launch of the purple carrot!” She scooted off to deliver the next order.

The taste of the super-fresh juices was out of this world.

VIKTOR

Molly looked up and waved to a tall, dignified man with light brown skin at the far side of the juice bar.

“Viktor!” she called out. He saw them, picked up his own strangely colored juice, and came over to join them.

“Jonathan! More handsome every day,” he said, as he grasped Jonathan’s shoulders and squeezed the young man’s hand, nearly crushing it. He hugged Molly, holding her longer than usual. She felt he was trembling slightly.

“What’s happened, Viktor?” Viktor always had a huge, infectious laugh - a giggle, a whoop and a howl combined, while his shoulders and torso jiggled up and down. Today, though, he had none of his usual jolliness.

“It’s Linorio. He’s disappeared. He’s gone.”

Molly felt a wave of shock pulse through her. “What happened?”

“Nobody’s seen him for over three weeks, not even on the Connect. He’s always wandered off for a few weeks every year, but this is different. His granddaughter went to his apartment last night. It’s all closed up. Apparently, he’s resigned all his official and community positions. He’s left his wrist-cell and given away his plants.”

“It makes sense now,” Molly said. “What he said the last time we spoke a few weeks ago. He said that the fame had got too much for him and he wanted to become anonymous again. And he said it was his time. Oh Viktor, I had no idea he was planning to disappear. He’s older than me, Viktor. We may never see him again. I may never see him again.”

“I know. He said something similar to me around the same time. It crossed my mind, but I should have known for sure when he gave me all his yellow oleander trees.”

Molly asked Jonathan “You never did meet him, did you?” He shook his head.

LINORIO

“Linorio was such a pioneer. He showed us how to safeguard the jungles. He’s a tiny man, but with a huge permanent smile, even when his mouth is closed.”

She told Jonathan that Linorio had been born and raised in the Peruvian Amazon jungle. As a young man he’d moved to a remote part of the area to work as a wood logger.

“Linorio, his wife and his little daughter set off. They found a beautiful spot, high on the river bank, which would be above the maximum flood line. The rivers could rise anything up to 10 meters during the wet season. They were hours by boat from the nearest town.

“The only other person in the area was an old man, and together the two of them logged the magnificent trees. There was a wealth of valuable timber. The jungle and river provided food to eat and plants for medicines, and they could sow a few fast-growing crops in the fertile soils of the river banks when the water subsided during the drier season.

“They would cut the huge trees, float the rafts of wood down the river to the lumber mills and sell their precious goods. It took a day and a half to get there. They were there two years, alone, before friends from town started to join them. Their second child was born there, miles from anywhere.”

Viktor continued the story. “Linorio had been there about four years by the time I joined him in the tiny community. It was a hard life, but we did well and made money. We built houses, had children and even set up a basic school.

“Most of us were wood loggers. Some were hunters and killed animals such as monkeys, alligators and turtles, both to eat and to sell. And of course, there were fish. I was the boat driver, mostly. They called me ‘The Captain!’ I knew those rivers like the back of my hand, even when they cut new courses and changed their banks. Sometimes trees would fall in the water and block the way, so I had to know what was under the water as well as above it.

“We collected the turtles’ eggs too. They sold well and were easy to transport. Damn near used up all the eggs though. We didn’t know it at the time, but we took so many of their eggs we nearly killed all the turtles.

“Then, about 10 years after I arrived, everything changed. The government included our area in the huge national reserve. Commercial logging of timber was banned, and wildlife was protected. We could still use the natural resources for our own purposes. Subsistence, they called it. But we couldn’t sell anything. About half the community returned to town. Those that were left had to rethink what to do. We wanted to stay but we had to make a complete change of direction.

“And change we did. We went from being wood loggers to caring for and protecting the forests. We changed from hunters to conservationists and started breeding programs to increase the wildlife. We had to live in harmony with our surroundings instead of using them.

“It was a dramatic change, and a fast one. ‘A leap of faith’ is what Linorio always said we’d taken. We learned new ways and how to organize ourselves. We took only our quota and helped the animals we had once hunted. Regulations enforced by the authorities were nothing compared to those the community set. Anyone found breaking the regulations was banished from the village for two years. We looked after our own, looked after our neighbors and cared for the future of our jungle.

“25 years passed, and we were doing OK. Trees were growing old again and animal populations were increasing. There were many more sightings of the animals we had driven into the deeper jungle, especially Molly’s beloved jaguars.”

Molly saw Viktor had started to falter, and she took over the story.

LIONS

“It was then that Linorio became famous. An accidental hero,” said Molly proudly. “It was suddenly announced that African lions in the wild were extinct. It was a total shock to all but the few who had been warning about it for years.

“Lions were the only big cats that weren’t protected as an endangered species. The experts said that lions had ‘slipped under the endangered species radar’. They suffered such loss of their natural habitat and were still hunted by trophy killers. They lived in some of the poorest countries in the world, and they were being killed by the locals to protect their livestock; locals who had rifles and poisons.

“The king of the beasts, and the symbol of Africa, was lost in the wild.

“When it hit the international news, the whole question of big cats became huge. The whole world wept for the loss, more with shame than anything else. How could we have let this happen? But, finally, people were prepared to make sweeping changes.

“I have a theory, Jonathan,” she paused to let Jonathan nod his agreement that she could share one of her theories. Molly was always careful when it came to express her opinions. She knew it was impossible to prove or apply reasoning behind many of the things she believed. They were simply her theories. But Jonathan always wanted to hear them.

“The great king of all beasts sacrificed itself. Sacrificed itself to save other species,” she sighed.

“Anyway, a feisty young reporter had read an article about Linorio and how the number of jaguars in his area had been increasing. You remember I told you about the first time I saw a jaguar with Linorio and Viktor? It was me who spotted the magnificent creature, I’ll always remember it. My heart was pounding so fast I could hardly shout out to Viktor to stop the boat. There it was, standing on the shore. It was so very magnificent.”

Molly’s voice started to fade as she remembered that day and many more that followed in that beautiful jungle. Viktor nodded and continued the story.

“So, the reporter from this huge news corporation tracked down Linorio and interviewed him. The community and the reserve were doing well by this time and they were a wonderful example to show the world. The reporter arranged for Linorio to speak at a huge international conference.

“Linorio told the conference the story of our little jungle community that had once been part of the deforestation and depletion of wildlife. He said that, financially, we were only a little better off than before, but the community was stronger and happier. The villagers worked together and shared resources rather than acting as individuals who were only out for themselves. There was unity and people liked being part of it. He told how we had taken our ideas to other communities and helped them. We showed it could be done.

“He spoke well. He always has such a calm demeanor, so relaxed and patient. He simply told the conference what we had done and took none of the credit for himself. But we all knew that he had been the driving force behind everything we had achieved.

“He’s not a big man. But with those steady eyes and his constant smile, he captivated the audience. He told them about the small lodge that we’d built for visitors who wanted to see the more remote jungle. And how 10% of all the income from this paid for the gasoline to run a boat that patrolled a huge stretch of the river, to help protect the forest and its animals. There were so few rangers, only 50 in an area the size of Belgium. We had taken it on ourselves to be caretakers, even though we had little in the way of material possessions. He asked how many there gave 10% of their earnings to protect their environment.

There were people at the conference with the influence and power to make changes. And Linorio gave them a working example to follow.”

A CHANGE FOR THE AMAZON

Jonathan said he had learned about this in college but was unaware it had started with Molly's friend.

"This was a huge topic at college," he said excitedly. "This was the conference where the whole of the Amazon jungle was declared an immense nature reserve. It must have been Linorio's example that they used for the entire Amazon! One of the delegates at the conference had written his PhD thesis a year earlier on exactly the same idea. It detailed everything: the phase outs, commercial farming of many plants and trees that were being sourced from the jungle, and alternatives for anything that was impossible to source elsewhere. They accepted it, almost unaltered, as the plan for the project.

"Governments made pledges there and then while the final legal issues were sorted out. Residents could still use the natural resources for subsistence purposes, but all commercial activity was outlawed. Deforestation, mining and mass agriculture stopped overnight. It was huge. Money and resources were put in place to control it and to start conservation projects, and also to help individuals and corporations that depended on the Amazon. That helped with the transition and softened the blow.

"Before the end of the day, there was a huge anonymous donation that nearly doubled the financial pledges from the governments. Nobody ever knew where it came from, but many thought it was a computer magnate who had worked quietly for years buying huge areas of land for conservation.

"Changes happened quickly, and much of it was education. As corporations and individuals moved out, many people returned to their homelands to be a part of the changes. They saw possibilities and wanted to return to their roots to help make it a success. They brought their own expertise and contacts and made good use of the financial and political support. Everyone took responsibility as caretakers. The impact on the climate was noticed after just a year. The Amazon had always been called the lungs of the earth, and this gave it the chance to breathe again. And within a few years, on the strength of the success in the Amazon, areas throughout the world were declared nature reserves."

Molly nodded. "It was a huge success, but it was more than that. It was such a massive symbol that we humans were capable of making a huge change. It made other changes seem possible.

"After that, Linorio was invited to talk at all sorts of conferences. I traveled with him for nearly two years. It was such a wonderful time. We met so many people from so many walks of life. And there were lots of parties, too!" Molly smiled to herself.

"It was always so busy and there was so much to organize, but I loved it. He always wanted to help, and he loved talking to people, but all the traveling was hard for him. And he said that sometimes he felt he was invited as some sort of lucky charm, almost as if just being there could make huge changes, which was nonsense of course. He needed to get back to his jungle and to his family. And I needed to get back to my life. But I have always loved him," she added softly.

Jonathan saw tears well up in Molly's eyes. He knew she was feeling more than the loss of an old friend and he wanted to help her. Searching for something to change the subject, he remembered hearing that there had been numerous spin-off projects, like the one that revised the volunteer initiatives.

"Did you ever get volunteers in the early days, Viktor?" he asked.

Viktor started to laugh. "We all love to help, but it was sometimes a bit misguided, with some silly projects and ideas. There were some volunteer programs where people barged in on communities, stayed a few days, did a few things and then left. Sure, they did things or built things, but sometimes they forgot to check if it was what was needed most."

Viktor started to laugh even harder. He remembered when a group of well-intentioned volunteers had arrived at a neighboring village.

"Some local goon in the city had organized it," he chuckled. "They stayed for four days and planned on building 10 brick cooking stoves, inside the huts! They arrived with all their hi-tech tents, water purification straws and insect repelling clothes, and a big pile of bricks. Ha-ha-ho-ho-ho-huff-ha."

Viktor's signature laugh was coming out now, his broad shoulders jiggling up and down. It was a wonderful relief, and Jonathan started to laugh with him, even before hearing the end of the story.

"I went along on the last day for the ceremonial try-out. Well, it had taken them four days to build one stove. And when they tried it out, the wood was damp, so they had trouble getting the fire going. In the end they doused it with gasoline from the boat. Damn near burnt the hut down. And the smoke! Everywhere! Oh my, oh my, it was chaos. Ha-ha-ho-ho-ho-huff-ha. But we were ready, with every bucket in the village filled with water. Everything was saved, and we congratulated them for all their hard work and got them back in the boats. The cement that was left came in useful to repair the volley ball space, and the rest of the bricks got used for a pathway. Our visitors were happy; they'd had an adventure holiday. And the goon in the city built himself a new house with the bulk of the money from the volunteers." Viktor's laughter was getting louder.

"But they hadn't asked the community. What that village really needed was books and writing equipment to help the little school they had just started."

Viktor composed himself a little. "But with this new structure, the volunteers really started making a contribution. They asked first how they could help and they got the women and the children involved. Participation and education were the main things that was needed, and the children loved learning foreign languages from talking to the volunteers. They spent time teaching us how to do the things they knew, instead of trying to change the things we already did well."

This started Viktor laughing again, a real belly laugh. He was mumbling "wooden huts with grass roofs and cooking inside, and oh the smoke, you should have seen it, everyone running around." They were all laughing, including Molly. Even the other customers in the juice bar joined in from a distance, just with the sound of Viktor's infectious laugh.

THE AWARD

In all the laughter, Molly had a flashback of a conversation she had had with Linorio and realized why he must have left.

“It was the award!”

As she said it, she swung round and crashed her hand into a pottery vase of flowers. The water and flowers went everywhere, and the vase smashed to the ground.

“Oh no, sorry! Look what I’ve done! Such a lovely vase!” she cried out in a panic. Jeni appeared from nowhere and helped clear up the mess.

“What award?” both Viktor and Jonathan asked in unison, while they picked up the scattered pieces of the broken vase.

“There was an award that was planned for him.” Molly was flustered and dabbed at the water around her side of the table as she remembered more details.

“Yes. It was called the Acclaimed Hero Award. I remember we laughed about the acronym and how he was finally going to have his A HA! moment. We started making up silly names for awards. But he was serious. He said he was worried we were going back to the old ways of thinking. He’d said it was the Great Spirit, animals, plants, insects, trees and all the people who had made it happen, that he was just a part. He was so worried we’d gone back to giving all the credit to one person, one reason. That we were losing connection with the whole.

“Maybe we can do something. Let’s find him and get a message to him. We can tell him we’ll organize it so the award goes to a group or something. We’ll make sure he is left in peace. I hate the thought that people have hounded him so much he’s had to vanish like this to escape. Viktor, you start it. Open a group on the Notice Space to let everyone know. Maybe we can still contact him.”

“I’ll do it. You’ll see it next time you plug in.”

Before anyone could step in, Molly passed her token transfer chip over the menu and paid the bill.

“My turn,” she said. She wanted to make her way home. There were many people to contact, and she felt like her brain was scrambled as she tried to figure out where Linorio could have gone.

“Love you Viktor. I’ll call you Tuesday. Take care of yourself and remember to eat well,” she said.

MEETING THE PROFESSOR

Molly and Jonathan made their way home through the section of the park planted with trees from around the world. By a group of magnificent cabbage tree palms was an elegant, wiry man in a light suit and the Panama hat he always wore. He looked completely at home amongst the tropical trees. Molly waved.

“Jonathan. Over there. That’s the Professor. I knew we’d see him”

“Professor! How are you? I knew we’d bump into you here.”

“Milly, Molly, Mandy my dear, how are you this fine day?” he chimed. She blushed slightly at the reference to the 1930’s children’s books.

“Good, thank you, and how are you, Professor?”

“Very well indeed, thank you very much for asking. How simply stupendous to cross paths this splendid morning.” He winked quickly, tipped the cream hat, nodded his head and smiled broadly. Jonathan found himself making the same courteous and infectious nod of the head.

“And who is this fine young man by your side, Molly dear? What a wonderfully shiny example of the human species. Hahahaha!” said the Professor, as he shook Jonathan’s hands between both of his own. Jonathan was a little taken aback by how this eccentric but graceful man spoke.

“Professor, this is my dear Jonathan. At long last you’ve met. You two should get together. Jonathan is teaching robotics at Sean’s Academy. And you can tell all your wonderful stories. Jonathan has an unquenchable thirst for hearing about how things used to be.”

“Yes indeed, my dear fellow. Molly has told me so much about you. Any friend of this scrumptious vixen Molly is indeed a friend of mine. Hahahaha! Here are my details,” he said as he touched his wrist-cell against Jonathan’s and pushed the button to exchange contact information.

“Any day except Mondays.” He glanced over at Molly briefly and Jonathan noticed her blush again. It occurred to him that Molly always said “Any day except Mondays” as well and decided to leave it as one of those mysterious things about Molly that he knew nothing about.

“We heard some strange and sad news today,” Molly told him. “Linorio has disappeared, three weeks ago. There’s no sign of him.”

“He’s escaping that award,” said the Professor without hesitation. “I remember you told me about it, Molly. All these silly awards that are being created. Remember the award you were going to honor me with, hahahaha! But not for young ears, eh? So where has Linorio gone?”

“Nobody knows. He’s obviously organized it, so there’s nothing suspicious. We are going to spread the word and see if we can get a message to him. Check the Notice Space later.”

“Will do, my dear. But knowing Linorio, there is more to this than meets the eye. I’ll have to put the thinking cap on for this one. But must away. Lunch in the city, you know. Off to a monthly chin wag. We call it the ‘Wise Elders circle’, hahahaha! Love them all dearly. See you soon young man, see you soon. How about tomorrow, a bite of Sunday lunch, dear chap? Meet you at the Bamboozle Bar at 12.”

Jonathan realized he had been completely silent.

“I’d like that very much, yes, thank you.” was all he could say before the Professor strode off. Jonathan saw that Molly looked delighted at having met him, and she had certainly cheered up.

“He’s such an eccentric and colorful character,” she said.

WALK THROUGH THE TREES

They took the long way around, beside the little lake with its floating water lilies. They stopped for a while and sat beside the water.

"It's so peaceful here by the lake," she said quietly. "You know, it's hard to believe he's gone."

Molly talked a little about how she felt. Would they ever see Linorio again? The sadness, the sorrow and the times that would never be again. After a while, she said they should be getting back. As they walked, they talked about the trees and where they originally came from. They laughed at the Baobab tree, the upside-down tree, they marveled at the huge Moreton Bay Fig, and soaked up the exotic perfume of the early blooming magnolia trees.

Jonathan tried out some more of the features on his new Merlin camera. He zoomed in on the delicate flowers and a tiny bird perched high in a branch. He panned out for a panorama of the trees and to capture the clouds building in the distance. But while they walked and talked, behind the shield of the camera lens, a spark ignited in Jonathan. He was thinking and making plans, big plans. He felt the spirit of his parents rising in him.

He was going to go and look for Linorio.

JUDGE JIMMY

Just before they got to the gates, they saw Judge Jimmy sitting on a bench in the shade of a huge mulberry tree. Next to him was a little girl with curly blond hair, one of his many great-grandchildren. They were throwing grains to a group of birds that had gathered round them and laughing at the way they pecked. Judge Jimmy had 10 children and always joked he had lost count of how many were in his "clan". But he knew every one of his grandchildren, remembered everyone's birthday and saw as many of them as he could, whenever he could.

"JJ," called Molly.

"Hello, Molly. This is little Betsy," he rasped. He'd had an illness years before that had damaged his vocal chords and he was completely hoarse, but he was perfectly well.

"You're looking so well." he said.

"Thank you. Always nice to get a compliment!" she laughed. "You're looking well yourself, JJ."

"Oh, I'm still pickled from all those years ago," he joked.

Judge Jimmy had been a full-on gutter drunk in his 30s. He had left the family of 10 kids, "before they threw me out," he'd said. He'd managed to get sober and had promised himself he'd only go back when he knew he could stay that way. He'd worked on the docks and managed to support his family, but he had free time on his hands. He'd decided to study law and joked that it seemed like an easy way to make good money. But he'd excelled in it and graduated easily with a Bachelor of Law. He was back with the family, and flourished.

He was lucky with his opportunities as an attorney and, always completely open about his past. It had never been used against him. He was nominated and appointed as a judge and, from then on, everyone called him Judge Jimmy.

Jonathan had met him many times on their park walks. They had often talked about the innovations he had instigated for prisons. He had experimented with painting prisons pink and giving prisoners pink uniforms. He had shown that it calmed much of the violence and unrest of the inmates. They allowed prisoners to work for real money. It helped them feel useful, and that they could give back to the community and help support their families.

The main change that Judge Jimmy brought in was to increase the opportunities for education and training courses. Prisoners learned new skills and how to live well rather than learning only more about crime, and it gave them dignity. Judge Jimmy thought everyone was a good being, but sometimes people made mistakes. He fought hard to set up programs and support to help prisoners reconnect. His aim was to increase their self-respect and to help them value themselves, to show them they were important.

Jonathan and Molly sat and chatted a while about Judge Jimmy's projects.

"But it was more than pink paint, school books and self-worth programs that had such an effect," the Judge said. "We got so many people out of the jail systems when most of the illegal drugs were decriminalized. Then there were the big pushes to properly look after the mentally unstable and the alcoholics. Ha, that should have been me in there, hey Molly? But, you know the big change that happened? Nearly put me out of business of course, but that was a good thing. Crime rates dropped, dramatically. Quite inexplicable. Molly has her theory of course."

"Come on Molly, I love your theories." Jonathan said.

"There was a change with the small things at first. It was subtle, but we started to see the ways that we all cheated, lied and stole in some way or another," she said. "And people started to see that if they stole, they lost something themselves. If they told a lie, they in turn were lied to. If they hurt someone, they were hurt back. We finally got the hang of cause and effect; for every action there is a reaction; 'what goes around comes around'. It started with more and more people taking real responsibility for their own everyday actions. It trickled through, until slowly we started seeing that crime rates were dropping. The small changes had affected everyone."

They sat chatting about the importance of integrity and self-awareness, about the birds, how lovely the park was looking and how Judge Jimmy's "clan" was. The little girl huddled up to the Judge, listening in to the conversation and throwing the occasional grain of corn to the waiting birds.

"Do you know Linorio, JJ?" Molly asked.

"Yes, of course. Remember how we met at that convention where he talked about the prison farm they set up in the jungle. Haven't seen him for a while, but we talked on the Connect not long ago."

"He's disappeared."

"That's strange, how long ago?"

"About three weeks ago. We've set up a Notice Space group to see if we can find out what's going on." replied Molly.

"Last time we spoke we talked about a concern I have," said the Judge. "There's something happening. I can't quite put my finger on it. I'm retired now of course, and feed birds in the park these days. But I keep in touch with what's happening. We are seeing crime rates rising. It's not dramatic, but it's happening. And I have my suspicions about some corruption at central administration. Nothing conclusive yet, but there are some things that don't make sense. Linorio and I had a long talk. He said something strange at the end. He said, 'It's OK, I'll fix it'. We laughed about it at the time. But now I think about it, he must be off on another one of his missions. I'll check the Notice Space.

"And it looks like we'd better get going. This little one is hungry. She's eating the birds' corn," said the Judge jokingly.

They said their farewells and Molly and Jonathan headed back to her apartment.

ROOF GARDENS

They glided back, and Jonathan went upstairs with her to help her stack the electropack. He said he and Belle would be there at 5:00 that evening, if she was still up to it.

“Absolutely. I’ll go up to the roof garden to pick some things.” She hugged him goodbye and walked up the flight of stairs to the roof. She always said going up and down stairs was the main thing that kept her fit, but she took it slowly.

The roof garden looked good with the spring plants coming on. She looked out over the flat and terraced roof tops of the adjoining buildings alive with their gardens of edible plants and colorful flowers. Most roof tops also had small greenhouses for year-round production. With the park in the background, it looked green and lush.

She wandered over to the small, glass beehive in the specially shaded area and watched the little bees as they flew in and out. She had always been fascinated with bees and, with the glass hive, you could see them working inside. Molly especially loved to watch the queen. The bees too seemed to like the glass, as if they liked to look out. One landed lightly on her hand. She chatted quietly to the little bee. With the promotion of the meliponines stingless species, bees had become very popular. Urban bees were thriving; there was such a variety of flowers to collect pollen from.

Molly’s own garden area always did well. She had more time than most of the other residents, so she helped with all their gardens. It was one of her great passions. Everyone in the apartment block shared what was grown, so it worked to everyone’s benefit.

Molly picked a few tomatoes in the greenhouse, and some young spinach. As she walked back into the building, she noticed a strange mold on her neighbor’s lettuces and saw that the leaves were wilting badly. They were planted close to a rose bush that seemed to be thriving and blossoming magnificently. But the roses had bloomed far too early. She looked around the nearby gardens and saw a little of the same white mold on a curly kale and on some early beets. She made a note to herself to ask her neighbor what he had put on the roses to promote such flowers. But she was more concerned about what had happened to the vegetables. She thought to herself that there were more and more mysteries these days.

Cooking dinner kept her mind off everything. She lightly steamed the caigua and improvised the filling with the nutty macambo. She made a corn salad with the tomatoes she’d picked and added lots of cilantro from the kitchen herb planter. She washed the spinach ready to make the green salad and sat down to contact friends about Linorio. As promised, Viktor had set up a group on the Notice Space. It said if anyone was in contact with Linorio, to ask him to reconsider leaving. Comments had already flooded in. People were spreading the word, and there were pledges from many to respect Linorio’s time and privacy.

DINNER WITH BELLE

The doorbell rang with an old fashioned “ding dong.” Molly let the pair of young lovebirds in and gave them both a big hug.

Belle looked radiant, as always. She had brought the Maca-rooms to take to the ballet for her friends and had a separate dish for their dessert. “Have you got room in your food cooler for these please? And this dish is for us.” Molly popped one in her mouth while she put them all in the cooler. “Never could resist eating dessert first,” she admitted. “These are delicious!”

They sat round the kitchen bench for a while talking. Belle chatted about the new micro-school projects and the fun she had during the week at college. Molly thought she was avoiding saying anything about Linorio.

“It’s been a good day in the Maca-noon department. I’ve finally got the recipes down to my favorite six.”

Belle was a great cook, and she earned good tokens selling her snacks at college. It helped to pay for all the extra education she had chosen to do. Molly was impressed with how she fitted everything into her day. Belle went out to the balcony to look at how the little garden was going, and Jonathan took the chance to check how Molly was feeling.

“Are you OK? Did you get some rest?” he asked.

“A little. Had a chat to the bees,” she smiled. “There are already so many comments on the Notice Space and ideas for what we can do.”

Jonathan nodded. He too had looked at the comments on the Notice Space and had started to piece together other small snippets of information.

Belle came in with a tiny sweet chili she had picked. “Rub it round the inside of the salad bowl. See what you think, Molly,” she said as they put the finishing touches to the salads.

“OK you two, let’s eat. There’s only a little time before the ballet,” and they sat down at the table to eat. Jonathan was back in historical mode.

“Tell us about what people used to eat, Molly. You know how much Belle loves talking about food.” he said.

“You have an unquenchable thirst for history, young man! Well, the vast majority of people ate very differently to how we do now. Nowhere near the same amount of fruits and vegetables that we eat, and a lot more cooked foods. So much fried food, and processed food that was usually full of preservatives. Many people had even forgotten their traditional dishes and ways of eating.

“Only a small percentage of people ate whole grains. Wheat was cheaper to mill without the bran and germ, which got sticky under the high-speed rollers, and white flour had a longer shelf life. So, they threw out the good parts and people ate only the starchy bit. Same with rice. Never could understand why so many people liked white rice. It was so tasteless, but it was the staple diet of millions. The world had got a taste for pappy foods. It was lighter and easier to chew. And white sugar, too. They took out most of the nutrients and left only the sweet bit. Anyone who wanted to eat the whole foods was considered some sort of health fanatic.”

“It’s impossible to imagine it, Molly. I love eating the foods we do now. You know, this macambo is 25% protein and has loads of fiber. Great energy food. I always carry a little for snacks. Caigua is brilliant for cholesterol, and you know about my love of maca. This meal is super, Mol.”

Molly laughed.

“Super indeed. You know, things like the caigua, maca and macambo were called ‘superfoods’ years ago. It all became very fashionable. You would have been right into it Belle, you knowing so much about food.

“But millions were eating badly. There were millions of obese people and diabetes was taking off at almost epidemic levels. All sorts of foods were ‘flavor enhanced’ by adding something called monosodium glutamate, or MSG, which made people gain weight even if they didn’t eat more. And it was the poor as well as the rich who were obese. Many people were slowly getting very sick. They were eating, but they were starving. And there was a lot of meat.”

Jonathan piped in “I know this story. Tell Belle what happened about meat, Molly.”

MEAT

“Meat, now that was an interesting one. There were always people who lived perfectly well without ever eating meat. It was growing, but it was still a small percentage. But it was only when meat and poultry started to taste bad, and people started feeling sick after eating it, that things changed. No one understood why humans suddenly had problems digesting meat. Scientists did their studies and the meat and poultry industries pumped money into it, trying to save their bacon.” Molly laughed at her own silly pun.

“They found nothing. It was completely inexplicable. Of course, I have my own theory”. She winked at Belle and looked over at the young man waiting for him to give her the go-ahead to share her theory.

“Yes, yes. Tell me your theory, Mol.” This was a new one to him.

“The animals were helping us. We take this for granted now, but in those days they were seen as inferior beings. The animals and plants all knew it was part of the grand scheme that some of them would be food - for us, for other animals, or for other plants. They knew all about the food chain and made allowances for it in their strategies for the survival of their species. That part was all in perfect order. But when they saw that humans were getting sick from eating too much meat, and especially eating animals that had been farmed and killed under horrible conditions, they changed themselves. They stepped in to help us. They made themselves taste bad to humans. And it was wild animals as well as farmed animals. It must have been something specific to humans, because it was only humans it affected. Other animals could still eat meat and everything in the wild seemed to be the same. Eggs, too. Eggs made people feel sick as well.

“Anyway, if there was a reason, nobody knew. The meat and poultry industries were thrown into a panic. No one was buying it. Companies that stuck to their old ways went under. But the smart ones looked for alternatives. They looked at new foods and how foods could be combined better for better absorption of proteins, and they started to promote new ways of eating. They had huge education programs. And these were big companies with deep pockets. They planted fast-growing proteins like quinoa. They looked to the future and started using their land to plant trees, like olives and avocados. They started to grow useful plants, and without large-scale meat production there was more land available.

“What was incredible is that if the animals were kept in good conditions, meat became edible again, but only in small quantities. We started to eat it as we do now, on rare and special occasions.”

“It was the same with dairy products. These suddenly caused terrible digestive problems, except for good-quality goat’s milk. This was when goat dairy farming took off the way it did, with the push to high-quality and organic products. And they found an exception with eggs. For some people, small amounts of good-quality eggs, from chickens that were fed well and lived what they then called ‘free range’ seemed to be OK. We all had to go back to the traditional ways of raising animals if we were going to eat animal products.”

“It is extraordinary. But I think your theory must be true, Molly. Hey, did you leave any Maca-rooms for dessert?” Belle said jokingly.

“Of course I did, but I must admit it was tempting.” They finished the meal with Belle’s delicious Maca-rooms.

“You’ve got the cinnamon perfect in these,” complimented Molly.

“Almonds, cocoa, honey especially for you of course, coconut oil, dates, a little cinnamon, a drop of pure vanilla essence, and of course my ‘miracle ingredient’, lovely malty maca. A tiny touch of salt is the secret.”

She was still looking for a good name for them. Macabelles was the latest. Molly suggested Big Macs, but it was a private little joke to herself.

REMEMBERING

It was time for Jonathan and Belle to leave. As they stood up to go, Belle finally said softly, "I was sad to hear about Linorio. If there's anything I can do..." Molly nodded and hugged them both a long goodbye. "Always lovely to have a big hug."

On her own again, she cleaned up the dinner things, happy to have had company for a while. But now she felt a sudden wave of shock. She was still in a state of disbelief that he was gone. She looked at the Screen expecting a quick "Hola" from Linorio to pop up like it used to, even though she knew how unlikely this was.

She felt empty, and hot tears rolled down her cheeks. Even though they Connected often, she felt guilty that it was months since she had seen Linorio face to face, then a flash of anger that nobody had helped him. A few weeks before, when he said that "it was his time", she had brushed it away in the same way Jonathan brushed away her comment about leaving him her wrist-cell in her will. She realized she was grieving.

She walked over to a cupboard and pulled out a magnificent antique photograph album. She unwrapped it from its protective cover. It was a family heirloom and must have been nearly 200 years old, beautifully bound in leather with the spine and trimmings made of solid silver that were now tarnished and black. She opened the treasure carefully.

There were a few old family photos: her parents, looking young and happy, and pictures of her dear brother's wedding. There were photos of her own wedding, and a collection of other special moments in her life. There were two pictures of the first magnificent jaguar she had seen on the river bank so many years earlier. Viktor had been driving and Linorio was keeping a look out for sloths in the tree branches. It was the start of a lifelong affinity with this jungle area, and friendships with these fine people. There was a photo of them all a few years later.

She looked through the small collection of her special photos. She was amazed at how they were still in perfect condition, even the sepia image of her grandmother with her father when he was a small boy on an excursion to the beach. She smiled at the posed look of the photo and the old-fashioned clothes. How much had changed in the world since that photo was taken so many years ago. She thought back to all the things she had talked about with Jonathan that day. She was exhausted and sad, but grateful for the wonderful people she had known and the ones in her life today.

LOOKING FOR CLUES

Jonathan woke up the next day full of ideas from the last 24 hours. He had spent most of the ballet thinking about Linorio, and as soon as he got home he started his research. He had been up most of the night searching and looking for clues.

In an obscure part of the Notice Space, he had stumbled across an interview Linorio had done a few months ago. He'd spoken then about the award and his concern for the praise he received. He said he was just a part of the great plan, just one of many who had made changes.

But he'd also mentioned the name of a small port town that he'd spent time in. It was in the north-east of Peru, in the Amazon jungle. Although it was in the same area as the community he had first started, it was nowhere near that village. Jonathan had searched through the long lists of places Linorio had visited or spoken of over many years. He could find no other mention of this town, or of anywhere near it. He decided he would start there with his search for Linorio.

Jonathan had been longing for something like this. A mystery to solve. His life seemed too perfect. People around him were content, healthy and living well. Belle was so beautiful, so perfect, but he didn't know why he was reluctant to move the relationship to the next level. A part of him had felt flat and without direction for so long. He longed for the unexpected, a sense of the unknown, and a sense of purpose. He felt a yearning for the life that his parents would have known.

His decision to look for Linorio, and this clue to where he may be, had sparked something in Jonathan.

He put it out of his mind and got ready to meet the Professor. Molly had told him to have a bite to eat before. She had laughed as she told him that lunch in the Bamboozle Bar for the Professor was usually "a few glasses of beer and a bowl of something snacky to nibble on". He took her advice and had a sandwich before he left.

LUNCH WITH THE PROFESSOR

Jonathan jumped on the Comm, the community bus, to meet the Professor. Molly had told him they called him the Professor as a sign of endearment and, in fact, he had no formal education to speak of. He'd had a severe learning disability as a child and had never been able to figure out much when it came to reading or writing. He'd failed miserably at any academic studies, but in his early twenties, had discovered software that would read the text on a computer screen to him.

His problems had actually been a huge advantage, as they'd forced him to remember information in a way that "readers" never had to. He studied money and its history. He found technology to transcribe his spoken word and had published many books. He had been among the first to alert the world to how the financial world, politics and large corporations worked against the interests of the general public and against the environment. Jonathan was looking forward to hearing what he could learn from him.

The Bamboozle Bar was in a small passageway off the main square. Sunday was a big market day, and it buzzed with traders and customers, artists and performers. It was a perfect blend of the traditional and the modern. Marketplaces had been a part of human society for millennia, and even more so now with the resurgence of small, independent businesses.

There was an area called "The Open Emporium" that was available to anyone to exhibit or sell their wares. For a small charge you could explain the products to the staff and leave them there. This allowed anyone to take part in the market without being there all day or committing to a full-time stall. It was started by Sean's Academy to encourage new and innovative ideas and was a huge success. All sorts of people used the market to demonstrate their innovations, display their artwork and, of course, sell their products. The Open Emporium was full of wonderful ideas and inventions. The demonstrators and sales staff were mostly students from the Academy, but there were many others who loved being a part of the buzzy market.

It was here that Jonathan had sold the first of the portable, auto-stir cook pots that he'd originally made for Belle's snack foods. A small manufacturer had bought his design and they were now in the shops and selling well.

He was early, so he spent a while wandering through the stalls. He stopped at one that sold hand-crafted wooden homewares and saw a large bowl made of a wood he recognized immediately. This wood was from a tree that had been protected for years. His grandfather had taught him how to recognize types of wood and had given him a small piece of reclaimed Big Leaf Mahogany for the 'fingers' of his mechanical guitar player. They had laughed about how to recognize Big Leaf Mahogany without its leaves. But he knew how precious the timber was and had worked with it lovingly. He knew instinctively this bowl was that same wood; but it was far too large to have been made from reclaimed wood.

The sales girl said they were made from stained commercial pine, but Jonathan knew it was impossible. Nothing could give pine such a beautiful reddish-brown luster. He took the details of the artisan and promised himself he would look into it later.

IN THE BAMBOOZLE BAR

The Bamboozle Bar was a tucked-away place. You had to know it was there and you could easily miss it if you walked past. But inside it was huge. It was a lively place to go on a Sunday, but the Professor had picked a quiet corner where they could talk. When Jonathan walked in he was half way through his first black ale, chatting merrily to the group at the next table.

The Professor jumped to his feet when he saw Jonathan. He grabbed his outstretched hand and shook it wildly with both of his own wiry hands. The knuckles were boney, but the grip was strong.

“Hello, Jonathan, young man! Take a seat. So good to see you. What are you drinking?”

“Just a small beer, please,” he replied. He rarely drank alcohol so was unaccustomed to ordering it, but he wanted to join in.

“Jolly good, jolly good,” said the Professor as he punched the order into the table menu. “And how about a bowl of something snacky to nibble on?” Jonathan smiled to himself.

“Now tell me. How it’s going at Sean’s these days?”

“I like it. There’s always a lot happening. Communications project 21 is nearly complete. Nano fibers are taking communications into the last of the very remote places. They’ve used one of my aquatic robots in part of the Siberian wetlands installation,” he said proudly. “Next, all resources are back to energy phase 7. You know, we are 97% renewable worldwide; geothermal, wind, tidal and nano flake solar energy and organic waste recycling.”

“Yes, solar has done wonders for the silver metals market,” he said with a wry grin. His investments in silver had proved very rewarding.

“And I remember the stink that was raised when they made waterless toilets and biogas cooking compulsory, hahahaha. Stink, hahahaha, sorry, laughing at my own jokes. Of course, that was the whole silly point. It was completely odorless. Made a huge impact on saving water. It’s anyone’s guess why we waited so long to use them globally. Have a dump, have a pee, throw in your potato peelings and all your organics. It’s all nicely contained and out the way. Wait a couple of weeks and then use the methane to cook your dinner. Even produces fertilizer so you can use it to grow your tomatoes to have with your lunch. Hahahaha.”

Jonathan joined in with the Professor’s laughter. He thought this was going to be a fun lunch.

“Molly says that when it comes to the history of money, Professor, you know it all.”

“My favorite topic, young man,” he replied.

CURRENCY, CRYPTOS AND DIGITAL MONEY

“For years, people kept their currency in the bank. But that was currency; money was something different. Throughout history, gold and silver had been linked with wealth. Currency only represented the physical metal money. But history showed us over and over what happens when more currency is created than the gold and silver it represents. End of the Greek empire, end of the Roman Empire, end of all the great empires. Greed, war, unemployment, and they kept printing currency. Nothing to back up the useless bits of paper or worthless coins. Caused a right old mess every time.

“Well, there it went again at the end of the American Empire. History repeated itself, and when the banks got into big trouble they took money straight out of the people’s bank accounts. That really shook people’s confidence in the mighty banking systems.

“But this time round, technology had jumped in and created something completely new. ‘Cryptocurrency’, they called it then, digital money. They’d reinvented it all. Not only could you transfer funds at a fraction of the cost, but you could protect what was valuable without having to trust the bank. It was private, and it worked. What’s more, it brought banking facilities to the billions in the world who had no previous access. Caused a hoo-ha in the governments and financial worlds once they saw it had taken hold, mind you.

“It started with Bitcoin. Lots of other currencies followed, and some did very well. Had its ups and downs, but it was a good start to our token system. The people themselves placed value on it and had faith in it and it was the market itself that agreed on a price for this money. In the old world of finance, long before your time, young man, no one ever knew who was manipulating what.

“And there were versions that reinvented the whole business model. Digital companies. Brilliant. And it kept the monopolies out, too. Some were innovations to raise digital funds for new projects in return for a share of the success of the project. Gave so many new ideas the start they needed. Molly told me you’ve invested in your pal’s Hatty Band.”

“Yes, yes, Henry’s band, Mickey Mad Hat. A bunch of friends got together and supported their launch and now they’re paying us! My parents made some great investments in some of these digital companies years ago. The dividends they pay covered all my expenses through college.”

THE CONNECT

“Then came the Connect. Before that was the Internet, the World Wide Web, the wobbly-wobbly-wobbly I always called it. Hahahaha!” The Professor laughed at his own words.

“But the Internet had little privacy. People were being watched and monitored, sometimes for marketing reasons, sometimes much worse. Most people had no idea they were being watched, or how easy it was to track what they were doing. It was the undoing of a few crooks and criminals, but it also invaded the lives of the innocent. And the Internet was wide open to fraud, theft and attacks.

“Then along came the Connect. It was private, anonymous and secure. You know, they offered huge prize money for anyone who could break into it. Thousands tried to hack their way in, hahahaha, even had a go myself. It was the challenge of a lifetime to a lot of techno heads, but they all failed. Molly thinks it was because the guardian angels looked after it, nothing to do with technology, bless her heart. But you never know. You’ve got to think twice about some of that gal’s theories.”

“She is pretty amazing. Where does she get those ideas from? Some sound like she channeled them straight out of the galaxy,” said Jonathan with a grin.

“You know you could be right on that, the way that gal seems to know things, hahahaha,” he said and took a gulp of beer.

“But the Connect became much more than the old Internet. It became a sort of technological collective unconscious. As people switched over, they saw it in a different way to the old wobbly-wobbly-wobbly. It was as if they passed through a doorway into an electronic spiritual realm. Great care was taken by everyone with any information and conversations. The wobbly-wobbly-wobbly had become a dumping area for complaining and nasty things. There were unkind photographs, judgments about people and cultures, fearmongering, miserable news stories. But when anyone switched on the Connect, it displayed the word THINK. It was an acronym for Thoughtful, Honest, Intelligent, Necessary, and Kind. There was a new etiquette about it all and it was a fresh start.

“All Connect users pledged to keep it a safe and wholesome place for all. If you broke that pledge you only deceived yourself. And it worked. It was self-controlling, and it was free of things like pornography, bullying, cruelty, humiliation and racism. The Connect was liberated from control, moderators or filters because it was free of anything that had to be controlled. Everyone was reminded to THINK.

“The founders said the Connect represented our thoughts and energies, and we needed to make sure we kept these positive and helpful. Our destructive thoughts were responsible for creating destructive energy and events in the world. As in the one, so in the whole they used to say. And the Connect was a place to start practicing, electronically.

“We have never found out who put the Connect out there. There are occasional broadcasts and updates, but nobody knows where they come from. You can imagine what Molly says about that one.” Jonathan smiled and nodded in agreement, imagining what the theory would be.

POSITIVELY SPEAKING

“And the Connect did something else at the beginning that was interesting and new. It helped us check that our words and phrases were stated in the positive. We all know now that the poor little human brain finds it impossible to process a negative. Don’t think of a pink elephant. Hey, I said don’t think of a pink elephant! Hahahaha. You’ve heard that one, yes?” Jonathan nodded, still thinking about the elephant and doing his best NOT to.

“Hahahaha. Drives you bonkers! That was always the example, but heaven knows how the poor elephants got roped into it. To the lumps of cauliflower under the human skull, it’s impossible to NOT think, NOT imagine, NOT forget, NOT do something.

“It may have been one of the reasons why changes were stalled or happened slowly for years and years. So many of us wanted to improve the conditions in the world, but we were full of phrases like ‘No more war’, ‘Say no to corruption’, ‘Stop the pollution’, ‘End child sex exploitation’, ‘War against global hunger’.

“It was all expressed as a negative, so in fact, we reinforced exactly what we wanted to stop. ‘Don’t forget your umbrella’, that was a good one. Thousands of brollies left on public transport every year. We were only obeying instructions, hahahaha!

“To get it to work in the blob of jelly in the head, it needed to be ‘Remember your umbrella’, ‘Protest for peace’, ‘Keep our governments honest’, ‘Save the bees’, ‘Clean up our environment’, ‘Keep our children safe’, ‘Enough food for all’, that kind of thing. You do it all naturally now of course, Jono. You’ve been raised that way. But years ago, most of us had no idea.

“So the Connect founders helped us along on this one. They added a clever little gadget that checked. A little reminder would pop up if, let’s say, you sent someone a message with ‘Don’t forget to pick up the laundry’. The little gadget would say ‘Do you want to change this to Remember to pick up the laundry?’ That kind of thing. Didn’t take us long before we changed. The number of umbrellas and bags of laundry that got saved, hahahaha.”

TROUBLE AT THE TOP

Jonathan was laughing too, especially at how the Professor presented everything. His laugh was infectious, and he waved his hands around theatrically like a magician about to perform a trick.

“Of course, the Connect also gave a safe place to broadcast the truth about wrongdoings and corruption. Corporations, politics and governments; they were in such a mess. It was very much about money then, money and power. There were so many cases when our trusted leaders stole public funds or manipulated markets for their own profit. It was more or less accepted that it was happening.

“You know, dear Jonathan, in a place I was living at one time, the regional president had actually been to jail for corruption, while he was still in office. He was in cahoots with a building company or some such. Even while he was still in jail he was campaigning for the next term. He got out with the help of some clever lawyers, but good heavens, a few months later the people voted him back in. They took him right back! They said ‘He steals but at least he does things’. They seriously believed that everyone in political power would steal or cheat in some way for themselves, but at least this guy was getting a few things done. In reality, the thieving gangster was doing few things, but mostly daft things that ignored many of the real problems of this region that was in dire need of help.

“Big corporations funded political campaigns to get their puppets elected. It was all about marketing in those days. Most of the public had no idea how their minds were being manipulated. They were sold their politicians in the same way they were sold their washing detergent.

“Oh, they were sorry times. Backstabbing, bribes for votes, scandals, you name it. It was completely crazy, dear Jono.

“But we were all to blame. Very few could seriously say they were always honest about all things. We all had our little scams and tricks. What starts with the leaders all too often leeches down to all,” he said with a sigh. The Professor was getting a little hot recalling the old times, and with all his hand motions. He paused, took a deep breath, and finished his beer in one long gulp.

“Another glass of ale, Professor? You must be thirsty,” he said as he tapped in the order for another beer. He wanted to listen to this theatrical man for a whole lot longer.

In the pause, the Professor looked around and realized that a small crowd had started to form around them, listening to what he was saying. He rather liked the attention. They waited for what came next. He decided it was time in to tell them about a brave and humble man who had made a huge impact on the conscience of many.

A PRESIDENT WITH A DIFFERENCE

“But there was a leader with a difference. The president at the time of a small country, with a little over three million people, thought differently from many other leaders. He said we all needed a change in thinking.” The Professor directed his voice a little wider to the growing audience.

“This humble man opened up the presidential palace as a shelter for the homeless. He and his wife continued to live in their modest farmhouse, with their three-legged dog and almost no security. He gave every child in the country a computer, free education and taught them farming. His was the first country to legalize marijuana, and this included growing and selling it. And they even taxed it, hahahaha! He said it was a fight against drug trafficking. He was a smart old codger. He said they had given the marijuana market as a gift to the drug traffickers by making it illegal. And he said that what he had done wasn’t liberal, it was logical.

“And the people trusted him. As a young man, during the period of military dictatorship in his country, he had been a guerilla fighter, a Robin Hood guerilla. He had robbed delivery trucks and banks and distributed the food and money among the poor. Sounds all very dashing and marvelous, but to the contrary. He had been imprisoned for over 10 years; two of those in solitary confinement at the bottom of a well. They say he talked to frogs and insects to keep himself sane. Oh, the inhumanity of it all. Anyway, when the military was overthrown he was released. He kept going with his political involvement and many years later, by then an old man, he was elected president.

“He made an extraordinary speech at a conference where he spoke about the things that he said, ‘we had to talk about’. A recording of it was passed around the wobbly-wobbly-wobbly. As they used to say then, it ‘went viral’ and it was like an infection, an infection of hope. Millions saw it.

“He was probably the first politician to tell us what we knew deep down but had never heard from a political figure. He told us we had to reexamine and revise the way we lived. He said that the most important thing for the environment was human happiness. Heavens above, dear Jono, it was the first time we’d heard a darn thing like that from a jolly old poli!

“He talked about the consumer market as a motor and said that we were governed by it. We thought if we stopped consuming, the world economy would collapse. But he said we would see this to be untrue, and we needed to start the fight for another culture.

“And he said wealth was when you had all you needed. But a poor person was someone who always needed and desired more and more. Ah, the power of that humble man. Such an example.” The Professor paused as a sign of respect to this man, took another long drink of the fresh ale that had arrived, and continued.

“The speech inspired many, including a few corporations, and they took the leap. An enterprising young man, about your age, met up with Sean in the early days of the Academy and set up the company ‘Made to Last’. He promised his products were built to last and he wanted you to buy them only once. And it was very successful. His products were expensive, but there were many who were tired of the throw-away society. They wanted to look after things they owned and hand them down through the generations. He attracted great designers and top engineers and used the best materials he could find.

“Finally, an electric light bulb that would last forever was available. Textiles and other materials that would last and last appeared. It was a change in thinking. Even with existing things, people got them repaired instead of replacing them. Repairs and spare parts businesses boomed.

“Fashion became out of fashion. Sure, there were always new things that people had to buy, but nothing was replaced only because of fashion. We bought things we needed instead of buying things to make us feel good. Clothes, homewares, electronics, mobile phones, you know, the early wrist-cells,” he explained to Jonathan who nodded. “The cars of the day, you name it. It became fashionable to have something that had lasted and lasted and lasted. Everyone was a little happier with what they had, rather than feeling they had missed out on the so called ‘latest and greatest’. We started to feel that we had enough. And guess what, the world economy survived, hahahaha.”

COMMERCE

“Once the whole model of the consumer market changed, businesses could work differently. They worked together instead of in competition with other. If one shop couldn’t supply something, they would happily direct a customer elsewhere. They knew that, one day, the other shop would do the same and send a customer to them. They worked together instead of trying to squash each other, and there was a sense of community and togetherness.

“There was a move to localized production, independent businesses and collectives. Lots of things got smaller and it allowed for more variety. Without the drive to compete, a business could be more innovative and instigate new ideas. Products and services were better designed and took greater care of resources. Components were standardized and interchangeable, to reduce waste and redundancy.

“The division between rich and poor changed, but not because the poor got everything the rich had or because the rich renounced all the material wealth. They met on a different ground. Interest-free micro-loans were better organized, which gave more people the chance to change their own circumstances. They took control rather than having to accept charity. Oh, and the lid was blown open about charities. Some of those charities had made a few people very rich.

“But the days were over where having more was a sign of wealth. Money and status became low priority. What became important were things like sharing with friends and family, being creative, time in the garden. People wanted more time, and they started to work less. The drop in the population helped, too, but no one needed as much anymore. Resources could be shared. As people had their basic needs met of shelter, food and clean water, and with time and opportunities for recreation, human and social health could flourish.”

TV AND MEDIA

“Tell him what happened to the television and newspapers, Prof. Remember those old things?” came a male voice from somewhere in the crowd.

“Yes indeed, oh the doom and gloom in the media. The newspapers, hahahaha. They were made of paper then. Most of them were full of dreadful stories. Same with the television, that was the early version of the Screen, young lad, you’ve seen them in museums I presume. Everyone got used to seeing the world as a dangerous place full of killings and horror stories. It was sensationalized, with little to balance it. And so much so-called entertainment was based on fighting, killing and hurting. We had become immune to it. The constant bombardment of the images had desensitized us to horrors.”

“Remember the silly dramas on the old television Prof?” called out a large woman with brightly colored hair. “All that rubbish about rich people with all their dramas and tragedies, sobbing and yelling?”

“And the reality shows, they used to call them,” another voice in the crowd piped up. “That was a reality that everyone wanted to avoid. Most of the time everyone was horrible to each other.” The crowd nodded in agreement.

“Yes, indeed, friends. Thankfully the media changed for the better,” said the Professor as he launched once more into historical mode.

“The son of a media magnate, Jordan Freitas, took over his crotchety old father’s role as head of a huge and powerful media corporation. It was seen as a strange choice, as the son was completely inexperienced in the world of media. But his father had been very insistent, and in his last days had drawn up legal papers to give Jordan full control.

“Without any knowledge of how any of it worked, Jordan was completely out of his depth. So, he decided to do something totally different. His father had been known for defaming people, spreading rumors, portraying one side of a cause, generally creating trouble. But for all his father’s wealth and extravagance, Jordan had been by his father’s bedside at the end and had seen that in his last moments he was tormented by guilt. Jordan had a chance to do it differently.”

HAPPINESS

“Jordan had lived a privileged, but unhappy life, and had been fascinated with researching what made people happy. He had found research showing that happy people lived longer, were healthier and more productive. Happiness was an all-round tonic. It also showed that with happiness came trust. He decided he was going to broadcast and print what he simply called ‘happy things’. He showed people helping others, programs about people’s relationships with animals, stories of success and triumph. There were stories of people doing ordinary things and being social together.

“At first it was a dismal failure, but his family supported him. They saw a new energy in him. The shows were inexpensive to produce, and Jordan stood up to the board members and shareholders. It also helped that Jordan was the largest shareholder, hahahaha.

“He also opened the doors to anyone who wanted to be involved, on a volunteer basis. He wanted to involve the public and give something back. Many young people stepped forward to help out and jumped at the chance to learn about broadcasting and production. The channel became a favorite with the younger generation who tuned in to see programs produced by people their own age, and from there its success grew and grew.

“Advertisers were carefully selected to allow only ads that were interesting to watch, and this opened up wonderful new opportunities for beautiful artwork and clever production. It was considered a privilege to be allowed to buy advertising airtime on the channel, hahahaha.

“Jordan ran a huge campaign to save paper and stopped producing any printed media. Everything was transferred over to an electronic version via the old Internet. This was part way in place, but still it was a bold move. And he applied the same model to this as he had with television. It homed in on happy things. Only a few select advertisers were allowed, and wonderful artwork appeared on the pages. Once again, he made it open to input from the public and the young people jumped on board. They needed little instruction to generate material for the Internet, of course. This side of the business was financially very effective, and he made huge donations to reforestation projects. He won support from all sectors, and other publishers soon followed suit.

“They were broadcasting and publishing information about interesting lives, showing different cultures and things going well. When there were sad or tragic times, these were shown with real feelings, how people coped and what they did. They took the panic and drama away and showed compassion and triumphs. The corporation became known as the ‘Happy Guys’. It was a far cry from what had been broadcast by the father of this brave young man.”

“What about The Laugh Show? Oh my, that was the best. I used to watch that when I was tiny,” came another voice, this time from the front row, where a woman with a flamboyant checked coat had started to laugh, just from the memory of it.

“Yes, yes. The Laugh Show was on three times a day,” the Professor explained and started to laugh before he pulled himself back to orator mode.

“All it did was show people laughing, for no reason what so ever. No jokes, clowns, clever puns or slapstick. Just people laughing. Research had shown that laughter, even if it was faked, produced happiness. The shows were a huge ratings success. Millions tuned in to join in the laughing. They helped us let go of worry and stress. After half an hour or so of The Laugh Show we all felt great. People lined up to be recorded for it and share their own special laugh with everyone. That’s how the Just Laugh channel started, which is on the Screen all day, every day now.”

The focus in the room moved away from the Professor and the small crowd was chatting and laughing together. It had become a party. Some were still sharing memories. A couple of people started to dance in the far corner, as the live band had struck up in the next room.

CHANGE

With everyone buzzing, the Professor decided it was time to leave his 'stage' and sat down next to Jonathan. He started to talk quietly.

"It came to us all at the right time, and just in time, Jono. There were energy shifts in the world. You could feel it. At the time, it frightened many people who had trouble tuning in to what was happening.

"There were all sorts of explanations, but nothing quite made sense. All I knew, my dear friend, was that 'the times they were a-changing'. We were out of balance. We had stopped following how nature had organized things. But the mystical laws of the universe, as always, were in charge.

"I saw the same things, but in a different way. I realized the mystical laws were taking charge within me. I was able to let go of my attachments to the past. I found myself taking care of my actions. I had a sense that I was aligned and whole, and I knew that things would work out. I sensed the life force and the life field in everything, and in everyone. All around me I saw it happening to others. People were making wise choices, we were speaking wise words. We realized our energy is always active and creating matter and that we, each one of us, were creating world events. We saw how we breathe together and we are all part of the web of life.

"And it happened without having to talk about it, without having to work on it or look at and process our 'stuff'. We stopped looking and stopped trying to tune into anything. All we had to do was realize we were already there."

The Professor paused. He looked serene. "OK, my dear lad," he said softly. "What a wonderful lunch, thank you. It's time for a siesta. Tomorrow's Monday so I've got to get some rest."

He paid the bill with a pass of his token transfer chip and pushed his Panama hat back into shape. He had accidentally leant on it at some point in his speech. He made a small bow and with a flourish of his hat, said, "Fair thee well, all" and walked briskly out into the afternoon air.

There were a few comments of "Bye, Professor", "See you soon," "Wonderful seeing you, "Loved hearing what you said." A small group at the back clapped as he left.

Jonathan smiled at the party atmosphere that the Professor had left behind. He finished the last of his beer and thought about all the things in his life that he took for granted which had been different 50 years ago. Privacy with communications and the Connect, the ease and safety of the money transfer system, honesty and transparency, how commerce and business had changed to open up wealth to more people and allow others more free time. Freedom of speech and optimism in the media. And happiness, human happiness. He felt truly grateful to be living in these times.

He looked down at the table and realized the bowl of nibbles was still full.

CHECK IN WITH MOLLY

Lunch with the Professor had been such a show, and Jonathan wanted to tell Molly. He called her from the Bamboozle Bar before he left to check she was up to a visit. She said brightly she would be more than pleased to see him.

When he arrived, Molly was still reading and responding to messages on the Notice Space. Linorio had met so many people over the years. She had started to get overwhelmed with it all again and was pleased to have Jonathan's visit as a distraction.

She asked how the ballet had been.

"It was OK. I'm not quite sure if I share Belle's taste in entertainment. But I had a wonderful lunch with the Professor."

They sat and drank tea, discussing the Professor's speech and the crowd that had formed around him.

"He would have loved that. The Professor adores having an audience." She laughed and laughed. "Did he do his bow at the end?"

"Yes, he did. What an eccentric character he is. And so charming," said Jonathan and noticed the girlish blush in Molly's cheeks again.

The conversation turned once more to Linorio and they discussed the comments on the Notice Space. Jonathan decided to tell Molly his plan.

He drew a deep breath and announced, "I'm going to go and find Linorio."

He told her what he had found, which confirmed her thoughts about the upcoming award. And he told her about the port town of Puerto Verdad, near Iquitos, Peru, that Linorio had mentioned in the interview.

"I know that town," she said completely taken aback. "I never went there, but he pointed it out on a map once." She paused, deep in thought. She had remembered something.

And then, very calmly, she said, "I'll come with you."

"Oh, Molly, that's amazing! I'll need time to hand things over at the Academy. Belle can look after your plants. We'll need supplies, and we'll have to organize flights and our permits. Are there any detailed maps? I've looked it up and it's pretty remote. I'll check the transport. And there's Henry's show on Wednesday. I have to be there. Can you be ready on Thursday morning?"

"Absolutely," was all she said, with the biggest smile.

ANY DAY EXCEPT MONDAY

At the door to the apartment, Jonathan gave Molly a big hug. An enormous sense of excitement and adventure had exploded, and he felt as if he could hardly talk. There would be lots to organize in just a few days.

“We’ve got lots to do Molly. Shall I drop round tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow is Monday, my dear. Any day except Mondays.” She grinned at him. The Professor had mentioned Monday a few hours earlier and Jonathan knew he would never get to hear what either of them did on Mondays.

“See you Tuesday.”

TUESDAY

Jonathan had been busy organizing himself, researching the area and working out what he wanted to take. He had borrowed equipment and gadgets from friends and from the resource library at Sean's Academy.

Molly had been busy, too, and she had lists of things to do. Many had already been ticked off, including the collection of the gift for Jonathan, the collapsible top hat for the hat party. Stacked around her living room were piles of the things she wanted to take on the trip. When Jonathan rang the doorbell, she was checking the condition of an old satchel and a battered backpack.

He was buzzing with excitement as he staggered through the door, carrying a huge backpack and dragging a second bag full of equipment. They took one look at everything they had collected and burst out laughing. It was going to be a long day rethinking what they would be taking.

They spent hours going through what to take and eliminated everything except the most essential items. Jonathan wore the top hat the whole day, making theatrical bows and sweeping gestures. He seemed like a new person, full of an energy that Molly had never seen in him before. The top hat suited the new Jonathan perfectly.

"The Professor sounded downright jealous when I told him I was going!" she giggled. "But he's pulled some strings with the Academy. You are a field researcher. I've organized my travel permit as compassionate travel. It seemed to work. Oh, travel used to be so easy. But I've organized the air travel."

"I couldn't find any detailed maps of the area," said Jonathan. "I spent hours looking. It is all jungle and rivers with just a few towns marked, but not much else. It really is remote isn't it?"

"We have something to go on." Molly said.

Molly had spent hours in a laborious search through old backups of computer files from years before. She had searched through her scans of all the scraps of paper and mementos she had collected. She was looking for a map Linorio had drawn for her many years before and had finally found it and made a print of it.

It was nothing more than a rough sketch, drawn on a scrap of paper. There were only two place names on the map: Puerto Verdad, which was the port Linorio had mentioned, and Shiringa, which looked like a village. There were a couple of winding rivers and two lagoons. Linorio had drawn it for Molly years ago to explain how the landscape changed with the rising and falling waters of the river. But the thing that made her remember the map was that Linorio had drawn an X alongside one of the rivers, and then tried to rub it out. At the time he had brushed off her question about what the X signified. But she knew there was something more to it.

She explained it all to Jonathan and laughed about how it was like a treasure map with an X to mark the spot.

Jonathan's expression was a mix of surprise and apprehension. "What is this place we are going to?" he asked.

They repacked and eliminated again several times, every time paring back a little more. Molly kept thinking of things to do or organize and added more and more to her lists. They drank tea, made lunch with the last of the perishable foods and talked endlessly about where they were going, what they were doing and what they might find there. Molly had lived in the area for several years and knew it well, but it had been a long time ago.

They finally collapsed on the sofa and decided that was all they could do for that day.

Jonathan was exhausted and slightly dizzied by the excitement of the day. "I had a dream last night," he said. "I kept hearing 'Marry Belle, marry Belle'. When I first woke up, I started to think if I should stay here and carry on with what I am doing. But it felt wrong. I've always thought that a life with Belle would be wonderful. But it feels so pre-determined and it lacks something. My life is so good, but I so long to move away from the conventional. Grandma and Grandpa and all you wonderful people gave

me so much love, time and energy. But there was always something missing, Molly. I wish I could know some of the adventures my parents had.”

“Well then it's a good job we're off to the jungle” said Molly, hugging him with all her might.

FLIGHT TO THE JUNGLE

It had been years since Molly had traveled by air, and it was Jonathan's first time. For decades, people had been used to traveling without giving it a second thought. But that culture had changed dramatically. Long-distance travel had become prohibitively expensive and applying for air travel had become complicated. It had started as a temporary measure, but then became the norm. You could travel, but you needed a good reason.

Many who had immigrated, either legally or illegally, had made their decisions to stay where they were, return to their origins or settle elsewhere. There had been a rapid shuffle around of large numbers of people after the amnesties for illegal immigrants, and since then people had settled down in one place, or at least in one country. Travel for work was a thing of the past; better communications allowed friends, family and business contacts to connect without the need to travel.

Molly had been a traveler for many years and had found it restrictive at first, but it became the normal way of life for all. She made do with exploring the country she had settled in, grateful that many friends had joined her there. In some ways she liked it. Many had wandered aimlessly; looking for greener pastures, or the perfect location, but by staying in one place they started to appreciate where they were and to take more care of it.

But this certainly was a trip with a difference, and they were going somewhere that could not be reached by road. It was an island but surrounded by jungle instead of by water. Linorio had left over three weeks ago. His great-granddaughter had found no record that he had applied for a permit, or that he had bought a flight, so he must be taking the long route, traveling by land and then by boat.

They arrived with plenty of time to spare, but the airport was almost empty. Jonathan was bursting with excitement but managed to keep a calm exterior.

They had both been busy the day before, and Jonathan had been up late at the Mickey Mad Hat show and party. It was the best party he had ever been to. Molly had been right about the hats; they were great ice-breakers, and Jonathan had been in such a good mood. But it was more than that. He felt different. He was waking up. He had decided to reveal very little about the trip but told a few people he would be out of town for a week or so. He had then mysteriously added "Off to the jungle" without any further explanation. It had felt good to say it.

They were first in the queue to check in and weigh in. The fare was calculated on the weight of both passenger and baggage. They were both slim and carried little, and Molly's estimate was almost exact, so there was no excess to pay. They would buy extra provisions when they arrived.

They heard the boarding call. "Iquitos here we come," thought Molly. She remembered the first time she had been there. She thought about the five wonderful years she had spent working with local communities and living the jungle life. It was a place full of strange energies; mysterious jungle rituals and shamanic goings-on.

They boarded, took off and climbed above the city. For a moment, Molly wondered if she would ever see her home again, and then calmed down to enjoy the flight.

Jonathan had the window seat and gazed out, transfixed. He gasped as they flew up through the clouds into the bright sunshine. They had been flying for some time when he suddenly saw the peaks of huge mountain ranges peeping out from the clouds, and as the clouds started to clear, they revealed the snow-capped mountains and the deep valleys of Peru.

There were brilliant turquoise-blue lakes high up in the mountains. Jonathan kept nudging Molly, but she too was gazing out the window, over his shoulder, most of the time.

At one point they flew through a bank of black clouds that buffeted the small aircraft, and a flash of lightning cracked close to them. A couple of passengers screamed, and everyone was tense and silent for a moment or two. To Molly it was representative of where they were going, where nature was the boss.

They flew out of the storm and the clouds cleared to reveal the jungle landscape with its brown and black rivers, winding through the vast green forests. An expanse so large it stretched as far as they

could see. They knew that most of this land was unpopulated, and as wild as any part of the world could be. As they started their descent, more and more details of the palms and huge magnificent trees were visible. They approached the airstrip, lined with banana trees, and touched down.

The moment they walked out of the airplane, the stifling heat hit them. Molly remembered the airport well. It was tiny then, and even smaller now. She remembered the heat and liked it.

They collected their bags and headed off to their hotel. The city was more like a town now. 50 years ago, it had been a cacophony of loud motor-cycles and moto-kars, the tuk-tuk style taxis that had filled the streets. These had all been replaced by silent, solar-powered electric vehicles, and you could hear the sounds of the jungle even in the busy streets. But it still had the feeling of a frontier town. Compared with the rest of the world, time had stood still here, in this jungle island.

"Well, you always say you want to know what it was like!" Molly reminded Jonathan. "It's not that time has stopped here, but it certainly has moved slowly. We are stepping back into the past."

The hotel was basic but had a wonderful view of the mighty Amazon River.

Jonathan was desperate to explore, so they freshened up and walked out into the late afternoon sunshine.

They walked through the main square which was buzzing with people and stopped to drink a coconut water. The little street-side mobile stall was clean and hygienic and was powered by a small solar motor instead of a bicycle, but otherwise it was the same as one of the stalls Molly might have stopped at 50 years ago. The street vendor chopped open the fresh coconut and they stood drinking the sweet water. They continued their walk along the busy street and stopped to buy some local fruits that Jonathan had never seen and chatted to a few people. Molly was on a trip down memory lane and Jonathan was on an adventure of all things new. He loved the feeling of the place. It was hot and humid and had an energy about it that he loved.

They walked past a small street, and Molly noticed a large banner for the cat and dog loan center.

"Oh, my! That's where 'Georgina Cares' started. The pet loan center." She recognized the street from years before. "Did I ever tell you about how Georgina Cares and the loan pets started?"

Jonathan loved dogs, and as a small boy his grandparents had taken out a loan dog for him whenever they could.

"No. You only said that you know her. Tell me."

GEORGINA CARES

"I met Georgina in Iquitos. She'd grown up here and lived here all her life. There were so many dogs and cats that lived on the street and survived on whatever they could find. It was the saddest thing to see. People would feed them scraps. But they didn't think to give them any medical help, or they couldn't afford it. And so many of the animals were in such a state, people avoided patting them or giving any affection. It wasn't only here of course; animals lived on the streets all round the world. Some were happy living like that and survived well, but some of the dogs were breeds that needed special care. They struggled on the streets. They needed to have their coats and claws trimmed. Oh! Some of them were balls of matted hair that was so long it pulled the fur straight out of their skin. Their hair would grow over their eyes, so it was hard for them to see, and their claws would grow so long they could hardly walk. They lived on scraps, and their skin was full of bald patches and sores. But they wanted to be with people, and to be loved so they could love us back.

"There were lots of even sadder puppies and kittens. Only too often, a litter of pups or kittens was born and nobody wanted to find them homes. So, they would kill them, or put them in a bag and throw the little animals in the trash. One time I was there when a friend came back from the market with a tiny kitten he'd found in a pile of garbage. It was so sick. I was holding the poor little thing when it died in my arms.

"Georgina started Georgina Cares to help these street dogs and cats, and to find them homes. It was so wonderful to see a little animal, healthy and in a new home, that would have otherwise died of parasites and infections, lying in the garbage.

"There was a center to keep the animals and look after them while they waited, hopefully, for someone to adopt them. The puppies, kittens and usually the cats went quickly, but for the older dogs it was much harder. They had a no-kill policy, and some dogs spent the rest of their lives there. But the dogs wanted to be a part of human life. It was how they had evolved over thousands of years.

"Georgina had a brilliant idea for how to help. She'd bring a few into the city, and she advertised for people to take them for walks or to look after them for a day or two. She knew that people with pets were healthier and happier. Pets are great companions and dog walking was a great conversation starter.

"That was the twist she put on it. 'Borrow a friend magnet'. Singles had always known what a 'date magnet' a cute dog was.

"The idea took off, and Georgina Cares came to life. It even went international a few years later. People loved to look after a dog or a cat for a few days or weeks, and often, they got so attached to the animal they would keep them. It was the start of the animal collectives. The pets were shared around, and they flourished. It became quite a thing. Before long, street cats and dogs were rare. All because Georgina cared."

They walked down the 'boulevard' that ran alongside the river, the magnificent expanse of the Amazon. They pointed out the water birds, resting in the tops of the trees that were now partly submerged in the waters of the rising river. Jonathan zoomed in on the distant birds with his new Merlin camera.

Molly told him there used to be hundreds of wooden shacks in that part of the city, a shanty town built on stilts for when the water rose. Basic houses without sanitation or running water, most without electricity. The sewage and garbage would be thrown straight into the river, which was also where most people bathed and washed their clothes. This riverside area was much smaller now, but it looked good. Clean and strong little houses, but still built for the rising and falling waters.

The old heritage houses from the grand days of the rubber era had been beautifully restored. It was a delight for Molly to see. Everything was the same, but better and cleaner. She remembered all the street cats and dogs that used to live along this area, and how she would shudder when she saw them. They were all gone now.

The river was high at the moment. They would be able to take a boat further into the jungle, but there would also be plenty of mosquitoes. Jonathan was already swatting them away.

“How come they ignore you?” he asked.

“Must still have the antibodies in my system. They like new blood!” she said as she pulled out a long-sleeved shirt from the satchel. “Here, put this on and cover up.”

BOB THE SCOT

The plan was to eat a quick dinner and then visit a longtime friend of Molly's, Bob the Scot. He knew the area well and would know how to get to where they were going. They took the moto-kar to one of the outer neighborhoods, which gave them a bit of a tour around the small city. Molly was amazed how it was still the same in some ways but had changed so much in others. There were still countless people sitting outside their houses, or in the plazas, enjoying the cool of the early evening. The houses were still small, but here too, the endless shanty towns had become clean and tidy neighborhoods.

On the way, Molly told Jonathan a little of Bob's story. He had been a miner and had spent years living in the mining towns high up in the cold, desolate Andes Mountains, or deep in the jungle. He would say "Oh it's impossible to imagine how dreadful it was". He had been a mining man all his life, and he knew his stuff. He did well, and made good money from it, but he also knew the devastation that mining had caused round the world. He was the first to implement a simple solution to clean up the pollution that he, in part, had caused. He worked with a team of biologists to develop a system that used plants to clean up contamination. As well as soaking up the pollution the plants also soaked up tiny quantities of metals, such as gold and silver, which could be reclaimed.

They knocked on the door of his house, and Bob's little dog was the first to greet them. The dog ran around their ankles, and jumped up and down, full of delight.

"Hello Molly. It's so wonderful to see you. How are you, young lady?" he said in his broad Glasgow accent while he laughed and hugged her.

"And you must be Jonathan," he said, as he hugged him too. "This is my wee doggie, Mac. He was a loan dog, Molly. Took him for a walk one day and couldn't part with him."

"I pointed out to Jonathan where the loan dogs started. This little one would certainly keep you fit, Bob. You are looking marvelous. This jungle life is suiting you."

"It certainly is. Sad to hear about Linorio. You said on the Connect you've come to look for him, and you're not quite sure where you're going. Sounds perfect, Molly. Off to the deep jungle, on a treasure hunt! What is she getting you into, young lad? Let's make a tea and we'll have a wee look at that map of yours."

While the water boiled, Bob looked at the scanty map. He laughed when he saw the X marking where they were going. But he knew from Molly's expression this was a secret that he was being entrusted with. They sat down at the table, and Bob added more detail to the map, inserting the names of villages and landmarks. He told them how to get as close as possible. It would be a bus and a moto-kar to the port town of Puerto Verdad, then two boats to the nearest village of Shiringa. They were lucky, as there was a shortcut now the river was so high. It would take a whole day off their journey.

"I have a friend in Shiringa, Jamie. I'll contact him. He can help you and organize a canoe for you. But be careful. At this time of year, the depths of the smaller streams can vary enormously," said Bob.

Molly revealed that neither of them had any experience paddling a canoe.

"Oh!" said Bob. It was obvious he was now getting worried. "Well, Jamie can take you some of the way. Then you'll need to walk if you want to go on your own. I don't know the exact location but there is nothing in that area, and I'm concerned about how inaccessible it's going to be."

Bob went over to cupboard and produced a small electronic device.

"Take this. Push and turn this red button to send out an alert to the local rescue team if you get in trouble. And promise you'll contact me as soon as you come out of the area, or I'll be sending a search party."

Molly was worried but managed to hide it from Jonathan. At least she now knew the map was part-way accurate.

Bob offered all sorts of advice about footwear, protection for the night and supplies they would need. "The water in the area is perfectly good to drink now," he said proudly. "Contamination free!"

They sat drinking tea, playing with Mac and chatting about what had changed. Bob talked about the times in the past where there had been so much damage to the land and waterways from mining, and drilling for oil. The rivers had been so contaminated the fish were unfit to eat. He told them how the damage wasn't always the fault of the companies. There were horrible examples where locals would smash oil pipes that ran past their villages to create work to repair them. But they had contaminated their own land in the process. They would sometimes vandalize the pipes while they were pumping, and oil would spurt up over the whole village, their own crops, and over the forest.

And Bob told them about how it had changed and about the successes. "Education was so important. We set up surveillance and made people responsible. And of course, my wee project was finally adopted. They came to their senses. And, they are still using my plant-based clean-up systems to reclaim precious metals after all these years. But it was such a struggle. It took so much time and energy to persuade the governments, and the huge companies, to use the system. They were unbelievably slow to act. But I held onto my dream to clean it all up. I kept saying to them, 'Imagine how much money you could make from reclaiming lost metals'. I imagined a cleaned-up world, and it happened."

Bob was a philosopher and talked on in his soothing Scottish lilt. He had seen such changes and had been a part of them. Jonathan loved to listen.

"We had looked for some great solution to all the world's problems," Bob continued. "We looked to our leaders, our politicians, religious leaders, our teachers, the corporations. But so many of their strategies were illogical and out of touch with how far the problems had advanced. It took a few of us to overcome our own resistance and push through to have a new vision. We had to think as individuals and believe in progress and change. We had to imagine the possibility of a better world and believe that humanity could advance and evolve.

"And evolve it did, young man," he told Jonathan. "And so did I. I did my best to catch myself, and the ways in which I contributed to the problem, so I could change it in myself. I made lots of mistakes, but I did my best. I watched myself carefully. And I knew there were others doing the same. I started seeing, thinking and doing things differently, more clearly and more honestly. And things started changing around me. Mystical laws at work, Jonathan, mystical laws."

They talked until late before riding back to the hotel in the cool night air, surrounded by the sounds of the jungle.

MARKET DAY

They slept well and got up late. All they needed to do that day was get supplies from the market. Molly had a shopping list, mostly of things Jonathan had never heard of.

The market was still, for the most part, open-air but it had changed, for the better. It had a lively, noisy feel, with traders' banter and music blaring out from the stalls. The general layout was the same, with stalls on either side of the street displaying the brightly colored fruits and vegetables. But the flies and piles of garbage had gone, as had the grey sludge on the ground that used to smell and look like raw sewage. There was no meat in the open air, nor any of the half-skinned turtles that used to send shivers down Molly's spine.

The street with medicinal plants from the jungle was in the same place, and still sold the same strange barks, leaves, powders and potions. They stopped at several stalls for Molly to check the quality of the products. She rubbed oils and liquids onto the back of her hand, and explained that this one should foam more, that should be stickier and another should smell completely different. She finally found the quality of the mysterious oils and liquids she was looking for and bought a few bottles. She also bought two huge fruits that looked like cannonballs, a ball of bright pink cord, and a pair of rubber boots for each of them. Molly also bought a small machete that was light, but sharp. They stopped for a lunch of fish with local vegetables and exquisite sauces, taking the leftovers with them for the journey.

Back at the hotel, Molly decanted the oils into small travel bottles and cut up some of the cord into short lengths. She had also bought some cigarettes made from the locally grown tobacco, known as *mapacho*. Jonathan was fascinated. He had never seen cigarettes, and certainly never seen Molly smoke. But all she said was, "Tobacco is a sacred plant."

"Where on earth are we going?" he asked, staring at the strange collection of items, especially the machete.

"Could be anywhere. We could find anything. You know, I have to admit it, your guess is as good as mine."

PLANT BATH

“OK, time for a plant bath, while the sun is shining.”

They went into the kitchen and Molly boiled water in two large pots. Beside her were the fruits she had bought in the market. She turned the flames off and dropped the fruits on the tiled floor, where the shells cracked cleanly open. The dark pink fruit inside was perfumed and smelled sweet, and Jonathan reached out to taste it.

“Wait! These are for something else,” she said, as she scooped out the pink pulp, added it to the boiling water and stirred. Molly placed one of the steaming pots on the floor.

“It’s the fruit of a huge, strong tree, the Ayahuma. You can see why they call it the cannonball tree! It’s for a vapor bath. Take your shirt off and sit down in front of the pot. I’ll cover you with the blanket. Careful to keep your legs away from the side of the pot. It’s hot!”

“How do you know all this stuff, Molly?”

“Well, I lived here for quite a few years of course, and I just picked up some of the ways they do things. There are so many plants, fruits and medicines that became common around the world once the Amazon resources were organized better. But these are things we always used here. It’s coming back to me. It’s like I never left.”

He sat on the wooden floor in front of the pot as Molly covered him with the blanket. He heard her place the second pot of steaming water with fruit on the floor next to him and cover herself with a blanket. At first the perfumed steam was pleasant. But, before long, the combination of the steam and the tropical heat grew intense and Jonathan felt streams of sweat pouring over him. It was getting uncomfortable.

“What are we doing?” he asked.

“Just concentrate on the plant. It’s for protection.”

“Protection from what?”

“Could be anything my dear, could be anything” he heard the muffled voice from under the blanket sauna next to him.

Jonathan started to relax. He concentrated on the sweet perfume and absorbed its energy. He had known from the moment they packed the bags that this was a journey to a place well outside his experience. Sitting in the steam, he began to feel the protection soaking into his being, covering him like the hard shell of the fruit of the Ayahuma. They must have sat for 20 minutes, or so, before he heard Molly emerge from her steam tent.

She pulled off his cover and took both pots over to the sink, filled each with cold water, and checked the temperature. “OK. Now we’ll go in the garden and rinse off with the mixture.”

They poured the sweet-smelling liquid over themselves, and wearing just their underclothes, stood in the sun and let the plant bath dry naturally. The garden of the hotel was beautiful, and they watched a hummingbird taking nectar, and pale blue birds flitting round the trees. They heard a rustle at the end of garden and saw an iguana, nearly a meter long, crawling through the undergrowth.

DAY ONE

The next morning, the travelers were up early. When they met in the breakfast room, Molly saw that Jonathan was covered in angry-looking bites, and he was desperately resisting the urge to scratch.

"They really got you didn't they? Here, this will help." Molly pulled out of her satchel three small bottles of the liquids she had bought in the market, the day before. She applied the amber liquid to the unscratched bites. She cleaned the other bites first with a little alcohol then placed a dab of a rich, dark red liquid to the open sores.

"What are those liquids?" he asked.

"Tree resins. Old jungle remedies, and they are very soothing. This is copaiba," she replied.

"What's the red one?" he asked. "Strange smell!" Jonathan asked.

"Dragon's blood," she growled, half laughing. "Well, it's actually resin from a tree called sangre de grado. It's an antiseptic. Let it dry and it acts as a bandage as well."

They were full of their breakfast of tropical fruits and juices, toast and strange-looking jams, and ready to go. They collected their backpacks, which they had pared down to only the essentials. A few clothes, a foldaway fishing rod, a small, lightweight tent which was more of a mosquito net than anything, a compass, and the machete. The rest of their luggage they would leave at the hotel. They had enough food to last three 3 days, maybe four, and a booklet with a description of any fruits they might find and that were safe to eat. And Jonathan had his ultraviolet water purifier, although Bob had assured them the water was clean.

Jonathan hoisted the heavier pack on his back. Molly felt confident she could manage her small backpack, and her satchel full of items for emergencies. They were fresh from a good night's sleep, clean and ready. But they walked out of the hotel both knowing that they were stepping into a complete unknown.

The first part of the journey was easy. They took a community bus to the town of Puerto Verdad. It was about an hour away. The bus left the city and flew along the narrow road, passing a few tiny communities but not much else. On either side of them was tall, thick jungle.

The bus terminal at Puerto Verdad was little more than a roof, with a small shop, and a bathroom. From there, they took a local moto-kar to the port. There was a small market next to the port which buzzed with people selling local produce. Jonathan bought a couple of desserts made from rice and milk which they ate while they waited for their boat, sitting on the boardwalk which looked out over the river. Boats plied their way through the water, people ambled along the shore and lively music blared out from a nearby bar. The morning sun had started to intensify, but the breeze from the water cooled them. They gazed over to the far side of the river, with its jungle backdrop of vibrant greens.

ON THE BOAT UPRIVER

They boarded the fast boat that would take them upriver and relaxed into the padded seats. All was going well and, so far at least, it seemed easy.

Jonathan gazed at the passing scenery that was constantly changing. Trees with exposed roots clung to the banks where the soil had collapsed into the water, competing with tall grasses and bushes for a place to grow. Birds took off and landed or circled above. The sounds of the wildlife and the fresh smell of the water were mesmerizing. They saw pods of grey dolphins and several huge, pink river dolphins.

Clumps of foliage floated by, some several meters wide. Molly said that these floating islands would sometimes get caught on a sand bank, and eventually form islands in the middle of the river. They passed some of these islands at various stages of development. Some had only low grasses, while others already had fast-growing trees in the center. Jonathan was amazed at how the river landscape could change itself.

They traveled upstream, then turned into a tributary river, markedly narrower, but which gave them even more wildlife to look at. Turtles, sun-baking on partly submerged branches, jumped into the river as they passed. Water birds took flight around them, and groups of parrots and brightly colored birds squawked overhead.

They arrived at a village, which was the furthest the fast boat would go, and stepped onto the shore.

VISITORS ON BOARD

The next stage of the journey was a small boat to the village of Shiringa. Molly and Jonathan had timed their arrival well, and the boat was nearly ready to leave. Six others joined them, and four of the passengers were also traveling to Shiringa. It would be at least four hours until they arrived.

Molly explained that the boatman had probably driven these boats all his life, and his family before him. He would have sat in a similar boat as a small child, learning the ways of the water. He watched out for tree trunks floating in the water and had to steer around objects from time to time. At one point, he had to slowly navigate through a huge mat of floating plants, forging a path through the vegetation.

They pulled into a small community to drop off two of the passengers and pick up cargo, then continued on their journey. They had been traveling a couple of hours through the full heat of the day, and the humidity was rising. Lulled by the gently rocking boat, the quiet hum of the motor and the warmth of the sun, the passengers started to drop into a trancelike sleep. Molly sat upright and propped herself against the side of the boat. She forced herself to stay awake and watch, without knowing why she felt it was so important to stay alert.

As they slowed to navigate around a fallen tree, they appeared from nowhere. A small canoe silently slid up beside them. Two ragged-looking boys, barely 13 or 14, tied their canoe to the boat and jumped on board. The first to board was shouting while he jabbed a machete at the passengers, gesturing for anything of value. The sleepy passengers woke up, completely startled. A young woman with a child on her lap, screamed "Pirates!" and pulled the child close to her. The second boy dashed to the front of the boat and nervously pointed an old and dirty looking pistol at the boat driver. Molly knew nothing about firearms, but was sure that, even if it was loaded, this one was so badly maintained it would explode if fired. The driver was so shocked and stunned; he just stared at the boy, open mouthed.

The first boy was moving nervously, causing the small boat to rock. He was yelling and motioned everyone to empty their pockets and luggage and to hand over whatever they had. The tense and unpredictable agitation of the boys was frightening.

Molly felt strange, as if she was absorbing a strength and energy from the air itself. Slowly and calmly, she rose to her feet, and concentrated on keeping her balance so as not to make any sudden movements. She was the nearest to the driver and the boy with the gun, and she started speaking softly to the youth.

"You must be Juan Carlos," she said. "I know your Aunt Maria. How is she, dear boy? Oh, I haven't seen her for such a long time. What a wonderful woman! We used to spend such lovely times together. We'd often go to the market. Such kind eyes. And your brother? How is he? Doing well now, I hope. She so loved her nieces and nephews."

He looked back and forth between her and the boat driver. Molly greeted him with a soft smile and continued to speak softly, but firmly, saying nothing in particular about this woman she had called Maria. The young boy was confused. Then he darted his look between Molly and the second boy, who had stopped in his tracks to see what had happened.

From behind her, she heard the voice of the second boy. "We're cousins. That was my mother. She died last month in a horrible accident." He lowered the machete, dropped his head slightly, and closed his eyes gently.

"Oh, my dear boy, I am so sorry."

She saw him weaken, and without hesitation, but moving very slowly, she went over to him. She reached out and put her hand lightly on his shoulder. He mumbled to her, but she understood almost nothing of what he said. She had a feeling that he was both apologizing and explaining why they had ambushed the boat. Molly kept talking softly, offering condolences and reassurances that everything was OK.

His cousin realized their plan had changed. He stuffed the pistol in his pocket and walked down to join Molly and the boy. Molly reached out and held his elbow, gently leading the two of them to the back of the boat. The boy placed the small pile of booty he had collected on the floor of the boat, and they

stepped back into their canoe. Within an instant they were gone. They had slipped into one of the narrow canals formed by the swollen river.

All of the passengers stared at Molly.

“What happened there? How on earth do you know them?” asked Jonathan.

“I don’t know them, never seen them before. I was just lucky with the names. Anyway, it worked didn’t it? OK captain, ready to continue.”

With relief, the passengers started chattering and discussing the encounter and thanking Molly. They wondered if anyone recognized the boys, but it was a mystery where they had come from or where they would be going. One of the passengers said that pirates on the river had been unheard of for years, but there had been a few such incidents recently. The captain, still too shocked at what had happened to say anything, started the engine and picked up speed. Molly sat back in her original place in the boat and let out a sigh.

“Were you frightened?” Jonathan asked her.

“Yes. I think I was. But it just came out. I feel a little nauseous now. Pass me some water, please.”

In silence, they continued to gaze out at the passing landscape, but this time, it was Jonathan who was on full alert. He saw it was a different world here. The rules were different.

SHIRINGA

The boat pulled into the shore at Shiringa, a little village much like the community Linorio had started decades before. Molly had never been here, but it looked familiar. It had an easy, relaxed atmosphere and people were milling around, chatting or playing ball games.

As promised, Bob had contacted Jamie, who met them at the little dock. He was pleased to see visitors. He chatted enthusiastically as he led them to the hut they would be staying in. It was an annex to Jamie's house, with two tiny rooms and a basic bathroom. Most of the external walls were fly-screen mesh, so it felt like a huge tent.

They ate dinner with the family: river fish, vegetables and rice, and then sat out on the porch where Jonathan told the story of the pirate attack. Jaime was completely perplexed by the young boys who had ambushed the boat, but he too had heard reports.

"There is something going on," he said. "There have been some strange things happening the past five or six years, but we can't put a finger on it. As if we didn't have enough to look out for from the jungle itself."

Jonathan laughed, but the comment left him only more nervous.

They said their goodnights and walked through the darkness to their rooms. Jonathan pointed out fireflies in the dense trees which glowed, not just from their wings, but also with their bright green eyes. A massive toad hopped over and looked at them and a bat swooped past, nearly clipping its wings on them.

In the safety of their little rooms, Molly and Jonathan fell asleep to the songs of the night-time animals and birds. The jungle orchestra.

CHULLACHAQUI

Molly hadn't been asleep long when she awoke from a strange, muddled dream in a panic. She could hear a strange tapping sound. Tap-tap-tap. Tap-tap-tap. Through the thin adjoining wall, she could hear Jonathan getting out of bed. He was talking to someone, and she could just make out the name Viktor. She wondered if Viktor had also come to look for Linorio.

Still half asleep, she heard Jonathan walk outside. She leapt out of bed and stumbled around in the dark, looking for her flashlight. She pushed her feet into her shoes, grabbed her satchel and dashed out of the hut into the cool night air. It was rare that Molly felt her years limit her movements, but she had found it increasingly hard to get going when she first woke up. She knew this was an emergency and cursed her slowness in the dark.

She reached the outer door and was just in time to see the shadows of two people as they turned the corner. It was Jonathan and a tall, lanky figure. She heard a distant laugh; the distinctive ha-ha-ho-ho-ho-huff-ha that could only be Viktor. But this person walked with a slight limp, and he had a twisted, club-like left foot. She knew it wasn't Viktor.

Molly followed, moving as fast as she could, being careful to watch where she stepped in the dark. She wished she had done some of those yoga classes or something over the years.

"Come on, legs," she urged herself. "You've got to get going a bit quicker than usual." She willed herself to speed up and concentrated on her breath. She walked as fast as she could and turned the same corner, grateful they were now walking down a long, straight path. They would soon be at the edge of the village, and the trees ahead were dense. But the two figures had started to gain distance, and she knew she would never catch up. She called out "Jonathan! Jonathan!" Her voice pierced the night air and travelled into the dark. She called again and again, each time with more strength, desperate to reach her friend.

A light came on in a couple of the huts and dogs started to bark. She was half walking, half running but she felt like she was wading through treacle. A small, cinnamon-colored dog raced up to her and excitedly bounced up, as if he was waiting for instructions.

"Go to him, go and warn him," she pleaded. The dog raced off after the two figures as if he knew exactly what to do. She pushed on, still desperately calling out. She saw the faint shadow of the young dog as he caught up with Jonathan and raced around him, barking loudly. Then he yelped, as if he had been hit, but she knew it wasn't Jonathan who had struck out. Still the dog ran circles around him. The shadowy images were getting further and further away, but she caught a glimpse of the dog leaping up onto Jonathan before he yelped once more and collapsed. Molly saw Jonathan stop and turn with surprise, suddenly aware of the dog by his side. He bent down to stroke it.

The second figure had disappeared.

She finally reached Jonathan and gave him a huge hug. She had tears in her eyes but tried to stay calm. He was barefoot, wearing only the clothes he had slept in. She sat down on the path, pulled out a mapacho from her satchel, lit it and puffed smoke into the air.

"Hey, Molly. What are you doing up? I was having a stroll with Viktor. He invited me to see his house with a big comfy bed. I didn't know he would be here. How did he get here so fast? And where did he disappear to all of a sudden? Where did this little dog come from? He's so sweet, isn't he?"

He picked up the dog and offered Molly an arm as support. He looked baffled about what had happened, but he was wide awake.

"It wasn't Viktor! Thank goodness this little puppy woke you up," said Molly. She puffed the rich smelling mapacho tobacco around them. Jonathan wondered what was going on.

Jamie and several others had woken up when they heard Molly's calls and the barking. Jamie had run after them, and Jonathan told him briefly what had happened. "Let's get back and I'll explain," Jamie said, as he led them back to their hut.

They sat on the wooden floor of Molly's room and sipped water.

"It was a Chullachaqui, a Shapishico," Jamie explained. "Some say they are a legend, but people who live here know they are real. Did you notice one foot was different to the other, and twisted? They are the spirits of the jungle, the guardians. But they are shape shifters. They change into someone you know and lead you into the jungle. That comfy bed? You would have woken up in the roots of some huge tree, in a bed of leaves, without a clue of where you were and hardly any chance of finding your way out of the jungle. They're not bad; they just want to play. You were lucky Molly woke up."

"It was a dream that woke me," she said. "And then I heard the tapping."

"Yes, that tap-tap-tap," agreed Jonathan. "That's what woke me, and then Viktor, well, what looked like Viktor, was there chatting away to me."

"You two share this room from now on, and we'll set up some more protection," said Jamie. He went to Jonathan's room and pulled the mattress and bedding into Molly's. He went to his own house and reappeared with limes and garlic. He placed a lime and a garlic clove by the door, on the window ledge and at each end of the two beds. Jamie looked around and nodded to himself, satisfied the room was safe, and bid them goodnight. But without letting them know he made up a bed for himself on their porch, just to be sure.

Molly lit a mapacho and puffed smoke around the room. Jonathan watched, and wondered, but said nothing. She seemed to be in control.

"Protection," Molly said, and anticipating Jonathan's question on what they may need protection from, she quickly added, "It could be anything."

"Let's clean up those feet." He had been walking barefoot in the dark, on the dirt road, and had a few nasty cuts on his feet. She reached into her satchel and pulled out the small bottle of alcohol and the sangre de grado antiseptic, 'dragon's blood'. The alcohol stung against the wounds, but the red liquid soothed. He slid into bed, relieved, and fell asleep immediately. The little dog curled up beside Jonathan, resting a paw lightly on his arm.

Molly let him sleep while she kept herself awake, watching and listening. She must stay alert. This was a new and strange environment for Jonathan. She concentrated on tuning in to this world again. It had been so many years. She connected once again with her jungle heart and started to relax. She began to feel at one with where they were, with an anticipation of adventure that both excited and terrified her at the same time.

It started to rain - heavy, tropical rain. She loved the sound of it, and the smell. An impressive storm was right on top of them, with flashes of lightning and a thunderclap that resounded around them.

The rain poured down until dawn, and she heard the wildlife start to awaken. The howler monkeys called in the distance; the birds and parrots chattered and shared the news of the night's events. She felt safe to sleep a little now, knowing that day would break soon.

As Molly drifted off, Jonathan awoke and started getting ready for what he knew would be a long walk. He walked out onto the porch, and was surprised to see Jamie there, fast asleep and snoring. He looked out to see a small lake had surrounded their hut with the rain from the overnight storm. Over by the river, the tops of some bushes that had been visible the day before were now submerged by the rising water. He thought how strong and resistant everything had to be here. The magnificent trees in the safe, city parks back home looked dainty in comparison.

FOLLOWING THE RIVER

The two friends had an early breakfast, then set off with Jamie in the little canoe. He would take them as far as a nearby lagoon. They had told him they were going fishing and had already arranged to be picked up later to go back to town.

“We can easily walk back to the river from the lagoon, and if anything goes wrong we’ll wait for the surveillance boat that passes mid-afternoon,” Molly reassured him. Of course, they planned on walking into the jungle, following their sketchy map.

The canoe ride to the lagoon was magnificent. They turned off the main river and were surrounded by huge trees. Groups of monkeys scampered through the branches. A turn in the stream revealed the beautiful lagoon, where the surface of the water seemed to dance. It looked like it was raining, but in fact the water was alive with fish leaping and splashing. The surrounding trees were full of birds. This was a feeding hole.

They clambered out of the canoe and onto the bank. They thanked Jamie for his hospitality, waved him goodbye and started to walk.

Molly breathed it all in. There were sounds everywhere from the birds with their magical calls. And when the cicadas started up their chorus, it was as if the trees themselves had sprung into song. The air was filled with the fresh smells of the water and the rich, dampness of the jungle undergrowth. Everything vibrated with a powerful energy. Jonathan was taking pictures from all directions. He wanted to record it for all time. But he was also nervous and felt safe looking through the lens of the camera.

They followed the edge of the river where the undergrowth was not too thick and there seemed to be a trail. Although it was overgrown, it looked to Molly like it had been maintained in the recent past. She saw branches that had been chopped back, and there was a large tree that had been cut through. Jonathan had noticed it too and took extra photos.

They were wearing knee-high rubber boots and two pairs of socks to stop blisters. It was hot on the feet, but they could walk easily through the muddy patches. They climbed over the buttress roots of huge trees that crossed the path, ducked under overhanging branches and clambered up and down natural staircases formed by tree roots. It was a hard trek in the heat.

They followed Linorio’s map. Molly knew the river could change course dramatically, and the landscape might now be very different. But Linorio had marked a trail that he thought would always be there, and the map showed where north was. They kept the compass out at all times, always conscious of where they had come from and the direction they were going in. Jonathan took photographs every few hundred meters and jotted a few notes down from time to time as extra guidelines. They were confident they would be able to find their way back along this same route.

MAGIC OF THE JUNGLE

The deeper they went into the jungle, the more mesmerizing it was. Birds flew through the trees; insects, ants and lizards scurried everywhere. Up in the tree branches groups of tiny, cute monkeys with big, inquisitive eyes looked down at Molly and Jonathan. Jonathan gasped as he spotted a pair of toucans fly by high in the tree tops, and Molly pointed out the bright blue and red of a macaw.

Dragonflies and butterflies of all sizes and colors flew everywhere. Molly and Jonathan would cheer every time an elusive Blue Morpho butterfly appeared and flashed its shimmering blue wings as it flew past, taunting them with a glimpse of its beauty. Try as he might, Jonathan could not get a photograph of the blue iridescent wings. Plants, trees and vines clambered to survive in the dense forest, and flowers flashed bright red and orange amongst the green.

They kept to the riverside trail as much as they could, but there was much to watch out for, especially the vines on the ground that they both kept tripping over. The ground got so muddy at one point that they hacked down a couple of young saplings with the machete to make walking sticks.

Jonathan was being seriously pestered by mosquitoes. The insistent buzz around his ears had become more than annoying, and now distracted him from where he walked. He had put on repellent, but they seemed immune to it. Molly, too, was getting attacked and asked Jonathan if they could stop for a while. She put down her backpack and walked up to a nearby termites' nest, a huge bulbous bulge on a low tree branch. She carefully brushed back the outer layer of the nest to reveal the tiny termites as they scampered around.

She placed her hand on the open part of the nest and it was covered with termites in seconds. She then rubbed her hands together to squash the insects and started to rub her hands over her face, neck and any exposed parts of skin.

"Someone showed me this once. You'll be amazed how effective it is against mosquitoes."

"I'll try anything once," he said dubiously, as he too spread mashed insects over his face, neck and hands.

They continued walking, and it was getting hot. It wasn't until about 20 minutes later that Jonathan realized there were no mosquitoes around him. The termite repellent had worked.

"Shame about having to squash the termites, but they certainly do the trick."

Jonathan noticed that Molly constantly puffed on her mapacho cigarettes.

"Why all the smoking Molly?"

"They always used to say the smoke kept the snakes away."

"Oh," was all he managed to reply.

HOW OLD IS LINORIO?

As they walked, it occurred to Jonathan how little he knew about Linorio, this man he had read about, heard about, but never met.

“How old is Linorio?” he asked. Molly cringed when she heard the question.

“Well, he never knew for sure. He remembered his mother, and he knew he had spent the very early days with her. One day he was sent to the shop to buy some bread and a can of milk. He could talk and run small errands, so he must have been about four. When he returned his mother was gone!

“He waited for her, alone in the tiny shack in the shanty part of town. He waited and waited, and finally went to the neighbor to ask them to open the can of milk for him. He had slowly eaten all the bread, even the piece he had kept for his mother’s return, and now he needed help. It was several days before anyone knew she was missing.

“Everyone knew she would never have abandoned the boy. She adored him. She was from a little village, and when they found out she was pregnant, her family pushed her out and she made her way to the city. She was only 13 and under the legal age of consent. Nobody knew the full story, or who the father was. She had always maintained it had been against her will. Her own mother may have sold her for sex. There was a trade in young girls for sex with wealthy men from the capital. So sad to think about it. She was so young.

“The neighbors looked after little Linorio for a while, and tracked down a distant relative, an aunt, in a small town up the river. He was parceled off to live with them. She was the only one who remembered the little that Linorio ever knew about his past. The aunt had lost touch with the family, due to some feud or other, and had no idea where any of the rest of the family may have been. She herself had nine children and Linorio was too young to be very useful. But he learned from the others. They loved the smiling young boy. They helped him and taught him what they knew. It was a rural area on the fringes of the jungle, and it was there he gained his knowledge of the plants, trees and animals, and how to survive.

“His aunt’s husband always resented the extra mouth to feed and would savagely attack Linorio whenever nobody was watching. Linorio would have been about 12 when, after a horrible beating, he packed his few things and headed back to the city. He’d borrowed a few coins for the boat fare from a shop keeper who had befriended him. He even went back a few years later and repaid that loan, with interest mind you.

“Back in the city, he slept rough at first, but he was lucky. He always had that magnificent smile and he’s such a charmer. And he was hardworking and honest. He found work almost straightaway, helping out in a lumber mill. He slept in the mill at night. He was safe and the men each gave him a little of their food. He got strong and tough and he saved the little money he earned. He had plans.

“Linorio was short and always looked so young. No one knew his real age, and he had no birth certificate. He had no documentation so, to the officials, he didn’t exist. As there was no family trail, the only way he could claim his citizenship was by proving that he had been found abandoned as a child here.

“He never found his mother and never knew what happened to her. By the time Linorio went back to the slum where he had spent those first years there were still a few who remembered her, but one knew for sure what had happened to her.”

THE PERFECT GARDEN

They had walked for several hours and were getting hungry. It was time to rest and eat. They turned a corner, and on the left-hand side was a small patch of forest with low-growing plants, full of bright yellow fruits.

“Hey, look at those fruits! They’re beautiful. Do you think they’re ripe? They look just like the pictures of the caimito but see how bright yellow they are.” Jonathan had taken his backpack off and was comparing the plants to the pictures in the booklet. He had started to walk towards the bushes and their delicious looking fruits, taking photographs of the magnificent display.

“Stop, stop, stop!” Shouted Molly. “Look at it! It too clean and tidy. It’s perfect, not even a leaf on the ground. We have to get out of here quick.”

Jonathan was getting the hang of this. He remembered the advice from the previous night and looked down at Molly’s feet, and then he even looked down at his own feet. They looked normal. He retraced his steps quickly and picked up his backpack.

“Something to do with Chullachaquis, yes? They are ...”

But Molly interrupted. “It’s a Chullachaqui garden. Just think good things about them. They are wonderful spirits. They take care of the jungle and protect it. All we need to do is respect them and get out of here quick. Think good thoughts about them. We love them. They are wonderful. Keep walking. Fast.”

They walked quickly for five minutes or so and reached a stream. There was a small bridge made by a couple of fallen trees and they crossed over. Molly stopped to catch her breath after the sprint. She pulled out a mapacho and puffed smoke around them.

“So what was that garden?” Jonathan asked.

“Amazing,” she said as she regained her breath. “I’ve heard about these gardens but never seen one. It was perfect, wasn’t it? They say that if you eat the fruit, it makes you really sick. And the Chullachaqui don’t like it if you say anything bad about them. I’ve heard so many stories. I don’t know if it’s just a legend, but I choose to believe it. That garden was just too clean and tidy. In the middle of the jungle? So beautifully looked after, and so far from anyone? It’s the only explanation.”

Jonathan looked through the images in his camera. He had taken about 20 photographs, from a distance and zooming in on the fruits. Every single image was just a foggy grey color.

“Yes, the only explanation,” he said and shrugged.

PALO ROSA

They ate lunch quickly and packed up ready to start the trek again. Molly looked back at the bridge they had just crossed and wondered why the trees had fallen in such a way as to form such a convenient handrail but decided to say nothing.

They walked for about three hours, constantly watching the compass and checking the map. So far, the map appeared to be accurate. It was mid-afternoon when they came to an area where the river widened, and they noticed the trees were markedly different.

“If I’m right, those trees are Palo Rosa! Rosewood!” said Molly in amazement. “A whole forest of them! They look like they have been planted as a tree farm and then forgotten about. That tree was thought to be extinct in the wild.”

She tapped the machete into the bark of one, which oozed a tiny amount of resin. She collected the resin on her finger, breathed in its perfume and offered it to Jonathan to smell. He thought it was the most beautiful smell he had ever known and breathed it in deeply.

“It was used for its beautiful wood, especially for guitars. And the resin is an essential oil which was used in perfumes. The Amazon species has a much more beautiful fragrance than trees grown elsewhere. The story goes that it was used in the most classic fragrance at the time, but the fashion house that made it refused to divulge their precious formula or to change it. The forests were plundered for the wood, for the oil from the tree trunks. Terrible waste, as the leaves hold even more of the beautiful scent than the wood. It was a tragedy that could have been avoided, but they wanted that scent as their secret ingredient for their precious perfumes. The scarcer it got, the more it was illegally chopped down. People started to farm the trees commercially, but they grow slowly, and they couldn’t keep up with demand. And by then it was too late to save the tree in the wild. We are looking at something very special.”

Jonathan walked into the trees. He caught hold of a low branch, snapped off a twig and inhaled the fragrance. He was touching an extinct tree. A glint of silver caught his eye. There was something metallic and he walked a little further in. From this point he could see tree stumps, but they had been cut. These weren’t old trees that had died and fallen naturally. The silver glints were from a small wood shredder and a barrel-shaped machine. He recognized it as machine used for steam distillation of oils. There were pieces of charred wood which must have been used to fuel the distiller. People had been here, recently.

Molly called to him a few times and he shouted back to let her know he was OK. He took photographs of the site, lots of them, and walked back to the trail.

They started walking again, keen to get away. They talked endlessly, in low voices, about who could be here and what they were doing with the wood and its oils. Jonathan clutched the small twig from the precious, extinct tree.

NIGHT IN THE TREE ROOTS

Night started to fall, and they were both tired. The previous day's experience with the pirates and a disturbed night of near abductions from the Chullachaqui had drained them, and Molly had slept only a little. The difficult walk in the heat had exhausted them, but they needed to set up a camp while they still had light. They decided to use their flashlights as little as possible, to avoid drawing the attention of any illegal wood loggers who might be nearby.

They set up the tent in the roots of a huge tree, careful to check for any 'inhabitants' beforehand. They inflated the built-in mattress and pegged out the mesh tent that would let air in while, hopefully, keeping everything else out. They ate quickly and crawled into the flimsy tent, exhausted. Molly blew a little mapacho smoke around and her jungle heart told her just to trust they would be safe.

There was only a thin sliver of moon, and in the pitch black of the night, fireflies glowed. Some were white, and some had the same green eyes they had seen in the village. Jonathan thought how completely lost they would be in the darkness and placed his flashlight so he knew exactly where it was.

The sounds of the jungle were even louder here. There were nocturnal birds and other peculiar sounds that Molly said were frogs. Molly was too tired to think of anything but sleep. Jonathan tried his best to keep watch, but quickly fell into a deep slumber. Nestled in the buttress roots of this grand tree, they felt safe and protected.

HIDDEN HORROR

In the early hours Molly and Jonathan both woke abruptly at a loud, metallic snapping sound. It was followed by the terrified cry of an animal. It sounded close.

Neither slept properly after that, as they lay listening, and waiting for first light. They stayed as still and quiet as they could. Jonathan tried to gauge where the sound had come from, so he could investigate in the morning.

Dawn was a huge relief. They quickly ate the last of their bread for breakfast and packed up. Jonathan wanted to find where the sound had come from, but they would have to leave their riverside trail. They left their backpacks and walked into the dense jungle. It was hard walking and climbing through the trees and undergrowth, but they tried to keep going straight ahead as much as possible. Molly counted her steps and at every 15th step she tied pink cord to a solid branch to mark where they went. She checked that from each mark she could see the previous one.

“Like a Hansel and Gretel breadcrumb trail,” she said.

They hadn’t gone far when they came across a horrific sight. On the ground were five or six traps; metal cages with spring-loaded doors. The traps were partly covered by foliage but still clearly visible, and they saw three more hanging on low branches. Next to the trap nearest them, on the ground, was a pile of brightly colored feathers from a large parrot. They were stained with blood.

They walked in a little and Molly screamed. In front of her, in one of the traps, was the body of a little jaguar cub, partly decomposed. The door of the trap had severed its back leg, and the cub must have bled to death. It was one of the saddest things Molly had ever seen. Her beloved jaguars, and this one just a cub.

There were footprints around the trap of what could only be an adult jaguar, some still marked with the blood of the little cub, as though the adult had circled the helpless baby. Molly felt the pain of both animals; the frustration, the endless circling. For what? She didn’t know what to do and wondered whether or not to bury the little body.

She was fixed to the spot in shock, so Jonathan walked further in and took photographs of the site. There were far more traps than they had seen at first. He was thankful they were empty. The whole area had a horrible feel and some of the traps looked old. This was not a new ‘installation’.

Then, in the low branches of a tree, he saw one of the traps contained a live captive. It was a little monkey, the same as the inquisitive ones they had seen the day before. It seemed terrified, and its foot was badly injured. Maybe this was the trap they had heard the night before. Jonathan reached up and opened the door, being careful that it didn’t spring shut on his own arm. The little animal darted out immediately and clung to him. He clasped it to his chest and walked back to Molly, whispering reassuring sounds to the frightened animal.

Molly pulled out a small towel and wrapped it over the little monkey, which was clinging to Jonathan like a baby to its mother.

Jonathan had taken countless photographs of the tragic area, and they both wanted to get back to the trail. At first, they decided to leave everything as they had found it. There was something happening here that felt dangerous, not only to the jungle, but to them. Then Molly had an idea. She went up to each of the traps she could get to and carefully pushed the bait out through the wires with her sapling walking stick. Then she nudged each cage to make the trap doors snap shut.

They had come across some of the same fruits they had seen in the Chullachaqui garden, not the same bright yellow, but the same fruit. She pulled them out of her satchel and took a small bite from each. Then she dropped the partly eaten fruit near the traps. If anyone wondered who, or what, had closed the traps, they may be fooled into thinking it was the jungle guardians, the feared Chullachaqui.

She picked up one of the pieces of bait, wrapped it carefully, and tucked it away. She wanted to find out what it was. It had obviously not been eaten by insects, but it must be appealing to different types

of animals and birds. They picked their way back to the trail following the marks they had left with the pink cords, careful to remove each one as they went.

Back at the river, Molly produced a tiny jar of honey from her satchel and some bandages. She washed the monkey's wounded foot with fresh water, dried the wound and applied the honey. She wrapped it carefully in a bandage, and then with a waterproof wrapping to make sure no insects could get in.

Then she pulled out a long-sleeved shirt and tied the animal to Jonathan in a makeshift sling. The little monkey gazed into Jonathan's eyes as if it knew it had avoided either a horrible death in the trap or something even worse if the hunter had returned while it was still alive. She pulled out a small banana, again from the satchel, and offered it to the little monkey.

"What have you got in that bag? It's like the bottomless magic bag the Felix cat cartoon character carried."

"Water, handkerchief, long-sleeved shirt, first aid, all sorts of bits and pieces. Oh, and a bag of almonds. Always travel with nuts."

"Yes, and we are the nuts, huh?" joked Jonathan.

They picked up their backpacks and were off again along the trail that followed the river. As they walked, they talked in low voices about what could be happening. Jamie had said that nobody lived in this isolated part of the jungle, and no one officially used it for resources. But there were certainly some people busy with something.

They walked carefully and watched all around them, not only for their own safety but also for any other signs of human activity. One part of the river looked like it had been made into a rough landing spot for a canoe or small boat. At the corner of a large tributary there were signs of a camp, with a fire made of stones. They found a small pile of garbage that had obviously been left by the campers. Molly wanted to get out of the area as soon as possible. Jonathan, as usual, took photographs of everything, and jotted down notes.

GIANT CREATURES OF THE LAGOON

The walk was getting harder. The ground was muddy, and it was hot and humid. Molly was surprised that she could keep up the pace, but she knew it was more from adrenaline than anything. Jonathan was in seventh heaven, fascinated by everything. He breathed it in, absorbed the sounds and vibrated with the energy of the place. He was more alert than he had ever felt before in his life, aware that there could be dangers at any moment - not only from the jungle, but also from humans.

Jonathan kept the little monkey safe in its sling the whole time, apart from when it chattered loudly, which, he worked out, was its way of asking for a 'bathroom break'. The two had obviously formed a strong bond.

They needed to stop for lunch and to collect water. The bank down to the river had been steep for the last few hours of the walk, and they had been looking for a safe place to get near the water. They turned a corner and saw another magnificent lagoon. It was a little smaller than the one they had seen the day before, but this too was full of wildlife and fish.

The far bank was swampy, but on the near side there were some spots where it was easy to get to the water and fill up their bottles. Jonathan climbed down to the lagoon, and as he approached a sunlit stretch of the bank, he disturbed what must have been over a thousand dragonflies. Brilliant metallic, purple insects burst around him in a cloud. To Jonathan, it seemed like the air was filled with fairies.

Jonathan filtered the brown sediment and other debris out of the water and zapped it with his ultraviolet light purifier. He dug up a few worms, baited the fishing rod and tried his luck at catching a fish, while Molly prepared some food from their supplies. Molly was glad that the one fish he caught got away. She didn't want to risk lighting a fire which could bring attention to themselves with the smoke.

They took a long break. It was a magical spot and it gave them both a chance to recover their strength. Molly even dozed for a while, and Jonathan kept an extra-special look-out. The last few days had been the most wonderful experience of his life, and he felt a huge gratitude for Molly, his unlikely friend and travel companion. He felt an incredible connection with his parents, too, and kept thinking that this was the sort of thing they would have done.

Molly slowly woke up and, without a thought, reached for a mapacho and puffed smoke around them, as she had done so many times over the last days. Jonathan noticed that she never inhaled; just blew the smoke around covering all directions. They sat in the dappled sunlight, readying themselves to collect more water and get on the trail again. Jonathan reached out for the bottles and realized how quiet everything had suddenly become. Instead, he instinctively reached for his camera and sat poised, motionless and alert. Molly too listened in the sudden quiet, while she watched and puffed smoke.

In the distance, they heard a faint, high-pitched sound, neither a hiss nor a hum. Jonathan saw a small movement in the river that fed the lagoon and motioned to Molly. They caught a glimpse of a snake in the water, dark green with black oval patches, being carried by the river's current. It must have been four or five meters long. It was a huge anaconda. The creature glided past and slid over to the swampy side of the lagoon. Jonathan zoomed in on the magnificent creature with his camera, and could just make out its eyes, peering above the water.

They were speechless. Jonathan decided not to collect any more water.

THE FIREFLY GLOW

After the appearance of the snake, they tidied up quickly and got back on the trail, still following the winding river. They had been walking for a day and a half, and both felt the connection with this beautiful, if scary, jungle. But they were tired, hot and muddy. The sight of the giant snake had put to rest any idea Jonathan had of a swim in these waters.

About mid-afternoon, Jonathan stopped to take one of his regular photographs as a reference point. He always picked something that was a little distinctive, and this time he chose a massive tree, with impressive buttress roots that stood in front of a bank of thick bushes. He pointed to the tree and said casually "There are those fireflies again with the green glowing eyes. They are so beautiful."

Molly had walked on a little and nearly missed the comment, but she stopped. She looked puzzled. "But it's daytime. Why would we be seeing fireflies?"

She walked back to the tree and peered through the branches and undergrowth. "This is very strange." She reached up with her sapling walking stick to touch one of the fireflies. It dropped beside her on the ground and she jumped back in surprise. As she peered down at the little bug she was even more puzzled.

"It's fake. It's made of a sort of ceramic with lights in the head."

She pulled out the machete to hack into the undergrowth but found it pushed aside easily to reveal a narrow, but defined trail, dotted with fake fireflies.

"There's a trail through there. We have to go down it," she said without a thought.

She stepped into it and Jonathan followed. From the moment they had boarded the airplane, every step had felt like an adventure to Jonathan. But it was starting to feel frightening. There had been pirates, jungle elves, illegal logging, animal traps, and the huge snake. And now they were walking through thick jungle along a trail that was barely discernible. What would they meet en route, or at the end?

He took the machete from Molly and went first, but there were no branches to clear. The fake fireflies petered out and Molly again marked their way with the pink cord.

The forest got denser, but they kept going along the small trail. It was almost a tunnel in some places, with low, overhanging branches, but they could always walk through without clearing any foliage. It felt unnatural.

After a while they saw bright light ahead. As they approached they could see the trees had been cleared. They crept along quietly. Were they about to walk straight into a camp of illegal loggers and poachers, or worse? Jonathan clasped the machete tight in one hand and clutched the little monkey to him with the other.

THE END OF THE TRAIL

They peered out of the tunnel trail to see what looked like a small village of traditional huts with thatched roofs made from huge dried palm leaves. To Jonathan it was like stepping into a picture in a history book. To Molly it was like walking into her own past. Close by, a young man tended a crop of plants, but he was the only person in sight. He wore coarse clothing and had a mass of long, tangled hair. He spotted the movement in the bushes and looked up to see them peering out of the tunnel. He smiled as he walked towards them, nodding, as if he had been waiting for their arrival.

Their instincts told them they had found a friend, not an enemy, but Molly lit a mapacho just in case and Jonathan gripped the machete firmly. They put down their backpacks, exhausted with the effort and tension of the last few hours.

"Hello. We've been expecting you," the stranger grinned. He said hello to the little monkey cradled against Jonathan, picked up their backpacks and led them into the village, chatting away like a tour guide. He excitedly described the crops that were growing and talked about the recent rains and the rising river. But he talked mostly about the insects. He pointed out trails of ants and showed them a huge spider's web. Molly couldn't understand why he kept talking about insects.

He introduced himself as Oscar.

"Oscar 'Wild', they call me," he laughed. He had an unusual accent, and Molly wondered where he was from. But she was too tired to ask any questions and was happy to listen to him chatter.

The wooden huts were in a circle and all the buildings had steep thatched roofs of palm leaves. There was a smell of cooking, but no one was in sight. They reached a larger house with wide wooden steps that led up to a wrap-around balcony. It looked more like a communal house than somewhere just one family lived. Oscar beckoned them to follow him, and he threw open the door.

They were met by a smiling group of people, welcoming the weary travelers. As they walked in the group parted and there, in the middle, was Linorio. He looked surprised but gave them a huge smile.

"Heavens, Molly! What are you doing here? And who is this? You must be Jonathan, yes? I've heard so much about you from Molly. I'm so pleased to see you, but what on earth are you doing here? And how did you find us?"

Molly explained everything in one garbled sentence: the award, how they wanted to persuade him to return, how Jonathan found the reference to Puerto Verdad, and the old map she had found with the X marked on it.

"Incredible! We were expecting an entomologist and her assistant, not you two! What on earth were you thinking of? You'll always have your jungle heart, Molly, but this young lad, with no experience! At least you have rubber boots, a machete, and mapachos. Let's get you two washed and patched up. And we'll get you out of those clothes! I'll explain it all when you're fresh. And there's a party tonight. This is a time to celebrate!"

A young couple, Gracie and Josh, picked up their bags and took them off to an empty hut where there was running water, towels and a collection of sweet-smelling lotions made from fresh plants. The little monkey, whom they had named George, refused to leave Jonathan, and clung to him when they untied the sling. But he seemed to be happy sitting next to the shower as long as Jonathan kept talking reassuringly to him. Molly sat on the porch of the hut and lit a mapacho. This time, she luxuriously drew the fragrant smoke deep inside.

Gracie and Josh reappeared with a pile of clothes, a bowl of fruit and a quickly constructed 'monkey carrier' made from material and thick string. Jonathan emerged from the shower, wrapped in a towel, and Molly took her turn to bathe. She let the cold water run over her, and now she too wondered what on earth she was doing here. The landscape felt familiar, as though she was reliving the life she had known half a century before. So much had changed in the world, yet here she was in the midst of memories from so long ago. It made her realize how much she herself had changed.

Jonathan was covered in cuts and bites which Gracie had spotted with the deep red 'dragon's blood' antiseptic. But he was clean and smelled sweet with the plants and lotions he had bathed in. He had

been given a strange collection of clothes to wear. A modern pair of sports pants, a beautiful traditional shirt with colorful borders, and sandals made from a woody fiber, carefully woven with knotted straps. He was glowing. These had been the hardest days of his life, but he felt wonderful. He found it hard to grasp why, but he felt his life had changed completely. He felt alive and in touch with the world, in touch with the forces and energies of the jungle and filled with the spirit of adventure.

Molly had a marvelous outfit in a style she had never seen before. A blouse and skirt made of soft cotton, with delicate embroidery, and a pair of sandals the same as Jonathan's. They both sat for a while on the porch, nibbling on the fruit while they talked over the events of the past few days, both puzzled by what they had walked into.

THE MYSTERY REVEALED

Refreshed and clean, the two friends wandered over to the main house, while the sun started to drop below the tall trees. George, the little monkey, was still inseparable from Jonathan and sat comfortably in his special carrier.

Inside the main house, people were preparing and carrying food for a fine feast. Linorio was sitting at the large table and waved Molly and Jonathan over.

“Come, my dear brave friends. I will tell you everything.” He passed them bowls of seeds and nuts to pick on before dinner. Jonathan devoured them hungrily.

“We set up the community here years ago, to keep watch. There are 15 hidden villages like this one, set up in strategic places as monitoring stations. Not much for such a huge area, but we have other lookouts posted around. And we have surveillance equipment. Over the last few years, things have started happening here which are not good.”

Molly told him about what they had seen: the animal traps where they had found the little monkey, and the rosewood logging and distillery.

“Yes. It appears the animals and birds are taken to private zoos, or for exotic pets,” explained Linorio. “It seems they are sold under the cover of being bred in captivity. Many never make the journey, of course, and many die in the traps. That little fellow there, Jonathan, is one lucky little monkey. That bait is clever. It attracts all sorts of animals and birds, and it is so concentrated that an animal can live on it for a week or two. It always stays fresh, and insects keep away from it. We’ve had it analyzed and have pinpointed where we think it is made.”

Molly told him that she had picked up some of the bait; it had fascinated her too. She also told him how she had closed the traps and left the yellow caimito fruit, in the hope the hunters may think the Chullachaqui had been there. Linorio laughed. He thought it would certainly give the hunters a scare. He said they were very superstitious people and would know the fruit and its link with the Chullachaqui.

“Those Palo Rosa trees you saw are so rare. The oils are worth a fortune, and the wood, too. There are some people who still want the so-called luxuries of the past, even if it means it will be extinct for the future. Like caviar. People just wanted it, kept buying it, and now the sturgeon is extinct. We have looked after those trees for 30 years now, keeping them secret. But they found them, and even worse, they found people who were prepared to buy the illegal timber and its beautiful essential oil.

“We also have parts of the jungle, much further in the north, where precious gems are being mined again and they have found a new gold reserve. It is polluting the water table. They think nobody is watching, so there is no clearing up, just covering up.

“The communities were also set up as experiments. We are helping to preserve the old traditions and knowledge, and we are keeping three languages alive. It started with small groups and families who were prepared to step out of society; people with enough knowledge, and enough guts, to live here without contact with the outside world. When the Amazon was declared a nature reserve we hid the communities. It’s as if we’ve created unknown tribes. But we are connected, very connected. And look at this village. We started with six families with 23 adults and children, and there are 56 people here now. Children have been born here; a few people have seen out their last days here. Sometimes people leave, or new families join. And about once or twice a year, we get supplies to each of the communities.”

“That was when you made your mysterious trips, yes?” asked Molly.

“Yes. Mostly, I brought communications and surveillance equipment, and a few extra resources like medical supplies. But the villages use traditional methods as much as they can. They are like space stations in the jungle.

“We picked the sites carefully. They needed to have fertile land and a good water supply yet be safe from flooding. They had to be remote enough that nobody would pass through. They also needed a hidden but easy way in and out, so that people could come and go if needed.”

"I'd hardly call that route we took an easy way in and out!" laughed Molly, rubbing her feet.

"I am sorry my dear friends. That is a dangerous route! How on earth was I to know you still had that map from such a long time ago? I am so thankful you made it through. Good timing, too! Although we didn't know it was you two, we've kept an eye on you some of the way. But there are blind spots."

"You knew we were coming? Since when?" Molly asked with total surprise.

"Since you arrived in Shiringa. But, of course, we were expecting the entomologist and her assistant. All we knew was there were two people coming this way."

"So that was Viktor in the village that night?"

"No, Viktor is still in the city, he's thousands of kilometers away. Why do you say that?"

"Oh, nothing. I'll tell you later. So how do you come and go?" said Molly.

"We only rarely have to take the trail you took! Just when the water is very low. And you won't go back that way, I'm sure you'll be pleased to hear. There is another way. Much faster. I'll show you my map." He reached inside a small bag and produced a recent-update, ultra-lightweight Screen, and flicked it to display a detailed map of the area. This map was exactly what Jonathan had looked for. This place certainly was hidden from the world.

"Ok, here is Puerto Verdad. You came up the river to Shiringa. Then you doubled back a little and traveled into the jungle to get to the lagoon. This is where you started walking." He traced his finger over the map, followed the riverbank and described what they had passed. He pointed out where they had found the Palo Rosa trees and the traps.

"And here is the firefly trail, and the village. 'You are here', as they always say on the maps! But this is the way we come and go. If you walk out of the other side of the village there is a little trail that leads to a lagoon, about a 15-minute walk. The entrance to the lagoon is tucked away, and we've made a sort of door out of branches that hides it even more. There we keep a small boat which has a motor that's almost silent. From the lagoon, it is about two hours to the main river. See here? It cuts straight across the terrain. When we get there, we hide the boat in this small tributary and walk down to the main river. A five-minute walk from there, and we are at a village called Monococha. From there we can pick up the regular boat to Puerto Verdad. So far, we've slipped in and out without anyone noticing us. We hid the entry points well. And so far, nobody has ever found any of these villages accidentally."

"We walked 40 kilometers or more when we could have paddled up that stream?"

"Well, it flows down to us, so you actually could have floated down stream! Sorry about that, but you took a trail nobody ever uses these days. Except the poachers and loggers, of course. We think they also use these rivers here on the map, and here's where they set up camp. You would have seen it. But this time of the year they are in Iquitos for the fiesta. You were pretty much safe from bumping into anyone. But they are sloppy, they rely on the fact that nobody comes through this part of the jungle and they leave their evidence lying around. And of course, supposedly no one lives in this area!" he added with a grin.

"So, what about the entomologist and her assistant? What happened to them?" said Jonathan.

"They were here to study the magnificent purple dragonflies."

"The dragonflies by the lagoon? We saw them!" said Jonathan.

"Yes, they are beautiful, aren't they? In fact, they are usually deeper in the forest, but we moved a cluster of them a while ago to that lagoon. Then we sent out a publication to an entomologist association with news of a rare sighting of the purple dragonflies. We knew a specialist in the association would be in the area for a conference and she could be a very influential ally. It was a small diversion we set up to lead them here. But we've just now found out that she got sick in Puerto Verdad, and they had to go home."

"So, what if we had missed the firefly trail?"

"We actually switched the firefly lights on for you. Although we didn't know it was you. We have a camera that monitors the trail. It's in that big tree. We saw you taking the photograph of it, Jonathan. But we also had someone posted, let's see, about here," he pointed to the map. "We were going to intercept you if you went much further."

"We think there may be a settlement about here," said Linorio as he pointed to the map. "We've recorded them on the surveillance system, but they move camp often. They seem to know many of the shortcuts that appear when the water is high, so they know the area. We are still putting the pieces together."

"The pirates!" exclaimed Jonathan. "Maybe they were from there."

"Pirates? What happened? Where?" Linorio asked.

Jonathan told him about the ambush on the boat and pointed out roughly where it had happened. And he recounted how Molly had saved the day. Although Linorio smiled when he heard the story of Molly's intervention, he was horrified that his friends had been endangered.

"There have been a number of ambushes lately. We think it is likely they are part of that group," Linorio agreed. "And we think they are involved in the smuggling."

"But how do they transport the illegal goods?" Jonathan asked.

"Good question, young man! It looks like the smugglers are using an old trick of the drug traffickers from years ago. They put the contraband in canoes, or rafts made of smuggled timber, and hide them inside the islands of foliage that float down the river. It floats straight passed the border control, and then it's picked up easily for road transport once it's downriver."

"We saw those floating islands. Some of them are huge. Yes, that make sense," said Jonathan.

"We can't directly expose any of this, without exposing ourselves," Linorio explained. "We've managed to get news out anonymously a few times, but it is always stopped. This is the very worrying thing. We got news out to the border patrol about a huge delivery of gemstones hidden in a floating island, but nothing more was heard of it. Same with several other attempts we've made. There is corruption somewhere that blocks anything we have exposed so far. There are still dark forces out there, and they are gaining strength. But we have a plan." Linorio sat and nodded to himself. He had just made an important decision.

"But for now, let's eat, drink and celebrate!"

PARTY TIME

The whole community had scrubbed up and put on their best clothes for the party. The spread of food was impressive. Jonathan had no idea what much of it was, but he tasted everything and loved it. There were several root vegetables that looked like types of potatoes, lots of fish dishes, many of which had been cooked wrapped in leaves, mashed vegetables, a delicious array of sauces, and a wide selection of grains and vegetables. He even tasted one of the grilled grubs with their little black eyes and wasn't surprised when everyone laughed as he politely refused a second one. Everyone was crowded into the main house, seated wherever they could find a space. There was much chatter, and a small group played lively music on a beaten-up guitar, wooden flutes and traditional drums. For Molly and Jonathan, it was good to relax, and to eat.

A young woman entered the room and bounded up to Linorio. Dark and slender, she moved quickly and gracefully. She was like a flash of energy. She bent down and whispered in Linorio's ear.

Linorio introduced her to Molly and Jonathan. "This is Maribel, our exceptionally brilliant strategist."

Molly greeted her warmly.

Jonathan was dumbstruck, lost in the eyes of what seemed to him the most incredible woman he had ever seen. Maribel and Molly talked brightly for a while, which gave Jonathan a chance to regain his senses.

Linorio helped him back to earth by saying "Maribel, tomorrow, I want you to take Jonathan around. Show him the communications and how we set up surveillance posts. Jonathan is an expert on robotics. He could have some very useful tips for how we can position those new long-range cameras. He also has hundreds of photographs we need to safeguard."

Maribel turned to Jonathan, saw the look in his eyes, and beamed with a smile. She seemed to melt in his gaze. The two started to talk and laugh. It was as if they had instantly melded together.

After the meal, people produced all sorts of musical instruments, some of which looked like they had been invented by their players. There was music and dancing. People cheered and laughed, and all the children joined in. Some people gave their own special performances. A comedian stood up and fired jokes non-stop for a full 10 minutes, mostly hilarious exaggerations of Molly and Jonathan's journey. A beautiful woman sang three traditional songs with the voice of an angel that brought a tear to many, and a small, stout man gave a mime performance of the perils of living in the jungle. Maribel put on an impressive demonstration of dancing the Charleston.

After the show, Maribel invited Jonathan out to the balcony to see the crescent moon, which had risen over the tree tops. Molly and Linorio exchanged a grin when they caught a glimpse of Jonathan, as he lightly rested his hand on the girl's shoulder while pointing to a bright constellation. They saw Maribel look up into his face with her gentle smile. Suddenly she pulled away and went back inside the main house. Jonathan nodded gently. He knew there was something fragile about this buoyant and vivacious young woman and that he had to be cautious. He stayed quietly on the balcony for a while. But inside he was glowing.

It was late when everyone started to leave. Linorio and Maribel walked the new arrivals back to their hut and wished them goodnight. They were under strict instructions to sleep until late in the morning. Molly asked that someone contact Bob the Scot to say they were fine and had returned to the city, or there would soon be a search party out looking for them.

Jonathan was too excited to sleep and sat with Molly on the porch of their hut. George was still cradled to his chest but was now sound asleep. Molly lit a mapacho and smoked slowly, hoping the smoke would keep away some of the mosquitoes that Jonathan now seemed oblivious to. He said how extraordinary this place was, and how incredible it was that they had found it. He was buzzing as he talked about what the community was doing, what they had found with the poachers and loggers and what else might be happening here in this massive jungle.

Then they sat quietly for a while, listened to the sounds of the night, and watched the bats and bugs flying past.

“I think I understand the voice in that dream now,” Jonathan said gently. “It wasn’t ‘Marry Belle’. It was ‘Maribel’.” Then he floated off to his room, whistling.

DAYS IN THE VILLAGE

Jonathan and Molly blended into village life perfectly. They met everyone and learned how they operated. Not only the day-to-day living, isolated and independent, but also about the surveillance and monitoring. Behind the exterior of a humble jungle village was some of the most sophisticated equipment Jonathan had ever seen. The people who lived there had a wide range of expert skills and had set up communications systems linking them to the other villages in the surveillance network and to trusted contacts outside the jungle. They had remote cameras and monitoring systems, with antennas and transmitters dotted throughout the forest, hidden high up in tall trees, complete with lightning protectors. As well as communications, the equipment was used to monitor and count animal and bird species as well as to carry out soil, water and air testing.

There were sophisticated systems for water and power supplies. They had a number of greenhouses, camouflaged with foliage so they could not be spotted from the air. They grew all sorts of fruits, vegetables and medicinal plants. Molly spent hours in the greenhouses, helping to tend the plants and learning new gardening techniques.

At first Maribel was like a tour guide to Jonathan, showing him around and explaining what they did. They had long walks through the surrounding jungle, and Jonathan returned with excited stories of wildlife sightings, including impressive snakes and spiders. It was a new world to him, and he loved it. He listened to her and constantly asked questions, hungry for what she knew. Every day he felt more and more comfortable in the jungle. Even the mosquitoes started to leave him in peace.

They talked and laughed constantly, but she felt reluctant to share too much of herself. She knew he would soon be returning to his life. And the people she had grown close to had always left her. Jonathan was patient.

They sat on the edge of a lagoon one day and she asked "So, when are you leaving?"

"I'm not leaving you," he said gently. "I'm going to stay with you, Maribel, wherever you are, whatever you do."

Maribel gently closed her eyes and beamed with a smile that radiated a happiness she had never felt before. She leaned her head against his shoulder and told him the story of how she came to live in the village. She had left the city two years ago and had been traveling in the jungle area when she met Linorio by chance at the port in Puerto Verdad. She was on her way to Shiringa, to spend some time in the village. Linorio was heading for Monococho, to deliver supplies. They had talked all the way and, when they got to Monococho, Linorio invited her to stay a few days in the village. That evening he shared with her what they were doing in the community and asked her to help set up the new computer equipment he was delivering. They took the secret boat, through the hidden waterway to the community and, the moment she arrived, knew she was meant to be there.

She had felt instantly at home in the jungle life, hidden in this world within the world. But, she told him, lately she had become restless. She wanted to do more but wasn't sure what her next move should be.

Jonathan knew he would burst if he held in his feelings any longer. "I feel that something has blossomed inside me since coming to the jungle. And since meeting you, I feel like a pod which, at long last, has opened," he said.

Maribel knew in that moment that she was safe to reveal how she felt. "It's happened to me too. I felt like I was in a cocoon, but since I met you, I'm like a butterfly emerging and unfolding my wings," she replied.

"You smell like rainbows," said Jonathan, and they shared their first kiss.

THE PLAN

Molly and Jonathan had been in the village 2 weeks, and they were all sitting after lunch when Jonathan was surprised to hear a loud electronic beep. Maribel reached into the small embroidered pouch that she carried everywhere with her and pulled out a chunky wrist cell he had not seen her use before. He recognized it as a short-range device that could send instant messages.

"Looks like there's more to this place than meets the eye!" said Jonathan. Maribel looked over to Linorio for confirmation. Linorio nodded.

"My trading alert has just triggered," Maribel said with a smile. "Come on. I'll show you."

As they left the main house, there was a faint flash of lightning in the distance. She led Jonathan to a rock face behind the house, darted behind it and disappeared. She reappeared a moment later and peeped her head out. "Quick! There's a storm coming. We may lose communications."

Jonathan looked around the corner of the rock to see a hidden door, slightly ajar, that opened to a dimly lit room.

"Shut the door. We have to keep the humidity out."

The small room was crammed full of equipment. Maribel was seated in front of half a dozen Screens which she tapped alive to reveal a myriad of graphs. She worked the computers with lightning speed as she tapped, clicked and checked. Jonathan sat next to her, tingling. She finally opened a small moisture-resistant box, pulled out a tattered old note book and jotted down a few figures. She sent a file out with a message on the Connect, and then made an external backup of several files. She sat back in her chair and smiled a sigh of huge relief.

"All done and backed up! I've waited months for those trades. Watch, these three markets will fall now. We got in at the top, and just in time!"

Jonathan looked puzzled.

"You know I trained as a strategist and economist. Well, I've been raising funds to expose the corruption," she explained. "I've just made some trades that now give us enough credits to start the next phase. We are ready!"

Linorio and Molly appeared at the door.

"Linorio, we've done it. We've got the funds! Help me explain the plan." Linorio nodded as he and Molly squeezed into the cramped room. Maribel flipped a Screen to display a chart.

"These charts cover about 250 years of data," she continued. "They track the cycles. Wealth distribution, disposable income, the markets for all sorts of commodities, fluctuations in prices, shifts in monetary systems. And these charts here are some of the economic cycles, like the Kongratieff wave and the East/West cycle. In some ways, things are better today than 50 years ago, because we are at the top of the cycles. But things will change again, and we have to go with the natural flow.

"It's the big mistake we've made so many times. Things are much better now. More honesty and kindness. But we are still in cycles. When we look back in history, we can see an extraordinary repetition of cycles. But most people don't pay any attention to them. People stop looking at history, especially when things are going well."

Jonathan remembered what the Professor has said about history repeating itself.

"Economics is energy," she said. "Cycles are part of nature, and they have been part of our culture. Even these days, with our contact to the higher dimensions, in touch with source and our new-found connections, we are still following cycles. We still go around the sun, the moon still goes around the earth, the tides come in, the tides go out, and we pass through the seasons. And there are dark forces becoming more powerful again; they follow their cycles, too. There are people misusing the jungle for their own gain."

“And it’s not only the jungle,” said Linorio. “There are things happening throughout the world. There are people who act from their darker side and misuse the power and trust they have been given. We are all human. It’s inevitable that some people will revert to the dark. We are starting to see a re-emergence of the urge to destroy.

“We’ve been accumulating funds to launch a massive campaign to expose the corruption and exploitation we have been monitoring, and that you’ve seen first-hand. We needed enough funds to make it big enough so that it couldn’t be squashed, like it has been before. We think we know where the information is being blocked, but there are still doubts. It looks like there are a few people who have taken control again. The forests, and the whole world, are in danger again.

“But today, thanks to Maribel, we have the funds to broadcast the information in such a way that whoever has been keeping it secret will not have a chance to block it. But we need a huge campaign, with as many channels as possible, so that it will still get through even if some of them get gagged.”

“We’ve been coordinating our contacts in preparation for the campaign,” said Maribel, as she flipped the Screen to a full map of the world and set it to display a hundred or so indicators. “Here are the contacts we have around the world, ready to release information. And we have eye witnesses, ready to say what they know. They cover everything from administration to transportation routes, from the legal system to the Connect. But we have to time everything so that all the information is released at the same time.

“The Amazon is so isolated that we also needed some people who have seen it first-hand. So, we have been bringing in people over the last months. That was why we set up the diversion for our entomologists to arrive the way you did. It was the only way an outsider could see what is happening.”

She zoomed the Screen into the area of the Amazon. “Up here, we have a young man researching his ancestry. He ‘stumbled’ across the illegal gemstone mining in this area. We have a biologist who ‘accidentally got lost’ around here. He found a racket that is poaching rare orchids from the area. We have been watching him and keeping him safe, although he went off on a wrong trail at one point. The scout team found him, and he was so startled he lost some of his equipment in the river. Thankfully all his notes and photographs were safe. We have an anthropologist researching the indigenous tribes in this area who ‘purely by chance’ discovered the gruesome poaching of iguanas for their oil. And a chemist who ‘caught the wrong boat’ and found a small but very lucrative factory of a number of chemical substances. There are about 30 such people who have seen, first hand, what is happening. We led all of them to one of the surveillance communities, and they are all safe and have been briefed about what we are doing. But they are all well-known people. You, Jonathan, are here just by chance. Or maybe not?” Maribel said, beaming with her beautiful smile.

“We have to keep all the people in the surveillance communities completely secret. None of us can go public and, anyway, most of us don’t exist, not in the official world at least.”

“We need a spokesperson,” said Linorio. “Jonathan, we would like that to be you. You are a natural. The way you found my reference to Puerto Verdad, and you instinctively take records of everything with your pictures and notes. We know you can do it. You need to be our voice, just like your parents were for so many causes. There is a vein of corruption that is deep in society, and it is hiding the truth. You’ve seen the evidence and we need someone impartial, someone without previous associations. They don’t know about you. You are our surprise to the world. You are perfect, Jonathan.” Linorio and Molly left. They wanted to give him time to think about it.

Maribel looked at Jonathan, with a look that said it all. They shut down the Screens, closed up the room and walked into the bright afternoon sun. She took his arm as they went back to the main house to announce they were ready to launch. It had started raining gently, sun rain, with a brilliant rainbow that cut across the trees. They stopped beside a small pool that had formed over the last few days, to watch the tadpoles that had recently hatched and the rain that splashed its tiny drops on the water.

“Once again, it has to be the few who start to make the changes. We are like the raindrops on water,” Maribel said. “I’ll come with you. I’ll come back to the city.”

“I’ll do it. We’ll do this together,” he replied, in a heartbeat.

THE CAMPAIGN STARTS

In the main house, Linorio sat at the table with Molly and half a dozen others. George was running around, playing with two small children in the play area. Everyone went silent as they walked in.

In one breath Maribel announced that they had the funds they needed, Jonathan had agreed to be their spokesperson, and that she would go with him.

Linorio and Molly nodded to each other and smiled, and a cheer came up from everyone.

They decided to leave the next day. Linorio was delighted Maribel was going with Jonathan. She knew the plans inside out.

“Someone may want to see the map you followed. Here’s a new one where we’ve changed it a little bit and roughed it up to make it look like your beaten-up one. We’ve excluded the X that marks the village and we’ve added this tributary which will divert anyone away from us. You’ll have to say that you stayed in Puerto Verdad.”

He handed them a written address. “Stay at this hotel on your way back. They will back up your story to account for the lost time. And remember, you didn’t find me! You found your way out down this track and followed this tributary.”

“Come back with us, Linorio. We need your strength and guidance,” said Molly.

“I have to stay here. How about you stay with us, Molly?”

“I have to get back,” she said as she motioned Linorio and Jonathan to draw a little closer. She had an announcement to make.

“The Professor asked me to marry him that Monday before we left. And I said yes.” She beamed with excitement.

Jonathan’s heart welled up with happiness at hearing this and he hugged her. Linorio felt a sudden pang of lost love, but it melted into a gush of joy for his dear friend. The announcement buzzed around the room and there was even more reason for celebration at their farewell dinner that evening.

They were to leave at first light, so everything was organized quickly. Maribel packed what she needed. Molly and Jonathan were back in their original traveling clothes, with all evidence of the village left behind.

After dinner Jonathan and Maribel retired early. There was a big day ahead.

Molly stayed with Linorio, deep in conversation. They talked, remembered and compared. They relived some of the joys and sadness of the days that used to be. They shared their love of the changed ways of living, and their concerns for how to protect them. They laughed and cried, rejoiced and hoped.

Late in the night, Linorio looked tired. He took Molly’s hand.

“You were right, Molly. It is my time. I came here to spend my last days, quietly, with no one trying to keep me alive. If I was in the city, there would come a time where I would end up in the hospital full of tubes and everyone sitting around crying and worrying. I’ve said goodbye to the family, they understand. Here, I can just disappear. Here, I can just be. I remember you said it, that in the jungle we can be whoever we want to be.

“And now I know there is someone to take over from me. This next phase is mostly Maribel’s work in any case. She has planned and coordinated most of it. She could do it on her own, of course, but she has never wanted to go back to the city, not until now. The two of them together, they can do it. He’s a natural. So calm and methodical. How on earth did he find that article? It was the only time I have ever mentioned the name Puerto Verdad! I was worried about it, so we had the entry erased. Then you, with your crazy map, Molly. Do you keep everything?”

“Pretty much everything. You never know when something might come in handy!”

“There’s so much to be done, Molly. Whoever is behind all of this has built up power, and humans are still in the early days of their transformation. But we stopped being vigilant, we took things for granted. The cycles are turning, and these people will gain even more control. We have to make people aware. In the same way that a little bad can spread a long way, so can a little good. We must all break this chain of corruption.

“I know I have always said I wasn’t the reason why so many things changed, and that is true. I have done my best to take none of the credit, but I know I have been a driving force. I’ve been a big raindrop!

“You know I’m not sure of my birth-date, or exactly how old I am, but that’s just a number. And now I’m tired, Molly. I didn’t know I would live this long or have the chance to see and do so much. I’m healthy, Molly, but my life force is slipping. I’ve been hanging on until this moment. Maribel and Jonathan can take over from me and be a new driving force. It is my time. I’ve been the spokesperson, now it’s time for me to become a legend. Then people can start telling stories about me!” he laughed, and then softly, he said, “I love you, Molly.”

IT'S UP TO ALL OF YOU

Jonathan and Maribel woke before it was light and went to the main house for a quick breakfast. Jonathan was surprised that Molly was not in her room, and that her bed wasn't slept in.

They found her in the main house, her eyes swollen and red. The tears started to flow again as they approached her.

"Sad news, my lovelies. Linorio passed away last night. He died in my arms. I heard his last gasp and felt his life force slip away, just like the little kitten that died in my arms so many years ago. But he left the way he wanted to. He died in his jungle, in his own time, with the orchestra of the forest, and the energy of Mother Earth around him.

"Just before he closed his eyes, he said 'It's up to Jonathan and Maribel now. And it's up to all of you.'"