

The Caregivers

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THE CAREGIVERS

Marilyn's mother is a sick woman who lives alone. Even though she is in good spirits, her ability to live on her own is being called into question by her family, except for Marilyn. Marilyn is the youngest of three children; two daughters and one son that is incarcerated. Her oldest sister, Carolyn, is insistent on having their mother reside in assisted living care, citing that her deteriorating heart condition is the definite reason. The only son has no opinion on the matter.

Her name is Gretchen Carol Donovan of Geneva, Kentucky. She is sixty-three years old and oblivious to fact that she needs any form of assisted living to continue her life. She has been a widow for fifteen years and asked no help from anyone for anything. Any discussion on the matter would be aimless, in Gretchen's opinion. Marilyn gets a phone call from her sister.

“Hello?” she greeted.

“Come to Mom's, she fell last night! “, exclaimed Carolyn.

“Well, what happened? “

“She was walking around outside last night and tripped and fell! I'm telling you something needs to be done about her! “

“What was she doing outside at night? “, Marilyn asked with concern for her mother, but resentment for her sister's tone. She decides not start a confrontation, only to keep it civil for now.

With agitation in her voice, Carolyn replied, “She said she saw something outside and wanted to see what it was. I'm ten minutes away. “Carolyn moved away after high school to pursue college and a career.

“I'm on my way. “; Marilyn concluded the conversation and proceeded to venture to her mother's house, just a few miles away. Apprehension and guilt consumed her being. An expectation of the worst in the event upon arrival, where her mother's health and well being will lead to accusations of usurpation and impervious objections toward their mother and each other. There has never been a good visit when Ann comes around.

When she got there her assumption was correct. Gretchen was sitting in her living room with her right foot propped on her ottoman. She had here ankle bandaged poorly with a stretched out sock over her foot. “What happened, Mamma? “, Marilyn asked with concern. Gretchen had a dire look upon her face. She was not really sure if she could explain what she had seen and what followed after without an issue of her

mental and physical well-being.

“Last night“, she began, “I thought I saw someone walking across the field. It must have been someone back there with a flashlight, I thought, so, I gotten up to go see who it was.“

“Why, Mom? “

“I can't just lay here and let people take what I got! Besides I had my pistol and Gabe,” her mixed hound, “no one was going to get me. “ Marilyn still gave her mother a voice of protest for not calling someone. Frustrated, Gretchen continued.

“I went into the barn lot. I shouted, ' Who's out there? ', and no one answered. Gabe was barking but then stopped and ran back to the house. I like to never have gotten out from underneath the porch!”

“Well, why didn't you go back with him? “

“My heart was beating to hard! “, this statement sent a wave of worry and fear inside Marilyn for her mother. She knows once Ann hears this it will be fodder for her cause.

“Oh, Mama! How did you hurt your foot? “A look of trepidation befell on Gretchen. She leaned into Marilyn as she moved her injured foot from the ottoman to the floor and looked deep into her daughter's eyes while rubbing the top of her left breast bone, as if she was calming her nervous heart.

“I called out once more... I can't talk about this! “

“It's okay! “

“No honey, it's not. I called out and something awful peered around the corner of that barn! It had two of the reddest eyes I've ever seen! I pointed my gun at it and it wouldn't fire! I turned to run and tripped and fell! I turn around to look and it was coming after me! I don't know how I got into the house, but I did. I slammed the door shut then realized the electricity was off! I kneel-ed in floor and started praying, but I guess I passed out! I don't remember anything, until Carolyn called and started fussing at me.” At that moment a car door slammed and in came Carolyn Ann to assume the unofficial role of a patriarch.

“This I'm talking about mother! “ She calls her mother when they are fighting. It is a tactic she uses to infuriate her. The argument carries on for a while, until Gretchen starts to complain of dizziness. They sat her back down in her easy chair, propped her injured foot, and made sure she was alright. Carolyn took her younger sister by the arm and led her to the porch. She inhaled and folded her hands as if she was about to issue a decree. “I've already spoken to the nursing home. On Monday

they'll be ready for her”

Anger filled Marilyn. The disbelief of her sister's arrogance to exceed her bounds and have blatant disregard of her mother's feelings, in her point of view, a concession of her responsibilities.

“Are you kidding me? What makes you think you can do that?” she confronts her sister.

“I can't do it all myself!”

“Such as what? I'm the one that takes to the store, doctor and anywhere else she needs to go! What are you doing?”

“She made *me* her power-of-attorney, and I think it is best for her or else we'll find her dead. Why don't you go home? I will tell her.” said Carolyn.

Marilyn stood still for a moment. She has no choice but to agree with her sister, therefore she made this decision: “I will tell her.”

Later that evening, a calmer atmosphere ensues. Carolyn returns back to her home in the city, and Marilyn reveals to her mother their intentions. Gretchen takes the news impassively. She has been upset enough and she cannot fight anymore.

“What about Gabe,” she asked, “who's going to take care of him?”

“I will take care of him. Don't worry about anything. Just think of your health.”

Her mother stood up and looked out the kitchen window. She gazed sadly at the farm her and her husband worked so hard for. She looked at the old barn that was new when they first moved there, now sits in disrepair.

She looked at the static implements scattered about in the barn lot. Soiled, rusted and almost useless, she can't help but feel a connection between the slow degeneration of her home and her existence. As the last bit of sunlight burns away and star-light pinpricks the darkening sky, she notices a bright, orange glow above the horizon of the hilly knobs. A star perhaps, but whatever it is; it gave her a sense of peace and assurance, even if it was short lived. She closed her eyes for a moment, but when she opened them the bright orange star was gone. The reality of her situation soon can back.

“I want you to go ahead and take him. Tonight,” she told her daughter, “and you need to leave.”

“Don't be mad at us! This isn't easy for us!”

“I'm not fighting with you. Go on home!” she commanded.

Marilyn took the dog. She insisted to her mother that she does not want her to go. But Gretchen wanted no part of her condescending pleas for forgiveness. The house is now quiet. Her foot ached and her skin crawled with anxiety. She sat down at the kitchen to sort out her medicine.

A pain pill for her swollen ankle.

A pill for her nerves.

A pill for her blood pressure and a pill for her depression.

She looked at her collection of medication and thought for a moment; *I could make everything go away. I can free children from my burden.*

She went to the pantry to retrieve an old bottle of bourbon that was given to her husband long ago, then proceeded to mix for herself a mélange of pills. Created a mixed drink of two-parts bourbon and one-part cola, and ingested the pills. She limped into the living room. She played a LP of her favorite gospel songs on her stereo, and sat in her easy chair.

When Gretchen was a little girl, she would visit her grandparents in the Virginia Mountains. She always loved spending the summer helping her grandfather work on the farm. Or listen to her grandmother tell stories of how her mother would cause them so much trouble when she would sneak out at night with her friends.

Memories of a much happier life.

But as the sun desiccates the land, time drains happiness from her memory.

A cacophony of emotions swam in her head.

Fear.

Peace.

Satisfaction.

And especially forgiveness.

Forgiveness for her oldest daughter for being overbearing. For

Marilyn, not being strong enough to stand-up for herself. And forgiveness for her incarcerated son. It's not his fault. He's a good boy. She's too tired to keep her eyes open now.

Brightness, then nothing.

Gretchen woke up. She looked around and realized that she was lying on her bed. She was clean, wearing her nightgown. It felt fresh, like it was just washed and dried and fist put on. But she had not done laundry in while. What is even more bizarre to her is that it appears that some one has cleaned her house. She rose from the bed and stood.

She stood straight.

There was no pain in her back. She also noticed that her swollen ankle felt fine. In fact she jumps up and down. It felt great! She grabbed her left breast to feel her heart. It's not racing! She started to walk but this t'l'me she was not short of breath. So she ran into the living room to see if she is alone.

It is just her and no one else. Everything is clean and put in its place. It's as if nothing had happened. She sat down in her chair to decipher what could have happened after she lost consciousness. Someone had to have come in and took care of her. Marilyn must have come back and discovered her unconscious and called for help.

Suddenly she remembered: *the medicine!* If someone was here, then they are aware of what she had done. They must have called 911 for help. If that's true, then there is no way of getting out of it. She would have no choice but to submit herself as a ward of the state.

Quickly, she ran into the kitchen and inspected the table where she had the pills. To her astonishment the pills were not where she left them. Fearful and cautiously, she walked to the pantry cabinet where she kept all of her prescriptions in a plastic container. She removed the container from the cabinet and lifted the lid for inspection. All of her medicine was there, except for what she had already taken the night before. Now she is worried. Last night actually happened. And there is no explanation that can save her from being put away.

Calling Marilyn is the only option she has now. If she has to explain herself it would be easier to talk to her, than if it was Carolyn that discovered her. Hastily, she picked up the phone. She froze for a moment looking at the keypad. Then she pulled herself together and dialed the number. Marilyn answered the phone after several rings.

"Hello," her daughter greeted

"Um, Mary?"

"Yeah, Mom? What's the matter?" Gretchen fumbled to find an excuse for why she called. "How's Gabe?"

"He's fine. Are you okay?"

"Yeah. I just want know how he's doing," said Gretchen.

"He's been playing with the kids," said Marilyn.

"Have you spoken with your sister this morning?" she asked.

"No. Why?" inquired Marilyn, curiously? Her mother's behavior is now suspected, especially when she is asking about her sister.

"Did you go anywhere last night?" her mother inquired.

"No. I've stayed here, why?"

"Just wondering," said Gretchen

Now Gretchen is even more worried than ever. If it was not Marilyn that came back to the house, then it had to be Carolyn. She stands still for moment, confused and ignorant of what to say next. Her only choice was to change the subject. But should she tell her daughter (or anybody else) about the strange events that are happening to her? She fabricates an excuse to hang-up. Immediately she calls Carolyn.

Carolyn sits at her desk in her office staring at the flat screen monitor of her computer. Since she was granted power-of-attorney for her mother, she is in control of her personal bank accounts. Gretchen's checking account is low but she has a savings of five-thousand dollars. This will be the means Carolyn will use to pay for her mother's stay at the nursing home. She transfers the funds into an account in her name. She does this with a satisfaction of acceptability. In her point of view, it was a necessary act of embezzlement to care for her mother. *I'm doing it for her*, she thinks to herself.

"Phone call for you," her receptionist informs her. "It is your mother." Carolyn sharply answers the phone. She anticipates an argument with her mother, seeing that has been the norm for sometime. And if her mother obtained knowledge of her actions just now, it would be considered an act of usurpation leading to even more alienation.

"What is it mother," she asked, "I'm very busy."

"I'm not going to that home!" declared Gretchen authoritatively.

"Now mom, we've discussed this; it is done."

"I'm leaving! I am better! The Lord has healed me and I am going to do what I have always wanted. I am going to live!"

Carolyn can tell by her mothers tone that she is sincere. But her mother is unaware of what she had done with her money. Carolyn believes that she should tell her now before she goes anywhere. The

discovery may be too much for Gretchen, and may expedite her deteriorating health. She prepares herself to deliver the confession. "Mom," she says with utter apprehension, "there is no money in your account. I had to transfer what you had, plus your social security, to a joint account, to pay for your care."

Anger, sadness, and disappointment drowned Gretchen. She secretly wished what miracle, (if it was a miracle), that happened last night never happened. She is speechless and numb. She does hear the bombardment of excuses and explanations describing her intentions.

"What gives you the right? What gives you the right to take control of my life? What makes you think you can steal everything I have and worked hard for?" Gretchen questions her daughter with the conviction of a mother. "Who do you think you are?"

"I am your power-of-attorney. I can legally alter your finances to pay for your healthcare." Carolyn stands her ground with her mother. She knew that this would not be simple. It's an act of rebellion that defies all characters of devotion and loyalty signifying a retro gradation of her relationship with her mother and possibly her sister. But, this makes no difference to Gretchen. To her, it is a blatant disregard of her rights. She makes a declaration of affirmation to her oldest daughter: "Never would I have ever thought that my children would steal from me. And I do not ever want to see any of you again."

Carolyn tries to make a dominant stance against her angry mother. "I didn't steal from you. You need help and the state will take anything of value from you including the farm. You need to sell it."

"I can't believe this is happening," said Gretchen, "I should have died!"

"There will be no more of that kind of talk," Carolyn commanded. "And no more talk of how "the Lord has healed you!"

"I am better! But I don't expect that you will understand!"

Frustrated, Carolyn informs her mother that she is too busy to argue. "I'm coming over tomorrow to help you get you ready for Monday." she tells her mother. And with an obstreperous response, Gretchen tells her daughter: "Don't bother. I can take care of myself."

Gretchen contemplates on what is plausible for her. What little money she had is gone. Stolen by the one she thought she could trust the most, it is unrealistic for her to assume that she can get very far on what little she has. She thinks of desperate means. One option is to sell her medication. Although illegal and questionable, she will not leave any

option out that would help achieve her goal of escape. As she walks down the hallway of her home; a mobile home converted into house, she noticed something unusual about her hands. She noticed that the age spots on her hands are fading. And her skin is thickening.

Am I getting younger?

Hastily, she went to the bathroom and stood in front of the mirror, analyzing her face and hair. The crow's feet around her eyes are virtually nonexistent. And the roots of her hair follicles are beginning to show signs of her normal hair color returning. "I am getting younger!" she shouts out loud. She exits the bathroom and runs down the hallway and out of the door. Running freely and exuberantly through the back yard and then through the barn lot eventually making her way to the basin of the largest knob on her farm. Without hesitation, she scales the hilly knob wearing only her thin walking shoes and cheaply made clothing. As she makes it to the summit, she looks out as far as she can see. The serene natural beauty of her and her county astonishes her. It has been almost twenty-five years since she has scaled the small mountain, and the experience makes her weep. A swimming sensation overtakes her and she faints.

She awakes four hours later, lying on the hard ground sore and stiff. The back of her head hurt with a sharp pain protruding down her neck and to her spine. Slowly, and with help with whatever she can grab hold, she rose to her feet. Not standing as straight as she was earlier, she looked down the knob and proceeded to make her way down. Walking sideways leading with her right leg, she picks up a stick to help guide her down, stopping periodically to catch her breath. "What have I done?" she kept saying to herself.

When she finally made it to the base, stark reality reset itself to her obfuscation. What miracle she was blessed with had been taken away from her. And now Gretchen, the once enslaved, once freed, now enslaved again, must make her way back home.

The time it took her to return to the house was three times as much as it took her to run and climb the knob. The early autumn afternoon air starts to cool a little. The broken down spirit made her way to the covered porch and sat down in on a metal chair. There was an old throw blanket lying on back of the she used to cover her arms and shoulders. She was paralyzed by swelling aching muscles and her right ankle began to throb, just like when she first it. The hands of an old woman came back to her, as well as her heart. The low drumming sound of a vehicle increased as a car pulled into the drive-way and parked in front of the house. Out came Marilyn with a covered plate of food. When

she sees her mother on the porch, she says: "I've been trying to call you. Where have you been"?

Gretchen had a pale, ghostly look on her face, as Marilyn asks her what's wrong. Beaten and exhausted, Gretchen tells her daughter of the great and terrible events that plagued her today. She tells her how she woke this morning regenerated and healthy, but then had it taken away from her and the feeling of betrayal from Carolyn, for stealing her money. But she does not tell her about last night or climbing the knob.

"You should come in," says Marilyn to her mother, "It's getting late. The sun's going down."

Gretchen shrugs her shoulders. "I'm gonna sit out here for a while," she says.

"Why don't you come home with me tonight?" asked Marilyn.

"I'm not going anywhere."

"Then I will stay with you tonight."

Marilyn stands up to leave. She turns to her mother and says, "I'm going set your food on the table, then I'm going to my house and tell Roger I'm staying here until Monday. Can you get up yourself? Or do I need to help you?"

"I can get up on my own."

Marilyn gets in her car and leaves. Gretchen does not want her to stay there, but it seemed a moot point to argue with her or with anyone that appears to patronize her. She covers her shoulder tighter with the throw blanket and looks down the barn lot. *I'm being punished; she thinks to herself, this is my punishment for trying to kill myself. My torment is to live as a prisoner in my own dying, decaying cell in that filthy nursing home with nothing. Not even my dignity.*

Outside, beyond the naked tree line, the same orange glow that she saw the night before, flickered in the dusk horizon. The oscillating rhythm of its nimbis mesmerized her. The orb danced and flickered above the tree line until it slowly descends into the shadows of the trees.

Gretchen leans forward in her chair, covering her mouth with her right hand. Stunned and bewildered by the anomaly, she is unable to move. Dusk is slowly giving away to night. Gretchen forces herself to get up. She remembers two nights ago when she fell and hurt her ankle. Fear of not knowing what she had seen that night is related to what she had just now witnessed, swim's in the canals of her psyche. As she walks to her front door, she keeps a cautious on the barn lot. When she opens the screen door and front door to step in the house, she is startled by what appears to be three individuals, ominous and unfamiliar; they seem

to walk without Impedance. What was even more disturbing to her is that their eyes are reflective. Similar to the eyes she had seen, previously.

Gretchen moved quickly to inside of her house and held the storm door shut with her hand, but did not lock it. Nor did she closed and locked both doors to protect herself. Instead she stared curiously at the strange invaders coming toward her house. When they reached the first porch step, they stopped. The tall one in the middle had an imperious aspect about him. And his voice had a deep, commanding timbre when he spoke these words: "Gretchen Lynn Yoder! Please, do not fear us! It is very important that we speak to you!"

Fright, with inquisitiveness led her vision of the strange three. The one who spoke portrayed himself accurately as their leader. He was the tallest of the three; about seven feet. And the other two were somewhat shorter, but still tall. The leader and the one on his left were hairless, while the other had straight fine hair, from the middle of its scalp to its shoulders. Their skin had a light salmon hue, with thick veins going up the left side neck to middle of their scalps. Human-like in their physiques, their faces were hairless with eye sockets slightly larger than humans and wide bridge noses, that along with their mouths were covered by a mask-type device, encircling their collars. But it was the reflective effect of their eyes that frighten her the most. Yellowish-orange when bathed in light. Otherwise, coal black.

"Please," he pleaded.

"Are going to hurt me?" she asked with a quivering voice. Her chest began tighten as the tall said: "We are not in the business of causing harm or distress. Nor, do we desire to. We are here because we owe you an apology!"

An apology?

"An apology? For what? Are sent by the Devil to take me? For that I don't want your apology! Only for you to do what you came to do or go away! So get on with it"

"Please, Mrs. Yoder we've only..." Before the Leader could finish his plea, the one his right interrupted: "Please let us help you! This is all my fault and I will forfeit my knowledge, my position, and my life if you *please* let us in so we speak to you and help you!" Its voice sounded feminine and angelic.

Gretchen stared at the one who spoke out. Somehow, it seemed trustworthy. She stepped away from the door to signal them that they may enter. They entered one-by-one with the Leader first, then the right, then the left. All four was standing still in the living room, looking at

each other waiting for someone to start talking. Then Gretchen spoke:

“What's this about an apology? Was it you that I've seen the other night? “

“First, let us introduce ourselves.” The Leader spoke first. Their language was translated through the mask that covered their faces. He made prominent stance to announce their intentions.

“There is no way phonetically, in your language that we can use to pronounce our names. Not even our translators are capable to perform that function; I am embarrassed to say. So, I will introduce us as such: I am Loll,” he says as he presses both hands on his chest, then he points to the right, “This Lay,” then he points to the left, “and this is Len.”

“Yes, how did you know my name?” Gretchen asked.

“We learned your name when we scanned you last night,” said Loll. “That is one apology. There are more.”

Gretchen's fear began to subside. The tension in her chest began to loosen, so she began to become a little more confident. “

What's the next one?” she asked.

Len stepped forward to speak. “It was me that scared you, I am sorry.” Gretchen saw sincerity in the being's eyes. Yet she is still confused on their intentions. She knows now that they are not here to harm her, but there still is an unknown hint of suspicion. Why would they come to her in the first place? *What's the big deal about me?*

“The big deal is,” spoke Loll, “is that my student felt responsible for your injury.”

“You, heard me thinking?”

“We are still scanning you. And again, we are apol...”

“Yes! You apologize!” Gretchen abruptly interrupted.

“Are you responsible for what happened today? I awoke this morning...better. And I was getting better, until this afternoon! I almost never made it back to the house! What did you do to me?” She asked Loll staring into his reflective eyes.

He appeared to be tanking a deep inhale from his face mask. He is not a military leader. He does not have the proper skills for mediation, especially when he failed to control a member of his own crew.

“Your body could not maintain cellular reconstruction,” he said.

“What do you mean?” she asked, very concerned, “What have done

to me?"

"When we discovered you, you were dead. So we saved you the best way we know how." said Loll

"Which is?"

"We infected you with a virus. Not a virus that would kill you," he assures her as she reacts with a look of shock and angst, "but a virus that attacks any deterioration on the cellular level. Any decay or plaque is removed and the body restores to its neural state before age, injury or disease. Do you understand?"

Gretchen nods her head. "I think I do. So, it was really you guys that saved me?"

The strange visitor nodded his head. "Oh, I see."

"Yes," said Loll, "It was your right to die, and we should never pry into your personal business. But it was Len who insisted that we save you."

"I am responsible for your pain," said Len, "I am accountable for my actions."

"It is a different kind that I suffer from. It was not brought on by you. Nor do I think you can heal me from it."

A look of sadness came to Gretchen's face. She stood in front her guest with folded hands and her eyes began to fill with tears. Her old hands that earlier in the day were young now ached with arthritis. And her ailing heart is now strained. The visitors stood in front of her with look of apathy in their strange faces. Unsure of what to do or having the right words to say, Lay, who stayed silent all this time, says: "I told you we should left her alone."

"Lay!" exclaimed Len as they proceeded to argue. A swift motion of Loll's hand signaled for them to stop, immediately. Gretchen just stood still and cried. The unsettling atmosphere caused Lay to explain what he said.

"I meant no disrespect. Only that we are two different species. We have different cultures and beliefs. What is acceptable for us, maybe a sin for you?" He directed his full attention the crying women standing in front of him. But her tears are for else.

"It's not that," said Gretchen, tearfully. "It's just...I had so much. Now it seems that I have nothing. Last night, I wanted it to end. I wanted for all of it to end. I miss my husband. He's been dead for ten years, now. And I know if he was still here he would take good care of me, and no one would try to take my home from me. He gave up everything when he

married me forty-four years ago. His family did not approve of me, because they were Amish and I wasn't. He was ostracized for marrying me. Now he's gone. My son's in prison. And my two daughters are sending me away on Monday."

"Sending you where," Loll asked, "Are you being ostracized to?"

"Yes, I guess you can say that. I'm in bad shape, and they want me to go to a nursing home on Monday"

"But that be good for you? Right?" Len asked Gretchen inquiringly. "You will have someone there to take care of you? Right?"

Gretchen looks at Len cynically. She expresses her grievous outlook on such institutions with an angry and defiant countenance, along with a visual idiomatic vernacular. "Have you ever been to those places?" she asks through her tears. All three shook their stiff heads.

"My father was sent to the same home they're sending me to." Gretchen begins to make her speech.

"When he first got, he was happy. He was there with some friends and relatives he had known most of his life. He would sit outside of his room and talk to everyone he see's. Mostly about war stories in the South Pacific. Sometimes he would see other servicemen coming to visit their relatives and he will show them his medals. A lot of times he would wear them proudly! I was twenty-five years old when he went there. I loved him. All my life I looked up to him.

"Then one day it all changed. He noticed that everyone he new was dying and disappearing right in front of his eyes. Fewer people came to visit him. I was the only one of ten children who visited him daily. The staff he once trusted even changed and became worst. Some of his stuff went missing. Little, by little his medals, his books, his jewelry; all he knew and all he had possessed, was now fading away."

"One day he got sick," she continued, "and I came over to check on him. Only that it wasn't him. He was someone totally different. The strong, strict, compassionate father that I once knew was no more than a feeble image. It was him. He grabbed my arm and pulled me close to tell me something. He whispered 'Don't ever come back!'."

"What did you do?" Len asked.

"I left!"

"You just left? Why?"

"Because I knew what he meant. Those places are not made to help people. They're morgues! Just warehouses to store the dead and dying! A place where you can put away people that are a burden to you!

“I realized that as well as I left there. Everywhere I looked was death. Old women screaming in their beds. Old men sitting in wheelchairs, some silent, some mumbling. Some are praying. All are praying to die. But the worst thing about that place is the smell! That stench of piss and death! I’d rather die at my own hand in my home than live the rest of my life in that filth!”

A solemn hush is among them. The absence of words signifies the guilt that the three visitors felt for prying in the old woman’s personal affairs. It is in their cultural belief not to interfere when it comes to certain personal freedoms. Even if the decisions are wrong. But, there was something about Gretchen that made them feel sympathetic toward her. An unknown aspect that is understandable to them. Gretchen stands straight as she physically can to show her dignity. As she looks at them, she makes this statement: “So, if you are here to take me to Hell for what I’ve done, then let’s go! Because this morning I thought I was healed by the Lord. But instead I was being punished! I guess I must have deserved it, but I’m done fighting. I’m done crying. Let’s go.”

“We are not from Hell,” said Loll. “We are from a planet thousands of light-years away. And it is not our intension to destroy your faith in whatever deity you choose to believe. Nor is it our job to carry out punishment for Him. As I said earlier, we had no right to pry. No right to interfere with you or any other life form we run across of. I am a scientist and these are my students. We left our home to study. Intelligence is a privilege that we do not take for advantage. Our intelligence dictates our position in society and we traveled very far to obtain it. To know everything that there is to know in all that exist.”

Loll continues: “As of now, while we are here in this part of the universe, everything we had and everyone we care about, is no more.”

“Did your world end?” asked Gretchen.

“No,” Len interjected. “We travel faster then the speed of light; which means we travel forward through time at an accelerated rate. Do you understand?”

“No,” said Gretchen. “I never learned such things.”

Len saw this as a perfect opportunity to briefly explain to her how they travel. Carefully, not to embarrass her with jargon she would not understand. It seemed to help her feel better about meeting them. They seemed more “human” to her now.

“And when it’s time to go home,” Len concluded, “we will travel backward in time. Within two years of the future.”

“Your lives seem amazing,” said Gretchen.

“It has its moments.”

The tall leader, Loll, spoke up: “It is time for us to leave. Good luck to you Mrs. Yoder.”

“Will we meet again?” she asked.

“No. It’s not likely. But we wish you well.”

It saddened her to hear this. To come across something so fantastic and brilliant, twice in one day, made her something that matters. “All the same,” she said. “I won’t be here anyway. I’ll be in that...place.”

Len turned to speak to Loll and Lay. But their communication was not exposed to Gretchen. After a moment she turned to face Gretchen. “Why don’t you come with us?” she asked.

“What do you mean?” Gretchen did not understand the question.

“Come with us and we will take good care of you,” said Len

“We’ll learn from each other,” said Lay

“And we will re-introduce the cellular re-construction virus to your system. Instead this time you will be monitored. You will be young again.” Loll said.

“What do you say? Want to live again?”

“You mean I can go with you?”

“Yes.”

“And see the stars?”

“Yes,” said Len.

“And you can return any time you wish,” said Lay.

Gretchen just stood still for a moment, careful not to make a hasty decision. Surely, anything would be better than the alternative. Especially after her contemptible diatribe toward nursing homes. “Can I bring some things?” She asked.

“A few small things,” Loll informed her.

“And I can come back any time I want?”

“It won’t be the exact time you left, but yes.”

“We can learn from each other. And we can make you better. Stronger. More alive than you have ever felt,” declared Len. “So, how about it?”

Ultimately she said: “Yes! I will go with you! But, when will start making me better?”

Len pulled out a device from her waist pouch. “Right now,” she

said as she bathes Gretchen in a soft blue light. Immediately she felt the effects of the treatment. A wave of energy and youthful vigor fulfilled her anatomy as soon as Len removed the beam.

“We must hurry,” said Lay, the pertinent one.
“Let my grab a few things!”

Quickly, she ran through the house grabbing a few clothes, photographs and wrote a note for Marilyn: *Gone away for a while.*

*Don't worry about me anymore...
Love, Mom*

“I’m ready,” she tells them.

As she walked by the coffee table, she sees her Bible. *Maybe I'm meant to go for a reason,* she thinks, and grab it as she leaves.

Nightfall as Marilyn pulls into her mother’s driveway. Immediately, she witness some unfamiliar about the surroundings. The back door was standing wide open, but the porch light was not on, although most of the indoor lights where. She cautiously exits her car to investigate what is happening. Nervously she calls for her mother. With no answer so steps on the porch and moves slowly into the house calling her name. She is now fearful of the unknown.

Her paranoia intensifies when she finds Gretchen’s note. Not making any sense of the situation, she frantically calls out. Outside, somewhere in open field pass the barn lot, she sees a bright orange glow in the distance. Bursting through the door, she runs down the field shouting. Shock at the horrific vision in front of her, she sees the strange visitors walking with what appeared to be her mother.

But she did not look like the same woman she had known when she last left her. A healthier, vibrant version of Gretchen now exists. Marilyn frightfully cries out: “Momma! Get away from them!”

Gretchen turned and spoke to her frightened daughter as she walked into the glowing orb.

“Don’t worry about me! I am better, and I always will be,” she said to her.

“Mama no! Don’t go with them!” Marilyn responded.

Gretchen turned to Marilyn. “I love you! Tell Carolyn I love her! And tell your brother he’s a disappointment!”

She turns, walks away, and disappears. Gracefully, the orb rises to the sky and drifts away.

Time moves unendingly. The revolution of the Earth and sun moves in tandem persistence, creating timelines of life and death, birth and passing and the suppression and progression of the eternal chronicle of humanity. And after thirty revolutions, Gretchen’s children never came to terms of what happened to her. Suspicion and ridicule followed them, always. Investigations of foul play continued for some time. And it took a negative toll on their lives. Marilyn, unable to deal with ongoing threats and interrogations, took her own life. Her brother never made it out of prison. He died in a violent attack against his cell mate shortly after Gretchen left.

Carolyn, under the most suspicion, fell into despair. Her marriage, her job, and her reputation, caused her to live her life a poor and broken woman that eventually became a ward of the state in her descent into the cold, void of old age.

As she sits in her room, alone and forgotten, a young and angelic woman enters the building and passes through the gauntlet of sad old men, wailing women, and the vile stench of piss and death. The angelic woman walks up to Carolyn and whispers in her ear:

“Don’t worry dear. Momma’s going to take care of now.”

THE CHOICE

It was a cool morning when my cousin and I set out for our journey to California. My wife hugging me very tight not wanting to let go," You be careful!" she exclaimed tearfully.

"I will. I promise." I replied.

"You sure you have to go?" she asked. I looked down for a moment then I looked into her eyes and said, "We have a child coming and there's no work here, it will be the right thing to do."

We were just married under her parent's disfavor. My heritage, not being purely Anglo, disgraced her father. The fact that his child would soil his name by marrying such impure filth. However our love was too strong for her father's ignorance to break us up. It was the 1960's after all. Things were starting to change.

We said our goodbyes to our new wives and began our long journey. We were very excited and sad at the same time. We had enlisted in the Navy and had only enough money to catch a bus in Louisville and we were over four hundred miles away in North Carolina. David, my cousin, convinced a local gate hauler to take us as far as Liberty, Kentucky.

"That's far as I'm again'." he said." But you're a welcome to ride." We climbed into his truck and took off.

"So where did you fellas' say you were a goin'?" he asked.

"To California. We've joined the Navy." I replied. He gave me a bewildered look as if I told him we were going to the moon.

"Shoot.", he said." Navy might take you, but I don't know 'bout your buddy there." David, sitting on the passenger side as I sat in between the two, had a defensive look about him.

" Why not there friend?" he asked. A sinking feeling befell me. He looked at David defiantly and said,"Aint no Navy gonna take no Melungeon." I saw David's hand go to his right pocket to grab his knife. I immediately extended my right arm to stop him before the driver

discovered his intention. I broke the tension with small talk and we remained quiet for the rest of the trip.

We departed from our ride and decided to stop for a moment to eat at a store on the side of the road. With the strange looks we got from the locals we decided not to stay very long. We made our way to Louisville with the kindness of a few strangers whom gave us rides. We immediately made our phone calls back home to our wives. Assuring that everything was alright, we purchased our tickets. We sat down on a bench and looked around at our surroundings. We noticed the vultures in sleazy suits circling to find their unsuspected pray of young ladies just arriving to find a new life. The homeless man panhandling for spare change. The two elderly women across from us were sitting close together as if it would protect them from any danger coming their way. Women scantily dressed and men who seemed to be together.

“This is not like home is it Dave.”

“No, it isn’t, Roger.” he replied. I looked down at our tickets, “Says here that the bus won’t leave until morning. Looks like a long night.” David had an undecided look on his face. I looked at him as if to ask what was on his mind. “Do you think we made the right decision on what we’re doing?”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Joining the Navy or leaving home?”

” Both.” replied David with frustration in his demeanor.

“I mean look around you. There’s nothing like this in the mountains. There’s no way our women would dress in such a manner, no way we let people go hungry , and no old folks going to fear anything at home!” I did not like the direction this discussion was heading. We thought about this decision for a long time, and now after all we’ve been through until now he has doubts.

“Look at home we have two wives expecting children. We have \$30.00 between us and there is absolutely no work at home!” “We can work in the coal mines.” he said as if it was a good idea. “I’m not working in the mines. No sir! Catch black lung and cough my self to death until I’m dead like Daddy did? Or have the whole damn ceiling fall on me and crush my legs like your Daddy?”

Perhaps I should not have mentioned his father. I could see the hurt in his eyes over his father, my uncle. Since the accident all he did was drink saying things like “No one wants a lame man to work for them!” He usually took his frustration out on David and his mother while his two sisters ran and hid. Perhaps he was concerned for their wellbeing or maybe he was worried about being treated different from me and other servicemen because his skin is darker. What ever the reason, I could tell

that he wasn't totally sure on what to do. We fell asleep clasping our packs to make sure that they were still there in the morning.

I awoke to hear on the announcement, "6:15 to Reno now boarding." David was already awake. I don't believe he slept at all. We grabbed our packs and proceeded to board the bus.

"I'm not going," he said as I made the first step up." What? Why?" I almost knew this was coming yet I was still shocked over his declaration. "I don't belong here, I belong home." He had an uneasy look on his face. "You're on or off Geronimo!" the driver asked very unruly. Angry at what was said by both the driver and David, I looked at David in the eye. "Well? Which is it? You're just going to abandon everything?"

"Not everything", he said "not home."

"Well then go! But I'll be damned if I die in those mines."

He turned and left after I said that. I climbed on the bus.

After training, I was based in Virginia where I moved my family. I served twenty years in the Navy, and provided a good life for my wife and family. We raised a son who serves in the Marines and a daughter who teaches anthropology at the University of Virginia. We still return home. I still talk to David. Though it's not easy for him to speak, he still doesn't regret returning home. Only that he should be more proud of who he is and not how people perceive him.