



The Hot Springs of America

A novel about a descent into a
Trumpian dystopia of Christian
fundamentalism, and a way out

Mark Mason

The Hot Springs of America

a novel

Mark Mason

Dwapara Press Eugene, Oregon

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Jeff sat on a bench on the Mall near the National Gallery in D.C., wondering whether any of the reps he had contacted using the pseudonym Drake Martin would come and talk with him. Would this name sound like it belonged to a real person? Already two had failed to show, and the Green Party's Amanda Klein from California was late. He had crossed the first two names off the list in his notebook, and was on the point of crossing Amanda's off, too, when he took another anxious look toward the Capitol building, and noticed an attractive, casually-dressed woman, somewhat too young, he thought, to be a member of Congress, about a hundred feet away, walking in his direction. Her wavy blonde hair tossed about in the breeze. She had a concerned, undecided look on her face. He was just pondering what sort of person she was, when he saw the flash out of the side of his eye. He looked around and saw the Capitol building engulfed in flames. A few seconds later the roar of the explosion arrived, and he clamped his hands over his ears and instinctively closed his eyes.

After the roar subsided, the woman turned around to gape for a few seconds at the collapsing blue roof of the House chamber, before just standing there in a daze. In the distance people were running in all directions. Jeff, though, like the woman, was immobilized, as it sunk in that what he had wanted to warn America about had actually happened. After a minute or so he noticed the woman, still standing there, staring at the flames licking out from the ruins of the

House chamber, and the pall of smoke above. He walked over and touched her on the shoulder. She turned around, a little startled.

“Are you Amanda Klein?” She began to emerge from her shocked daze. “The Amanda Klein I asked to meet me here?”

“Yes...I am. So you are Drake Martin?”

“Yes.”

“Is this what you wanted to...warn me about?”

“Yes.”

“What...”

“I think we need to get away from here. My car’s further down the Mall. Do you want to come with me? And we can talk about it in a while when we get over the shock?”

“OK. I do want to talk to you...I’ll come.”

They set off at a walk, but soon were running. The Mall seemed strangely deserted to Amanda, as if its soul of service had left it. She sensed it was the end of an era. As she slowed down a little she felt the new bleak atmosphere, so different from before. She was falling behind.

“Hey, don’t run so fast! My shoes aren’t up for it.”

“Sorry, we’re nearly there.” He slowed to a fast walk. “Being out here in the open is giving me the creeps.”

They sat in his car, recovering their breath, and started to calm down a little. After a minute or so, Amanda said,

“I guess I’ve got you to thank for saving my life...I’d have been in there.”

“Huh. If more members of Congress had taken me seriously, like you did, maybe the bombing could have been

prevented. I sat there for over an hour while two congressmen didn't show up."

"Really? But that's not surprising. I thought you were a crank myself. But some niggling feeling—call it intuition—told me I ought to meet you anyway."

"Then I'd say your intuition saved your life."

"That...*and* you. Thank you, my mysterious benefactor."

"You're welcome—really."

"So, how did you know this was going to happen?"

"I was tipped off. I wasn't told exactly when, just that it would be soon...Hundreds of people must have died in there."

"Yes...And quite a few of them my friends. Even if you don't agree with them politically, you get to know them. And after all, they are people—and every person is precious. A lot of them will be gone forever, and even more...injured. I don't even want to think about what it's like in there. If there was something I could do I'd go right back now, but I know the emergency crews will be there. I would just be in the way, and need to be rescued myself. I just have to accept feeling helpless."

"And me, too."

"And maybe the most useful thing I can do now is finding out what you know."

"Well, I'll tell you what I know."

"I don't know why this has popped into my head. It's going to sound insensitive and silly. But maybe it might just be relevant."

"What?"

“It’s just occurred to me that this terror attack is like the ending of one of Tom Clancy’s novels.”

“That’s not so silly. I even know the one you mean, where the plane crashing into the Capitol building sets the scene for the next novel. The World Trade Center was like that, too, with the planes being used as bombs. It was just a different target. This time the target’s the same as the book.”

“So you can see it, too?”

“Sure. It’s possible the 9/11 terrorists, and the militia responsible for this, both got ideas from that book. Both times, of course, the way they did it was different enough to make it unexpected.”

“The ‘militia responsible for this’? You know who they are, then?”

“Well, I don’t know any names, but I do know it was a Christian-Right para-military group, and some congressmen they were working with.”

“How do you know that?”

“My father’s an influential person in the religious right, active in the Republican Party. He hinted at it. Then I phoned an old school friend of mine who’s attending Bible college to become a pastor. He has connections with the militias. He’d heard of it, too, and filled me in on the plan. You see, I’m supposed to be one of them, or they would never have told me about it. I went to the same Christian college, and have been teaching at a Christian high school.”

“A fundi with a conscience! So, you were going to tell *me* all this?”

“Well, yes!” Jeff gave an exasperated laugh. “I told you in my fax the whole of Congress was in danger.”

“And you wanted to talk to a member of congress about it. Why didn’t you just phone the FBI?”

“I did phone them, a couple of times. They said they would look into it, but I totally got the impression they thought I was a crank, and were not going to give me the time of day. They said security was already very high around the Capitol building, and had been since 9/11. And I think they just out-and-out dismissed it when I said the bomb might be carried in by a congressman.”

“Well, it does sound crazy...Still, there were a few other members of Congress leaving the building when I did. And come to think of it, they were mostly those extreme neocon GOPs I despise.” She realized with a chill that his explanation jived with what she knew. “I thought it was just that they didn’t want to hear the president speak any more than I did, since he is, in their eyes, a relatively ‘moderate’ Republican—not that I would call him moderate—and they...Oh my God! The president—he may have been in there already!”

“Yes, I wouldn’t be surprised—that was the plan: to have the vice-president, who is one of them, become president. Although the president was conservative, and pandered to the religious right, he wasn’t reactionary enough for the fanatics. And they considered him incompetent—along with just about everyone else! They wanted their man in. And, needless to say, the veep would have been safely away from the scene at one of his undisclosed secure locations.”

“Of course. To keep the conservatives happy, and balance the ticket, the president took a running mate from the

far right, and kept him as vice president into his second term. What a mistake that may have turned out to have been.”

“Yes. Well that was because the veep was really the boss, and nearly always dictated what happened. But it was an awkward, roundabout way to have to govern. Now he’ll get to be seen as the boss. But getting back to their plan. It was to have the vice president take over, declare a state of emergency, and rule by martial law until they fix the ‘moral decay’ they believe is destroying America.”

“I can see it now. It’s actually starting to make some sense... And if that’s what happened...” One side of her wanted to get back there and at least try to help, see if her staff were OK, report what she’d learned from this Drake guy. But now something else was telling her to be careful, that there might be a trap. “They’re going to want to pin it on someone, you know, and I’m beginning to have this feeling that that someone might be *me*, since I’ve mouthed off so much about how useless Congress has become. And since I got out just before the bomb went off. And you—since you tried to warn them, they’re going to realize you know too much. You’re in danger, too!”

“Maybe, but I don’t think so. I faxed you and the others from a copy shop, didn’t use my real name, and paid with cash, so they won’t know who I am. You see my name isn’t really Drake Martin...it’s...it’s Jeff. I’m sorry...I had to be careful. I’ll tell you my last name later, when I get to know you better.”

“Well, Jeff.” Amanda looked at his blue-gray eyes, in that long face like her father’s. “That figures, I guess. Maybe

you're going to be OK. But it doesn't get me off the hook, does it? I need to get outta here."

"Where to?"

"West—to California, where I come from."

"I was thinking west might be good, too, but more like northwest—Oregon maybe, where I know people who live near a hot spring in the forest."

"So, it seems like we're both heading in the same general direction?"

"Yes, but maybe it really would be better for you to go back to the scene and check in with the police. It might clear you."

"No thanks. I don't think I'm going to do that. Now that I'm tuning in to this, wild horses couldn't drag me back there. Call it intuition. Or an instinct for self preservation. Or wanting to live to fight another day. They'll want to pin it on someone, and they could see me as a likely suspect. If it was a member of Congress, it must have been one of those neocons who left when I did. But that sleazebag Jones is probably president by now, and he's not going to want to pin it on one of his own number."

"Mm...I see your point. Well, you can come with me if you like."

"Or I could just get a taxi to the airport."

"Huh. Don't like your chances. And I don't see any taxis around. Want to come with me?" Her face relaxed a little, and there was the hint of a smile. "We'd better get going then—there'll be roadblocks everywhere in no time. What do you think's the best way out of town?" He started the car.

“I guess I-270, and count on it taking a while before roadblocks go up.”

“Out along Constitution and the Roosevelt Bridge?”

“Yes, then 66 to the Beltway.”

As they drove by the Mall on Constitution they had to stop three times for emergency vehicles with blaring sirens, but they had no more trouble after that getting out of D.C. At Frederick they branched north to Gettysburg. All continued to go well for a while, but about five miles south of the Pennsylvania border the inevitable roadblock appeared.

“What am I going to do?” Amanda said. “I’ve just realized my license has ‘Member of Congress’ written on it. They’ll want to see it.”

“It does? Well, nothing we can do now but hope they let you through anyway. Trying to turn around would be a dead giveaway. Just try to appear relaxed and calm. It’ll be at least half an hour before they get to us.”

“Man oh man.” She slouched in her seat.

For over half an hour, Amanda was sure she was going to be arrested, tried, then who knows what? Executed by a bunch of religious extremists who had taken over the government? She’d composed herself, though. She knew her best chance of getting through this was to appear as unconcerned and relaxed as possible. Then she remembered. She still had her old California license in her bag, which didn’t have ‘Member of Congress’ written on it. She dug for it, found it, and told Jeff.

“Good. Everything’ll probably be just fine, then.”

“I don’t know. They’ll still most likely do a computer check, and that’ll be just as bad as having it written all over my license.”

They were nearly at the front of the line, and a police officer was coming over to them.

“Can I see your driver’s licenses, please?” He inspected them, and took down details. “Where are you both going today?”

“I’m not sure how far we’ll get, but we’re en route to California via Yellowstone and Zion.”

“How come you didn’t stick to the freeway?”

“We’re going through Gettysburg this afternoon to see the Civil War stuff.”

“Uh huh. Did you come from D.C. today?”

“Yes.”

“Why did you leave D.C.?”

“Just to continue on with our trip.”

“Where did you both stay last night?”

Jeff named the motel he had stayed in. Amanda kept her silence.

“So what time did you leave D.C.?”

“About two and a half hours ago.” Jeff added a half hour to the actual trip time so it would seem like they had been at least ten minutes on their way by the time of the blast.

“About noon.”

“Stop at all on the way?”

“Yes,” Jeff fabricated. “At a restaurant in Frederick.”

“Notice anything unusual before you left D.C., or as you left?”

“Well, we did hear something like thunder, or an explosion, in the distance—is that what this is about?”

“Maybe! So you haven’t heard? Muslim terrorists smuggled a powerful bomb into the House of Reps chamber in the Capitol building during a joint sitting. The president, who was there, was killed, along with many members of Congress. The FBI thinks it was suicide bombers in the gallery, and that they must have had supporters on the outside. We’re searching for them.”

“So what’s going to happen?”

“I really don’t know...But one last thing before I go to check out these details—I need you folks to get out of the car for a few minutes while we search it. If you could just pop the hood and trunk for me before you get out, I’d appreciate it.”

The two officers spent about five minutes searching under the seats and through Jeff’s bags, yet somehow didn’t notice that there was only one set of luggage there, and only men’s things, and that Amanda was traveling interstate without luggage. That would have been awkward to explain away. Then there was another fifteen minute wait while their IDs were checked, before the policeman returned.

“OK. You’re free to go. Sorry to keep you waiting for so long. Our C.R.I.S. went down and we still haven’t got it back up. But you guys don’t exactly look like Muslim terrorists. Thank you for your cooperation. Have a nice day sir, ma’am.”

Amanda forced a polite smile as they drove away. She remained silent for about fifteen seconds, then heaved a huge sigh of relief.

“Yes! Their computer system went down. How lucky could I get! I thought I was done for all money. Their C.R.I.S. had to bring up my being a member of Congress. And it crashed! Man. What a relief.”

“So what’s a C.R.I.S.?”

“Oh. Cross Referencing Information System. It’s the police’s way of tracking people by computer. It brings up everything about them.”

“Well, nerve-racking it was. But I told you you’d get through.”

“Yeh. Thank you! I was freaking out. You really helped me get myself together.”

“Oh well, that’s OK. I’m as relieved as you are to be past that roadblock.”

“So, what about the Muslim terrorist bit? What a nerve they’ve got.”

“What a load of garbage.”

“Absolutely. Still, I figure that’s another part of my good luck. I realize now they would have to have got their perpetrators out. The Muslim terrorist story, even if it doesn’t hold up in the long run, will at least divert attention from any of their members who were able to get out before the blast. It will give them time to leave the area and establish their alibis. And it’s giving me time to leave, too, of course. But if the Muslim story doesn’t hold up, they may still try to pin it on someone like me later.”

“Possibly. But I think they’ll push the Muslim story for all its worth, and it’ll probably stick. After 9/11, a lot of people will believe it. Some will see it as scapegoating, and howl for the truth, but most will just want to accept it. It’s really very clever. If the religious right control the state of emergency, which I’m sure they will, then they can ethnically cleanse the Muslims from the country—one step down the road toward their goal of making America uniformly white and Christian.”

“You’re painting a very bleak picture.” She weighed up his view as they drove along.

“Hey look. We’re crossing the Mason-Dixon Line.” Jeff pointed to a brown sign. “It’s strange...for us to be crossing it now, just as the whole country is losing its freedom, passing from peace into civil war again. There’s been a cultural civil war going on for decades. Now there could be an actual civil war again. If there really is a fundamentalist takeover, I can’t see the majority of people in this country just giving in and accepting it. They’ll fight for their freedom...I’ll fight for it, for that matter.”

“I’m sure you would. And quite a few like you. But as for most people, I don’t know. It’d be nice to know what the political fallout actually is.” She glanced across the dashboard. “Why don’t you turn on the radio?”

“Sure! Don’t know why I didn’t think of that.” He pressed the switch. “Can I get you to find a station?”

“OK...Just static. But here’s something.”

“...If you’ve just tuned in, the shocking news is that the Capitol building has been bombed by terrorists, and the

president and hundreds of congress men and women are dead. In a country plagued by violence for years, from school shootings to racial hate crimes to the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the ultimate violent crime has been perpetrated: the destruction of the heart of our democratic way of life, the Capitol building in Washington, D.C. What do you think about it, Jack?"

"I can't help feeling that after all these years, and after all the violence we could have done something about, but didn't, our chickens have come home to roost in this ultimate tragedy. Maybe now we can really address the problem of violence seriously. This could, finally, be the turning point."

"So Jack, you don't buy the official story that Muslim terrorists were responsible?"

"Not for a minute, Bill. That's what they said after the Oklahoma bombing, but when the dust settled, it proved to be home-grown violence, and this will, too."

"But Muslim terrorists were responsible for 9/11. Why couldn't they be responsible now? No-one thinks the war on terrorism totally wiped out al-Qaeda."

"Of course not. Al-Qaeda, ISIS and their ilk are still out there, and still capable of mounting a terrorist attack. But there's no evidence implicating Muslims this time."

"The FBI's saying there is."

"But they haven't shown us any of it. Until I see the evidence, count me a skeptic."

"Whoa! When we come back I'll have to challenge you on that one. We will continue talking with Jack, right after this message from our sponsors. Stay with us for our continuing coverage of this devastating breaking news."

“Ads, at a time like this!” Jeff rolled his eyes. “Want to find another station?”

“Sure.”

Soon they were approaching the turnoff to Gettysburg. The battlefield where Lincoln made that most sublime of all speeches was a special place for Jeff. He could still feel the reverence that pervaded it, that had kept him silent, reflective and in awe every time he had visited it. It was one of America’s most holy places. Yet he wasn’t sure he wanted to visit it again now, in the current circumstances. And they didn’t really have the time now, either.

“Do you want to drive through the battlefield?” he asked.

“Not really. I’ve seen it before. I think we should just keep going.”

“Sure. I’ve seen it before, too. We’ll push on, then.”

“It *is* rather poignant, though, to think of all those Union soldiers dying to preserve the freedom that’s now going up in smoke. ‘Government of the people, by the people, for the people,’ may not have perished from the earth, but it could well be departing from America for a while.”

“Yes. It was a wonderful ideal of Lincoln’s. And I hope one day it will see the light, but up to now I don’t think we’ve ever really had it—in this country at least. All we’ve had is: ‘Government of the people, by the ruling elite, for the corporations and the rich.’”

“Hah!” She reacted with a quizzical look, then paused. “Maybe if there’s another civil war now, its legacy really will be to usher in government ‘of the people, by the people, for the people.’”

“Actually, that could well be how it ends up. Reason being that if the religious right seize control, it will be the ruling elite, with its back against the wall, desperately trying to cling to power. And its desperation is a sign of its weakness.”

“Are they really so desperate, though, that they would blow up Congress to cling to power?” Amanda threw up her hands. “I really don’t understand! I know it looked like they would lose the presidency in November. And without control of Congress that certainly means they would have been in the political wilderness. But they’ve come back before. Especially with the extra six percent margin they’ve been getting recently by rigging the vote where there are electronic voting machines with no paper ballots. It should be easy for them.”

“You’re referring, I presume, to the fact that the exit polls in the last few elections gave the Democrats a six to eight percent higher vote than they actually achieved in the elections?”

“Yes. And the fact that around the world exit polls have proved to be exceptionally reliable, with an error of less than *one* percent. After all, they’re polling people who have just voted—that’s got to be much more accurate than opinion polls taken before the election from people who may not have made up their minds yet and may not even vote.”

“Oh, I agree with you that the exit poll discrepancy shows the Republicans have been rigging the vote.”

“Right.”

“But even all that vote rigging was not enough to stop them losing both the House and the Senate to the Democrats

last time. The Democrats swamped the six percent and gained another three or four percent on top of that.”

“Of course. I know that. But there were exceptional circumstances, and when these circumstances subsided, as they would have in time, with the aid of the six percent vote rig it should have been easy for them to get back into power.”

“Yes, if they could have actually kept doing the vote rigging. Some districts have already passed ballot measures to replace electronic voting machines with paper ballots, and many more were planning to this time. And, once the Democrats regained congress and the presidency in November, they would have been certain to have taken action to end the vote rigging. It would have been greatly to their advantage to do so, as it would have given them back an extra six percent margin that was rightfully theirs, and that would have greatly solidified their hold on power.”

“OK. The republicans may have been worried about that. But there is no reason in principle why they couldn’t have competed on an even footing with the Democrats. They would just have needed to get new policies that really met the needs of the people. Isn’t that how democracy is supposed to work?”

“Yes, it is how it is *supposed* to work. Trouble is that for a long time now the Republican Party has been controlled by the ruling elite. As a result, its policies represent the interests of the elite, which is about exploiting the majority of the population, not helping them.”

“OK. Let’s be clear about what you mean by the ruling elite. Do you mean that part of the one percent of the

population that owns half the wealth and that bribes politicians with campaign donations to do their bidding?”

“You’ve got it. That’s exactly what I mean by the ruling elite.”

“But the majority of people have often voted Republican. Why would anyone vote for a party that doesn’t represent their interests, when there is a party that does?”

“That’s a very good question, one I’ve thought about quite a lot. Do you have half an hour?”

“No! The short version, please.” Amanda was not in the mood for too much talk. There were so many images forcing their way into her head from the bombing. So many uncertainties about the future. God, what was she doing here, anyway, with this man she didn’t even know? And where was she going to get some clothes? All she had in the world was in her one small handbag. Thankfully she had changed into casual clothes and comfortable shoes before heading out to meet Jeff. But she did also want to figure out why the ruling elite would feel it needed a dictatorship to serve its interests, when it already had the Republican Party. “So, the short version?”

“I’ve just been thinking about that—why people used to vote for the Republican Party when it wasn’t in their best interests to, but are increasingly not doing so any more?”

“Ah ha.”

“I think there are many reasons, including the ruling elite controlling the media, but I suspect the main reason—the one that has kept ruling elites in power for thousands of years—is people’s belief that they are better off in a hierarchy of power, because they too, with hard work, can climb their

way up the ladder and become better than other people. The idea is a con, of course. Most people don't make it up the ladder, and there is no happiness there anyway. Like most cons, it's one which succeeds better with uneducated people. And that is why people are now turning away from the Republican Party. In our increasingly educated society people are waking up to that con, and not being taken in by it. What's replacing it is the cultural creative idea that all people are valuable and that happiness doesn't come from treading on as many people as possible, but from cooperating rather than competing, sharing rather than hoarding, loving rather than hating, allowing people the freedom to live the way they want to rather than dominating them. What's happening is that we are in the early stages of the greatest revolution the world has ever seen. Of course, when you are *in* a revolution it's hard to see the forest for the trees, but I believe that, in the future, history will look back on this time as being a major turning point in the civilization of our planet. Ever since the dawn of history, humans have been dominated by ruling elites, but now that's ending. What's happening, quite literally—and don't *laugh*—is that the meek are inheriting the earth.”

“Hah!” Amanda did laugh, but Jeff could see it did her good. “I know what you mean by the cultural creatives: all those people who want to live in a new way—egalitarian, co-operative and spiritual, They are now a significant minority in our society. I'm a cultural creative myself, and so are most of those who voted for me. In a way we are the ‘meek.’ But we sure as hell are not going to be meek little door mats and get walked all over.”

“I didn’t think you would. And, actually, the way you’ve just described yourself as meek is exactly what Jesus meant by meekness. He chewed out his own disciples for trying to dominate each other, saying something like: ‘You know how the rulers of the Romans lord it over them, and their officials exercise authority? It won’t be like that with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must serve everyone.’”

“That was very revolutionary of him, but you know you are not going to convert me from being a Pagan.” She spat out another laugh.

“Pagan, eh? That’s different for a member of congress! Even for a Green. But still, I don’t want to convert you. I’m a cultural creative myself, these days, and as I’m sure you know, tolerance is a cultural creative value.”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

“Good.”

“So, I think I can finish your argument for you,” Amanda said.

“OK.”

“It’s like this: the ruling elite had its back against the wall. It knew it couldn’t stay in power any longer ‘democratically,’ even with the widespread election fraud it has perpetrated in recent times, so the only thing left for it to do was to find an excuse for their far-right, neocon vice president to seize power as a dictator, and use force to keep him and the elite in power. And the way they did it has been to work with an extremist Christian-right militia to bomb Congress, then blame it on Muslim terrorists. Am I close?”

“That’s just about it. Of course, it’s only an extreme minority of the ruling elite who would ever have thought of taking such drastic action. But now it’s happened, the rest of them will go along with it gratefully enough.”

“Yes, I’m sure they will.”

“So, it makes sense to you?” Jeff looked around at her.

“Well, It *kind* of does make sense—watch the road, Jeff!...But we still don’t know if that’s what’s actually happened. After all, for all we know at this stage, it could have been Muslim terrorists.” She laughed a little, because, of course, she didn’t believe this.

“And the confusion and uncertainty about that will play right into their hands, and enable them to get their theocracy well established before people see what’s happening, and before they can start organizing to fight them.”

“You’re absolutely certain about that, aren’t you? Oh well, I won’t argue with you any more...I’m sure you’re right! I give in!” She broke down with the laughter that had been gradually infecting her. Jeff was a little put out by her making fun of him this way, but his annoyance only lasted a few seconds. She was sprawled out as much as she could be in a car seat, laughing like a tree in a gale. Jeff looked at her in astonishment, but could only join her. Suddenly he could see the funny side of his being a political know-it-all with a politician, and he laughed along with her. For a moment the car was weaving all over the road. In this lightness, the shock and distress of the day were relieved a little. When they stopped laughing he caught her eyes, and in that look seemed to be an understanding that everything would be OK between them.

“Jeff, it’s nine-thirty. Shouldn’t we be looking for somewhere to stay the night?”

Exhaustion had caught up with Amanda. Throughout the afternoon and evening they had eaten up the miles, trying to stay ahead of the avalanche of government security they feared would overtake and overwhelm them. They swapped drivers at gas stations and kept right on going. Jeff, however, was still in a groove.

“I guess I like driving through the night. What’s there to do before ten-thirty in a motel, anyway?—especially when you’re with someone you don’t know very well.”

She glanced at him oddly.

“We could watch TV and find out more about what’s going on. And then get some sleep! I’m exhausted.”

“I know, I know. It is getting late. Let’s keep an eye out for a motel. I’m tired, too. But we wanted to get as far as we could, didn’t we?”

“Yes, but we have done well—in Illinois, already.”

Just before 10:00 p.m. they saw a towering neon sign peer out of the darkness to the right of the freeway, and realized they’d found a motel in one of the good, cheap chains that had cable TV.

“One or two beds?” the motel clerk asked.

“Oh, two thanks,” Jeff said quickly, to head off the embarrassment he saw coming. Amanda smiled at him through sleepy eyes.

“Two queens?”

“Sure.”

After moving Jeff’s bags into the room, they switched on the cable TV just in time for the eleven o’clock news. After a brief wrap-up of what they had already heard, came the announcement that vice-president Jones had taken over as president, and had, earlier in the evening, given an address to the nation about the ‘tragic and dangerous situation’ the country had been plunged into. They replayed the speech:

“Dear fellow Americans. I address you tonight with a heavy heart, and not really knowing quite where to begin, in all the confusion that surrounds the tragedy that has befallen us. The president, whom I’ve worked with so closely these last few years, is dead, along with many other friends and colleagues from Congress. So many very well-known people have been slain in this barbaric act of terrorism, that I am sure many of you will have known some of them personally, and nearly all of you will know a lot about what they have done for America in their lives of service to the nation. I’m sure all of you share the sorrow I feel. Other members of Congress are in a critical condition in hospitals throughout the area, and I know that, along with me, you are all praying for their speedy recovery.

“The moral decay and violence in our society, and in the world, has to end somewhere, sometime. If a tragedy of these proportions cannot propel us into doing something decisive about the terrorism that has so often held us to ransom, then what hope is there for us? I am determined to act decisively to rid America of those who would perpetrate crimes like this, and make our nation a safe, secure, law-abiding place, where children can be raised in a wholesome environment,

and where we can all live free from the threat of this kind of tragedy being repeated.

“With so many of our leaders and law makers dead, and the perpetrators of the crime as yet not apprehended, a dangerous state of national emergency exists. The time will come when we can hold elections to replace our lost Congress, and return to the democratic rule we all treasure. For the time being, though, steps need to be taken to avert the collapse of our nation, and keep it functioning as smoothly as possible. Consequently, I have declared a state of martial law under the War Powers Act, and am working with our military leaders to bring the situation under control. The country has not been plunged into anarchy. I want to reassure you that everything humanly possible will be done to ensure the safety and security of all law-abiding Americans. Please stay calm. Keep going to work, but for the time being it would be most helpful if you could avoid any unnecessary travel. Thank you, good night, and may God bless America in this time of its greatest need.”

“So what do you think of that?” asked Jeff.

“Much as you predicted. Rather ominous really. He’s declared martial law, so there goes our democracy! And still blaming it on terrorism, although he didn’t mention Muslims as such. His determination to act decisively to ‘rid America’ of the sort of people who perpetrate these kinds of crimes is the most telling part. As you said earlier, it could be an excuse to indulge in cultural cleansing.”

“He probably didn’t want to mention the Muslims in the same breath as talking about cleansing the nation of security risks—not at this early stage, anyway.”

“And martial law was always in the cards.”

“Yes, but it sounded like he was preparing us for a fair stint of it.”

“I’m sure you’re right. This is the secret government emerging from the shadows to take over. But...Oh well...It’s been a very stressful day. I still don’t know what to make of the bombing. I don’t think the enormity of it has really hit me yet. We’ll just have to wait and see what tomorrow brings...” She yawned. “I thought I might take a shower. You don’t have a spare pair of pajamas, by any chance?”

“Of course, you don’t have anything. I’ll lend you my pair—they’re clean. I can wear a pair of boxers and a tee shirt.”

“Oh thanks. I’m really sorry to be imposing like this.”

“Not a problem. Feel free to use my toothbrush, too. I’ll get it for you.”

“Actually a toothbrush is one thing I do have—I carry one in my handbag, so I can brush my teeth after eating out...Why are you looking at me like that? I guess I sound a little over fastidious?”

“Oh no! I like to keep my teeth clean, too. Especially at night. When I was ten, this guy I met by the pool at our apartment building told me a story about how he used to be a CIA agent, and that sometimes he used to crawl down air conditioning ducts to get into an office he was spying on. He said he once even had to spend the night in an air conditioning duct. I said that must have been awful, but he said no, it wasn’t too bad. The worst thing about it, he said, was not being able to brush his teeth before going to sleep. Being a child, I, of course, thought that was the most

ridiculous thing I had ever heard. But you know, later, when I grew up, I could relate to what he said.”

“Yeah, I can relate to it, too. Kids! How we change when we grow up.”

Before getting into bed, Jeff went and pushed the window wide open.

“What are you doing?”

“Oh? I always sleep with the window open. But I guess I should have checked with you first. You don’t want it open?”

“Well, not so far, anyway. It’s noisy, and I don’t know if it’s safe.”

“I would have thought a Pagan, like you, would have been all into fresh air—worshipping nature...”

“Well, yes, we do *celebrate* nature—‘worship’ is hardly the word. But we don’t celebrate noise or crime. And I think you know that. You’re just giving me a hard time.”

“No I’m not. I really did think you’d be into fresh air. But still, I don’t mind closing the window most of the way. The only thing is if it gets stuffy later on we might need to open it a tad wider.”

“OK. That sounds good. How about just leaving it six inches open?”

“Sure. That’s a good compromise.”

“Goodnight.”

“Goodnight.”

About half an hour later Amanda whispered, “Are you awake?”

“Yes. Why?”

“I can’t sleep.”

“Are my pajamas uncomfortable?”

“Oh no, they’re fine. It’s just my mind is racing, thinking of everything that’s happened today.”

“What in particular?”

“Everything in particular! Whether we are going to get caught tomorrow. What we are going to do. You would be better off without me. It’s me they’ll be after, but if you’re with me, they might get you for aiding and abetting or conspiracy or something.”

“But you haven’t done anything.”

“They don’t know that. And they might not want to know.”

“Well, if we are stopped at a roadblock and you get into trouble, I could just say I gave you a lift.”

“I was thumbing a ride?”

“Yeah, I’ll disown you!”

“Hah! Might work. Except they’d probably already know we’re together from the search at the first roadblock...And another thing: I really ought to get word to my staff in D.C. and L.A. They’re going to think I’m dead. Now I’m this far away, I should phone them and tell them I’m safe.”

“Of course. I didn’t think about them. But you members of Congress do have staff. I kind of think of you all as one man bands—mavericks.”

“No—far from it. And I’m very close to my staff, especially Jason, my chief aide, and my secretary, Berni. Somehow everything that’s happened just blocked them out

of my mind, but now I feel really awful about not phoning them as soon as I could've."

"You could do it tomorrow morning, before we leave."

"Yes, I will. I will."

"And are your parents in L.A.?"

"Oh, they died in a car accident when I was only five. I was brought up by my grandparents after that. They were great, and very supportive of me—let me know I could do anything I wanted to—but they've passed on now, too. My Grandma just last year, so she lived to see me elected to Congress. She was very politically progressive herself. She was so proud of me."

"I'm so sorry. But it sounds like you had the best grandparents."

"Really wonderful." Amanda's eyes were a little misty.

There were a few moments of silence.

"I was going to ask you some more about your Paganism."

"What do you want to know?"

"First, I guess, how you came to be a Pagan."

"Oh, it's very common these days. Paganism is the fastest growing religion. There are zillions of Pagan sites on the web, for instance. But I guess you want to know how I personally became one?"

"Yes."

"Well, it started in high school. I always hated the stupid, vengeful, violent, male 'God' that Christianity kept trying to ram down my throat. And then, in History class, I learned a little about Celts and Druids with their gentle, peace-loving earth goddesses, and their delightful Pagan rituals. It really

spoke to my soul. After that I read every book I could find about it, especially about the Wiccan tradition. I guess you could say I'm a witch."

"I was thinking that...But go on."

"Well, back before Christianity invaded Western Europe, the Pagan culture there was quite gentle and equal—women were usually the priests and healers, and men organized the more mundane things they were interested in, such as politics and wars. Witches were the wise women people looked up to for guidance and healing. But, through the centuries, Christianity fought a bitter struggle to replace this civilized culture with its fascist, male chauvinist, brutal domination of society. Millions of women were burned alive by the Inquisition just for being witches—wise women."

"Yes, I've read something about the witch craze. The way women were put down *was* appalling, and it was Protestant churches, just as much as the Catholic, that did it. By medieval times Christianity no longer reflected the God of love Jesus taught about."

"I'm amused by the concept of a God of love. I think it's an oxymoron. A loving goddess, for sure, but all the gods I've heard of or read about have been hateful."

"Don't you think Jesus was the 'prince of peace'?"

"Some of the things he said certainly are wonderful, and others have probably been put into his mouth by the Bible writers. So perhaps he was a prince of peace—the one-and-only *prince* of peace—the exception that proves the rule!"

"It sounds like you're a raging feminist."

"Sounds like you are a typical male chauvinist."

“I guess I have been...But the last couple of years I’ve been finding my feminine side, and seeing God in a different way—as something inside every person, connecting them to everyone and everything in the universe, not someone out there telling us what to do.”

“You do seem to have shifted a long way from the fundamentalism you grew up with. What caused that?”

“Well, in one respect, I think I’ve always had an open mind about things. I’ve always liked discussing ideas with people who had a different religious outlook. This got me into a lot of trouble as a teenager until I learned who I could and couldn’t talk to about things controversial. Then it seemed to my parents that I’d ‘sown my intellectual wild oats’ and settled down, but I was really just keeping the peace in my family and church.”

“Ah ha.”

“I’ve always been searching for the truth about religion, though, and I knew it wasn’t to be found in the fundamentalism I grew up with. It was so hateful. Then, a couple of years ago, I read some books about a loving, inclusive kind of spirituality, and saw there was a totally different way to approach Christianity: as inner spirituality rather than outer moralizing—probably much like Paganism.”

“Yes, inner spirituality certainly is an important part of Paganism.”

“In fact, one book I read had a chapter on the witch craze, and talked about Paganism in a very favorable light—of how, as you said, it had been the original culture of Western Europe, which was gentle and fair, and how wrong it was that Christianity persecuted it so relentlessly. Still, that

was a controversial book. Everyone else in my family would hate it, and think it was the work of the devil.”

“Sounds good, actually. If it has the power to turn even one fundamentalist into a seeker of spirituality, it must be on the side of the goddess!”

“Well, as I said, I was searching—I don’t think too many fundamentalists would be open to those sorts of books. You need to know they have closed minds.”

“I already had an idea that might be the case.” She smiled.

“Yeah, I guess just about everybody knows that these days, except for the fundamentalists themselves.”

“So, knowing all this, how could you go on teaching at a Christian school?”

“Well, for a while I tried to encourage a curiosity for the truth in my students—until the parents started complaining! Then I realized I just couldn’t go on with it. I took a year off, and traveled around the country. And in Europe and India. I was supposed to be going back this fall. But I know now I just can’t.”

“So, were you at that hot spring in Oregon you mentioned when you heard of the plan to bomb Congress?”

“Yes. Camping at the hot spring in the forest, conspiring with a bunch of ex hippies on how to save the country! I know that sounds unlikely.”

“Oh no, I believe you. You were saying that’s where you’re headed back to now.”

“True. Well, for some time, I’d been traveling around the hot springs of the Northwest, discussing philosophy and politics with all sorts of interesting types. Many had dropped

out of what they saw as our totally crazy, corrupt way of life, and spent most of the year communing with nature and preparing for the breakdown of materialistic society when the oil runs out.”

“Hah! I know a few people like that, too.”

“What I’ve found out is that there’s a vital counterculture in and around the hot springs of America. And I believe that in it we might just find the seeds of a new free and fair society.”

“You’re such a starry-eyed dreamer...But I like that.”

After not sleeping very well, they left soon after sunrise. Amanda was driving.

“So, we’re outta here on day two!”

“It’s not like me to be up this early in the morning.” Jeff rubbed his eyes. “But I guess we were both awake an hour ago. So...it made sense to get going.”

“I’ve always been an early riser—I love the freshness of the morning.”

“As for me, I often used to get up to go to the bathroom about five in the morning, and briefly admire the dawn before going back to bed again. If it was particularly beautiful I’d sometimes photograph it. So looking through my photo albums, you could easily get the impression that I’m an early riser. Just another example of how the camera can lie. Personally, I prefer the gentle zephyrs of mid-morning, and warm, balmy summer evenings.”

“Not the severe stoic, by the sound of it?”

“Not me. Give me moderation in all things.”

“But you do seem to have a penchant for early-morning humor.”

“That’s only because I haven’t woken up properly. Sometimes I fall prey to my own belief in Oscar Wilde’s dictum that ‘only boring people are eloquent before breakfast.’”

“Mmm. I can see how that could get boring real quick. If it doesn’t die a natural death, we might have to stop for breakfast quite soon.”

“Seems you’re also pretty sharp at this hour of the morning.”

“Must have rubbed off from you.”

“Yeah.”

“And also, I was up before you, phoning my staff.”

“I hope they’re all early risers like you.”

“Actually they’re not. All but Berni were asleep, and I woke them up. And of course it was really early in L.A. Still, they were pleased to hear from me. And they all think I’m doing the right thing by escaping the scene. They’re going underground themselves.”

“Only thing to do.”

“Anyway, I feel better now for having phoned them.”

“Glad to hear it.” They exchanged smiles.

“Since you’re navigating, you’d better tell me which way to go.”

“We were planning to get off the freeway ASAP weren’t we?”

“Uh huh.”

He examined the road atlas. “If we stay on the freeway until just after Farmer City, we could branch off onto Highway 136 west across Illinois, and take it from there.”

As the clock on the dashboard approached six o’clock, Jeff turned on the radio and scanned for a station that might have news coming up.

“I don’t know how you can figure out which station will have news at six, when it’s only five to.”

“It’s intuitive. You’ve heard of men’s intuition, haven’t you?”

“Can’t say I have, actually. But this will be a good test to see if it works.”

Jeff kept scanning through the stations, until one just happened to say, ‘National news coming up at the top of the hour.’ “There you go. *Voila!* News!”

“That’s not intuition! You heard him saying news was coming up.”

“But my intuition told me to scan the stations *before* six, even though it didn’t make a lot of sense to. Isn’t that what intuition is all about?”

“Oh yes! Just your little party game.”

“No, no, no! It *is* intuition. I feel offended that you don’t believe me.”

“So, I’ve just seen an example of that rare and endangered species—the male intuition?”

“What I like about your facetious comments is that they have such...a light touch. They don’t come across as a put down, or as sarcastic, or anything.”

“Oh?...I don’t quite know what to make of that. But I’m going to assume you were serious about it. So, thanks. It is perceptive of you. I am just having fun. I don’t really hate men, even if I’m a feminist. It’s too corrosive to the soul to hate. I really do love everyone, although there are certainly some people I would prefer not to spend too much time with.”

“I hope I’m not one of them?” Jeff was half quizzical, half serious.

“No, no. Seriously. You’re OK. You’ve been kind to me. And I do like your company.”

“Oh, good.”

“What about me? I can be a little over the top sometimes.”

“I haven’t noticed it. And I’m enjoying this adventure of ours. I’m anxious about what’s happening to America, but I like being with you.”

“Thanks. That makes me feel more comfortable. You are—The news! Can I turn it up?”

“Sure. Here.”

“The latest on the Congress bombing story is that the FBI have arrested two suspects—Muslim agitators known to be sympathetic to ISIS. The search for other perpetrators, however, continues. Their names are—”

“Inevitable!” Amanda interjected. “The first two of many innocent Muslims who are going to suffer.”

“And in developments from the White House, President Jones announced late last night that he has appointed a ‘Presidential Governing Council’ to help him administer the country for the duration of the time martial law is in place. He did not name the members of the council, saying that since there were so few of them, their time would be eaten up by lobbyists and reporters, and they could even be in personal danger, if their identities were made public. He did say, however, that the council includes some of the few members of Congress who either were not in the House chamber at the time of the blast, or had survived the blast, and certain prominent ‘upright’ members of the community whom he respects and trusts. Although there was intense pressure on the president at the press conference last night to reveal at least some names, he refused to budge from his position. When asked whether there were any members of religious right organizations on his Governing Council, he said, ‘No comment.’”

“I bet you there are,” said Jeff. “And possibly even more unsavory types from citizen’s militias and white supremacist groups.” They kept listening, but there was not much else of interest. There was reaction from around the world, and condolences from the leaders of many countries, but nothing significant seemed to be happening.

“I get the feeling there’s a kind of stunned silence everywhere,” Amanda said. “Which is what you’d expect.”

“Yes. And have you noticed that there’s no other traffic on this freeway. It’s early, but still...”

“Kind of eerie.”

“People have been advised not to travel unless they really need to, but it still does feel weird. I feel kind of conspicuous or something.”

“Actually, conspicuous is the word, Jeff. If any helicopter or plane flies over they’ll wonder who the hell we are to be hot footing it between cities when everyone else is quietly waiting out the crisis at home. When can we get off this freeway?”

“I’ll check the atlas...See if there’s a closer road...Well it looks like the road to Seymour might connect, via Clinton, Mason City and Havana. It should be coming up in a few miles.”

“Let’s take it then; I’ll be happy to get off the beaten trail. Something tells me we were driving right into a trap.”

Later when they stopped for gas in Iowa the attendant said to Jeff,

“I’ve heard there are roadblocks going up on freeways at state borders, and folks are not being allowed out of the state

their cars are registered in. They're searching every vehicle at state lines. Seems to be the Feds enforcing it, not Iowa. The army, from what I've heard. Don't know what they're doing, though, when someone's as far away from home as you are."

"And I don't really want to find out. We need to get to California. Do you know what would be the least used road into Nebraska?"

"Got a map? I could show you a road I know. Of course, if the army's got a mind to stop folks moving interstate until they catch all these Muslim terrorists, then before the day's out they could have *all* the roads blocked. But to do that across the whole country would be some job—my guess is this road here will be OK."

"Well, thanks a heap."

"Good luck."

Jeff wandered back to the car via the gas station's fast food counter.

"Hey, Amanda, they had these ready-made burgers that looked good, so I bought a couple of them, as well as these juices."

"Well, thanks, but I'm a vegetarian. I am famished, though. That continental breakfast at the motel hardly even whetted my appetite. Let me have a look at it." She unwrapped and examined it with rather a jaundiced look. "Junk food, ugh! But if I take the meat pate off, I think what's left would be better than nothing. Want the extra meat on yours?"

“Sure. I don’t think there was anything else there that would appeal to you, but you could go take a look for yourself.”

“No, let’s get going. I’ll just keep an eye out for a health food store, or a market that might sell some fruit.”

They drove tentatively past a police car by the side of the road at the edge of town. The officer waved to them. Obviously the army had not fully coordinated with all the local police departments yet.

“The gas station attendant was saying the army is putting roadblocks up on state borders, and are keeping people in their own states.”

“How’s that going to affect us?”

“I don’t know. He showed me a back road into Nebraska. Just have to see how it goes.”

When they made it into Nebraska mid-afternoon, they found that health food store, and stocked up for the rest of the trip. Soon after that, when they stopped again for gas, Jeff asked the girl at the register, “Do you know anything about roadblocks on highways leading to Wyoming?”

“East to Iowa seems like nothing much is getting through. But from Wyoming this farmer told me he was turned back on the interstate, but got through on 26.”

“Excuse me.” A burly man who had overheard them from behind the counter came up next to the girl. “Are you looking for a good route to get past the roadblocks that are going up?”

“Yes.”

“Going west?”

“Yeah.”

“There’s someone I could phone up who would know the best road. If you would just like to take a seat, I’ll go out back and phone him. Only take a few minutes.”

“Just need to go out to my car, but I’ll be back in a minute.” Jeff called out. He smelt a rat. As he pushed open the glass door he noticed his car was now hidden behind a truck which had pulled in. What a stroke of luck!

“What’s up?” Amanda could see the concerned look on Jeff’s face.

“We’re getting outta here. I think the owner of the gas station’s phoning the police.” Jeff pulled out onto the road at a normal speed, so as not to attract attention, and decided to take a left off the main road west out of town. A few blocks down he pulled over to see if his map showed a road going south. Just then a police car flashed by, and turned on its siren to cross a red light. It turned right, toward the gas station they were just at, and a few seconds later the siren stopped.

“What are you going to do?” Amanda whispered.

“I think I’ll wait right here and see which way he goes. Since I was talking about heading west, I think he’ll head that way. If he does, we’ll find a way out of town south, then a little later double back north to get back on the highway we were on.”

About two minutes later the siren started up again, and Jeff saw the flash of black, white and orange fly past a few streets back, heading west.

“OK, we’re outta here.” After a couple of turns, they found their way onto the main route south. “So, let’s look for

a road west, then one north again, to get us back on the highway in an hour or so.”

The strategy worked. After crossing Interstate 80, and seeing there was some traffic on it, they decided to take it west for a while to make up time. Just after dark they branched north onto highway 26 to avoid crossing the state line on the freeway. Each two hours or so they swapped drivers, and the one in the passenger seat tried to sleep in a seat laid back as far as possible, head buried in a pillow. Just after midnight they crossed into Wyoming, and, as the farmer had told the girl at the gas station, there was no roadblock on 26. They decided to press on across Wyoming, to get into Idaho early the next morning. It would be Sunday, and they figured that might give them a little time in the morning, before a roadblock appeared at the border. All night they drove, swapping drivers ever more frequently. In the end they could only do about an hour each before they started nodding off. It was grueling. Dawn cast its rosy glow on the snow-covered Tetons, then the sun climbed into the sky behind them as they ground up and up the winding road over the Teton Pass, and down into Idaho. They had been driving twenty-four hours with hardly a break. The sun rose and went down, and then, after the interminable night, came up again, and still they drove. At noon, they had been thirty hours on the road, and were almost at Stanley in Idaho. They were nearing a hot spring Jeff knew of on the Salmon River.

“We’ve just *got* to rest,” Jeff said. “And a soak in a hot spring will be just the thing to freshen up.”

“I’m not going to object to that.”

“And we might hear something.”

“The radio certainly hasn’t been much help.”

“All the soul-searching commentary you would expect, but precious little information about what’s actually happening.”

“So the springs are down where those people are?”

“I think so.”

“So close to the highway. Can we just park here?”

“Yeah, well, it is sort of a turn out.”

“Do you have a towel?”

“Sure. I’ll get it.”

“It’ll be nice to get these clothes off.”

“After wearing them for three days?”

“Yeah.”

There were just three other people in the spring, and two more snorkeling in the river nearby.

“Hi.”

“Hi.”

“Lovely day.” Jeff stripped off and sank into the warm embrace of the muddy water. Amanda got in in her undies and bra, then after a few minutes peeled them off. She leaned over into the river to rinse them clean of the sulfurous hot spring mud, wrung them out, and put them on a warm rock in the sun to dry.

“Where have you come from today?” Jeff asked the couple lying next to them.

“Camped here last night,” the girl answered, “But we came from Oregon yesterday.”

“Oh? Any problems getting through—across the state line?”

“Not at all. Some people are saying there are roadblocks going up, though. We’re heading back to Portland tomorrow. Hope we can get back OK.”

“Yeah. We’re worried about that too.”

“I don’t know what to think about this bombing of Congress,” chimed in the guy. “Do you think it really happened, or it’s just some excuse to turn the country into a military dictatorship?”

“It really happened,” Amanda said with conviction. The other couple both turned and looked at her. Jeff responded.

“We saw it with our own eyes. Day before yesterday. We’ve been driving just about non-stop since then to get back West.”

“Get outta here! You mean you actually saw it happen?”

“Sure we did. Still, you’re probably right on the other count. I’m sure they *did* do it to provide an excuse to turn the country into a military dictatorship.”

“The Feds; we’d be better off without them.” Another guy there laughed and took a drag on his reefer.

“There are always going to be Feds,” Amanda observed. “Just a question of which Feds you’ve got. The ones you’re going to get now might be a whole lot worse than the ones you used to have.”

“Fuck ‘em all, if you ask me.”

The two snorkelers then climbed into the hot pool.

“What were you looking at out there?” Jeff floated over toward them.

“Salmon. And trout. I kid you not. Dozens of them!”

“Hah! Hear that Amanda?”

“Well it is the *Salmon* River.”

“And they’re not lying about that! You want to look for yourselves? I’ll lend you my mask and snorkel if you like.”

“Sure! I’m up for that. Thanks. Amanda, do you want to go first?”

“Oh, I’ll lend you mine, too.” The girl twisted them off her head and passed them to Amanda.

“Hey thanks.” They waded out into the surprisingly warm river, over irregular boulders and pebbles on the bottom. They donned their masks and sank below the surface, feeling for rocks as footholds to brace them against the current.

They both popped up together. “Hey, I saw one!” Amanda burst out.

“Me too.”

“You know, despite what they were saying, I didn’t really believe *I* would see any.”

“Neat eh?”

“So long señor, I’m back with the fish!” And she was back under the swirling river. Jeff dropped down stream a little to find a better spot. He was observing her little-girl enthusiasm and unselfconscious nakedness as much as he was the fish.

Back on the road again, Amanda asked, “Is that hot spring like the one in Oregon we’re going to?”

“A little, except the one in Oregon is more out of the way—lost in the forest—and the river it’s on is a lot colder. You can’t just loll about in it like in the Salmon.”

“Pity. That sure was fun.”

“Still, I think you’ll like it.”

“I look forward to seeing it. But I hope that full-of-himself guy smoking the joint back there isn’t typical of your counter-culture heroes who hang about your hot spring.”

“Well, you do get a few of his type. But generally speaking, no. I didn’t like him much either. My friends in Oregon are cool. And there are women, too, not just men.”

“I should hope so.”

“So it sounds like you’re thinking about hanging around with me in Oregon for a while, at ‘my’ hot spring?”

“What choice have I got? I’ll try it.”

“Well, I’m not exactly sure who we’ll even find there, given what’s happened.”

“Yes. That’s occurred to me, too. Well, one step at a time.”

“Exactly.”

As dusk fell over western Idaho, they spotted a bed and breakfast on the way out of a small town, and Jeff pulled over just past it.

“What about it?”

“I say we go for it.”

“Well, we’re both totally bushed.”

“All of last night on the road—hardly surprising.”

“OK. If we stop here, how are we going to check ourselves in?”

“What do you think?”

“What if we make out we’re married, but I’ll try and get a room with two beds, again?”

“Sounds good to me. This *is* redneck country. They might not be too impressed if we were sharing a room, otherwise.

And it's best to share. How would it look if I went into my room with no luggage? Besides, I need to share your stuff until I can buy some of my own. Tomorrow, when we get to Oregon, I'm stopping at the first town we come to, and buying some things, OK?"

"Sure."

"Unless this hot spring of yours is a nudist colony, I'll need some clothes, not to speak of...Anyway, this doesn't need to be the Swiss Family Robinson, like we're stranded on some far-flung island—this is still America, and I'm sure there will be stores open."

"I'm sure there will." Jeff smiled. They did a U-turn and drove up the drive of the bed and breakfast. Inside, an eighteen or nineteen year old girl looked at them over the counter.

"Hi. My mom's out at church tonight, and won't be back 'til later—there's some special meeting on after the service. But I can check you in if you like. Queen bed?"

"Do you have a room with two beds? If you don't that's OK, but we are both really tired, and we actually sleep better in separate beds..." Jeff felt he was struggling to sound convincing.

"That's OK. We cater for all types...Don't worry. We have a room with two full beds. Mr. and Mrs....?"

"Croft."

"That'll be seventy-five dollars."

"That's OK. We'll take it."

"Credit card, or...?"

"Yeah, here."

“In the morning, breakfast is from seven till nine, just across the hall. I’ll show you your room just as soon as this...Here it comes.” She tore off the credit card slip.

The room struck Jeff as over decorated in a fussy, not very tasteful, way. It reminded him of the homes of many of the people in the church he grew up in. And he remembered the girl saying her mother was at church.

“What do you think of the room?” he asked Amanda after they’d brought his things up.

“A little prim and proper. But the beds seem comfortable. And a shower! If the water’s hot, I’ll be happy.”

Just before turning out the light, Jeff said, “Earlier on—yesterday—you were starting to say something when the news came on the radio. You said ‘You are—’ then stopped, and I’ve been wondering what you were about to say.”

“You are...you are...Oh, I know. I think it was just something like: ‘You are really very nice.’”

“Well thank you, you’re kind of nice yourself.”

“Thank you.” Amanda smiled, then yawned. “Good night. Oh! So I finally found out your last name, eh—Croft?”

“Yeah. I told you I’d tell you when I knew you better.”

“When you felt you could trust me, I expect.”

“Well, I trust you now.”

“That’s nice to know. Good night...Jeff Croft.”

“Good night Amanda.”

Next morning they came down to breakfast at seven-thirty after a long, refreshing night's sleep. They sat near the window end of the table, and poured themselves orange juices from a jug. The dining room's floral wallpaper, lace curtains and ornate imitation antique furniture, reminded Jeff of the bedroom. A large vase of fresh flowers, however, transformed the room into a more inviting place. A conservatively dressed middle-aged woman came in from the kitchen with a smile that matched the decor.

"Good morning. You must be Jeff and Amanda Croft?"

"Yes. Good morning." Jeff looked up at her slightly puffy face.

"I'm Barbara. You met my daughter Angela last night."

"Nice to meet you Barbara."

"Lovely flowers," Amanda offered.

"They're from the altar at our church. I brought them back with me last night."

"How nice! They really lift the room."

"Thank you. Well, for breakfast, would you like granola, or fruit and yogurt? And, after that, ham and eggs or mushroom scramble?"

Jeff looked at Amanda, who took the cue. "Fruit and yogurt and the mushroom scramble for me, please."

"And the same for me, too, thanks."

After a while, Barbara brought in the scrambled eggs. "Do you mind if I join you, now I've finished cooking?"

"Oh no, of course not. Please do."

When she turned back to the kitchen to get her plate, Jeff, out of long habit, and personal liking for the custom, closed his eyes, clasped his hands together, elbows on the edge of the table, and silently gave thanks. Amanda noticed, and joined in. She had often taken such opportunities to give thanks to the Earth Goddess for her bountiful gifts. They remained silent at first, but toward the end of the meal, Barbara caught Jeff's eye and started the conversation.

"We haven't had many guests the last couple of days, because of the crisis, so it's nice to see you. Where are you headed?"

"Oh, we're off to California to see Amanda's parents, after visiting friends in Oregon."

"And you live in Virginia?"

"Yes."

"You are a long way from home."

"And a little worried about getting back, the way things are. We're hoping that if we stay a month or so in California traveling might be easier by then."

"I noticed you giving thanks for the meal earlier. Are you a Christian?"

"Yes."

"And, forgive me for asking, are you born again? Do you accept the Lord Jesus Christ as your personal Savior?"

"Yes." Jeff, although comfortable enough with the first question—about whether he was a Christian—had for some time been uneasy about these next two, which often came together. They seemed to exclude more people than they affirmed, which was at the heart of what was wrong with fundamentalism. But something told him to say yes this time,

and with the habit of the years, it slid convincingly enough off his tongue.

“The reason I ask is that the Lord has put it into my mind, probably because you are so far away from your own church, to tell you about what’s been going on in Christian circles these last couple of days. It’s truly wonderful!”

“Wonderful?” Jeff was taken aback.

“Well, it was a shocking thing that happened, to be sure. But it *is* wonderful, because it’s the beginning of the tribulation. Our pastor was telling us about it last night at a special meeting after the evening service. Professors from Bible colleges and pastors from across the country have been meeting and phoning each other, and they’re all agreed: this is the beginning of the tribulation. Jesus is directing it, and has revealed himself to some of our most faithful church leaders. Jesus told one of them he would not reveal himself widely until after the earth was cleansed of the unrighteous. And the rapture! That has happened, too. It is a little different than we all expected, but God always surprises us.”

“So what’s the rapture now?”

“Well, I always thought the idea of righteous Christians being raised up into the air to meet Jesus was a little ridiculous, although I went along with it, because everyone else did. No, it turns out that instead of being raised up into the air, we have been raised up to a position of authority over all the earth to help Jesus execute the tribulation, which is a cleansing of the earth of all the immorality and Godlessness, all the idol worship and sexual perversion and witchcraft that pollutes it, more than ever in this evil generation. Cleansing

the earth so it will be perfect for Jesus' reign during the Millennium."

"How's this going to happen?"

"It already has! In the twinkling of an eye. That's the way it is with Jesus. President Jones, who is a Bible-believing Christian, has established a 'Presidential Governing Council' which consists of a few faithful, Bible-believing Congressmen who were miraculously spared, and the most important born-again church leaders from the true Bible-based churches."

"We heard about the 'Presidential Governing Council' on the news, but what we heard is that the president is not revealing who is actually on it."

"And why should he? What business is it of the Godless to know what is happening to them in the tribulation? But we know, and that's what's important. The Presidential Governing Council is communicating with true Christians everywhere through church leaders and pastors, and we all have an important role to play in the tribulation. For the first time, America has a truly Christian government—it is being governed by the church itself. Isn't that a miracle?"

"Yes. Astounding. It'll take me a while to get over my surprise. I'm glad you told me about this, because, as you said, being away from my home church, I haven't heard of it. So tell me more about what's happening. What's this new government going to do first?"

"Well, we've received our first commission already. God doesn't muck around when he gets going! Since the whole point of the tribulation is to cleanse the earth of all impurity, our first job is to collect names and addresses of all those

people we know who are homosexuals, adulterers, followers of pagan and idol worshipping religions, feminists, communists, libertarians, pornographers, followers of yoga and witchcraft, and all those who try to pervert Christianity into something it isn't. We've been given a complete list—I may have forgotten some; I'll have to read it carefully and memorize it."

"And what do you do with this list of names and addresses, when you've got it together?"

"Oh, just give it to our pastor. Jesus will see to it these people are converted or cleansed at the right time. Jesus is the prince of peace, and his dearest wish is that all these people repent and accept him as their Savior. And in these amazing times many will. But we know that some people will never repent of their wickedness. Some will have to be taken out of society to bring to a halt their evil influence on those around them. Others who are not so bad will be allowed to stay on as our servants. We will adopt their younger children, out of compassion, so that as many as possible of them can be saved. Our pastor has asked us to be prepared to receive as many as three of these 'children in peril' into each of our families. His view is that with strict discipline, which we shouldn't be afraid to administer, even children as old as twelve can be saved, despite their being saturated by evil influences up 'til then. Isn't that a miracle? But with the Lord, all things are possible. And through faith and obedience to his church, we can be his miracle workers."

"When is all this going to start?" Amanda hoped she wasn't showing her nervousness.

“Oh, it will take some time to organize, of course. The tribulation will last longer than a few weeks! But I hope to be blessed to see the dawning of the Millennium in my lifetime...To start with, as I said, we just collect the names, and God’s new government will keep them in their towns, and the jobs they are doing, for the time being, and watch them, so they know which ones to treat in which ways. We are all called on to have Christlike discernment in these times.”

“How will they keep people in their towns and jobs?”

“Oh, check points are being set up everywhere by the army, acting on the president’s orders. Only true raptured Christians will be given passes—no one else will be able to go anywhere. We are in authority in the world now. There’s not enough gas left for everyone to be driving around all over the place, anyway. The other thing is that only raptured Christians will be able to have phones and internet access—it’s important that the wicked can’t communicate and plot with each other to try and foil Jesus’ plan.”

“So, have you heard whether the same thing has been happening in other countries?” asked Jeff. “Have Christians been raptured into authority anywhere else?”

“No, no. America is where it has to happen first. Then we will conquer all the world and put born-again Christians into authority in all the countries of the earth. Actually, it will only be necessary to conquer one country—the arch evil haven of communism, China. It is the dragon of the book of Revelation, and the war with China will be the Battle of Armageddon. When we have conquered China and laid it at Jesus’ feet, all the rest of the countries in the world will

voluntarily offer themselves up to us, and the Millennium will be at hand. The final act, before the Millennium begins, will be the destruction of the Muslim ‘Dome of the Rock’ and another mosque they’ve defiantly built on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, so the third temple, which will last forever, can be built on the site of King Solomon’s original temple. The laying of the corner stone of the third temple will mark the beginning of the Millennium...And since you’re from the South, let me tell you something else.” She lowered her voice. “We’re not acting on this right away, as there are other more urgent things to do, but before the Millennium all the Negroes will be returned to their God-ordained positions as slaves, so they can serve God’s chosen ones. Robert E. Lee did not fight in vain! After nearly a century-and-a-half he will have his final victory, and our inherited rights will be restored to us.”

Jeff was filled with horror at the enormity of what this woman was saying to him, but realized it was important for him to find out as much as he could.

“One other thing you may have heard. Since the bombing of Congress was the start of the tribulation, was it a Christian group who planned it and did it?”

“Good glory no! God would not want Christians to have that sort of blood on their hands. But God didn’t stand in the way of the plans of the heretical Muslim terrorists, as he most surely would have if Congress had had a majority of God-fearing Christians in it. Congress had become an anathema to God, full of atheist libertarians posing as Democrats, homosexuals pushing for the right to be able to *marry* each other and be considered a family. Some

Republicans even voted for homosexual rights. But worst of all, there was even a *witch* in the House of Representatives! A *lesbian* witch, which is what you would expect of a witch. She was Amanda Klein from the Green Party. We had all been praying for her defeat in the next election. Now that's not needed since she died in there. Can you imagine, a *witch* in the American Congress? No wonder God's wrath was stirred up. I'm sure she's gone straight to hell."

Jeff glanced at Amanda. She was as white as a sheet of paper, and looked as if she was about to vomit. He had to get her out of there. Barbara noticed, too, and said,

"Never mind, dear. I'm sure you are shocked at that witch having the same name as you. But you shouldn't be worried. Amanda is a lovely name. And I've met other good Christians called Amanda. I'm sorry if I upset you. These are shocking times we live in, but God will protect you, and even exult you, along with all true Christians. So take heart my dear—everything will be all right."

"Well thank you for telling us about all this. I'm sure Amanda will be all right in a while. All this is quite an emotional overload. It's making my head spin, too. They say even good changes in your life are stressful, and this is an enormous change in all our lives. It'll take time for us to come to grips with it. And time is flying by—nearly nine o'clock! We have to get going. Thanks for the lovely breakfast."

"Give me our room key, Jeff—I want to go up and get ready to leave."

"Sure."

As Amanda walked up the stairs, Barbara said to Jeff, “Just one more thing. I’m sure you know of some people who should be cleansed—witches and homosexuals and the like—back home where you live. If you’d like to use my phone to call home to your local church to report them, that would be perfectly all right.”

“Oh, don’t worry. All this has just been such an overload. We’ll need to think about that as we drive along today. We can always phone up from our friend’s place in Oregon.”

“Yes, you can, can’t you. I’m sure that’s the best plan then. God bless you in your travels.”

“Thank you. And God bless you, too.” Jeff had to restrain himself from running up the stairs. Amanda was sitting on the bed, pale and teary.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

“I just threw up my breakfast.”

“That was shocking. Really shocking. As soon as you’re ready, we’ll get out of here.”

“Confronting my enemy face-to-face like that brought all the horror of the situation home to me. It was nauseating. But I’m feeling a little better now.”

“Can I give you a hug?”

She nodded and stood up, and Jeff put his arms around her and stroked her hair, and she broke down and cried some more. After a few minutes, she said,

“OK. I’m all right now. Let’s get outta here.”

As they drove along in the bright healing sunshine, Amanda said,

“Man oh man! You sure were right about this being a fundamentalist take over, and about what they would do.”

“Except I didn’t imagine the half of it. Bringing back slavery! And what she was saying was shocking enough even without that. I wouldn’t have believed any human beings could be that ruthless, cruel, and self-righteous. Except maybe Hitler or someone like that.”

“I felt so trapped in there. I was sure she was going to figure out who I was. And if she had...She probably would have pulled a gun on me and called the police.”

“Yes, I’m sure she would own one.”

“I can see now that this is why my intuition was warning me to leave D.C., even though you were right, of course, that the new government will succeed in blaming the bombing on Muslim terrorists.”

“Absolutely. They probably wouldn’t have even bothered with having a good excuse to lock you up, they’d ’ave just gone ahead and done it on the flimsiest pretext.”

“Exactly! Well, it’s good to be putting the miles between us and that woman. But I want to warn everyone about what’s happening, so they can get away. How can we do that?”

“Well, first we have to get away ourselves. There is still the Oregon border to cross. We’ll get there mid morning. Should we try to cross it as quickly as possible, or should we wait ‘til after midnight?—that’s what I’m concerned about.”

“I think we should try and make it through this morning. The longer we leave it, the worse it’s likely to get.”

“OK. So if we’re stopped, you are my girlfriend, and we’re traveling to Oregon to visit some of my friends, and

then to California to visit your family? And you have your California driver's license, right?"

"Yes. Sounds good."

Coming into Weiser, they turned left to cross into Oregon, and just before the bridge crossing the Snake River was a lone police car, staring them down. An officer emerged from the car and waved them over.

"You're a long way from home."

"Virginia? Yes."

"I'm supposed to prevent cars with Idaho plates leaving the state. But what do I do with someone from the East Coast?"

"My girlfriend's from California."

"Oh? I guess I'd better see your licenses." They handed them over, and he had a good look at them. "As you say. Virginia and California. So, you're heading down to California?"

"Yes. To stay with her folks. And we're visiting friends of mine in Oregon on the way."

"Well, *you* sure have a problem—she's headed the right direction, but you are going the wrong way." He handed their licenses back.

"Why's that a problem?"

"Well, the army wants everyone back in their own state as soon as possible, so in each state people cleared to travel can be given a pass. Idea is to help track down the culprits of the Congress bombing, and help prevent the movement of other would-be terrorists, to make the whole country safer for

everybody. Trouble is, you're going to get caught in California without a pass."

"If I drop off Amanda in L.A. and head straight back to Virginia, do you think I'd get through?"

"Well, if you were heading toward home, that might work—especially as you don't look too much like an Islamic terrorist—but don't take my word on that."

"Does that mean you are letting us through?"

"I probably shouldn't, but I'm going to."

"Thanks."

"You're welcome—safe trip."

They drove slowly over the Snake River, then a big smile lit up Jeff's face.

"Hey! We made it to Oregon."

"You did well."

"*We* did well."

"And now?"

"I've got no idea what we'll find."

"I know what I'm going to find."

"A store where you can buy some clothes?"

"You guessed it."

"We could go through Baker City."

"Thanks."

Jeff had something on his mind, which he didn't quite know how to raise with Amanda. But a half hour or so later, after a few minutes silence, he overcame his hesitation. "There's one thing I want to ask you."

"Go ahead." There was a tinge of apprehension in her voice.

“Are you actually a lesbian, or was that just a fabrication of those religious right people?”

Amanda cleared her throat. “I was kind of hoping you missed that—so I could tell you myself. I am a lesbian. I *was* going to tell you...Hell that sounds lame.”

Jeff was silent for half a minute, which seemed like half an hour.

“You’re upset with me, aren’t you?” Amanda asked.

“No. Not upset with *you*. After all, there was no reason for you to mention it...Not unless things...”

“Got more intimate?”

“Well, yes. But then again, since you’re a lesbian they wouldn’t have got more intimate, would they?”

“You could have tried to persuade me to ‘change teams.’”

“Would you do that?” asked Jeff, missing the slight edge of scorn in her voice, because of his wish that it might be true.

“No.”

Then he realized his mistake, felt embarrassed and hurt, and fell into a long period of awkward silence. She, too, felt awkward, and a little annoyed. How absurd that she was here with this man, anyway. She just wanted to get away from him. She wished she had a great big coat she could shrink inside and disappear into. It was a slow trip into Baker City. As they entered town, Jeff broke the silence.

“Does that look like the right sort of store?”

“Yes.”

He pulled into the parking lot. “I’ll go buy a few things too. Only be fifteen minutes, then I’ll just be waiting in the car.”

“Sure.”

An hour later Jeff was wondering whether Amanda might have just taken off on her own and left him there, when she appeared around the corner wheeling an elegant new suitcase, and carrying two large plastic bags. He opened the trunk and helped her fit her new things in it. Inside the car she looked at him, abashed.

“Jeff, I’m really sorry I was so rude to you. You had every right to ask me about my sexual orientation. If you didn’t ask, how would you know? And it was mean of me to talk about ‘changing teams’ when I had no intention of doing so. I realize I have, unconsciously, got more caught up than I want to be in an extreme feminist outlook on men—with all its scorn and righteous indignation. I need to step back from that.”

“That’s OK.”

“No, it’s not OK. Acting like that made me feel wretched. I realized while in there shopping that I need to look at things in a new way. I also realized your friendship is important to me.”

“Thank you. Friendship is important—the most important thing, really.”

“Sex is important, too...I must say I’m pretty confused, emotionally, at the moment.”

“But one can separate them—sex and friendship.”

“I know. I think *I* can most of the time. But can you, in this situation?”

“Well, on one level, I can. And on the other level I can try.”

“I guess you are physically attracted to me?”

“Yes...As well as to who you are.”

“I’m sorry...I really am very sorry about that. I’m attracted to you as a person, but male bodies just don’t...do anything for me. You know it’s not personal?” And just as she finished saying it she found herself wondering whether this, too, was just a prejudice, but she didn’t think so.

“Sure. It’s OK. I’m glad you explained all this to me. It makes me realize you care about me, and that’s nice.”

“I do care about you, Jeff. The last thing in the world I meant to do was hurt you.”

He smiled, a little poignantly, and she did, too, with slightly moist eyes. She leaned her shoulder against his, then put her arms around him and hugged him.

About the Author

A teacher with a degree in Biochemistry, Mark spent five years researching and writing his first published book, *In Search of the Loving God*, which continues to sell well.

Since then he has written three more books. This novel, *The Hot Springs of America*, arose from his passion for envisioning a better future for humanity and his love of the natural hot springs in the Pacific North West where he lives and has a small farm. *Living the Revolution* is a handbook for living sustainably. *Celestial Navigation Without Almanacs* is a book on simple ways to navigate by the sun and stars. It is based on his being a life-long Amateur Astronomer, a science teacher, and a cruising sailor. He has also presented two original scientific theories on his website, one about healing depression and weight gain naturally, and another a quantum gravity theory called *Universal Field Cosmology*.

All these works, as well as a cruising blog, some computer programs and some songs he has written, are available at his website at: www.markmason.net.

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