

Chapter Five
A Rest Along The Way



After riding at a leisurely pace for a couple of hours, to allow Pen to become used to the saddle, they came to a spot where a creek ran down over an alluvial fan under a glaciated peak, and a stand of cottonwoods and sycamores shaded a grassy spot. The four dismounted and led the horses to the creek, and after they had drunk their fill, Bend tethered them to trees away from the water so they could graze. Theo chose an inviting spot where a felled tree stump provided a table, and began prepare their tea: bread, honey, cheese, and apples, which he explained had been stored from the previous fall. He pulled out a flask, which Lirit happily ran to fill up with water, and four ceramic mugs, and they began to eat.

Pen wondered about literature. “This goes back to something Bend and I were talking about this morning; I remember reading a book once about a utopian community, and one of the things I found odd was that they talked about reading novels—and I wondered what they would have to write about.

Everything in the society was ordered, people served in a kind of industrial army, and then went home to listen to music on a radio and read novels. But I couldn’t imagine what those novels would be like.”

Bend looked at her thoughtfully and replied, “Well, at least your long-term memory seems to be returning. But you’re right. There aren’t many novels written here; not enough angst. Our few anxieties tend to be seasonal, or biological. But then, we all chose to come, and so far seem content with our commitments. Perhaps when our children are older, and we can’t introduce them to the relatives we left behind, and they want to hear stories other than the ones we tell them or what they can read—maybe then enough conflict will

have developed for novels to appear. But I wonder. We left for good reasons, and building this life demands a certain amount of struggle. Perhaps a new kind of literature will evolve from all this. Your coming here will certainly affect us, and the consequences aren't really foreseeable at this point. This new uncertainty might well spark something interesting."

"But what do you write?" she asked. "Even the youngest children seem anxious to record almost anything. I've never seen so many varieties of notebooks, sketchbooks, scrapbooks—people carrying about bits of paper, scribbled all over, drawn on, gathered into piles, held together by string. What gets written down?"

Bend chuckled. "Everything! Remember, we haven't been here long, and we're still discovering the place. The oldest member of the group, Clara, who had lived 'here' before for most of her life, originally spent all of her time walking around, watching, listening, sniffing, recording what she noticed. She had done the same thing before she came, and she felt compelled to make note of the changes. Even though she's quite old now, she still tries to locate spots she once knew and record the differences. The valley itself had been polluted with heavy metals and dust from the lake bed after the water was siphoned off, and even though the air was far less damaged than that in the urban areas to the north and south, it had already begun to kill off the population. Although Clara's healthy now, our ability to deal with catastrophic illness and old age is limited, so she goes out to learn as much as she can about what's different, and she writes it all down. The kids are just plain interested in everything, and absurdly materialistic in a way. They collect seeds, flowers, leaves, rocks, animal bones, and make their own study collections. We had to find a way to make sturdy baskets and boxes really quickly, once we started having babies! But they come by it naturally, since we're all collectors in one way or another."

As they spoke, five-year-old Lirit walked over to show Pen a desiccated jackrabbit skull, then scurried off to find the little sheaf of drawing paper she

apparently carried with her most of the time, and which Theo had placed in his pack. Pen had seen her earlier, tongue stuck out nearly to her nose in concentration, attempting to reproduce a pattern of rocks and twigs she had arranged on the ground. Her hand skills were strong for her age, but, from what Pen had already observed, not exactly unusual for this group of children. Lirit found the paper and a pencil, sat down, and proceeded to draw the skull. The tongue came out again as she began to focus on her sketching.

“Why do all of these kids seem so smart? Have they been bred for intelligence? Is there some kind of eugenics program going on? Or is this just a byproduct of being able to select who joins the community: everybody who came was smart, and so they have smart offspring?”

“Well,” said Bend, “there’s no ‘program.’ The kind of mechanical thinking that eugenics entails is abhorrent to us. And I guess if you were to subscribe to a notion of intelligence that says ‘smart’ means ‘performs above expected levels for age group,’ all this might seem surprising. But we had decided before we came that we would try to avoid those kinds of expectations. One of the reasons we wanted to do this—beside the necessity of getting away before all hell broke loose—is that we wanted to be able to rethink the concept of ‘intelligence’ and to find a way to let children learn that didn’t entail rigid structures and failed methods. I really think that the main reason that these kids seem so bright is that we *let* them be bright. We don’t separate them off into little groups of other little kids and let one person ‘teach’ them what they ‘need to know.’”

Theo joined the conversation. “My wife and I were field anthropologists who had worked in Africa. We noticed when we studied among one group of people that children were incorporated into the community from birth, and that they worked and played alongside their parents. These kids grew up peacefully and happily until the government decided that they had to go to school, which was more than a day’s walk away; they had to board at the school and come home

once a month or so. As the children matured, they lost the connection with the community, and if they did come back to the village at all (which most of them didn't do), they were generally maladjusted and angry. Few of them ever really re-connected. We finally convinced local authorities that if literacy were so important it would be considerably cheaper to hire a teacher for the village than to board all of the children in town. After that, things improved, but when our group was thinking about education before we left to come here, we decided that formal schooling itself might be at the heart of the problem."

"That's pretty radical," said Pen. "Isn't literacy a hallmark of 'civilization'? Wouldn't abolishing schools just produce a bunch of illiterate kids with no notion of history, science, maths, poetry—all the things we usually think of as 'culture'?"

Theo answered, "Perhaps—if they never learned *anything*. But we wondered why learning had to take place in a classroom. The African group I just mentioned traditionally taught their children about their culture by telling them stories, by setting examples, and by including their kids in their daily life work. Isn't that how our ancestors educated their young, before 'boy farms' were invented? Do we really need special teachers to teach children to read? If we let them encounter literacy on their own, might they not develop a true desire to read? Of course, the Book Project makes it inevitable that our children will grow up around books; they also grow up around people who read and write all the time for pleasure, as well as people who read to acquire specific information."

Bend continued. "As I mentioned this morning, research seems to be a natural inclination around here. 'Mama, what's this flower?' is usually answered by 'Let's go look it up' or 'let's go ask' the local plant expert (although most of us are reasonably literate about basic botany). Children also discover the power of words, of stories, and begin to read on their own if they're read to enough. Some, like Wren, don't seem to want to do it until later than others do, but

with the first generation of children born here just now reaching maturity (the oldest is only twenty five), we haven't noticed much of a pattern. So far, though, it certainly seems to work better than forcing everyone to learn in a particular—usually mechanical—way at a particular time, isolated from what reading is really good for. Other aspects of learning are treated pretty much the same way: in context. Kids learn maths by solving real problems, not by rote. By the time they're ready for abstract mathematics, it's a game. The mathematicians here have a field day when kids discover interesting relationships or geometrical patterns or something, and descend on the old folks for help."

"Well, then, what about experimental sciences?" asked Pen. "You said that several people here are hard scientists—astrophysicists, theoreticians, chemists, biologists. What do they do about the kinds of facilities they had before they left? How do you teach kids about science without labs?"

"But we do have labs," Theo insisted. "They're not state-of-the-art, equipped with all the latest technology. Hell, we don't even know what the latest technology is! The fact that you're here indicates that things may be different than they were before we left. The discoveries that made it possible for us to come here weren't shared with anyone outside the group, but perhaps your research and ours overlapped enough for you to find this place. We had decided that we knew enough, and could take enough basic equipment with us, to be able to do necessary research. Since our commitment required that we separate need from desire, we had some very long discussions about what 'necessary research' would entail. If Leonardo and Copernicus could make wonderful, sophisticated discoveries about the world with minimal technology, we could survive quite well with some basic resources and some ingenuity. So we brought telescopes and microscopes, and basic research necessities. Of course, we also packed a whollop library. We made sure our population's skills would be diverse as well, because we had already discovered that a

musician can often help a geologist come up with an answer, and a dancer often has something to teach a mathematician. Getting more than two thousand people through the portal without anyone's noticing it was probably more difficult than any problem we'll ever have to solve here."

Bend went on. "We try to provide our children with both experience and the language with which to express that experience: to interpret it and understand it, to communicate it to others, to provide a richness of metaphor. That's why it's important to preserve the art and literature and music of our past, even though that past is exotic, distant, foreign, unreal. Those *other* experiences (and, through literature, music, etc., those experiences of otherness) enrich the pool. If language is the primary medium through which we come to understand the world and each other's experiences and interpretations of the world, then the provision of language-wealth multiplies possibilities. So we emphasize the many manifestations of experience—tactile, aural, visual, multi-sensual. And then we talk about experiences and compare them with those of others—some local, some textual: a multiplicity of metaphorical possibilities."

Theo continued in another direction. "This all begins with childbirth. Most of us had contact with the institutionalization and, for lack of a better word, medicalization of childbirth. Normal life experiences, which include death experiences, had been so mechanized that infants lived, sometimes with immense disabilities, who in an earlier world would have died. The artificial prolongation of marginal life brought up the question of *meaningful* life. Many of us wondered if life itself really were so valuable that it should be preserved at any cost—not just financial, but emotional and cultural. Babies born with disabilities who could survive without intervention weren't problematic. Nobody was thinking about euthanasia (that's as mechanical as intervention). But we talked long and hard about what kind of life we wanted our children to have, and how we wanted to live when we reached the point at which dramatic interventions could prolong adult life.

“This was part of our initial questioning about what we would ‘pack’ and how much technology was necessary. The first people who fell away from the original groups and opted out of the ‘conversation’ felt that taking books and focusing on texts and images in preference to life-saving technologies was morally problematic. To them, life—any kind of life—was sacred and unquestionably valuable, for its own sake. But most of us thought that the technological means employed to make life possible in the first place (such as cloning and *in vitro* fertilization), and those used to prolong life beyond the possibility of meaningful experience were inappropriate if we were to begin to shed the consequences of overly-technologized lives. Since the world seemed to be rapidly doing itself in, we wanted to strengthen our ability to survive as a species without all of the plugs and switches. The gene pool needs to recover—to regain evolutionary possibility without the constant intervention of the machine.”

Bend continued Theo’s line of thought. “One of the real considerations was how we would deal with the natural ebb and flow of life. How would we decide, both at the beginning and at the end, how much effort would be put into preserving life: how would we handle the dangerous or problem pregnancy? What kinds of interventions would we be able to handle? Nobody had a problem with a simple Cesarean section designed to save the life of the mother and/or child, but everybody balked at machinery that would prolong the life but not necessarily ensure a functional, productive, ultimately meaningful life for a child.

“This became a central feature of our concept of birth control. Pregnancy is deliberate, and fostered by the community. Women who choose to become pregnant realize the communal responsibility of child-bearing, and so view it as a craft, doing everything they can to ensure healthy children. When birth-day comes, the mother is supported by the community in which the child is destined to be raised. Our doctors and midwives are expertly trained, so that if things go ‘wrong’—birth defects, stillbirths, etc.—we do what we can. So far

we've only had minor difficulties, but we've made choices about what comprises appropriate action. There's no book, no 'to do' list, but we rely on our experience and our capabilities to be able to handle what comes up. At the same time, we value everyone in the community, and even children with what might have been termed 'disabilities' in the old world, whether intellectual or physical, have the potential to contribute in some way."

"The idea," said Theo, "is to return the experiences of birth and death to the natural realm. We're born; we live; we die. That doesn't mean that we don't just do nothing when problems arise, but that we consider the meaning of our actions. What does it mean—to ourselves, to the parents/children, to the community as a whole—to prolong life at all costs? It's obvious that we don't have the equipment that necessitates the 'at all costs' part of the question. But how far do we try to go? Do we try to develop means, or do we simply do our best to make a baby or an old or terminally ill person comfortable, to make him or her feel loved and cared for as long as life lasts? Part of this goes back to the old quantity or quality debate."

"Right," said Bend. "In the end, we do what we can. Women take care of themselves, we as a community take care of them, and we foster good births. Old or terminally ill adults continue to be a part of the community until they die. If they're in pain, we alleviate it. If they no longer wish to live, we help them understand the consequences of suicide, but the option to end their lives is their own. As our population gets further and further away from the negative influences of the former environment, we have also noticed an increase in general good health and well-being, which may ultimately make some of the questions moot. Our children are much healthier than we were at their ages, and we have been spared most of the diseases that plagued humanity when we left. If the way we live can continue to improve our physical lives, the solutions to any problems that arise may actually be simpler than we now imagine."

Pen asked, “But how do you cope with the gut-wrenching situation of terminally ill infants or children?”

Bend answered. “We haven’t yet had to deal with the problem. About all we can do is to try to minimize the likelihood that such situations would arise. Of course we can’t prevent them entirely, but so far we haven’t been faced with anything more challenging than a breech birth and a death from prostate cancer. Clara hopes she’ll fall off a cliff before she reaches any kind of decision-making stage. But the whole idea is to foster good, meaningful life. Should a baby die, we will mourn it, and we will help the parents through the experience. We hope that the children we raise will grow up both physically robust and knowledgeable about physical processes, which in turn may minimize future problems. Historically the increase in the number of childbirth-related technologies increased the number of live births and somewhat mitigated infant mortality rates, but it also created whole new categories of problems. The big, industrialized, technologically-sophisticated countries never did lower their infant mortality rates significantly. And if people had severely disabled children, they either had to be extremely wealthy or the State had to maintain the child throughout life.

“The countries that did best were those that had the least invasive child-birthing institutions, as long as there weren’t other factors—like infant malnutrition or chronic diseases like AIDS—to snuff out life before it had a chance. So here, the basis of all experience, the beginning place for understanding, is a good first introduction to the world. Pregnancy and childbirth are not treated as a disease process, and our outcomes so far have been encouraging. Our children aren’t physically perfect by any means; we have our share of vision- and hearing-related problems. One child whose grandfather had been deaf, is also profoundly deaf. But where he lives—up at the north end of the Valley—everyone in the community ‘speaks’ our version of Sign, and there are other speakers in other communities. One child in

Tinemaha was blinded in one eye in an accident, but so far no one has been born blind. We have optical measurement and grinding facilities, so those of us who are far- or near-sighted are accommodated.” Bend carefully adjusted his simple, rimless glasses. “But I think that pretty much no matter what happens, we’ll be able to handle it—as long as we can maintain our isolation from the world we left.

“The central idea is to deal with life as naturally as possible—to avoid the approaches from our old world that seemed to create as many problems as they solved. Women here undergo menopause with the support of their families and communities, rather than with drugs designed to extend their ‘youth.’ If women are valued as people, rather than objects, and allowed to celebrate, rather than avoid, life’s transitional moments, stages of womanhood become rites of passage rather than confirmations of uselessness. There is no youth cult here; old people are every bit as valuable as young people, because there’s no market-driven, technologized ‘model’ male or female. In a need-driven society, desires are carefully examined. So the women here determined even before they left that the postponement of the aging process was one of the essential problems that emanated from capitalism.

“You might remember that in order to feed the beauty and youth markets, manufacturers of cosmetics and pharmaceuticals invented more and more products whose purpose was to preserve female youth and beauty; cosmetic surgeons and researchers found more and more ways to make women (and eventually men as well) look younger at great expense, and these industries fed one another with advertisements that featured increasingly young-looking models with vacuous faces. Image became all-important, and many of the artists—photographers, graphic designers, painters—were called upon to support the market with advertisements that featured these models and ignored anyone who looked as if he or she were over twenty. The men and

women who chose to come here decided early that this is one of the major phenomena they wanted to leave behind.”

“It seems a bit ironic, then,” said Pen, “that I’ve seen no one in this place who doesn’t seem truly attractive. No one seems very old—you say Clara’s ninety, but she certainly doesn’t look over sixty.”

“Well,” said Theo, “if you think about the factors that affect the way people look, like general health, quality of diet, level of activity, exposure to pollutants, addictive habits like smoking or alcoholism, and then realize that life here promotes the good and eliminates the bad, then it shouldn’t be *too* surprising. Rather than Madison Avenue images of health and beauty, we have a truly natural substitute. We limit our exposure to the biggest problem, the sun, by using protective clothing and hats, but even the sun doesn’t seem to be as much of a problem as it was in the old valley. The ozone layer, from what our tests show, seems to be intact, and the air is not laden with petrochemicals and other pollutants. We sleep well, eat well, work and play enthusiastically, and just don’t create the same morass of problems that seemed to increase yearly in the old world. The old preoccupation with looks and youth was part of a narrow, self-indulgent vision that didn’t fit in with the expansive view of life that we developed before we came here.”

“I’ve got a personal question to ask,” Pen said. “Forgive me if it seems rude, but I’ve just realized that you’ve got to be over sixty, and unless your wife is considerably younger than you are, so does she. But Lirit is five, and even though you *look* rather youthful, it seems improbable that she could be your child. Is this another aspect of living here—prolonged fertility?”

“Not rude at all,” said Theo. “I’m actually a little surprised that you didn’t ask earlier. Safi and I are both nearly seventy, and we adopted Lirit when her mother, who is quite young, realized that she was not ready to rear a child. She lives further north, and Lirit regards her as more of a sister than a mother. As

soon as she was weaned, Lirit came to live with us permanently, and we've had her ever since. But to answer the rest of the question, we do seem to be enjoying a somewhat enhanced period of fertility. We've had a couple of recent pregnancies where the mothers were nearly fifty, and bore their babies without problems. Menstruation doesn't occur as early here as it did in the old world either, because our children, while well-nourished, aren't overweight. Even a slight increase in body-fat can lower the onset of puberty, but among lean, active youngsters, it doesn't seem to happen until fourteen or fifteen among girls. This also helps stem the problem of rampant teenage hormones—children around here don't even seem to get interested in sex until they're in their mid-teens at least. But we don't make a big deal out of it, either; kids are naked when it's appropriate, but we don't dress to titillate—practical clothing requires covering much of the body to avoid over-exposure to the sun. Women don't run around in miniskirts and string bikinis in order to attract men. They think more of themselves and their bodies than women in the old world seemed to. And men don't measure themselves here by the 'size' of anything—muscles, genitals, etc.”

“Well, maybe brain capacity,” laughed Bend. “My brain's bigger than yours, so I'm a manlier man!”

“Yeah,” retorted Theo, “but I can drive a golf ball farther than you can, and flip a pancake faster!”

The banter continued for another few minutes, until Lirit was laughing so hard tears were running down her cheeks, so things settled down and everyone sat quietly musing and catching their breath.

