

Chapter Three How Matters Were Arranged

nce again, Bend smiled. “Good Grief! I haven’t thought about all this stuff in years! But of course we thought about it long and hard once we knew we could leave. Clara often used to say, when she was particularly disenchanted with the world we left, ‘I want to live on another planet.’ To her, and to many of us, the local universe had become uninhabitable—for more reasons than we could begin to name. Many movements like ours—from slow food to anti-globalization—offered some small hope that things could change, but Clara felt that we needed a new place that would enable us to make as fresh a start as possible. And then, when the trigger was discovered, she was one of the first people to help us map out a future, and who got us to start thinking seriously about what to ‘pack.’

“We knew immediately that the preservation of craft technologies would be at the center of whatever new ‘planet’ we would make. We were all artists, crafts-folk of some sort, in the old sense of ‘artist.’ We were all highly skilled in something, often many different things. For example, I’m a linguist and a philologist, and a weaver, as well as something of a musician. Clara is a potter and a designer; she’s also a linguist, a geo-archaeologist, and an amateur astronomer. Anyway, we realized that whatever we took with us had to be either very durable or eventually expendable, because it would be difficult at best to replace what wore out. And even though we knew we’d need some basic metallurgical skills so we could smelt ores on a small scale, we also knew that we did not want to start the whole slide over again by ‘needing’ highly sophisticated tools and technologies. While we might take computers of some sort with us, and perhaps a supply of replacement parts, we knew that the

extremely exploitive processes involved with creating new machines rendered impossible the maintenance of large networks, or the development of any kind of computer-manufacturing industry—even on a small scale. So yes, we could take computers, but no, we couldn't make new ones, and so we had to be prepared for their obsolescence.

“This led us to thinking about what became the Book Project. We could take and carefully maintain a large database of texts and digital copies of books we all wanted to remember, and take a mechanical press and type, and grow what we needed to supply us with ink and paper and fabric, and we would create our own books. For as long as our solar-powered e-books and tablets work, we can read anything we have, any time we want, although we tend to minimize their use in an effort not to remain habituated to them. But the books we really care about we print, illustrate, bind, and cover. Some of us have even hand-lettered and illuminated especially beloved works, on a variety of papers we've created here. We've even processed a few vellum-like pages from animal skins we don't use for clothing or other more necessary items. But that hasn't been used yet, because we haven't decided what to print on it. There's talk of a new Chaucer, but we haven't really made up our minds.

“We actually had to argue about the Book Project. Some members of the groups objected to the preservation of certain kinds of books, or thought that even the best literature would be difficult to explain to future generations. Eventually, however, the temporary nature of the electronic library convinced most people that we could be selective about what to print, focusing on the best-loved books, and not worrying about the rest. Since we would not be forcing children to learn to read (at this, Pen looked at him quizzically), they would probably be ready for whatever confronted them when they got curious enough to begin to browse through the library.” Bend acknowledged Pen's puzzlement, grinned, and said, “At one time I would have raised an eyebrow about our approach to reading, too—mainly because, as a child, I had devoured everything I could get

my hands on—with no notion of quality or import. But consider this. The whole community participates in educating children; we don't leave it up to a school or a single teacher. Our children have proven to be terrific metaphor makers. They imitate grownups constantly—in the fields, around the fire, at meals, etc. So they pick up the desire to learn to read naturally, when it comes to seem necessary. Wren's a good example. She showed no interest in reading until recently; she learned to draw very early, and would leave 'picture notes' to us. But when someone began to weave a wall-covering based on a painting by Burne-Jones, Wren was enraptured by the drawings, and wanted to know about the artist. Clara provided her with some basic instruction, and within a couple of months, the child was reading during every free moment. She read some of Morris's prose romances after she finished the Burne-Jones biography, and proceeded to illustrate some of them. There's now a plan afoot to publish one or two, with woodcuts based on Wren's pictures—which she'll hand-color."

Pen was again startled. "But she's only a little kid! What? Seven or so?"

Bend replied, "You'll find that children's natural abilities are both valued and encouraged as soon as they manifest themselves. We help them to explore and develop interests and talents. We don't stash them away in institutions to let them grow up in predetermined ways! We've also come to trust their judgment because it's been so carefully fostered. We do guide their choices, and try to explain why it might be a better idea to leave a particular project or book until later, but we're prepared to deal with their choices without forcing them in particular directions."

Pen went back to the question of choosing books, and asked how the group made its decisions.

"In the end, we settled on bringing a large supply of e-books, several copies of the library, and replacement solar chips; we have people who know how to maintain them, but they probably will not last forever. The potential for

disaster always exists—an earthquake could destroy the archive, for example, although we try to minimize the possibilities of losing everything at once.” Again, he laughed. “If something big did happen, it would probably provide enough grief and anxiety to provide real impetus for new novels—or we’d all be kept busy trying to rewrite the old ones! One of the arguments for having the library in the first place, is that many people were afraid that we’d never be able to write any real literature again if we became too contented with our new lives!

“After all of our deliberations, ‘what to pack’ eventually boiled down to questions of sustainability. What should we take with us that could last, that we would really need, that we could not eventually make for ourselves if we found it necessary, and that could be used with minimal impact on our surroundings? Not much, as it turned out. If the two presses we brought ever wear out, the Book Project will change, but we won’t have to abandon it. Gutenberg, after all, started out with a wine press, and the Chinese block-printed their books long after they developed the concept of moveable type. We could still do it, although at a far slower pace.”

“So what did you actually bring, besides the presses and the e-library?”

“Two high-quality, low maintenance telescopes—antiques, actually. A large quantity of pencils. A huge collection of beautifully made fountain pens. Several salvaged treadle sewing machines and a variety of looms, large and small. Three old mechanical microscopes and boxes of slides; stethoscopes and other medical paraphernalia, including surgical instruments; antibiotics and other medicines that would help keep us alive until we had developed a stable population and could manufacture some of what we needed. But surprisingly little of that sort of thing, and mostly for the benefit of children. Since we knew we were already increasingly at risk in the old world, and that our chances of dying there were probably greater than our dying here, the tradeoff seemed sensible. Many of us came with medical conditions that would eventually cause

problems without the typical treatments, but were willing to take the chance of living long enough to mitigate environmentally-caused disease, or at least to help build a stable community before being overtaken by the problem. Our first ‘funeral’—a celebration, really—was held for a fellow who came with an inoperable cancer, knowing that he’d be among the first to die. But he lived here for ten years, all but the last in pretty fair health otherwise. When he finally became really ill, he had friends and family to care for him, and he died a happier man than he had been before he left. Had he stayed in the old world, he would probably have undergone long-term treatment that might have saved his life, but at great expense, both emotionally and financially. Here, he kept busy developing a recycling system for liquid wastes, and contributed substantially to the success of the community. He also began the first vineyard, and we drink to his memory often.” Bend pointed to the southwest end of the valley, where a vineyard lay on the alluvium.

“So you brought the vines—or found them?”

“There were a few wild varieties growing here, only one of which held any promise as a decent wine grape. We brought several Mediterranean varieties, suitable for a somewhat dry climate. They’re mostly reds, and the local ‘find’ is a white, so our vintners are playing with it to see if it produces anything worthwhile.”

This time Pen laughed. “This sounds a tiny bit like nouveau-riche heaven! Fine press printing, hand-crafted everything, earth-centered architecture, good wine—like something out of an upscale catalogue.”

“Yes,” Bend replied, “but with a very large difference. None of this is gained at the expense of anyone or to the detriment of the environment. We have the gift of clean water, clean air, and a pristine landscape. We have no unemployment, no crime to speak of—unless you count a few naughty children testing their limits—no homelessness, and few of the ills that large populations and

rampant capitalism produce. We came here committed to creating a world in which the difference between ‘want’ and ‘need’ is clearly recognized. Everyone’s true needs—food, clothing, shelter, occupation, community—are provided by common effort. Desires—for excellent food, comfortable and expressive clothing, beautiful living spaces, gainful employment, and good company—follow naturally as a result. We do not absolutely *need* really good food or wine in order to survive. But some of us are talented agronomists, farmers, chefs, and vintners, and good at what we do. We take pride in treating the land well and enjoying its bounty, and we relish the products of our hard work.”

“So you’re all healthy and happy, crime has been abolished, and madness a thing of the past?”

“Not quite. Although there’s not much we can do about major physical illnesses, the few cases of mental illness we’ve encountered have been handled pretty effectively by community efforts. One fellow suffers from periodic bouts of deep depression, but responds well to music. So some of the musicians among us work with him, he’s taken care of physically, and he recovers fairly quickly. Most of the medical people here had already realized how much twenty-first century life contributed to most diseases, and had begun to develop therapies based on the absence of social pressures and environmentally-induced illness. The most dramatic differences have shown up in those with various kinds of heart, metabolic, and lung diseases, because the hard work, clean air, and healthful diet have obliterated obesity and many breathing problems. When people have to engage in physical labor to survive, walk almost everywhere, eat foods that are naturally low in fat and calories, and can’t watch television to entertain themselves, general health and well being follow almost inevitably. Even those who brought a bit of tobacco with them, and we actually do have a small crop, knew that addiction and resulting lung problems resulted primarily from commercial additives. Some people here occasionally smoke a pipe or roll a cigarette, but tobacco is treated almost as a

ceremonial luxury, and no one smokes frequently. A gift of a fine clay or carved wooden pipe and a small pouch of tobacco can win eternal friendship here. And although most of us drink wine or beer, and a variety of other fermented or distilled beverages concocted for various reasons, none of us are alcoholics.”

“It sounds,” Pen observed, “as though the need/want distinction you talked about earlier contributes to all of this—needing what’s good for you, and recognizing what desires might be bad for you in excess. But surely you have to deal with the chap who drinks too much at a gathering, or the woman who decides she wants a bigger share of the tobacco crop. Or someone decides he needs a bigger house than seems appropriate to the group, or someone wants to do something that most folks don’t think is good for her. How do you set limits? What happens to someone who doesn’t fit in? Are there no iconoclasts, or folks who choose to be different just in order to be different?”

Bend looked out over the valley, toward the lake, and then up at the mountain. “It all goes back to why we came here: to live. To *be*. In the old world, ‘life’ amounted to a complex of a few basic needs combined with an astonishing number of culturally-imposed desires, many of which could not be fulfilled for myriad reasons—and many of which had to do with stereotypes and expectations based on those stereotypes. But we realized that if we could abandon the world that had been constructed *for* us, and that was beyond our control, we might have a chance to discover a way of living that would allow us to understand what really is necessary and what is not. The process of deciding what to pack helped us to explore the possibilities, and to pare down the list to basic needs and a few embellishments designed to ameliorate the impact of radical change. We made the decisions in small groups, quietly. The consensus that emerged helped us to realize how attuned we were to our groups, and how much the groups held in common with each other. We did not have much time to make major decisions, but the necessity to abandon everything we knew meant that the only people who would come were those willing to make the

commitment to the change. Several of us had already moved into small cooperative enclaves and had some experience with conflict resolution and dealing with the kinds of problems that utopian experiments had faced in the past. But we all shared one common notion: that it is possible for human beings, given the satisfaction of those few basic needs, to live in philosophically and environmentally sustainable communities. We were willing to walk through that gateway, abandon what we had known, and *live*.

“To allow natural human empathy to emerge,” he continued, “to facilitate the metaphors that build common ground, and to foster an intimate understanding of our own place in the environment, we had to escape those aspects of modern life that mediated between us and the natural world. In order to become a part of nature, a part of a community, we had to be able to see with our own eyes, feel with our hands, hear with our ears, to smell and taste without the intervention of manufactured odors and flavors. This is the ground of natural democracy, built on fellow-feeling that is not dictated by ‘higher powers’ or ‘experts,’ but is experienced *in person* and *in common*. The inability to see ourselves in different circumstances or to imagine what others experience blunts understanding. But living and working together, and experiencing the world with the fullness of our senses, nurtures democracy and provides the foundation of our social contract. Without this shared experience, we’d have no basis for any kind of viable community.”

“But there were over two thousand of you. How could that many people decide anything that uniformly?”

“It was surprisingly simple. There were enough of us to build several small communities up and down the valley. The possibility would always exist that we could move back and forth among groups if conflicts arose. For reasons of sustainability, group populations would have to remain small, but some ventures require cooperation among groups—wine-making, for example—and the total gene pool was initially so limited that travel to and contact with other

groups needed to be encouraged in order to allow for the potential of children. No one came here with children who weren't already grown, and no children were born for several years after we arrived. The fact that people waited was a good sign that we were already thinking of a kind of larger whole, and of the importance of getting something established before there were babies to take care of. The first two births, however, took place within days of each other, and were celebrated throughout the valley.

“Another sign that the system is working is that children don't just happen. When a couple decides that they'd like to have a child, they discuss it with their community. No one says 'yes' or 'no'—it's just another factor in the decision. But children are viewed differently here, I think. Not as a necessity, or a 'right,' or even a need. They seem to be almost a product of craftsmanship, like an artwork. We're all involved in their upbringing, so no one needs a child in order to 'fulfill' him- or herself. Because there are no formulas or disposable diapers, people realize that babies require nursing for a year or two, and need to have their nappies changed and washed, and need to be watched closely for a long time. Everyone here is busy with basic community projects like farming, weaving, building, mapping, or any number of activities, along with craft work and home-keeping, so children have to be planned for. To make the whole prospect more difficult, we employ no contraceptives other than body-knowledge, traditional herbal methods, and, occasionally, condoms, so couples can seldom afford to be carried away by passion. We've had only one accidental pregnancy, and that resulted in a child who was ultimately adopted into another community. Since then, casual sex seems to be viewed as an essentially irresponsible act. Since memory fades relatively rapidly when hormones are involved, though, we're always trying to develop strategies to help our children through adolescence without a population explosion.”

Pen thought about this for a moment, and then posed another question. “You seem in many ways like the intentional communities that emerged in the

twentieth century, after the ‘Summer of Love,’ in the midst of the sexual revolution, and in the heyday of the women’s rights movement. So is abortion not one of the ‘remedies’ you would enlist to handle the problem of unwanted children?”

“Well, although we might look like a classic example of rampant liberalism and left-wing social policies, abortion is viewed as a last-resort solution. It would probably only be undertaken to save a mother’s life. For one thing, women here are so aware of their bodies and of their fertility cycles, that an ‘unwanted’ pregnancy is unlikely to occur. Even if a couple were to act unwisely, however, and a child were out of the question, we do have emergency remedies available. They would consult one of the medics immediately. There is no shame involved with sex here, and although the couple might be counseled about ways to express their passion for one another with fewer consequences to the community, their mistake would be treated as a lapse in judgment—which, in fact, such an act would reflect. Life in the valley is viewed, as I mentioned before, as a gift. To enjoy that gift is to take responsibility for maintaining its conditions. Abortion in the old world was seen by some as a moral abomination and by some others as an inalienable right—even though most people viewed it as a necessary evil, and still others worked to make the procedure both safe and rare. The people who came here were primarily among the latter, and thought it imperative that children born in this community be brought up to recognize the relationship between rights, which are granted by the community itself, and responsibilities, which emerge from participation in the community. Nobody here has ‘inalienable’ rights. So abortion is no more a right than are ‘life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.’ Everything we enjoy is the product of a social contract developed by those who chose to settle in this place.

“We’re also pretty sure that many of the problems that faced us in the old world were cultural rather than biological, and that making sure children are raised by adults rather than other children helps. But we also want to make sure that

we don't impose old temptation-laden values on them that focus on sexuality as forbidden fruit. We try to let them get to understand their bodies and desires, and how to tame them, without loading them down with Puritan restrictions. There is a supply of long-term injectable female contraceptive in storage, but we do not want to have to use it; I think most of us would see its necessity as a failure of community and personal will."

Pen knitted her brows together in a frown. "I find it really difficult to believe that people can live such controlled lives! Isn't passion—sexual, artistic, intellectual—part of human nature? How can you be sure that someone isn't just going to be carried away by the 'moment'? Or what's to stop someone from deciding to have dozens of kids just because she wants to? Can you really force people to be celibate?"

Bend frowned in turn. "Well, we can't, really. But throughout history there have been those who managed to control their passions and channel them into productive areas—not necessarily *reproductive*. Of course, celibacy has been practiced by numerous groups and individuals, and when it's voluntary and purposeful, it seems to work. But we don't really ask people to be celibate—just to be careful. And as much as we enjoy our lives here, and the children we have produced, we also have to work hard and the care of our children is part of that work. So we can't afford to be casual about babies any more than we can be casual about raising food. And since we don't have to deal with cultural pressures that encourage a preoccupation with sex, it's remarkably easy to raise children who understand the concept of responsible sexuality. Many of us came to realize that a great deal of sexual 'passion' actually reflected a poverty of imagination: boredom. People who couldn't express themselves creatively or passionately in anything else saw sex as one of the only ways in which people could fill the resulting void. But here we do pretty much everything passionately, including sex—it's just not a preoccupation. Also, the whole idea of 'human nature' is a little like 'the dog ate my homework.' It's just an excuse.

I mean, if human beings have the ability to think, there ought not to be any voluntary act that's totally out of our own control. Some behaviors, tendencies, and predilections are hard-wired into our makeup; but our adaptive abilities have often led us to go against our so-called nature."

Pen seemed satisfied, and changed the subject. "Who decides what work people do? Do you have some kind of lottery or other method for figuring out who does the unpleasant work?"

"Surprisingly enough," replied Bend, "there isn't much that's entirely unpleasant. We don't have to worry about garbage collection, for instance, because we recycle absolutely everything. Since we don't have giant corporations trying to convince us to buy stuff we really don't need by putting it into fancy packaging, and because we don't have to stock hundreds of products on shelves and that sort of thing, we don't have excess paper and other materials to throw away. You'd be surprised how careful people can be with the most mundane objects when everything has to be made by hand. A piece of ruined paper gets recycled; broken glass is remade into more glass; broken pottery is ground up and reincorporated into later pots; worn cloth is used in papermaking if it isn't suitable for making into quilts or rugs. We don't make so much food that any of it gets wasted, but any food scraps get composted. Even dried chicken bones get ground up to be used as a calcium additive to compost.

"I suppose cleaning the toilets might be regarded as 'unpleasant'—but we all help out when it's necessary to empty the bins and compost the waste. We use solar composting toilets that heat waste enough to sanitize it for eventual use as fertilizer. But most people take responsibility for their own toilets; we don't expect to have everything magically disappear and be carted away by anonymous honey-bucketeers. Clara remembers that when she was in Asia she saw people shoulder a pole with buckets hung from each end and collect human waste from cess pits, then use it in the rice paddies as fertilizer. Here

we do much the same, except that it's neither as malodorous nor as dangerous, since the heat kills potentially harmful microbes. And you will have noticed the little water bottles in the loos—we wash instead of using paper, and clean our own towels. A little peppermint soap in a bottle of water seems to us quite a bit more pleasant than what we knew before.”

Pen smiled as she remembered figuring out what the squeeze bottle next to the toilet was for. “Since we're on the subject, how does the plumbing work? I took a lovely bath, in what seemed to be mineral water—does everyone have indoor plumbing?”

“No, because not everyone lives over a mineral spring. Clara's house, where I live and where you're staying, was one of the first ones built because she's a sort of matriarch for the group. It also serves as a guest house for visitors from the north and south. There's actually a communal bath about a half a kilometer up the road; there are hot springs all over the valley, and we've located baths near many of them. There are several wells or creek-fed cache-basins in the settlement, and houses are located near them if the inhabitant thinks it necessary to be close to a water source. Many of us have cisterns and periodically haul water to augment rain runoff. Because of the 'rain shadow,' most of the water comes from streams, or the river, and from an underground aquifer rather than rain. But we don't have pipes that conveniently bring water into everyone's home. If someone's ill and needs a reliable supply of water, we usually house him where there are home-baths. That's what the room you're staying in is for. Clara has three guest rooms that can be used for visitors or people who need nursing. So does anyone else who has a bath in his or her living space.”

Pen then observed that there didn't seem to be much concern about privacy. “Don't you get tired of each other? Aren't there any rugged individualists or iconoclasts among you—people who just don't fit in and need to be alone?”

“Occasionally someone will need time alone, and we’ve actually also made provision for that. There are a few small cabins in the wilderness where people can go to get away, and they’re almost always in use, except when we’re harvesting. One chap actually lives up on the mountain all the time, collecting samples of all manner of things, and keeping pretty much to himself. He has a small garden, and comes down for other supplies once in awhile. Mostly, though, he lives alone.”

“Then how does he earn his keep? If there’s so much work to do, how does he contribute?”

“Hermits and recluses seem always to have been a part of humanity. This fellow, who calls himself Search, is pretty self-sufficient, and ‘costs’ us little. In fact, except for an occasional trip up to check on him and for a short visit, we seldom have to worry about him. And his drawings of the flora and fauna he finds are exquisite; we’re using them to illustrate a book we’re reprinting on alpine wildlife and vegetation. So he really does ‘pay’ his own way.”

It was clear that Pen, despite her interest, was fading, so Bend suggested that they go find something to eat. As she gazed out over the valley once again, she commented on the apparent perfection of both the land and the life these people had made: “It seems much too good to be true. This valley is clearly rich and productive, everything is so tidy and well-managed that it’s almost invisible except close-up, and it frankly seems impossible. Are there really no problems? Isn’t there anything that you feel worried or threatened about?”

“Yes;” Bend looked at her with the barest trace of concern in his eyes and said, “you.”

