

Chapter Eight Crossing The River



They all awakened shortly before dawn, when the noise from the birds in the trees and along the creek became loud enough to serve as an alarm. The activity didn't seem to abate when the human occupants of the site stirred. When Pen remarked on their lack of trepidation, Lirit advised her that birds didn't seem to be afraid of people as long as there weren't any cats around.

The campfire was rekindled and water set to boil for porridge and coffee. Pen seemed startled that coffee was on the menu, but Bend explained that although still not abundant because of the resources that had to be dedicated to raising it, coffee was one of the pleasures most of the valley residents treasured. Theo brought out an exquisitely simple hand grinder and produced a carefully constructed linen filter that fit into the top of his ceramic carafe. The result was ambrosial to Pen, who observed that this was further evidence that she'd died and ascended to an upscale paradise. The "porridge" consisted of oats, amaranth, walnuts, and dried bits of fruit which, when simmered for a few minutes in hot water, produced a filling and satisfying breakfast. They all returned to the "rest area" around the spring for their morning necessities, before clearing the campsite. As they left, Pen noticed that the only evidence of human presence lay in the ring of stones for the campfire, and the neat stack of "pillows" in their small wooden corral. Even the ashes had been buried away from the camp and the stream. Theo's expertise as a camp-master was evident in the lack of leftover wood in the fire ring.

They moved east, back toward the river, and again began to follow it north. Although their pace quickened somewhat from the previous day, Bend was still

anxious to continue Pen's education, and to learn what he could about her world. But when she asked him about how the population of the valley could live without art, he was utterly taken aback.

"But we *don't* live without art. There's almost nothing here that doesn't reflect our aesthetic sense of the world, and the skill that it takes to produce any object we use!"

"I mean fine art—you know: painting, sculpture, that sort of thing. You people produce beautiful objects, but they're all *used* for something. Don't you ever produce something just for the sheer beauty of it? And how can you live without the great masterworks?"

Bend relaxed a bit and then explained that the valley concept of art had evolved during early discussions on needs and desires. "We went back to the original Latin and Greek notions of art and technology, he said. *Ars* and *Techne* both refer to craft and skill; the distinction between *fine* and *applied* art came along much later, and was reified during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when art increasingly became a commodity—one which, for the most part, could only be afforded by the rich. The 'great masterworks' you refer to were never really available to many; most were owned by people who had pilfered them from ancient sites, or who bought antiquities from dealers, or who commissioned them from the most popular artists of the day. It wasn't until the advent of museums as repositories for large art collections that people other than the owners got to enjoy them at all—and even then they had to visit large cities and often pay large sums to view the works. But in the nineteenth century, some artists and designers began to postulate that art is something human beings *need*, and that the need can be fulfilled without wealth if we also see art as those objects that require skill and talent, and that can be created by all kinds of people—even those who could not afford to attend expensive *ateliers* or academies.

“This idea of art was closely allied to the reaction against the effects of industrial capitalism: the impoverishment of the countryside and the appearance of Blake’s ‘dark Satanic mills’ in England’s ‘green and pleasant land.’ Although Adam Smith couldn’t have foreseen it, the result of the development of capitalism outside the face-to-face society of eighteenth-century Scotland (beyond where the ‘invisible hand’ could hold the market in check), and the rampant march of industrialism and urbanization across Great Britain caused so many problems that the early British socialists took Marx’s critique of capital to heart and tried to formulate alternatives. But the revolution they desired never occurred, and ultimately only the rich could afford the hand-crafted works produced by the movement’s arts and crafts proponents. As we were trying to formulate our own economy, to escape the consequences of yet another hundred years of greed-based capitalist development, we realized that the education of desire must include the education of the hand, and the re-evaluation of the relationship between art and life.

“I think I see what you’re getting at,” said Pen. “And it goes back to what we were talking about yesterday—to the idea of ‘efficiency.’ Industrial society must be efficient in order to fill its markets with things people can be convinced to buy, whether they need them or not. Industries have to be able to produce objects at a low enough cost so that they can make a profit, but in order to make that profit they can’t afford to spend much time or effort on the product. But people only really need a few things, as you have so gracefully pointed out, and it wouldn’t take many industries to supply all the real needs, if industries would even be required at all. So people have to be educated—indoctrinated might be a better word—to ‘need’ things in order for profits to be made and new industries created. But surely some good came out of this: new inventions that actually helped people—and I’m trying really hard to imagine what those would be right now. Well, like bigger telescopes that could help us understand the universe better.”

“You really *must* be an astronomer,” laughed Bend. “But think about it; every invention meant to help people or make their lives ‘simpler’ had unsuspected consequences. Even the development of antibiotics, for example, which enhanced human life immeasurably at first, ultimately created problems when they were overused. People became so convinced that antibiotics could cure anything, that they insisted on using them when they weren’t effective or necessary. Then the biota that these drugs were designed to kill became resistant to them and new strains had to be produced—*ad nauseam*. Along the same lines, people then became so afraid of microbes of *any* kind that they developed antibacterial soaps that killed any innocent bug that landed on their kitchen counters, with the result that these bacteria also became resistant. Of course my description vastly oversimplifies the situation, but we ended up having to decide whether the human propensity to invent more and more stuff was really the solution, or whether it was at the very heart of our problems.”

“We can relate this back to the transportation issue, too,” said Theo. “Efficient, speedy transportation meant cars and planes, which required huge amounts of fuel, vast numbers of resources, and produced equally enormous amounts of pollution—both in terms of particulate matter and solid waste. And this doesn’t begin to address the social costs, some of which actually include loss of life, if we consider the wars around the turn to the twenty-first century that were fought primarily over oil. A horse, on the other hand, eats hay and produces fertilizer—probably a pretty even trade. And they’re nicer to be around than cars are.”

“Not only that,” said Bend, “but horses figure into the craft equation in a subtle way. Being able to train horses to let people ride them isn’t simple. We wondered at first about the ethics of ‘breaking’ horses to be ridden, when some of our people pointed out that there are other ways of going about the task. Horses actually like being around people, and don’t mind having a steady supply of food. As long as they’re not overworked, they seem to enjoy the tasks

we give them. But it's not necessary to coerce a horse into letting someone ride; gentle training is a talent that people like Rain are both born with and cultivate. In exchange, she, and others like her, house and care for horses and burros, help them give birth, and determine when they should no longer be 'used.' So in some ways they are used as 'tools'—but so are the human beings who build and maintain their stalls, supply nourishing food, and give them the rubdowns that clearly give them pleasure. While many of us used to enjoy driving long distances to see new landscapes and visit new cities, or flying to distant parts of the world to partake of other cultures' benefits, we also take comfort in knowing that we're not ultimately making the world worse while we indulge in our particular wanderlusts. Now we rely on books and the stories told by those in the valley who originated in places other than the United States, and even on the artwork they have produced that depicts those other places; but it's hard to miss something when life is genuinely fulfilling and one's work is truly satisfying. The work itself is the expression of both the art and the craft.

“We realized at the outset that we would be giving up a great deal: great works of art, significant architecture, and any books that we didn't manage to bring along with us—as well as the ones that would be written after we left. We were also painfully aware that we might not always have access to the books we love—that the e-books would eventually wear out, or something might go very wrong with the technology, or some catastrophe might occur that would destroy the things we brought. But we had all lived in a world in which life was already pretty contingent on forces beyond our control. Catastrophic events, we thought, were far more likely to occur in a world where nuclear weapons were created and maintained by powerful people, where one national economy was slowly, but inevitably, redefining the economies of every other nation in the world, where people who felt threatened by this notion of 'progress' became so angry that they struck out at the civilian populations of the West, and where reliance on dangerous methods of propulsion led not only to war but to

poisoning the air and water necessary to maintain life. And many people who might have been in a position to question the status quo either disbelieved the evidence or thought that technological fixes were both possible and desirable. Diseases that spread among human beings were also on the increase, and biological or chemical warfare presented nearly as big a threat as nuclear weapons. Despite all of the technological capabilities represented by the major world powers, few had even *begun* to prepare for the very real possibility of a ‘civilization-ending’ event precipitated by a comet or asteroid impact. Any number of these factors could easily have led to the destruction of major museums or libraries, obliterating their holdings.

“Despite all of these prevailing conditions,” Bend continued, “very few people who had the power to change any of them had the imagination or desire to do so. They saw people like us as ‘fuzzy minded utopians’ and saw the world that they had made as a kind of utopia already—a bit flawed, of course, since not everyone in the world bought into it, but the best life there could be: plenty of money, plenty of stuff—and the capability of making more money and more stuff, as well as of subjecting everyone else to this world view. We thought it ironic that many of those who saw efforts like the United Nations as an attempt to build a ‘one world’ government, with sovereignty over everyone, had no difficulty at all with the idea of imposing Western, and particularly American, values and economics on the rest of the planet. Few of these people had any desire to visit other cultures, but if they did, they wanted their familiar fast food restaurants and theme parks to exist wherever they went: everything sanitary, familiar, comfortable, the same. Some countries fought against the tide, but we were pretty sure that they would lose in the end. And this is part of what fueled our discussions, and helped us to refine our vision.”

“So,” Pen added, “you would have tried to do what you’ve done here somewhere else, even if you had not discovered the trigger.”

Theo took over, allowing Bend a breather. “Admittedly, we were not terribly optimistic about finding a place where we could isolate ourselves enough even to begin. Only a handful of intentional communities had ever managed to succeed, and they operated on a much smaller scale, and with much more reliance on modern technology than we really wanted. But we were beginning to think about trying out small communities in a variety of locations, in places considered marginal or less than desirable by national or corporate interests. This meant avoiding areas with potential for economic development, particularly tourism and oil. We had located a few places in South America, Australia, and Asia, and even a couple of promising islands. Some of our people had already belonged to economically successful communities elsewhere and had only left because they wanted a stronger philosophical component. Everyone who eventually came here was convinced of the need for foundational, radical change, not simply different technological approaches. We were ready to go, even though we were not terribly optimistic—precisely because of the external forces Bend mentioned. But when the trigger was discovered, our perspective changed, and the real possibilities emerged. Our thought experiment had been provided with a much more promising laboratory.”

“Yes,” said Bend, “and although we could still be hit by a comet, we don’t see any evidence of the environmental problems, and if there are any other people around, we haven’t come in contact with them. A group of young people are actually planning an expedition south, beyond the citrus farms, in order to help us determine just what does exist outside the valley, but it’s still in long-term discussion, and will depend on how many of them can be spared. A few intrepid souls have spent a couple of months going over the mountains far enough to know that there’s now an inland sea to our west. But it’s quite possible that further exploration will have to wait for Lirit’s generation to accomplish. Some of the older children are also talking about exploration as a formal rite of passage—to mark entry into the adult community, in the form of

a month-long excursion in one direction or another, attempted by a small group of people, or even by a single person. They see it as a way of bringing their own stories into the community, of experiencing the world differently than their parents have, and then contributing fresh tales and perspectives.”

As they talked, the little group approached the most beautiful bridge Pen had ever seen. “It looks Japanese,” she said, commenting that its necessity—the need for such a long, graceful bridge in this place—meant something to her. But in her experience, the river had never been wide enough to require more than a very small one.

Once again they all realized that her memory was returning, but Lirit piped up with an explanation. “From here north,” she said, “most of the villages are on the eastern side of the river, so this is where we cross, and the bridge is so we don’t have to swim.” Pen smiled, and noticed that the river began to shift westward at this point, leaving the largest amount of land on its right bank as they faced north. Bend explained that fairly recent alluvial deposits provided an easy route for the river to take, and its path followed the contours of old lava beds that provided some resistance at their margins.

The foundation of the bridge was built from dressed lava, which clearly came from the floes that abounded in the area. Flat granite pavers, pinkish grey against the black lava blocks, were laid over the base, which arched over the middle of the river just enough to allow a boat to pass underneath. Two smaller arches supported either end, with their pylons anchored beneath the water, and wooden rails followed the contour along each side. At each end a large, formal, but simply designed gateway had been erected, like entrances to Buddhist temples. Theo pointed out that Japanese internees had once lived in the valley, which prompted Pen to recall that the gates resembled the part of the camp that remained in her time, the guard station at its entrance. Descendants of those people were the ones who designed this bridge, Bend told her. That’s why they chose this particular form. “It has always been important

to us,” he said, “to remember both what was laudable and what was shameful about where we had come from—to recognize that human beings are capable of actions that are benign, beneficial, or malignant, and that every act we perform must be considered in the light of possibility.

“Much was made of the idea of ‘intentional communities’ in the ‘60s and ‘70s, but few of them survived. When we began to ‘construct’ this place, we wanted to be mindful, continuously, of the fact that intentions must be tied to possible consequences, and that means must be married to ends. This is why we chose to minimize the amount of technology we would adopt; good intentions with bad results can be remedied if the scale is small enough. If we make mistakes, we can amend our strategies fairly easily, because we haven’t ever committed a huge number of resources or people to a particular endeavor. If the design of this bridge, for example, had seriously disrupted the migration of trout up and down the river, as lovely as it is, we could have dismantled it. It took several months and lots of sweat to build, but if the designers had been wrong, and it had created problems for the river, we could take it down and either start over, or build a wooden version, or a pair of docks with a supply of rafts and coracles to ferry folks across, as we’ve done elsewhere. But we do have engineers and designers among us, and architects, and these people love to build. This has turned out to be a blessing in many ways, because it simplifies travel without destroying the pace we’ve chosen, and without creating something that doesn’t fit with its surroundings. Even with the gateways, it’s almost invisible from a distance, but as we approach it, we’re struck by its beauty and its necessity at the same time.”

Pen smiled, and remarked that she now wondered how she had ever thought that these people lived “without art.”

They crossed the river, pausing in the center of the bridge to note the way in which the gates framed the view on either side, and to look both north and south to admire the river itself: free-flowing, clear, wide, and deep—nothing like

the river Pen now remembered clearly—and down which she had floated on her “raft” only a couple of days earlier.

