

Chapter 72
Back to the Program
Saturday, May the 11th. Early morning.

Everybody at Three Acorns knew that Erich would eventually have to leave.

Officially, it was because the island was too far away from the Program ; its young leaders wanted to consult Erich on a weekly basis, and receive some proper schooling as well. Cheryl was in charge of March Island and didn't need Erich in any way.

However, the real reason for Erich's departure was his relationship with Kathryn. Robert and Sue witnessed the constant degradation of the couple over the weeks, which was devoid of hate or anger but full of exasperation. To make things even more complex, Erich and Kathryn still loved each other, in spite of it all.

The multiple traumatic events they experienced had changed each one of them into another person. Kathryn was used to run the island by herself and became bossy. Erich, on the contrary, became increasingly meek and out of place. There was little for him to do apart from following Kathryn's orders.

It always seemed to Robert that Erich and Kathryn had a covert or implicit understanding. Indeed, Erich announced his departure as soon as Kathryn fully recovered from childbirth. He would only return on weekends.

On that early Monday morning, while Robert loaded Erich's very meagre possessions on the Ticonderoga, Erich and Kathryn hugged each other, repressing tears. The moment was too brief, as if they were afraid to burn each other with emotions. Erich took more time to embrace his son. The last shirt he still had from his corporate years, all worn up and torn, had been turned into makeshift diapers.

Minutes later, Erich and Robert left, and Kathryn pretended to go on with the morning chores.

Erich kept silent for half an hour, until the necessity to coordinate with Robert on a delicate maneuver broke the silence.

After a while, Robert asked : « Do you think you'll ever get together again ? »

Erich was looking at the horizon straight ahead ; he kept his vacant stare and replied : « That's the only thing I ask from life now. If I could have that, I would need nothing else. »

Robert : « What would you need for this to happen ? »

Erich : « I don't know. I think she doesn't know either. »

Robert nodded. Silence returned, and then their minds switched to work when they saw the silhouette of the Western Trawler at a distance, where the Gliding Dragon was being loaded.

The sun had already set when they reached the northern pier, close to Water Wells. About ten people from the Program and some others had been expecting them for hours, idling on the shore. Erich observed them as they unloaded the Dragon. Their movements were slow but steady, like lazy machines. They were all barefooted and most only wore short trousers. Their red-brown skin looked thick, almost leathery, their feet and their hands disproportionally large.

The survivors had become farmers and peasants.

The Program people spread around the reclaimed fields. Now that the fields were sown, they switched their efforts into turning houses into farms, or building them from scratch.

The farms were inspired by Trawler Islands, and in each farm one could find the core population of an island, led by one of the Leaders. Each farm had an inner yard, reminiscent of the central trawler, and three to six buildings surrounded it. Erich had read about those fortified, circular farms in China, but those people did not, and yet they were recreating them.

An additional defensive layer against the outside were the fenced gardens, full of young vegetables and flowers.

The disposition of the farm themselves created a parallelogram around the fields, as if the fields were themselves the inner yard. Parallel roads formed two sides of the shape, and two newly created paths closed the figure.

The Administration, as they called it, was a small bungalow, probably once built for tourists or summer vacations, with large windows under the shadow of a centenarian oak. I was located on the southern road, sticking out like a single tooth in an old man's mouth. Only rubble and discarded materials remained of the neighbouring houses.

The Administration felt like a sleepy southern rural mayor's house. Jim was running the place like a post office, with the help of two skinny women, who had been busy and alive from the Water Well Massacre on.

A single car LED bulb hooked to a car battery was casting a hard light in the main room. Adjacent rooms were used for privacy and sleep, a small one for the clerks and a larger one for Jim and Ms. Ling. The place gave an impression of order and neatness, but a prolonged stay revealed there was very little material in the first place. There wasn't even enough to make the place look untidy.

All kinds of paper and cardboard were put to use, but there was a semblance of standardisation. Pages carefully torn from phonebooks seemed to be used in the daily routines, whereas cardboard held more precious information. A myriad of small signs and coloured crayon markings suggested various sorting methods.

On the back wall was a makeshift map of the area, much smaller than the War Room mural map at Kieffer's place, in which the families' names and the number of people were kept up to date. All in all, the office gave an impression of boredom and routine.

Jim dressed himself from his room and went out to greet Erich. Erich was alarmed at the sight of an emaciated, used up Jim. He wasn't a senior anymore, he had become an old man, with little time left to live. Jim read Erich's face and made a faint smile.

Jim : « It ain't pretty, Erich. I had it coming. »

Erich wanted to protest, in an attempt to insufflate the will to live into Jim again, but Jim interrupted him : « It's all right, Erich, really. When I first came here it was as if a new life was starting, and it did, but now it's taking it all back. »

Erich nodded. They sat on the floor and kept silent for a while.

Ms. Ling entered the house with energy and didn't stop to look at neither Jim nor Erich, rushing for

Jim's sleeping room. The door was closed hurriedly, short of being slammed.

Erich and Jim shared a smile.

Erich commented : « You too, huh ? »

Jim : « Yep. Feels good to be back in that business. I hope to be around to give the baby a proper surname. »

Erich : « You're sure about... ? »

Jim : « Don't worry, she isn't very popular around here. She tried with Connolly but he wouldn't want to have anything to do with her. So yeah, I'm sure I'm the father. »

Erich approved with a nod.

Jim went on : « We're having our wedding in eight days. Tomorrow, it's Henry's. »

Erich was surprised : « Henry ? With whom ? »

Jim : « Well, that Catalina chick kept banging Father Francis, but it seems he's shooting blanks. So she hooked up with Henry instead. »

Erich replied casually : « Good for her, and good for him. How is he ? »

Jim's face became somber : « There's a reason why they're in a hurry. »

Erich pinched his lips and asked : « Is it that bad ? »

Jim : « He will be carried to the altar on stretchers. »

Upon visualising the scene, Erich felt sick. In former times, he would have been frozen cold by the horror, but now he was fed up by all this pain and sadness. Like everybody else, he was reaching a point where the pain of losing a loved one was not grieving anymore but something akin to an unwelcomed annoyance.

Jim looked at his electronic watch and said : « Let's go to sleep now. We don't want to drain the lamp's battery. »

There was no spare mattress for Erich, since the clerks were already sharing a single mattress, and so Erich spent the night on the floor, covered in the few clothes he brought along, the single-shot shotgun as always at hand's reach.

Erich found the same open air church he visited on Eastern. The fields had now been harvested and plowed. Although this was pretty much a Program-only celebration, there were some new faces around, with a meeker attitude than the proud Program people.

Jim explained : « Some people left the other farms, and some people who were hiding in the area decided to join us as well. They all pull their own weight. »

Erich : « How many people do you have to manage ? »

Jim : « I record all the people we saved from Joyeux-Tiburou, those who remained or returned there and those who joined since. We have a little bit over sixteen hundred people in the area now. »

Erich : « Can we feed them all ? »

Jim : « Fish and shrimps are coming back. We should be able to do it, I guess. »

Erich : « Is anybody still keeping count ? »

Jim : « The Program leaders are, the Outer Farms... I guess not. Mackenzie is out of the loop there. »

Erich noticed he was being observed and at the same time somewhat avoided by almost everybody. The leaders greeted him hastily and then returned to their own groups.

Erich : « I guess I'm not going to be welcomed back anytime soon. »

Jim : « You're a legend, Erich, but legends are not real. What you are in their mind is conflicting with what they see. »

Erich : « I can understand I'm something of a VIP but... »

Jim : « You're something religious, Erich. Like some weird prophet that saw it all coming, and you saved the chosen ones. This is just biblical stuff, really. You can't fight it. »

Erich made a sour grin : « I don't like how the Bible treats its prophets, you know... »

Jim laughed out loud, which made more heads turn towards them. Erich felt even more awkward.

Some twenty minutes before the ceremony, most girls were still preparing themselves inside the compound, sharing the few mirrors that had been retrieved. Giggles of excitement and nervousness kept coming from the house in waves.

Diane tried to maintain dignity as she rushed out of the compound to meet Erich. She didn't let him finish the salutations : « Erich, you got to get me out of this place. I heard you're setting up a school, I want to be part of it. »

Erich : « That was just an idea, a project. »

Diane : « It isn't a project anymore. I'll do it by myself if you don't want to. »

Erich was impressed : « What worries you ? »

Diane : « There is more to the world than this. I don't want to replace Jim and spend my life watching over two secretaries in some backwater shed. »

Erich cringed but tried to take it with humour : « There are worst place around these days. Actually I don't know of any better place for you, unless you want to help Kathryn with her cabbage. I showed her to how to prepare sauerkraut. »

Diane : « You're not from here, you don't know how it is. I don't belong here. »

She made a gesture with her arm engulfing the whole crowd : « They all agree. I pull my own weight but I won't become a farmer. »

Erich hesitated, but Diane didn't give him time : « I'll tend the school's garden. We'll have enough to eat, we'll trade, but I don't want to live like this any longer. »

Erich felt trapped by the situation. He had not thought this far ahead, and needed time to assess the situation, but Diane was waiting impatiently for an answer.

For some reason Erich thought about Dwight, his mentor : seize the opportunity, it won't come back. Diane would never be as enthusiastic again if she were to experience a rebuttal.

Erich stretched out his hand : « Deal. »

Diane shrieked with joy. She took Erich's hand and held it in a wrenching grip. Erich struggled. He didn't want to appear weaker than a teenage girl ; these things were mattering in this physical, rural world.

Diane released her grip and tried to regain some dignity. She was at loss with words and quickly hopped to mingle into the crowd.

Jim : « You had about one day of freedom. »

Erich : « Yeah, but I don't mind. I wouldn't want to loiter around here any longer, I did enough of that back in Three Acorns. »

There was some excitement as a man in costume exited the compound. Erich recognized a slim, almost sporty Reginald, now far away from his geek attitude.

Reginald recognized Erich and had a large, genuine smile. He almost ran to him.

Erich : « You're the best man ? »

Reginald looked confused. Jim was at a loss.

Reginald : « You haven't been told ? »

Erich and Jim shook their heads.
Reginald : « I'm marrying Belinda. »
Erich had a proud smile and declared : « That's excellent. It was her father's last will. »
Reginald : « Yeah, you were there, this wasn't really his will, but... »
Erich : « ... it'll be the official reason. »
Reginald : « Yeah... »
Erich : « Because the real reason is ? »
Reginald : « She's pregnant. »
Erich gave Reginald a tap on the shoulder : « Hey, good on you ! »
Reginald had an embarrassed smile : « Yeah well, back at your place she fu... she slept with most boys. With me too, mind you, but still... »
Erich : « I see... so it's not the baby's fault, am I right ? »
Reginald : « That's the idea. But the next ones are going to be from me, for sure. »
Erich : « You're doing the good thing. »
Reginald : « Doing the good thing sucks. »
Erich : « Tell me about it. »

People grew impatient ; the temperature was rising fast, and if Henry was as in bad shape as was said, he soon wouldn't be able to perform the ritual.

As soon as Matthew appeared at the compound's door, the crowd became a congregation. It appeared to Erich these children and teenagers were used to the mass and as disciplined as ever. Even the newcomers behaved promptly.

Matthew and the Program leaders were as well dressed as they could, given the circumstances, wearing shirts or jackets, all decorated with simple flowers. The program leaders were bearing a stretcher where a skeletal Henry, appallingly pale, was lying. Four junior leaders were holding the poles to an improvised tent and maintained it above the stretcher. It was impossible not to associate the stretcher to a coffin, as if this were in fact a funeral.

In absence of instruments, a choir started the ceremony, obviously sininging too fast. Catalina appeared in a fluffy wedding dress that had been found in some abandoned house. She had flowers in her hair and appeared in much better shape than the month before, with more flesh on the bones and no trace left her once deeply sunken, diseased eyes. She hurried to the altar, and the ceremony unfolded at breathtaking pace.

Erich couldn't see much of Henry, but it was obvious he was a dying man. Because the congregation remained perfectly silent, his only words, « I do », carried a surprising potent effect in spite of its coarse and weak tone.

The ceremony was over in a matter of minutes. Henry was rushed back inside the compound, Catalina tightly holding his hand while the audience applauded.

Some minutes passed, enough for people to chat, then Reginald's and Belinda's ceremony began, at a much slower pace.

Erich whispered to Jim : « I realise I would have been a good substitute for her father, to carry her to the altar. After all... »

Jim : « After all, you saved her life, yes, and you were the last to see her father. Doesn't it occur to

you that perhaps Belinda doesn't want this memory recalled during her wedding ? »
Erich nodded, embarrassed.

The teenagers that used to be present at Three Acorns at the same time as Belinda were all aligned on the last row, as far away as possible from the altar. Reginald looked each one of them in the eyes, and they held up the stare, as in a mute conversation. In a way, they were all poised to be the child's godfathers.

Belinda was looking all puffed up in a simple robe that was slightly too small for her. This ceremony took about an hour but seemed longer, due to the intensity of an event that was a welcome break from the monotonous rural routine.

As soon as the ceremony was over, Matthew rushed out of the compound and took Erich inside.

Henry had been brought to the upper floor, in a corner separated from the rest by hanging sheets. He was lying on a thick mattress, his head and back resting on a quantity of pillows and folded clothes. His face was as if some white sheet had been stressed on a skull. Even the eyes were pale. Henry made a faint smile, with some teeth missing, and exchanged tender looks with Catalina.

For a moment, Erich thought he recognised in Henry the skeletal, moribund Catalina he once rescued. And indeed, she used to have that vampiric looks for a while after her recovery. It looked as if she took all of Henry's life force.

Back on the ground floor, there was much agitation, chicken were being roasted and cutlery dispatched. Jim was sitting on the stairs, prevented anyone from climbing to the upper floor.

Finally, a disembodied voice came out of Henry : « Matthew... in charge. »

Erich repeated slowly : « Matthew is now in charge of the works, and of the clandestine camouflage of tools. »

Henry made an effort and articulated : « Yes »

Erich nodded. Henry slid back in his bed, released from his last duty. He focused his attention on Catalina. It appeared to Erich that he was now almost blind.

Nobody knew what to say. Finally, Catalina broke the ice : « He didn't want to call for you, because he was afraid the others would suspect something. It's just as well you came only now. »

Matthew added : « The most important stuff is already hidden, but it's in town. It took us a lot of precaution and time. We didn't sleep for several nights in a row. »

Catalina nodded and added : « There are really very few people we can trust on this. »

While they talked, Henry fell into a sleep that looked like a coma, with hints of worse still.

Catalina looked at her husband in pity, then looked Erich straight in the eyes : « There is something he wanted me, or Matthew, to show you. In Joyeux-Tiburon. We'll meet there next week. »

Erich nodded, upon which Matthew rose on his feet. The meeting was over, and Erich stood up as well. As he was about to leave, Catalina said : « Erich, when he'll... go... Don't come over. Please. »

Tears sprang again in Erich's eyes. He sat down and took Henry's feeble hand, whispering : « Goodbye, Henry. They must have told you about my son. I'm sure your child and my son will be

good friends. »

Catalina couldn't hold back her tears this time, and started crying. This was not relieving her, but adding to her pain. Erich and Matthew stood by, comforting her the best they could. They all felt betrayed by their own bodies when the smell of roast chicken made them salivate, against their will.

Most of the congregation had skipped breakfast on this day, to make the wedding meal even more important. There was a peculiar silence when the meals were served : for minutes one could only hear mastication and the occasional moan of delight. It would have been unappropriated to utter a word in these circumstances, for what phrase could carry more importance than food ?

Fried shrimps were served in lieu of a dessert. It was as if a long forgotten taste, a long lost friend who had returned.

Soon after the meal, the suffocating heat made everybody slumber, either inside the compound or under the trees. Flies buzzed lazily around the spotlessly clean chicken bones, and occasionally the love song of a lone bird could be heard in the distance.

It was only when the sun was setting that some activity reappeared. Erich understood that the Program people were very observant of the Day of the Lord : no unnecessary task was performed that day. Girls were washing the dishes, while boys were cleaning up the tables and the wedding decorations. The next day would be the start of a week of hard labour, as every other week.

People were getting ready for the evening soup when a boy yelled in excitement : « The white bike ! The white bike ! »

Everybody looked surprised and jolly. They gathered around the largest wall of the compound. Matthew informed Erich : « That's Jonesy's open air cinema. Somebody found a video projector somewhere and traded it with him, against booze I guess. As always. When one of his employees come around, we hook the projector to our batteries, and so we can watch two DVDs in a row, all together. »

Erich grew suspicious : « Jonesy ? Last time I heard of him, he wanted to prostitute some of the poor girls who survived the massacre. What is he up to these days ? »

Matthew : « Entertainment. Booze, hookers, boys if you like... and movies... video games... credit. Water Wells is becoming Houma's Las Vegas. »

Erich : « Holy Crap ! People told me he was into stuff, but they didn't tell me all this. »

Matthew : « They remembered how you saved Cheryl. They were afraid you would turn biblical, Cleansing-of-the-temple style. »

Erich : « That's bullshit. I was the one who told them it was better for the girls to be prostituted than killed. »

Matthew : « Yeah, well, I think that Jonesy guy knew how to turn Philip's head around. It wouldn't surprise me if Philip is his man in Houma now. »

Erich made a sour-sounding sound.

Matthew went on : « Yeah, and Roger works for him too. »

Erich was startled : « What ? Roger ? »

Matthew : « Booze, girls, drugs... this used to be Roger's natural environment, remember ? »

Erich : « Has he learnt nothing about these guys ? »

Matthew pointed his hand at the plowed fields : « This is nothing for Roger, Erich. It is nothing for

Mark either. He left for New... »

A teenager called in the distance : « It's Jonesy, Jonesy himself ! ».

Jonesy was a smaller than average man in his thirties with a bald top, somewhat attenuated by a short haircut. He had the shape of a clerical worker who worked out but was losing the fight against his potbelly. Given the harsh food situation, this pot belly looked almost out of place.

He was reasonably well dressed, wearing quality jeans and an ironed shirt. He had a very straightforward facial expression, a man who stated things as they were without apologizing for it.

He let the teenagers hook the video projector to the compound's own 12V car DVD system. They seemingly knew the drill. Jonesy brought the children's movie « Ice Age » and « Rio Bravo », an old western featuring John Wayne.

As a conversation starter, Jonesy explained to Erich and Matthew : « People have no interest in action movies with fast cars or high-tech spying anymore. Westerns are making a comeback. »

Erich just nodded. He had a hunch Jonesy wanted to meet him.

Indeed, Jonesy promptly asked : « You must be that German guy, Erich. It's been some time since I wanted to meet you. »

Erich answered politely : « Very pleased. »

Jonesy's eyes darted between Matthew and Erich. Erich remained placid, seemingly oblivious to the signal.

Jonesy had to ask : « Say, while the kids watch the movies, why don't we have a little chat, you and I ? »

Erich : « Is it about the common good, or is it, say, corporate consulting ? »

Jonesy : « The latter. »

Erich : « Then you'll have to pay for it. »

Jonesy : « Of course. How much do you want ? »

Erich : « What you deem the advice was worth. »

Jonesy : « Fair deal. »

Matthew withdrew himself quickly. Erich and Jonesy walked away, at a leisurely pace, towards the fields, always under the distant scrutiny of the Program leaders.

Jonesy : « First of all, I would like to say I hold you in high esteem over the girls whose lives you tried to save. »

Erich : « Thank you, Jonesy. Those who wanted them dead, what difference does it make to them, one month later ? None. »

Jonesy : « Exactly. But that's the problem with power. »

Erich : « Do you have currently problems of the same kind ? »

Jonesy : « Oh no. I have seven employees, all able to defend themselves. The business is running well. »

Erich : « What do you do, exactly ? »

Jonesy : « What did they tell you ? »

Erich : « They told me Water Wells is the new Las Vegas. »

Jonesy : « It's the new frontier town, if you ask me. But yes, I provide entertainment for some

people in Houma. »

Erich : « Which people ? »

Jonesy : « Not the top people. They have to play hollier-than-though all the time, and those who would like to be admitted in this upper circle have to play by the same book. Except, of course, that some top people are banging groupies or poor children, and the lower one don't. »

Erichcommented : « The more the things change, the more they remain the same. »

Jonesy : « That could be my motto. Those who come to Water Wells are some middle managers and technicians, who can afford to be less religious. »

Erich : « What about their military ? »

Jonesy : « The DHS have their own dungeons, many of them are bi or gay anyway. The Saviour's goons, well, most of them got married to whatever desperate chick eager to save her hide. For the others, or the same, old ladies in town offer their services for a song anyway. »

Erich : « Got it. What about money ? »

Jonesy chuckled : « At Water Wells we have an airplane container, full of dollar bills. We use it as toilet paper. But that's up to 20\$ bills, if you want hundred dollar bills, it costs you extra. »

Erich : « I'll give it a try someday. Sounds like fun. »

Jonesy : « Of course, real toilet paper is much better, and much more expensive. In fact it has become a collector item. So, yeah, no money, but barter. I get paid in grain and in soap, mainly, and then the occasional other item. I said I was much interested in sewing supplies, but they don't have enough of it themselves. Bicycle parts, tires etc, this is still going well. »

Erich : « Seems you business is blooming. »

Jonesy remained silent for a while, then went on : « Erich, as a businessman, I have to look for the future. What is in store for us all ? »

Erich : « The truth, I mean, the naked truth, Jonesy, is that I have no way of knowing it. »

Jonesy : « I understand. I value your honesty. What is your hunch, then ? »

Erich : « The crisis was engineered, I think we can all agree on this. »

Jonesy : « Indeed. Was it only about thinning the herd, just some long-due depopulation ? »

Erich : « No, it's linked to advances in robotics. I think most humans are no longer needed for those who own the machines. »

Jonesy : « Is this a hunch of yours, or do you have proof ? »

Erich hesitated to answer. Jonesy could have received the information, about the Cantaloupe or the robotic trawler, from Roger himself. Either he did, and then Jonesy was testing Erich, or he didn't.

Not wanting to remain silent for too long, Erich diverted in another direction : « There used to be an information exchange in Houma. I have been there, and I have seen footage of crab-like machines turning SUVs into land drones. »

Jonesy seemed very interested, but remained silent.

Erich went on : « For me this is already proof enough, but I can also tell you that in my former job, there was a huge wave of modernization, that is, of software development which was made by Artificial Intelligence. »

Jonesy stopped walking : « You witnessed this ? »

Erich : « I witnessed parts of it, and have received intel on the matter. Very reliable intel. »

Jonesy remained silent for a while. The young night still carried a lot of heat from the day, and it dissipated all too slowly.

Finally, Jonesy asked : « So, what do you think are my perspectives, business-wise ? »

Erich : « The thing is, do the Technology People still need technicians, or not. If they do, they would still want cities like Houma to exist. »

Jonesy : « And if they don't ? »

Erich : « Well then, either they would let us develop ourselves back into 19th century rural communities, and cut the tall poppy if we try to go beyond that. »

Jonesy, some anguished : « Or ? »

Erich : « Or they engage in an extra expense and try to kill as much of us as possible. »

Jonesy let the information sink in, then asked : « How would the do the latter ? »

Erich : « I think they would do it like they did before : destroying our food supply. For instance, it seems Houma still gets food from the outside world. »

Jonesy : « They do. Technicians also talk on the pillow. They have a weekly convoy that leaves Houma and reaches a pre-defined place, generally a warehouse or something similar, where a robotic convoy left supplies. The place is secured by snipers, or rater remote-operated sniping weapon platforms, that are put in place the day before, in order to keep stragglers or strigoï at bay. »

Erich : « Excuse me... Strigoï ? »

Jonesy : « You don't know about them ? The name comes from Eastern European surperstitions. These are people who hide during the daytime, very stealthy people indeed, most of them loners. They sneak in during the night and try to steal your food. »

Erich said : « Black Pat. I killed one of of those last year, before the whole trouble started. »

Jonesy was in awe : « I've heard rumours about that, but I thought it was just some stories people added up to your legend. I wanted to know, how does it feel to be a legend. »

Erich : « That's what people do, they invent legends. What I feel about it is that it's soon going to fade, because after all, so much people are being heroic so often these days, older stories are bound to fade away. »

Jonesy : « I like your attitude about this. »

Erich : « If i'm not cautious about what happens in my head, I'm going to end up dead. I can't afford self-delusions. »

Jonesy : « Very wise words. By the way, you don't seem impressed by those robotic sniper stories. »

Erich : « To me this is only consistent with the rest of my informations. So, yeah, back to the subject, the day the warehouse turns out empty is the moment the Program gets attacked by Houma. They will overwhelm us, then, since there is clearly not enough for everybody, they will destroy themselves, and the survivors will starve. I'm made these calculations countless times, I know what I'm talking about. »

Jonesy remained silent.

Erich concluded : « All that will remain from humanity would be small isolated farms, with dim chances of prolonged survival, and then only very few foragers. Back to the Paleolithic with us. »

Jonesy : « Fucking great. But, given what already happened, still very possible. »

Erich : « Your business depends on Houma, and the need for technicians. If Houma falls, I'd say, become a forager, a strigoï, on that very night. »

Jonesy held on to his pot belly : « It's too late for that. Strigoï are usually children or young teenagers. Some of them are into it since even before the CCC period, hundreds of days now.

You've got to be born into this. What would be other option ? »

Erich : « Well, either Houma becomes self-sufficient, or we'll have to destroy it before it destroys us. »

Jonesy remained silent for a while, then declared : « There is something that could be an edge. In the months since the troubles started, the population of Houma spent a lot of time turning the city into an urban prairie. People have been concentrated into concrete buildings, and a lot of the city's suburbs have been turned into what they call « community gardens ». These gardens have supervisors, enforcing the sharing of the produce. »

Erich : « Let me guess, the community gardens are not effective at all. »

Jonesy : « Exactly. I guess the top people couldn't prevent people to do something against hunger, but wanted to stay in control. »

Erich : « And to keep the control that stems from the outside deliveries, from ... well, from the robots. »

Jonesy : « I hate to hear that formulation, but I guess we'll have to consider it that way. So what do you make of this ? »

Erich : « This is rather good news. It means that when the embargo from outside starts, they will not immediately march against us, but later. Up to one week later, if we're lucky, but I would rather bet on one single day. Enough to run away, or mount defenses. »

Jonesy and Erich mulled over these informations when at a distance angry voices from a public debate could be heard. After exchanging puzzled looks, Erich and Jonesy hurried back to the compound.

Some teenage boys were clearly upset, unable to manage their anger. Jim was unsuccessfully trying to calm them down. Children were crying while the « Ice Age » movie kept playing on the wall of the compound.

Erich went straight to Jim and asked what the trouble was.

Jim : « It's the dodo scene. »

Erich : « The dodo scene ? »

Jim : « In that scene, dodos are preparing for the ice age, they're super militaristic, but they only have three watermelons as food reserves. Now, some boys think this was propaganda to prevent people from preparing, others think that the authors were just mocking survivalism without second thoughts. »

Erich : « And this is causing all that trouble ? »

The angered teenagers were calming down as they focused on Erich's conversation with Jim.

Jim : « You got to understand, Erich. They all saw that movie once, with their parents. Their parents didn't prepare for the crisis and now they're dead.. »

Erich : « When you see it that way, it makes sense. They want to find a culprit. »

A teenager erupted : « This movie is bullshit ! They wanted to kill us even then ! It was all part of the plan ! »

Erich made soothing gestures with his hands, but he wasn't good at addressing crowds, even more so when emotions were high.

Reginald, who wasn't that much of a crowd speaker himself, got up and said : « I once was like those dodos. I had a semi-automatic rifle, thousands of rounds of ammunition and about one month of food. On top of that, I was superindebted, because of my preparations. I was dumb, just like those dodos. »

People listened, curious but still angered. One of them asked : « What became of all your guns ? »

Reginald answered : « Jim and Erich, they managed to find someone who would buy those from me. I paid back my debts. Without those two, I would have lost my home, I would be dead now. I wanted to prepare, but didn't know what to do. »

Another teenager asked : « How could you be so dumb ? »

Reginald scoffed involuntarily : « The crisis surprised everybody. Some people like me expected that sometime in the future things would get bad, but it wasn't clear at all. And, mind you, if I had not been in debt, this weaponry would have been handy when the invasion took place. »

The same teenager replied : « But you didn't have enough food ! »

Reginald looked at Erich and said : « Erich provided a lot of food to those who didn't plan ahead. It's the reason most of you are still breathing, you know. »

Erich became embarrassed, his face turned purple.

A young girl asked : « Why did you help us, and not others ? »

Jim answered for Erich : « We trusted your parents. They were good people, they were honest. »

A murmur spread in the crowd. Some of the younger children started crying, in sudden remembrance of their lost family. The discussion, and the ongoing family movie propelled them back to a better time, not even a year before.

Jonesy intervened : « Perhaps I can switch to the other movie ? »

Some of the angry teenagers, witnessing the emotional distress of the younger ones, rejected the proposal : « No, let us watch this until the end. It's okay. »

Minutes passed. Erich and the other adults watched as the faces became mesmerized by the movie.

Erich muttered : « Behold, the power of the media. »

Erich and Jonesy went to the compound's kitchen, in order to get their ration of cold soup. They ate it slowly and in silence, while the girls in night service finished to clean up the bowls and dishes. It was the end of a community-wide event, they would have to go back later to their own farms and hold night watch.

Erich asked : « These strigoï, how are being dealt with ? »

Jonesy replied : « Oh, they are nasty. And cunning. Usually, a night watch is enough to keep them away. That said, if somebody catches a strigoï around my place, not only can they keep it, but I'll add half the strigoï's weight in grain as a reward. Huge incentive. That said, I think only four have been caught so far. »

« Five » corrected one of the cleaning girls.

Jonesy went on : « You can't really hunt them, you know. You have to use traps, but it's complicated. It's a trade in itself ; there are three boys, from the Outer Farms, they're bit like strigoï themselves, they're getting good at that. Once they caught only a foot, the strigoï must had severed it in total silence, then he went to the canal and swam away. We still haven't found any one-footed strigoï. »

The conversation made sense, and Erich surprised himself thinking about possible traps to install around Three Acorns and Joyeux-Tiburon.

Erich : « How about these Outer Farms ? »

Jonesy, looking at the service girls : « Oh, lots to be said. It's for another time. »

They finished their bowls, thanked the girls and resumed their night walk, not too far away from the compound this time.

Jonesy answered Erich : « These Outer Farms are not so organised. Roger told me, you're aware they used to be Joyeux-Tiburon's white trash. They give me trouble. »

Jonesy stopped and looked upwards, to the stars. It was a magnificent sight, all the beauty of Creation engulfing the land. So far away from the deviance of humans.

Jonesy : « The alcoholics, for instance. They didn't sow all the grain, you know, but gave me some to brew beer or booze with it. Then, since I also get grain from Houma as payment, they sold me rights on the next harvest. They don't realise they won't have anything to sow or even to eat once the harvest is over. The thing is, these guys are toxic. Some always were, other became like that. They often talk about your cannibalistic experiments, and how it traumatised them. I guess your little followers don't think about that very often. »

Erich : « They never saw it. As far as I know, for them it's only hearsay. »

Jonesy : « Well, for those who dive and drown into my booze, it's still very real. I know you wanted to save as much people as possible, but this backfired. On me. »

Erich : « I'm sorry to hear that, but what can I do ? At least you're making a business out of it. »

Jonesy : « Well, it's their family which bores the brunt of the problem. But it does provide me with enough prostitutes to get my business going. These guys prostitute their children for booze, and the children get treats from customers, as well as their daily meals. Of course, they pawned their children's share in the harvest as well. »

Erich : « So now, your problem is, how will you enforce the contracts ? »

Jonesy : « Precisely. »

Erich : « Why didn't you think about this before ? »

Jonesy was nervous : « I needed the girls, and boys, Erich. It's my capital. All I had back then was a moonshine cooker I found in some house. Now I'm trading soap, grain, books and a lot of other stuff. »

Erich : « So you don't really need your shares of the harvest, do you ? »

Jonesy : « Well, I could really use it, you know. No, the thing is, they're sorting the wheat from the chaff in those farms, and I'm speaking metaphorically, so spare me this grin of yours. I already know quite well which farm is going to make it and which won't. »

Erich : « Let me guess : the farms that are not going to make it are those where most of your shares are. »

Jonesy : « Well, it's not that simple. Some also are in well-run places where they won't let me. »

Erich said : « I see » and mulled over the problem for over twenty minutes.

Finally, Erich came up with a proposition : « Perhaps we can combine both the short-term and the long-term here. I'm sure Houma has its troublemakers, which it wants to get rid of but can't. We, I mean, you, have people you want to get rid of. There must be a way to exchange one for the other. »

Jonesy was ecstatic : « Yes, exactly, and since the new guys come empty-handed, I will lend them a share of the grain they'll harvest for me, which they'll pay back over time. »

Erich : « Years. A piece of advice, don't ask for a 20% interest, halve that, it will take years for the agriculture to run smoothly enough to get that kind of return. About the slaves you're going to sell, because that's what it is, call them « exchange workers » to avoid trouble. »

Jonesy and Erich walked back to the compound, discussing the price and upkeep of slaves, when a young girl walked up to them, holding a small bouquet of wild flowers.

She was all embarrassed but managed to say : « Here, Mr. Erich, these are for you. Thank you for what you're doing for us. »

Erich sported a large smile and patted the girl on the head : « Thank you, they are beautiful ! »
The girl was very pleased and left in a hurry, quite nervous.

Erich felt awkward with this small innocent bouquet in his hands.

He turned to Jonesy and asked : « Don't tell me you have girls her age. »

Jonesy : « No, the youngest are young teenagers, but I can tell you it's not making it any less difficult. »

Erich : « Is this ever going to end ? »

Jonesy : « If we can get rid of the human wreck and the deranged religious lunatics, we will. »

Erich : « We won't be able to, but we can try. »

Jonesy : « I'd rather be landed gentry, as your plan is suggesting, than a pimp. »

Erich : « I wonder if this is how the way to power and privilege starts. »

Jonesy : « Of course, Erich. You worked for enough of these people to know that. »

Chapter 73
Monday, May the 13th. Late afternoon.

This had been another very hot day under an unforgiving sun. Diane and Erich spent the day pulling a small jury-rigged trailer from farm to farm, retrieving whatever materials they could to start a training center in Joyeux-Tiburon. They used Jim's inventory as a guide, which was little more than unsorted, grotesquely long and quite inaccurate lists checked infrequently, mainly on rainy days.

Nevertheless, Erich and Diane found enough to start their center in earnest. The greatest treasure was the complete encyclopedia that Erich missed on that fateful garage sale back in September.

I had been decided that school materials would remain within the Program's compound, and that Ms. Ling would be the teacher. The training center in Joyeux-Tiburon was to be an annex to Henry's workshop, and thus hopefully not attract undue attention, especially from Houma.

At the end of the day, Erich and Diane went to the pier and transferred the trailer's content to the Gliding Dragon. Roger came by, carrying a heavy knapsack full of reference books and soap, a small contribution from Jonesy.

Erich's consulting fee would be of a different nature : Jonesy would have to try to get some people released from the DHS' dungeon, in particular any former member of the information exchange, and if he was still alive, Gus Armstrong, the survivalist that got captured before the crisis started.

Once they were done loading the craft, they sat down and started to chat. Robert was waiting for Catalina and Henry, whose only possibility of travel would be by night. Basically, they were taking Henry to Joyeux-Tiburon so he could be buried there, close to his friends and family.

There was some tension between Erich and Roger and few words were exchanged. Diane tried to break the ice : « So, Roger, are you going to pay us a visit down there ? »

Roger replied with hesitancy : « I don't think so, Diane. I have to stay close to Water Wells. I often travel to Houma. »

Erich didn't comment, but pinched his lips.

Roger : « I'm sorry things worked out the way they did, Erich. »

Erich : « Things could have been different if you weighted in for me, instead of taking Philip's side. »

Roger : « Erich, you know how it is with loose ends. Witnesses are problems. This is why you sent me to Philip's place, remember ? »

Erich : « I see you didn't grant these girls the same favour. »

Roger's face became red with anger and embarrassment.

The discussion ended there, and nobody tried to revive it. The sun was almost setting, sending long shadows over the landscape, when a procession appeared in the distance. Six young adults carried Henry on his stretcher, while four teenagers, wearing heavy knapsacks, carried a tent over him. Catalina followed, carrying a lighter knapsack on her back, her face tense with anticipation.

Henry was either asleep or unconscious. Roger took his hand and said in a strangled voice : « Goodbye Henry ». He turned away, with tears in his eyes, and walked towards Water Wells at a brisk pace.

Erich would have liked Roger to see that he was sad too, and maybe they could have started to

reconcile, but it wasn't going to happen this time.

Henry was carefully placed aboard the Gliding Dragon, then the five knapsacks, only two of which carried personal possessions. The three others contained materials and tools for the workshop.

The Program people walked away, and the crew prepared for travel. In absence of wind, the sails couldn't be used, but Robert said the boat was already too heavy to carry combustible materials : they would all have to paddle down to town.

Erich realised that all the people on the boat were in the know of the clandestine project. He declared : « Perhaps it's even better that way, after all we've got stuff to discuss. »

At that moment a yell could be heard at a distance, it was Father Francis running towards the boat. It turned out he too wanted to travel to Joyeux-Tiburon. It would have been inappropriate for him to stay at the compound while a dying man was travelling.

As he approached, Erich declared flatly : « I hope he doesn't think his presence is a good sign. » Catalina had to scoff at that. Perhaps the phrase triggered some other memory of him in her mind, after all she knew him like no other did.

Robert was delighted, he told the priest : « Welcome my father, we happened to need a fifth person to paddle. »

The travel was uneventful and was made at a slow pace. They were all making this one last effort before taking a day or two of rest. Catalina stood up from time to time to whisper some kind words to an inanimate Henry. While doing so, she held his wrist, in order to find out if there was still a pulse.

Erich learned that nobody knew what illness befell Henry. After all, since no medicine could be obtained, it didn't make much of a difference.

Erich declared : « Still, one of these days we're going to have ourselves a doctor. We have a few books about medicine, perhaps we can teach somebody to become one. »

Father Francis : « I hope we will, but keep in mind this is a rural community. You'll have few people beyond a high-school level. »

Erich : « I realise that. »

Father Francis : « I'm just telling you and Diane this, so you don't become disappointed if your center doesn't train what you expected it would. »

Diane replied in a spiffy tone : « Well I guess we can try, besides planting carrots and turnips. »

A strange sound came from Henry, like a muffled moan.

Diane said : « See ? Even Henry agrees. »

This had the whole crew laughing. Catalina rose to check if Henry caught the joke, or if just a small, a tiny smirk could be seen on his face. She sat down again, disappointed and worried.

They reached Joyeux-Tiburon at the end of the night, when the darkness turns into a dirty grey. With the help of the night sentry on the pier, they carefully carried Henry to his workshop, then proceeded to empty the boat close to a dilapidated holiday bungalow, now the pier's warehouse.

Robert slept on his boat, out of habit, Diane and Erich in the warehouse : nothing of value could be left unattended.

On the evening of the next day, what remained of one of the smaller clanic compounds had been turned into the training center. The walls and floor were still tainted with blood, scarred by the various traps and weapons that had been used in those inhuman battles.

Three rooms out of nine were made useable, in that they provided some degree of protection against the elements. All other rooms, lobbies and the bathroom had one wall or more either torn open or outright missing. The training center was a ruin that simply looked in better shape than the others in that area.

One year ago, Erich would have been full of resolve and energy, he would have made extensive plans to make the best out of the place. Now, just like Diane, he remained seated in the shadow of the porch, waiting for the hot day to end. They had become a caricature of southern lazyness.

Hurrying was a waste of calories and carried a toll on the mind. The slower, energy conservative way of life was the best option in this hot climate. Nobody would admit it, but everybody thought it wasn't going to make a difference anyway.

Erich had a good glimpse at the future of the place when he realised they were spending a lot of time talking about the veggie patch. Erich knew this would be the real center of their interests and efforts in the future. Fixing the house, or cataloguing books, would only happen during rainy days or cool nights.

Days became weeks. On the few days the Program leaders came by, Erich would flame up for a couple hours, behave like the corporate expert he used to be, then they would leave and idleness returned.

Diane still had the energy of youth, but she wasn't the same person that spent sleepless nights updating the map in the War room. She too was calculating in her efforts and being cautious, if not stingy, with her energy.

They didn't have neighbours as such, but the two hundred survivors in town formed a community of sorts. People were scattered all over town ; some of them regularly changed places, for no good reason other than survivor's superstitions. Old people were making up most of the local population, but were not often seen. They remained at home, most often in loose groups, carefully rationing the grain allowance the Program organised for them during the last harvest.

Some of them would keep themselves busy by fixing some bit of broken furniture or salvaging some odd piece of equipment that could in some way be fixed. They would then carry it to the workshop in exchange of praise or constructive criticism.

For some, the line between gentle odd people and lunatic was hard to determine. As long as there was no danger, nobody would care. A naked old man was one of the more regular sights in town, as well as an old woman wearing dirty white curtains like a toga.

The workshop was the busiest place in town. At the moment they were building a large fishing pirogue, out of the good wood planks that had been evacuated to the trawlers. Three fishermen were helping them in any way they could. There was no pay and no boss. If one could do something and was willing to do it, he would be given free reign. More often than not, the workers forgot themselves in activity, pretty much like geeks slaving away at their hobbies. After all, there was nothing better to do.

Diane and Erich fitted quite well in this loose but quiet town. When the news of Henry's death reached them on Friday morning, it was as if Diane and Erich's transition to this place was complete.

People gathered around Henry's and Catalina's place near the Workshop, where volunteers dug up a deep grave during the morning early hours.

About a hundred people came by, dressed as they were, often barefooted on the hot soil, travelling between shadow islands on the ground. Catalina herself was only marginally better dressed. She had a very sad expression but wasn't crying anymore.

Only Father Francis was solemnly dressed, and carried a dignified funeral ceremony. As he carried on, more people joined the congregation often chatting with people as they met them. Some people left in the middle of the speech to go to the workshop's toilet, right beside a full set of bioreactors, others made jokes on the side.

Father Francis continued unabated. Erich helped put Henry's corpse, in a completely skeletal state into the ground. It felt as light as a plank of wood. People lined up and paid their last homages. Often, compliments over Henry's bioreactors, or « shit rockets » as some people called them, were given. Older people, who knew Henry for a long time, told him they would soon join him.

The ceremony felt familiar to Erich, yet strange. It was as if they all reverted to more primitive ways of life, himself included.

Once the ceremony was over and the hole covered with earth, a very elaborately sculpted slab of cement was brought as a funeral stone ; the artist, an old man, had spent weeks carving it with nothing more than a rod of steel. He said : « I did it for my own grave, but it felt right to give it to Henry. Besides, I found an even better slab for myself. »

People congratulated him and asked what he wanted to make some of these for themselves or relatives. People remained around the grave and kept chatting. Catalina, not at ease with public events, retreated inside her place, supported by Father Francis.

A hour later, Father Francis left with the Gliding Dragon northwards. People were still hanging around Henry's grave for lack of anything better to do, then disappeared all of the sudden around dinner time.

The next day, Erich and Robert left for Three-Acorns. Erich brought some soap, a couple of detective story books and ten assorted beer glass bottles, for canning. When they arrived, they discovered Robert's newborn daughter, Elizabeth.

Erich felt like a guest on his own land, and was treated as such. Kathryn was actually nicer to him than before, but they had a hard time sharing emotions. She heard about Erich living with Diane, and although it was obvious nothing of a romantic or sexual nature was taking place between the two, Kathryn couldn't help being jealous. As for Erich, all he cared about was to hold his son in his arms.

The vegetables and seeds from Three Acorns had been welcomed everywhere in the area, but were not really needed anymore : people's veggie patches were increasingly self-sufficient and gave a

wide variety of produce.

Sue and Kathryn were curtailing the island's production to suit their own needs. They too adopted a gentler pace of work, and took more time for their children.

No big plans were made for the future. In a way, Erich felt the place was going back to the good old days, when bringing back empty glass bottles felt like having won the lottery. But this time, he was excluded of it.

Robert and Erich left the following day, like guest who didn't want to overstay their welcome. They carried with them enough seeds and vegetables for the training center to start its own veggie patch

Back they went to a daily routine without larger perspectives than occasionally indulging in amateur cloak and dagger stuff, like hiding copper cables somewhere in the bayou.

Ten days later, Catalina appeared at the training center's door. Four Program leaders had left the day before, after an intensive course of Economics 101.

Erich was working since the earliest lights in the veggie patch, before the heat would become unbearable. Diane, who liked her morning sleep, would then do her part in the evening.

The veggie patch was nicely arranged, with clear pathways and vaillantly sprouting plants. There was a cistern full of canal water, a plastic barrel that had been gifted to the training center by an older woman, who also volunteered to clean up the place twice a week. As return gifts, she would get some vegetables from the patch.

Erich's only piece of clothing a pityful, dusty and smelly short robe patched together from various scraps of fabric. He realised his appearance was not the one he wanted others to see, and embarassingly declared : « Oh, hi Catalina. Sorry to be like that, but it's the best for that morning work. You know, morning dew and all that. »

Catalina laughed and replied : « I don't care much for what you're wearing. But now we have to make good on a promise we made to Henry. You'll have to take your day off and come with me. »

Erich prepared himself in a hurry. His worn sandals, shabby short and patched shirt were pityfull, but still not as much as the gardening robe he shared with Diane. As he slinged his shotgun onhis shoulder, his appearance and his posture suddenly became much more dignified.

Catalina took Erich to the Shrimp Institute, without a word. The place had been covered by a layer of mud since the flooding, over which grass was growing fiercely.

Catalina took him to one of the furthest locations inside the building. Traces in the mud showed that people had worked over the electrical cables and removed them.

Catalina said : « These cables were all protected against flooding, they're in excellent shape. One of them, though, was running towards the bayou, seemingly nowhere. We had to find where if we wanted to disconnect it and retrieve it. We found something. »

Catalina took Erich out of the building, towards the canal that separated the town from the bayou. Hidden by dense vegetation was a concrete cover over a sewer manhole.

Catalina : « This is where we disconnected the cable. From another cable that runs to the other side. Of course, we investigated it. Now undress yourself, we're going in for a swim. »

Erich didn't ask questions and undressed completely, just as Catalina. They swam for fifteen minutes in the mildy cold canal water. Erich wasn't inconvenienced : as every inhabitant in Joyeux-Tiburon, the canals were everybody's bathtub.

At one moment, Catalina said « Follow me » and dived. Erich followed her for a short dive : he emerged in a completely dark cave with a low ceiling. He touched the walls and realised they were made out of concrete.

Catalina dived in the dark until she found a watertight light switch. A dim LED provided sparse lighting to the place. It was a narrow cave, the dimensions of a large car. A long waterproofed metallic door, probably made of coated aluminium, ran across one of its largest sides.

Catalina worked the door's lock and the door opened to a completely dark place. On the other side of the door, was a maze of industrial-grade tubing, the size of a delivery van. It was a miniature chemical factory, assembled inside a concrete pit. The concrete slab was the end of a narrow concrete stairway that ran along the side of the pit.

Erich : « Avery's lab. »

Catalina : « Yes, and more than that. »

Catalina reached inside the tube maze and took out a can of tuna. She said : « He filled every free space with food. Carefully packaged, for years or decades. »

Erich : « So he did listen to me. Back when you warned me, I warned a lot of people, Avery was one of them. »

Catalina : « You did well, even if you didn't expect where it would all lead to. »

Erich : « Who knows of this ? What have you planned to do ? »

Catalina : « Me, Matthew and you are the only ones in the know. But we should go now, if people followed us they might start to ask unwelcomed questions. »

Catalina closed the door with great care, then switched off the light. Seconds later, they emerged in the bright sunlight again. Without a word, they swam back to their clothes, laid down for a while under the hot sun, and finally walked back to town.

Catalina : « To answer the other question, we weren't sure about what to do. »

Erich : « I know. Perhaps this is an answer to a question that hasn't arisen yet. »

Catalina : « Yes, well, we thought we would leave it where it is. »

Erich : « If one of us three dies, the other two must inform another one. This is too important to be forgotten. »

Catalina : « What exactly, the food or the factory ? »

Erich : « The food is an emergency thing, but the factory... it's a game changer. We could rearm troops or build explosives with that factory. »

Catalina : « But we're no longer the top dogs, are we ? »

Erich : « Don't worry about that, Catalina. This is a long-lasting game. As you've seen, top dogs usually don't stay on top very long. Normal dogs, though, are around since the dawn of time. »

They walked back into town when Erich sighted the remnants of the electrical transformer that the director of the institute destroyed.

Erich stopped dead in his tracks : « Now I know... That guy wasn't dressed in a diving suit out of madness... He tried not getting electrocuted while he crashed his van into the transformer. He

wanted to deny Avery any more electricity. God only knows what kind of deal these two made, but that night, it must have been the best thing for him to do. Perhaps he saved us from more trouble, who knows ? »

Catalina : « Nobody knows, and that's the trouble. Perhaps the reason was different. People dealing with drug money have a lot of secrets. Am I right ? »

Erich felt embarrassed, and flatly declared : « You definitely are right. »

The memory of the secret chemical factory faded from Erich's mind. There was no use for it, and all he had to do in the meantime was to secure the half-submersible on Kiefer's island, for further use.

The cultivation of his potatoes absorbed more of his interest. His grandmother once said that growing potatoes was a science in itself, and now he understood why. He went to see other people in town and asked practical details about growing potatoes and other vegetables. He found himself another bond with Kathryn as they discussed the cultivation of vegetables in length on these long Saturday nights in the summer.

Erich and Diane found out that the garden maintained them in a working habit. Their minds continued to work, and soon they found enough energy to go beyond. The house received some badly needed repairs, library furniture was assembled and an additional room was repaired. Diane started a system of book lending, prompting people in town to donate some books and magazines to the library. Some books were sometimes provided from Jonesy as part of the increasingly complex barter circuits that were slowly emerging, creating a more capable economy. Matthew found a way to turn sunflower oil into soap, by adding the ashes from certain plants, reinforcing the Program's economic might in the area.

Erich felt at time excluded from these developments but, on the other hand, he wouldn't want to leave his present life. His body also felt older, through the accumulated effects of this harsh way of life. In medieval Europe, the average lifespan was about forty-five years, meaning he had less than a decade before him.

This thought didn't disturb him much : it was speculation, and if it turned out true, there would be nothing he could do prevent the outcome.

Time went by in a slow but steady manner. In June, Connolly came to Three-Acorns with a new steam-powered pontoon boat and took the horses to feed on other islands. This was paid for by Houma, through complex channels involving Jonesy and Jim. It seemed some people in Houma wanted to develop some sort of cavalry unit as a stealth program, away from the prying eyes of whoever their masters outside were.

Reginald reported that the Cantaloupes were still present at their usual location, inactive as if forgotten. Mark had left for New Orleans, where there was supposedly work for the adventurous, but since then no news of him returned.

There was the impression that cities like Houma, now the size of towns, where about the largest organizations still remaining on the continent, if not the world. But there were no trustworthy news, no long-distance radio broadcasts and no internet. Even rumours were of no use.

In June, Robert reported that the first workers arrived from Houma to Water Wells, and were a welcome replacement against those who were forced to leave to the city in return. People were slowly readying themselves for the August harvesting season, jury-rigging concrete structure to turn

them into granaries.

As the crops grew taller and riper, the prospects for the coming year were looking good. The general interest shifted from food to clothing. Although the climate was hot, people were fed up of the rags they were wearing. There were too few linen seeds compared to the demand ; it would take years to build that culture up to needs. Instead, the interest switched to indian hemp, which could be found in greater quantities, usually remains of clandestine fields gone wild.

An economic specialization began to unfold. Joyeux-Tiburon exported salted fish to the emerging, soon to be booming northern farms, and received grain and soap in return. Although there was a substantial demand for beer and booze, a severe lack of bottles, kegs or any other way to transport liquids restricted that consumption to the increasingly infamous Water Wells.

Some girls left the Outer Farms for Water Wells, aggressively flirting with people from Houma. Three managed to leave in May and June, inginiting hopes for the others.

One late afternoon in the middle of June, a strange man disembarked at Joyeux-Tiburon, wearing nothing more than a soiled pair of knickers. He was rather tall, with above average musculature and severe limping. Formely without doubt very pale, his skin was one single, very recent sunburn ; his back was lashed with countless scars, as many as there were straws in a bundle. A large tramp stamp had been tatoood over the scars on the lower back. His face had the hallmarks of intense torment, his eyes had a dead stare, as if he was permanently absent-minded. His unkept hair was at shoulder height, his eyelids and lips had been contoured with permanent tatoo make-up, giving an exotic, oriental note.

The man was apparently mute. Robert told Joyeux-Tiburon's stevedore to take the man to the library and leave him to Erich. The man followed the stevedore obediently, until he faced a puzzled Erich, Diane and his two old readers in the library room..

It was Diane who recognized him first : « It's Mr. Armstrong ! Gus, is it ? It's me, Diane. I lived three houses away from yours. »

The stare of Gus Armstrong focused, but the man remained mute and his posture unchanged.

Diane was still surprised, and turned to Erich : « What were the odds ? »

Erich : « Given both your social class, the odds were quite good, actually. »

Diane nodded, still fascinated by the mysterious former neighbour.

Erich didn't even try to address Gus. In a very calmed manner, he took Diane to another room.

Erich : « Diane, Gus has been arrested by Homeland Security around New Year's Eve. I think he has been severly tortured, and his mind messed with. He probably doesn't trust anything or anybody.

For him, every hope he might have could be yet another cruel trap set by its tormentors. »

Diane was horrified. After several minutes, she dared to ask : « How can we get him out of that situation ? »

Erich replied : « I will try and find a way. I must. »

Erich approached Gus with caution, and spoke slowly : « I am Erich. She's Diane. We live here. You can live with us if you want. »

Gus stare was unfocused but troubled.

Erich lead him to go in the former bathroom, an empty place missing two walls. It was currently in the shadows, with a view to the Eastern Canal and the Bayou beyond.

Erich told him : « You can sit while I get you some water to wash yourself with. If you want. Then, I have some sunflower oil. For your sunburns, you know. If you want to speak, you speak, OK ? »
Gus still said no word, but his stare showed he was confused.

Gus remained in the barebone room by himself. He could watch Erich at a distance, fetching some canal water with a repurposed motor oil canister as a bucket.
Erich gave the man a towel, showed him how to use the unusual soap and then fetched him his only spare clothes.
He finally declared : « Take your time, nothing's the hurry around here. »
Then he left, leaving the door half-closed.

Erich went out to find Gus a mattress and a sheet, while Diane started to prepare the evening meal. The curious but polite readers stayed as usual until the last ray of sunlight disappeared from the room, then left for their homes, with a great story to tell the neighbours.

Diane helped Erich to haul a small, quite shabby mattress up the stairs. When Erich thought about what Gus might think of it, he spoke out loud : « We're just a bunch of glorified squatters, that's what we are. »
Diane turned to Erich and asked : « What are squatters, Erich ? »
Erich was at first surprised, then realised some concepts were about to become old-fashioned. Everybody here was a squatter of sorts, even those who were still living in the same house as ever before.

Erich knocked on the still half-closed bathroom door, and entered. Gus had apparently washed himself, he was now dressed and his pair of knickers had been washed, although that piece of clothing was beyond salvation. Erich had a hunch and turned around Gus realised the newly worn trousers had been soiled by excrement as well.

It was an embarrassing moment for Erich, but he had to know.
Erich : « Gus, I have to know why you're losing excrement. I think they did something to your asshole, but I need to see it. You're okay with that ? »
Gus remained impassible.
Erich calmly gave him an order with a precise tone : « Gus, take your trousers down and show me your butt. »
Gus complied.

A curious and giggling Diane entered the place, saying « Did you really say that - »
She didn't finish her phrase as she made a sudden horrified gasp. Her eyes kept fixating Gus' mutilated bottom.

Erich ordered her inside at once. She complied immediately.
Erich examined the problem closely : the very scarred anus had apparently been torn open, probably from a penetration with a large object, then imperfectly stitched shut. The anus was now a triangular hole with no possibility of closing by itself.

Erich said : « I understand. Put the trousers back on. »
Gus complied.
Erich explained : « You'll sleep in your knickers. Tomorrow we'll find a way to fix you some diapers. All right ? »
Gus remained mute, but all of a sudden Erich could see a very discrete nod.
Erich : « Good. It's going to be good. Now wash your hands and come eat with us. »

Gus complied and entered the library room, in a middle of which was a large bowl full of mashed potatoes with garlic. That would be their whole dinner.

Diane, Erich and Gus sat around the bowl, and ate the mashed potatoes with their fingers. There was however a jar with clear water and five assorted glasses to choose from.

Diane explain, as an apology : « Many people entered the house and smashed a lot of things : dishes, glasses, mirrors, you know, that kind of things. We were given the glasses and the jar by one person, and some cutlery by another, but I use it for cooking only. »

Gus ate slowly, and so Erich and Diane adapted to his pace. Erich proceeded to tell the town's history since January. Gus was obviously listening, but either kept his reactions to himself, or he had some issues with emotions as such, either repressed, destroyed or twisted.

At a moment, Erich had to say : « When we moved to the north, we only found your youngest son. He's still alive, the Program took him over. Nobody knows what happened to your wife and to your other son, but there are no chances of them being alive. I'm sorry. »

Gus' face changed abruptly : he started weeping, discretely. Lone tears runned down his cheeks.

Diane and Erich kept quiet, impressed by the change.

Seemingly out of nowhere, Gus' strangely whispering voice could be heard. On top of the surprise of hearing a mute talk, the voice itself was strange, nothing like anything heard before. The act of speaking was apparently painful for Gus, as was the proper articulation. It seemed like sighs from a broken accordeon.

Gus : « So many times. They ... never told me. Nothing. »

Erich realised Gus must have broken his voice from repeated screaming. Gus had not changed his stance to say these words, and resumed his muted attitude afterwards.

Erich and Diane respected this silence and prepared themselves for the night. Gus didn't apply any oil to his sunburns and went straight to bed afterwards. On the next morning, Erich woke up as early as every day, stretched and put the hideous robe on.

Gus had awoken at the same time as Erich. He didn't move, apprently waiting for instructions.

Erich only said « good morning » and purposefully left Gus as he was. Gus had to regain some will, and assisting him in every step wasn't going to do the trick. When Erich returned from his morning chore, he was happy to see Gus had washed his knickers in the bathroom by himself. Small steps.

Gus was a very passive person, but his mere presence was a distraction to everybody in the library. Erich decided to take him for a tour of several hours, until they reached his former house.

They often stopped to chat with the scattered locals, who welcomed any change to their dull routine. Nobody used the road anymore, and the places which once were central had turned into a backwater area. Erich was surprised at the extent of the individual gardens, and the vast effort to clear the rubble and mud. Joyeux-Tiburon was becoming as close to a cosy little town as possible.

Gus remained mute and didn't even greet back. It wasn't hostility at all but thick, sincere indifference to everybody and everything.

Erich and Gus eventually reached the empty lot where his house used to be. As a Saviour's Soliders compound, it had been repeatedly attacked, then ransacked and eventually dismantled into components and firewood. A slab of mud covered the place, upon which tropical wild plants were growing fast.

Erich searched the area for any remnants of the house, and found a pile of twisted and violently destroyed door fittings. Gus recognized the door handles and knelt to inspect them closely. Erich studied every gesture and emotion. Gus weighed a deeply scarred and ripped away door handle.

He made an effort to speak one words : « Expensive. »

From the painful tone, Erich realised that to Gus every word was a torture to his throat.

Erich nodded, and asked : « Do you want to spend some more time here, by yourself ? »

Gus shook his head and rose up again, returning to his blunt, extinguished attitude.

Erich decided to head back to the library. They made a stop at the canal when Gus uncontrollably soiled himself. Erich realised the whole nervous system in that area must have been upset by whatever they did to him in the DHS' dungeon.

After a long walk in silence, Erich asked : « Do you think we should visit Johnny tomorrow ? »

Gus had a sad look at Erich and shook his head.

Erich replied : « Okay, maybe later », to which Gus didn't answer.

As they walked back to town, Erich imagined how tedious Gus' presence would become. If Gus continued to be that passive, Diane and him would have to increase their workload in the garden just to feed him.

It was worth trying something to accelerate the process.

Erich took his shotgun from the shoulder and gave it to Gus, along with the other cartridge in his pocket. Erich declared : « You take charge of this, now. »

Gus stopped dead in his tracks and looked at the firearm with a fix stare, like a deer in the headlights.

Gus then firmly seized the firearm and the spare cartridge. Erich turned around and resumed walking. Gus followed.

Some minutes later, Erich heard the gun being opened and shut close again. His blood chilled with irrational fear. A gunshot erupted. Erich closed his eyes and cursed his foolish ideas.

Leaves in a nearby tree had a brief shake. Erich was untouched. He turned around, to witness Gus lowering the gun still aimed at desert spot.

Gus appeared deeply impressed, almost a changed man. Tears sprang to his eyes, and he appear to have a knot in the throat. Unable to speak or even to communicate his feelings, he brandished the weapon in the air with a large smile, his weeping eyes wide open.

Gus cracked the gun open, extracted the shell and chambered the spare round. He shut the gun, the hammer of which was still lowered, then slinged it on his shoulder. Erich knew how he felt, since he had the same feeling every morning.

Gus' posture had changed. He was now confident and his face was more communicative, although

too much unripe emotions were surging at the same time in this moment.

Gus took Erich's hand and shook it vigorously, staring into his eyes with great intensity. This left Erich deeply impressed, just as if he just insuflated life into a clay figure.

Some locals observed cautiously from a distance, since no words had been spoken after the shot. Erich resumed walking, and this time Gus didn't follow, but walked by his side.

Erich had a deep sympathy for Gus in this moment, but mourned the loss of his gun, one of his last possessions. Now all he owned to his name was the metal canoe Ticonderoga. They marched in silence towards home.

Erich wondered if he wasn't losing something every time he insuflated life into the community. It didn't take long for him to be persuaded of it, but he also knew he would never be left to starve in this community.

Gus stopped at the stairs to the library, pointed his finger northwards and spoke, in a more normal yet still painful tone : « Tomorrow ».

Erich replied : « This evening. The ferry should be here soon, or we'll have to wait for the same time tomorrow. »

Gus nodded with enthusiasm.

Erich ran upstairs and told Diane he would be away for a couple of days, then grabbed his plastic beaker and walked down to Gus. They embarked half an hour later, paying for their trip by paddling continuously until they arrived at destination late in the evening.