

**Tuesday, 8 August 2045**

You named me Rabiyya Patrick.

Rabiyya, a common boy's name from your home country. Patrick, Dad's last name. My name is Irish-Arabian. I am Irish-Arabian.

Mom encouraged me to start writing down my thoughts a year ago. She said it might be helpful, but I put it off for months. I promised myself that I would start on my 21st birthday, and here it is. So, I'm starting, and I decided to write to you.

Today is my 21st birthday and you aren't here. You haven't been for years. Neither of you have.

I am grateful that I still have Mom. Tonight, she's taking me to dinner at the same place we go every year. It's a Mexican restaurant in the outer Mission called Baja. You and Dad would like it. I remember that you liked Mexican food and I didn't. Ironically, it's one of my favorites now.

Three years ago tonight, as we walked home from Civic Center station after dinner on my 18th birthday, she told me who my parents really are. She told me about you and Dad. About how I had two biological fathers.

She told me that I was genetically engineered.

I just stared at those words for about five minutes. That's the first time I've seen it written out. It makes me sick when I think about it sometimes. Did you and Dad think about how it would make me feel when you planned it?

I wish I could ask you. I have hundreds of questions for you both. But now I only have Mom, the woman you chose to carry me.

I remember our house on Delmar in Ashbury Heights. It was an old Victorian near Buena Vista Park. Back then Mom lived in Mill Valley and you took me to visit her most weekends because you thought it was important I keep a connection with her. The house we lived in is gone, of course. Sometimes I ride up to Ashbury Heights and look at where I think it was. Delmar is still there, though it looks completely different. It's hard to remember exactly where it was since everything was destroyed.

I have two biological fathers.

When I was 16 I started wearing your *taqiyahs* (a white cloth cap traditionally worn by Saudi Arabian men). You had both left some clothing at Mom's so four of them survived - genuine Arab *taqiyahs* you brought with you from Saudi Arabia. It's not called Saudi Arabia now, by the way. Mom doesn't say much about it when I have one on, but sometimes she smiles and tells me that they look good on me and that I remind her of

you. I like wearing them. I feel closer to you. When I was younger I used to smell them – and for a long time I could smell you I could close my eyes and remember how I felt when you held me. But your scent is long gone now, and I have nothing left but pics and vids of you and Dad.

It was so painful. I can't describe it. I can't explain it to Mom. I'm sure she tries to understand, because I know she loved you too in her own way. For so long I thought you would come back. I used to pray to God all night for you to come home. It shredded me. But now, after so many years, I just feel numb. Except when I dream about you – in my dreams the pain never goes away.

My friend Mark just pinged. He's on his way across the bridge. I'm going to meet him at the university and then we plan to ride down to Fort Funston. I'll tell you about him later.

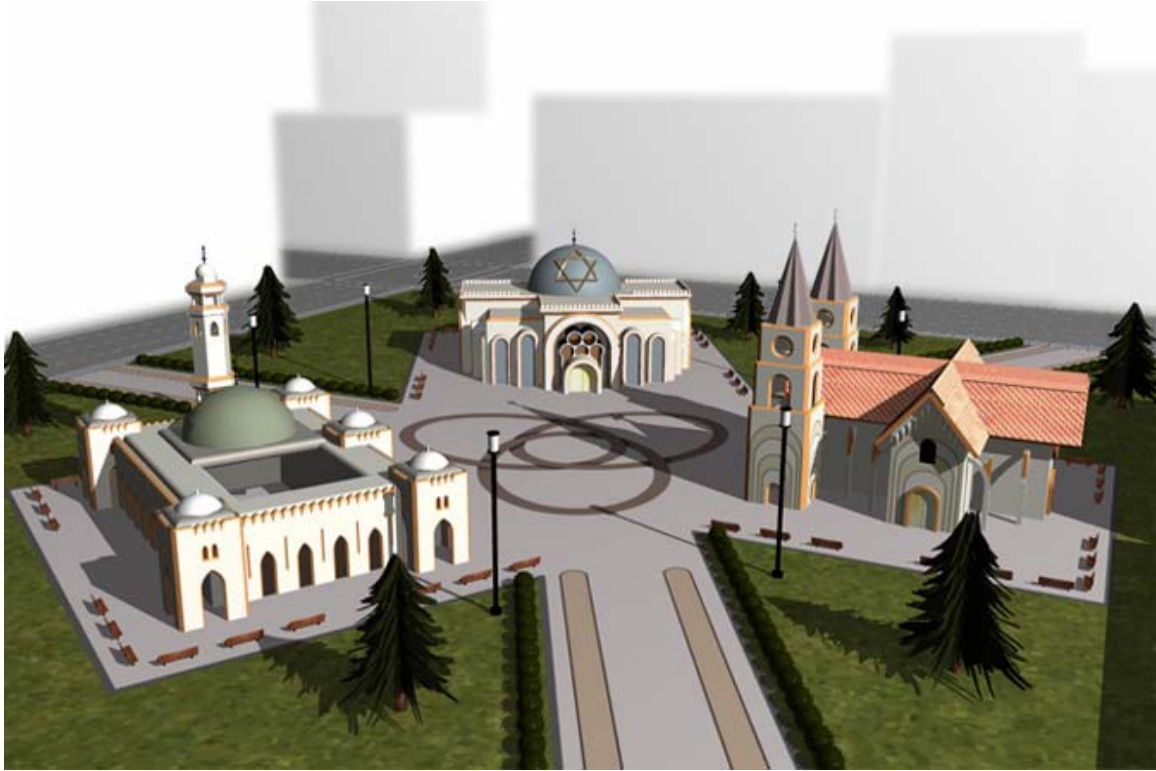
This is harder than I thought. I miss you.

### **Sunday, 13 August 2045**

Mom is at church so I can write again.

I used to go to church with her sometimes but it doesn't seem right to me anymore. I remember when you used to take me with you to pray at your masjid. That doesn't seem right now either. Mom says that Dad had a lot of respect for your faith, but didn't subscribe to any particular religion. I asked her if he believed in God and she said yes. I don't think I do though. This would upset you, I know. But I can't imagine a God that would allow the things that happened - to happen.

She recently started going to the new church at Abraham Square. It's only a few blocks from our house so on Sundays we hear the church bells very clearly and on Fridays I can hear the Jum'ah call to prayer at the new masjid.



When I used to go to the old masjid with you, I thought the whole prayer thing to be very tedious. But I would do anything to be with you, Abuyah (*what Saudi kids commonly call their father*). Or at least that's how I remember it. Maybe it's more that I would do anything to be with you now.

I would do anything to see either of you for just an hour. I have so many questions.

I haven't been to the new masjid, though Jamal tells me he would like to see me there sometime. I just have no interest. Or maybe I'm afraid of something. Still, I have to admit that Abraham Square is beautiful. I am glad we live so close to it. Before it was even finished it became a symbol of hope and peace world-wide. You would both like it.

Mark and I did ride to Fort Funston last Tuesday. From SOMA it's around 22 km round-trip since we don't go over Twin Peaks but rather around to the north of Buena Vista Park, through Golden Gate Park and then down the coast. I prefer taking Market over Twin Peaks but Mark isn't in the best shape so it's harder for him. I'm very strong like you were. Mom says that was one of the things Dad liked about you. But it's not that I enjoy biking uphill as much as I avoid going through the Haight and the park.

Remember the Peet's coffee shop on Haight where Dad went? He would buy me a hot chocolate. He always had a lowfat latte. This is still so clear in my mind. I remember standing next to him and watching the employees with all their urban jewelry, piercings and wild hair. It was only a few blocks down the hill from our house. Of course it is gone now too.

Everything that was here is now gone.

Golden Gate Park is completely different. I remember the four of us going on picnics there - it seems so long ago. It was so green and lush.

Today much of it is still barren and the charred remains of thousands of burnt trees remain where they fell 13 years ago. There has just been so much to rebuild. It will be interesting to watch it mature as the years pass. Already hundreds of trees have been planted and volunteers work day after day to restore parts of the park, but it is still depressing to ride through. Buildings are easier to replace than a 150 year old forest with a million trees.

A forest is easier to replace than lost parents.

Mom says this is one of the things that I need to work through. I both cling to the memories of you and avoid them. Sometimes I wish I had never known you at all. It's like being given a small taste of something amazingly delicious and then denied it forever ... even though everyone else can have it.

Sometimes I wish I had never been born. Mom hates it when I say this.

### **Wednesday, 16 August 2045**

The fog is unusually thick today. Usually it burns off by mid-morning, but it's already 3 in the afternoon. I know summers in San Francisco used to be very foggy, but now there aren't so many foggy days. I was going to ride to Oakland to hang out with Mark and his girlfriend since he's off work today, but it's too gray out. I just want to stay in. I'll go Saturday.

I start school Monday, so my free time is over. I have one year left on my degree, though I'm thinking about going to graduate school afterward. I guess we'll see how I feel when I get to that point.

I'm getting an engineering degree with a concentration in nanotechnology. I absolutely love it. When I'm studying or working on a project I forget about everything and am completely happy. I hope to get a job at Nissan Nanotech when I graduate - if I don't go to graduate school.

I think I picked engineering because you were an engineer, but I had no idea it would be so fascinating. I certainly don't want to be an attorney like Dad.

It was a good thing both of you invested overseas. About half of your investments survived, which proved fortunate for Mom and me since San Francisco is extremely expensive to live in. It was very expensive even before the war, but now it's more crowded than ever. You wouldn't recognize the City anymore.

Our condo is on the twentieth floor of one of many tall apartment buildings built during Reconstruction. Our view is to the east. Mom enjoys watching the sun rise over the East Bay hills. We can see Oakland, Emeryville, Alameda, and so on across the bay from our balcony. Mark lives with his parents in Oakland. It seems so old and dirty compared to San Francisco, but I like going to see him there. It's like going to another country in a way. It's more real.

Mark is more real. He doesn't know how jealous I am of him sometimes. He has a mom and a dad and two sisters. He's not a freak. Yes, I think of myself as a freak. Did you consider that possibility?

I remember the other kids at the school in Cole Valley. Many of them had two dads or two moms, but of course they had a biological mother and father. I always thought I was just like them. For a long time I thought that you and Mom were my natural parents. Now I can see both you and Dad when I look in the mirror.

I have Dad's blue eyes and your black hair and olive skin. Well, I'm not as dark as you were. I am about average height like Dad was, maybe a little taller, though I look more like you. I have your naturally muscular build. I even wear a moustache and beard as you did, though I keep mine trimmed close. You are both a part of me. It makes me miss you even more.

Did you know Mom is half Irish and half Ethiopian? I think she is beautiful. Did you? People often think she is my sister.

She's home, gotta go.

### **Saturday, 19 August 2045**

I'm at Mark's house. He and Kelley are playing some new VR game right now. They are just in the next room so I can hear them laughing and yelling. Mark's dad fell asleep across from me while watching BBC World News. I muted the system. I can't stand watching or listening to the news. How can he watch it and still sleep? Even with the new mood stabilizer I get furious. There is some British reporter in Syria giving his account of the latest battle between the Arab Liberation Army and the Greater Israeli coalition force in Anbar. The Arabs don't have a chance, of course. They continue to be wiped out on their own turf. Just looking at the pictures enrages me. I can imagine your reaction.

I have to think about something else.

Mr. Ewansiha is always trying to get me to ask his daughter out. She's not my type, but how do you say that to your best friend's dad? I tell him I don't want to date until I finish school. That's not really true. I wonder if he thinks I'm gay.

When I was a kid I used to wonder if I would be gay like you and Dad, but there is no doubt that I find women attractive. Oh, God, do I find them attractive. It's just that dating terrifies me. I just don't trust myself.

But I can't say, "I'm sorry, Mr. Ewansiha, I can't date anyone right now because I'm an emotionally unstable laboratory experiment."

I'd rather be gay.

Mark knows about some of my issues, but he doesn't know everything. I can't tell him everything. I can't tell anyone everything, even my shrink. Well, Mom knows a lot. But she's my Mom. I don't know what I would do without her.

I wish you were here. I want you back.

### **Saturday, 26 August 2045**

I'm sitting at the top of Twin Peaks. I like to come up here on warm days. It makes my problems seem less important, even trivial. But most of all, it is quiet and serene.

Today is a beautiful warm day. The fog didn't appear last night and the air is so clear that Mount Diablo is sharp on the horizon. The City is spread out beneath me. Its sounds drift up from busy streets and sidewalks, muted by distance. Everything is familiar to me now, but not like in the pictures.

Not like I remember.

When they rebuilt San Francisco, many things were left the same. The names and locations of the neighborhoods are identical. Most of the streets have the same name, at least the ones that still exist. But there are many new things as well.

The Phoenix Tower rises in the center of the financial district, where the Transamerica Pyramid was. It even has a similar shape. The power of nostalgia was very much evident during Reconstruction. Market Street still runs straight from the new Embarcadero Ferry building to the Castro before winding up Twin Peaks to become Portola.

The Ferry building and City Hall were designed with a nod to their previous incarnations, but this was unusual. Most non-residential structures look little like their previous versions. Most residential structures look different too. Few attempts were made to rebuild the Victorians that gave San Francisco much of its character.

Whether or not to try and recreate the classic Victorian style was very controversial. Everything having to do with Reconstruction was very controversial, except for its need. The attempts looked authentic, but weren't. Much of the character of a neighborhood is established with time, and everything now is brand new. And the people are gone. The

Chinese and Japanese and Italian and Russian and African and Mexican and Arab and Irish and Filipino and rich and poor and gay and straight and young and old and conventional and rebellious and mixes of all of the above that lived here before are all gone.

A city is also defined by its inhabitants and less than one thousand survived.

Most of the old parks remain, at least those that have been restored. Other than the mature trees that were donated, the trees are at most twelve years old. Every last blade of grass was incinerated by the firestorm.

Memorial Park is completely new. It is in the Marina where the largest crater was. This was the only crater not filled in. They are planning to build a memorial of some kind, but of course a design hasn't been agreed upon yet. How do you build a memorial to 800,000 people?

I can see Abraham Square. The three houses of worship occupy the block bounded by Howard and Folsom and 5th and 6th Streets. All three buildings are true to the traditional designs of the religions they represent, but also compliment each other. The message is not subtle: that we can live and flourish together, complimenting and supporting each other in peace. And we do, more or less, at least here in Pacifica.

That is one of the legacies of San Francisco. It had long been a very diverse, successful city, and it is again. It was destroyed, but we are back. I wish you could see it.

I feel relaxed and centered now. It's time to ride home.

### **Monday, 28 August 2045**

This is the second week of school. I'm taking four courses this semester: Surface Physics, Molecular Electronics, Intermediate Nanostructures, and Modeling and Design of MEMS (Micro Electrical Mechanical Systems).

I don't know what I was thinking when I registered. Last week I spent 12 hours in class and about 40 doing homework and research. At least I like my instructors this time, though two are from India and are challenging to understand. My labs start this week.

The labs for the two classes that specifically relate to nanotech use the latest VR modeling technology. Everything is done in a sophisticated 3-D immersion environment where we are able to "physically" manipulate the structures. Luckily the programming is a lot easier than it was even 10 years ago.

I am fortunate to live here. The Bay Area is a world leader in nanotech. Probably only Japan is more advanced.

Mom is so proud of me. My instructors say I have a “gift” for it. I don't know what to think about that. Do I have a natural aptitude for engineering or was I enhanced somehow? She insists that such tweaking didn't occur, but how can she be certain?

And if it did, what difference does it make?

Well, it makes a difference to me, but I'll never know. Do you know?

She says there were five of us – that were born anyway. The project - germline genetic engineering - was highly illegal, but when enough money is involved laws become meaningless. Supposedly no records were kept that can identify me, though I can't imagine how that could be true. All anyone would need is a genetic print.

She has no idea who the other four were, where they are or even if they are alive. She claims you and Dad didn't know any of the other parties involved either. But Dad was close friends with one of the primary sponsors – and so here I am – a product of a secret experiment by the largest biotech corporations in the world. How am I supposed to feel normal when I'm not? Am I even natural? How does one define natural? I certainly did not occur naturally, so does that make me unnatural?

Did you and Dad consider this possibility?

Mom thought that by telling me I would feel better about losing you, that I would feel closer to you. Instead, I've been on a series of mood stabilizers ever since.

In addition to the anti-depressant.

I wish she had never said anything. I look pretty much just like everyone else, but I'm not.

### **Saturday, 2 September 2045**

Mark and I rode up to the top of Mount Tam this morning – our first time together. I rode up here frequently in junior high and high school, and I'm glad he's up to the challenge now. Not that it's particularly hard, but he used to be in pretty bad shape.

Having a girlfriend and an athletic best friend took care of that. I'm always pushing him physically.

It's an unusually clear day for this time of year. I think I can just make out the Sierras on the other side of the Valley. During the summer the valley is shrouded in the hydrocarbon haze created by agriculture – and because it is very hot.

Here it is often cool. Today a blanket of fog hides the hills and valleys and bay from our view, but I knew it would be clear up here. I can see the rust-colored tops of the Golden Gate Bridge poking up through the mist, which is bright white with reflected sunlight.

I love the bridge. It is the only structure I can cross and know that you and Dad had been on it too. Mom and I went to the 100 year anniversary celebration. The Reconstruction was in full swing at that time and they had recently finished repairing the bridge itself.

We stood on the inland sidewalk and looked at the City. Most of the hills were still dead and blackened from the fires, but white and silver towers were climbing back into the bluest of skies in the Financial District. Elsewhere, a patchwork of smaller buildings and homes were under construction. About a dozen air force fighters zoomed about overhead, both part of the celebration and part of the heavy security. In retrospect, the presence of the fighters may have also been in case of another attack, however unlikely.

The geopolitical changes have been surreal for those older than I or that have family members in America.

Mom is the only family I have left. Most of your family died in Arabia with you. Dad's family is in America, but we've had no contact with them since the war. I remember my grandparents though. Do you remember how nice they were? Grandpa Patrick always took me shopping for a toy when they came to visit. I wonder how they are. I could try searching the public webspaces for them, but I don't want to find out that they are dead too. So, I do nothing.

Mom's parents lived in Massachusetts. They were apparently killed trying to escape to Canada. So it's just Mom and me.

I know I'm repeating myself, but I don't know what I would do without her.

Mark is sitting on a rock a few meters away talking to Kelley. He talks to her all the time, even when they are apart. Is this something people do when they are in love? How could they possibly have so much to say? What do they talk about? Were you and Dad like this?

Maybe he thinks I'm ignoring him. I should probably stop now.

I just asked him if he wanted to go back yet. He said he wanted to ride down to Muir Woods first, so we are off.

### **Sunday, 3 September 2045**

I just made Mom cry. I am such an ass. Nothing upsets her more than when I call myself unnatural.

We were talking about school when I asked her “that” question again. How does she know that I wasn't enhanced somehow?

“Rabiyya,” she said. “There is nothing about you that is unnatural. Yes, you are extremely smart, but smarter people do exist.”

“I know,” I said. “But they are real – they weren't developed in a laboratory somewhere!”

Then she got that look she gets when she is really serious. “You are just as real as they are,” she said earnestly. “You are just as human as they are. You have two parents like everyone else. The fact that your genes came from two men makes no biological difference.”

“Yes it does!” I yelled at her. “It makes me a freak!”

I instantly regretted it.

She started to cry. “Dave and Hassan loved you very much, Rabiyya. I love you very much. You are my baby.”

I started to cry too. So I ran out of the room.

I know you loved me. I miss your love. It was ... *hanaan* ... I think is the Arabic word. Mom loves me the same way I know, but she doesn't understand me. She can't understand me. You wouldn't have been able to understand me either, but you brought me into this world and then left me here with a million questions and no answers.

She came into the room just now and asked me what I was doing. Now she knows I'm keeping a journal. At least she stopped crying. I feel like I should apologize but ...

She has no idea how important she is to me. Or does she? Is that something mothers “just know?” It's hard for me to tell her. I'm so good at masking my feelings around everyone else, but then I take out my anger on her. It is so unfair. She tries so hard.

### **Monday, 4 September 2005**

I apologized to Mom. She was so surprised that it actually hurt my feelings. We didn't say very much afterward. What is there to say? She is worried about me and I am worried about her worrying about me.

And worried about myself. I don't always feel this way - feel “unnatural.” Sometimes I don't think about being engineered, or it doesn't bother me so much. Yet sometimes it is excruciatingly painful. Sometimes I get caught in the downward spiral of negative thoughts.

It is completely black at the bottom of that emotional pit.

She asked me to make an appointment with Dr. Cohen. We argued about it for a while, but I felt guilty so back to the shrink I go.

### **Saturday, 9 September 2045**

A new guy joined our team today. His name is Yenner. I didn't get to talk to him much, but he's from Texas. One of the refugees. He almost looked embarrassed when he told me.

I'm pretty sure he's gay. He looks gay, but then people have told me I look gay. Anyway, he is really built. I didn't think he'd be a quick as he is. How can someone so big maneuver like that? The man is almost as fast as I am and made every goal he attempted. You would be impressed.

Mark met me at the UC after practice and we took BART to Berkeley to have lunch at this vegetarian place I like. It's called Herbs. It's pretty new so you wouldn't remember it. The food is very good.

On the way there we noticed a guy on the train that had sores all over his forearms and hands that he kept picking at. He was a normal looking guy otherwise. Mark said later than he wanted to strap him down for a week so they would heal. He called him defective, but I felt sympathy for him. I wondered what issues he was dealing with.

Defective. What would Mark call me?

While we ate lunch I told Mark about Yenner. I asked him if he thought it was chizz for me to ask him about his experience coming here during the war. After all, he had volunteered where he was from. Mark wondered why I wanted to know.

"I'm just curious, that's all," I told him. "I've always wanted to ask one of the refugees about their experiences."

"Don't call them that," Mark scolded me. "Rude."

Mark was right, but that's how I think of them. "Sorry," I said. He remained silent for several seconds.

"Bud, I want to ask you a question, just don't spark off."

Immediately my heart started pounding in my chest. It was too late, I was already upset.

"Are you gay?"

I was so relieved I started laughing. "Am I gay? Oh, God." I knew why he was asking. I never date anyone and now I was telling him about some gay dude on my soccer team.

"Well?"

"No, I am not gay," I said finally. He didn't look convinced.

"I'm not gay," I repeated. "I'm just not ready to date."

"Makes no sense," he said.

"Why would I lie about it? My dads were gay. My best friend in high school was gay. I don't have any issues with a person's sexual orientation."

"Trust you, but makes no sense. You're 21 years old, hormone soaked, you're ... hell, you're catch of the school, and you don't date. People ask me."

Or he said something like that. I was pretty embarrassed at that point so I don't remember his exact words. But I remember my response: "I am not the catch of the school. Mark, you have no idea."

"Because you won't tell me. I'm your best bud, man."

"Someday," I said. Then I held up my left hand. "But for now, this has to do."

Then he laughed. "Left hand?"

"Does it matter?"

"Everyone I know uses their right."

"You know which hands your friends masturbate with?"

That ended that conversation. Finally, we got back on topic and talked about the refugees immigrants. I decided to try to casually ask Jenner for details.

I took BART back to Powell Station and stared at my nails. They were too long. You would tell me to trim them. I remember your story that kids in Saudi Arabia were taught to keep their nails short so they could wash properly before prayer. You said the teachers would even check them at school. I never understood why it made a difference, but for years I kept them very short, even after I stopped praying.

I trimmed them first thing when I walked in the door. Even before sitting down to write this out. Somehow, you still reach me after all these years.

**Tuesday, 12 September 2045**

Dr. Cohen put me on yet another anti-depressant. Of course, I can't tell him what really bothers me. Or at least bothers me the most. I think it's a waste of time for me to see a shrink when I can't talk about my deepest, darkest problems.

He knows I'm hiding something. Maybe I should tell him.

It would be so easy to find out that something is wrong with my birth certificate. You and Mom are listed as my natural parents and you and Dad are listed as my legal parents. Mom never changed that. But all someone would have to do is check my genetic print against hers and they would discover that I wasn't her son.

I've already done it. I had to prove it to myself. A friend of mine that works at the university let me use the solo-capable computer in the genetics lab. I told her that I had doubts about who my father really was, but wanted to keep it secret. So last year I walked in with four samples, hairs from you, Mom, Dad and myself.

Remember the room we kept at her house when I was a kid? After you had been missing for six months, Mom packed everything of yours away and put it in storage. All I needed were hair brushes, and I found one with blond hair and one with black hair.

Using my friend's access codes, I told the network I was shutting down the system for hardware maintenance, disconnected it, performed the test, wiped the primary memory, replaced the security buffer with a new nanochip, purged the backup card, and reconnected it. An expensive but record-free test.

When I saw the results, I felt the same wave of horror I experienced when she first told me what I was.

The new drug is making my head hurt a bit. It makes me sweat too. Dr. Cohen said it might take a few days to get used to it. I have a lot of reading to do so I need to get to it.

**Friday, 15 September 2045**

I went to talk to Jamal today after the noon prayer. I had to tell someone and he is the only person I trust.

We talked for a while about school, soccer and my friends but finally he asked me, "So, what do you have on your mind?"

I hesitated for a long time. My heart was pounding in my chest. I felt weak. But finally I blurted it out. "There's something wrong with me."

“There is nothing wrong with you,” he said immediately but deliberately.

“You don't know what I have to say,” I croaked. At this point I was feeling dizzy and panicked. It was so strange. I felt so ... disconnected from my body. I wanted to run outside but I didn't trust my feet. I could feel sweat running down my face and back. In retrospect I can't believe how terrified I was.

Then it was as if he was at the end of a long, dark tunnel, yet he had cupped his hands around my face. I don't even remember him moving toward me. “Yes, I do know. Rabiyya, there is nothing wrong with you. Hassan talked about this with me before they decided to ... have you.”

He knew. You had told him everything.

I began to cry. How can I explain it? I had finally found someone that I could talk to about it. Someone that knew my secret. Someone that might be able to answer questions that Mom could not or would not.

I was so relieved and happy, but then I felt I must be dirty in his eyes. I was ashamed and grateful at the same time. I found myself crying - I couldn't prevent it - but he just sat there patiently in his office, waiting for me to stop. When I finally did, I was kneeling on the floor, exhausted.

“Rabiyya, look at me,” he said.

“I can't.”

“Rabiyya. I was Hassan's best friend. You know you can trust me. Look at me.”

I looked up into his dark brown eyes. Jamal is about 60 years old. About the same age you and Dad would be. Should be. His skin is the same color as mine though his beard and hair are completely white. He is thoughtful and caring, warm and gentle, strong and focused. I do trust him.

He told me that I was not unnatural. That Allah willed for me to be born. Of course, I don't believe in God, but somehow hearing this from him, having his acceptance, felt better than anything I had felt in a very long time.

I don't believe in God. I know how much this would hurt you. How disappointed you would be. But you are not here to discuss it. You are not here to explain to me the source of your faith.

“Why do you think I survived the destruction?” he asked me.

“Random chance,” I answered immediately.

“Really? Random chance? It was a random chance that I was one of 800 or so people that survived? That I happened to be your father’s best friend? That I happened to know your origin? That I would be here so that we could maintain a relationship?”

“Yes.”

He merely nodded.

I don’t have your faith. I don’t have his faith. Logically, I know we have a relationship because we both survived. We didn’t survive so that we could have a relationship.

Why would I believe something for which there is no evidence?

### **Sunday, 17 September 2045**

I realized today how grateful I am for Jamal’s friendship. And I feel lighter somehow. I’m not sure if it’s the new drug kicking in or my relief at having a friend to talk to. A friend that knows my secret. Maybe it’s both. He’s like my ... release valve. When I talk to Mom about myself I only get angrier and feel worse, but when I talked to Jamal I felt better. I can see why you liked him so much. You could talk to him in confidence and now so can I.

Continuity.

Mom is at church, Mark is at work, and I am home, looking out the living room window at Potrero Hill to the south. The sun is reflecting off the arrays of solar nanopanels on the houses and buildings. My homework is done, and for the first time in months I feel okay.

I keep thinking about Yenner. He was tracking me again yesterday during practice. I don’t know how I feel about that.

I’m used to people looking at me. I know how I look and I don’t like it. I feel ... pressured. Ashamed of my potentially designer body. But ... I find myself enjoying Yenner’s attention and now I’m confused. I really am curious about him. What does it mean? I wish I could talk to you or Dad about this.

### **Wednesday, 20 September 2045**

I’m back at the top of Twin Peaks. I should be doing my homework, but I needed to get out of the house.

One of the reasons I like coming up here is to see what’s new. Reconstruction has continued during the three years since we returned, and as the months go by I can watch buildings and homes being built and trees being planted with my binoculars. The new

buildings use LEC (*light-to-energy converting*) paint so they don't have nanopanel arrays.

An entire city can't be rebuilt from the ashes in 13 years, even with the massive investment from the EU and Asia. It took a few years just to recover and bury the dead that weren't already incinerated, to fill in the craters left by the hundreds of conventional and kinetic missiles fired from sea and space, to finish cleaning up the rubble that survived the firestorm caused by the incendiary weapons.

I remember the day the Americans destroyed San Francisco. It was Friday, the 23rd of April, 2032. The War of Secession was in its fourth week, and already hundreds of thousands had died. I was at Mom's in Mill Valley, where Dad had left me a month before. He had flown to Washington D.C. to protest the attack on Arabia. As I wailed, he promised me he would come back.

He didn't. He abandoned me. He knew you had been killed and he abandoned me anyway.

We had no water, power or gas. We had been eating cold soup and drinking bottled liquids for two weeks. We were lucky we had that. Several neighbors were with us. They had guns.

The first missiles fell from the sky early that morning and the earth didn't stop shaking until after noon. It was like an endless earthquake. The smoke and clouds of debris and dirt turned the sky orange then brown then black. Night came early and lasted for days.

It was deafening. Mind-numbing. Even though most of the missiles fell many kilometers to the south, the thunder of continuous impacts and the shaking of the house were all we knew. We cowered in the hallway wondering if we were next. It was the second time I'd seen a grown man cry.

I remember crying for you and Dad and praying to an apathetic God until my throat was raw. I thought the roar would never end, but finally, there was silence.

We were covered with dirt and dust. The windows were shattered and beyond them all was dark and quiet. There was almost no light, but it wasn't over yet. After a few more hours, it must have really been night by then, we could see a glow to the south. San Francisco was burning.

The firestorm lasted for two days. At its height, a massive column of flame twisted hundreds of meters into the air. The sky itself seemed to burn. Then, as the fire noticeably diminished, a storm blew in from the Pacific. For two days the City was drenched. Finally, the sky cleared. There was nothing left.

We discovered that the war was over. After San Francisco was destroyed, the EU and Canada had threatened to defend Pacifica if the American forces didn't withdraw. With

most of its military engaged in the Middle-East and Africa, America was simply spread too thin. It backed down. They had struck their final blow by annihilating San Francisco, but Pacifica was an independent nation.

America lost its west coast. We were free.

### **Sunday, 24 September 2045**

Our bikes were stolen yesterday. We were at the Embarcadero and Mark had gone in to use the restroom. One moment I was standing at the railing with our bikes, the next I was flying over the rail into the bay. By the time I got out they were gone. I didn't even see what the thieves looked like. And of course, no one saw what happened. I probably looked as unhappy as a wet cat.

I was wringing out my t-shirt when Mark came back. He was looking at me with surprise. "Waaa! Bud, you be cut," he said. Then, "why you wet?" Then with increasing alarm, "where the bikes?"

"Someone stole them while I went for a swim," I said sarcastically. I put my wet shirt back on. It was cold. "Someone pushed me into the water. The bikes are gone."

They really were gone. By the time we reported the theft to the police, the GPS units had been disabled. The security cameras weren't much help either. Two dark-skinned guys threw me into the water and took the bikes, but they had caps and com-goggles on (Mark calls them "coggles") so we really couldn't see their faces. The police said they would follow up, but I'm not holding my breath.

As we walked back to my place Mark said, "Not easy to get to work now." He was frowning.

"You can't buy a new bike?"

He looked angry. "You know how long I saved up for that? Can't just buy something cuz I need."

"Get a used one."

"Was used."

We didn't say anything else for a while, but I felt guilty again. I didn't have to work to pay my tuition. I didn't have to work for anything.

"I'll buy you a new bicycle," I said. "It was my fault they were stolen. It was my idea to go down there today."

“Don't need your help.” He sounded even more angry.

“What am I supposed to do then? You seem mad at me.”

“Taking BART home. Talk later.” And he turned around and walked back toward Market Street.

I stood at Mission and First and watched him walk away. I was still wet, and the fog was pouring in. The sun disappeared. I was freezing.

I remember when you and Dad would have arguments. Sometimes it seemed like you were speaking different languages. When I replay your discussions in my head, I can see that you both understood the facts differently. You would rank the importance of things differently. You had different perspectives, and you, Abuyah, could be particularly stubborn.

I need to get inside Mark's head and understand his perspective on this. How would I react if I were in his shoes?

### **Monday, 25 September 2045**

About yesterday: Yenner kept tracking me during practice. I admit it. I'm interested in him. I'm not sure why. Am I attracted to him? If so, what does that mean? I know I like women, why would I be casing a guy?

Afterward he walked up to me. I was nervous. That surprised me.

“Are you meeting your friend now?” He asked.

“Mark? No, not today.” I hadn't heard from Mark since he sparked off.

“Is he your boyfriend?”

I laughed. “No, Mark's my bud.” I wanted to tell him I was straight. I didn't.

“Can I buy you lunch after we shower?”

Here was the shower thing. I always go to the engineering building to shower to avoid being naked in front of the other guys. “Sure. Meet you at the UC in twenty?”

He looked like he was going to ask me a question then thought better of it. “Sounds good” was all he said.

I ran across the field to the engineering building. I couldn't stop thinking about him as I washed up. I was excited and that makes me feel weird. I toweled off and was at the UC in fifteen minutes. He was already there too.

He looked at me surprised. "You wear a *kufi*?" (*another word for taqiyah*)

"Oh. Yeah, it was my father's. It's not really a religious thing, I just like to wear it."

"Your father isn't alive?"

"No." I didn't want to talk about it further. He seemed to get the message.

"I'm sorry," he said simply. "I thought we'd have Thai. That work for you?"

"Yeah. I like pretty much everything."

"I'll drive," he said.

"You'll *drive*?" I was surprised. "You have a car?"

He laughed. "Don't be too impressed. It's my company car."

His company car is a five year old silver Hyundai hatch. Somehow he fits into it. "The seat's a bit narrow," he said as I watched him get in. As we drove to the restaurant he told me that he works for Shell Hydro and maintains several fuel cell stations. Not glamorous, especially since fuel cell powered vehicles are being phased out, but he has a car.

He's going to school to get a Master of Logistics degree. Boring (to me), but he is pretty sure he will get a promotion into management that way.

The restaurant was in the Marina. I was wondering why we drove so far just to have lunch, but then he said it: "I live near here."

It didn't go well after that. I was very uncomfortable and he could tell. He told me to relax and that after lunch he would take me home, but it didn't help. Part of my nervousness was my awareness of how I was feeling. What I was thinking. And I think that he has beautiful green eyes.

We just made small talk and he did take me home. I gave him my public contact info.

I want to see him again. I wonder when he will call.

**Saturday, 30 September 2045**

It's been a week since Mark sparked off. I've pinged him twice but he hasn't called back. I don't understand. What did I do wrong? Why am I being punished?

Maybe I should ping Kelley. I have an idea. All three of us can pitch in and buy him a bike. If he doesn't have his share I can just lend it to him and he can pay me back whenever. I don't really care if he does, but I know his ego. He would eventually.

Then there is Mr. Green Eyes. I haven't heard from him either. I'm anxious. I hate this. Why hasn't he called? Why did he ask for my address then not use it? Why didn't I get *his* address? Why am I spinning about it, anyway? I'll see him tomorrow at practice.

I don't get it. I do think about him a lot. What does it mean? And why am I spinning about what it means?

### **Sunday, 1 October 2045**

When Mom got home from church, we had lunch on the roof under our building's solar array. In fact, the company you used to work for owns the intellectual property rights to the cell design. On a sunny day it can produce and store enough power for the entire building at average usage for about 24 hours.

Pacifica has thousands of solar nanopanel installations that generate over half of our power. Most of them are in the southern deserts, but many also dot the hills and countryside around the Bay Area and Sacramento. We also have several dozen gigawatt-class pebble-bed reactors built by the Chinese, which not only produce power but most of the hydrogen for our cars through thermochemical water splitting. We have very little air pollution. In fact, most of our air pollution comes from China.

I was just happy to be in the shade. It's been very hot all weekend.

I was chewing on the Portobello mushroom sandwich Mom had made and suddenly blurted out, "Jamal knows." I hadn't even thought about telling her. It just came out of nowhere.

She looked at me silently for several seconds. Her eyebrows went up. "About you? Hassan and Dave?"

"Yeah. Abuyah went to him for advice."

"Oh. He never told me that. Did Dave know?"

"I don't know. We didn't talk about it much. I was too surprised. Upset."

"You seem okay now. In fact you've been the calmest I've seen you in a long time, if a bit distracted."

“Good drugs,” I smiled. She didn't.

“I didn't know you still talked to Jamal.”

“I find it helpful,” I said.

“Good.”

For some reason that irritated me. As if she was approving and I felt like I didn't need her approval. I stayed quiet for a while and finished my sandwich.

“Mom?”

“What is it?”

“Why don't you date anyone?”

She blinked. “We'll talk about that another day, honey. Maybe when you tell me why you don't.”

### **Monday, 2 October 2045**

Today is Selection Day. We don't have state or national elections in Pacifica, our public servants are randomly selected by computer from a database of qualified citizens and serve five year terms. This was our third selection. The theory is that it is better to have government officials that are more concerned with running the country than getting re-elected. Since I grew up with this, it seems perfectly natural. No other country does this.

The software is all open-source to prevent fraud. If the public objects to a selection it is possible to have a recall and re-selection, but so far it hasn't happened yet.

I will probably never be eligible because of my emotional problems, not that I really care.

Pacifica has five states: South California, North California, West Oregon, Washington, and Hawaii. I've never been outside of NorCal, at least that I remember. Mom says I went with you and Dad to New York City when I was very young.

I wish I remembered that trip since it was destroyed only a few years later.

### **Friday, 6 October 2045**

I was thinking about pinging Kelley when Mark finally called me back. His sullen face filled the comm window on my pad. I couldn't tell where he was. "Bud," was all he said, as usual.

"Hey," I said in greeting. "Glad you're alive."

"Sorry, bud."

"'t sokay."

"'t sup?"

"Just studying." I didn't know what else to say. I felt like I was walking on egg shells. Had he bought a bike? Was he going to take me up on my offer? Did he even want to talk about it?

I started making small talk, telling him about my classes and asking him about work. I watched as the camera software in his pad stabilized his image as it tracked him moving back and forth. I could tell he was a bit nervous. I decided to bring it up.

"I had an idea," I interrupted. I decided to give him a modified version of my plan.

"Yeah?"

"How about if I lend you half the money and you can pay me back whenever? I'll pay for the other half since I let the bikes get stolen."

Even in the small image I could discern a range of emotions. His male ego was conflicting with necessity. "Not your fault, man."

"Just think about it."

"I'll pay you back all of it," he finally said after a minute.

"Chizz. C'mon, Mark. Lose the ego and let me help. I lost your bike. I owe you."

Another minute of silence. He was sitting on the fence. "Good to go?" I asked, trying to push him onto my side.

"Good to go," he finally agreed.

I felt so relieved. I could feel my face make the most genuine smile I had in some time. Part of my relief was that I really needed a bike, and I hadn't felt right buying a new one without Mark. Part of me really did feel responsible. And part of me just wanted to help him.

“Hey, I’ll meet you tomorrow at the Berkeley BART station and we can case some bike shops. At ten?”

“Ten’s good,” he agreed. “Then.”

“Then,” I confirmed.

It had worked out much better than I planned. I didn’t need to involve Kelley, and now that it was done, I realized her participation probably would have been a very bad idea given his rather old-fashioned macho personality.

Suddenly I envied him that too. He seems so uncomplicated. Is he continuously analyzing himself and his past and thoughts and family? Does he second-guess every other decision? I’ll bet he doesn’t.

### **Wednesday, 11 October 2045**

I finally have a chance to relax. This week I’ve been working on a project on nano-scale heat dissipation. You would find it interesting. The amount of heat that a single molecular device emits limits the density of such devices on say, a nanochip. Efficiently dissipating that heat greatly increases the possible density of molecular devices on the nanochip.

After a century of miniaturization we are still trying to make things smaller and faster.

Anyway, last Saturday went well. We both got Marin hybrids. I paid an extra thousand for a biometric security system for his. Someone could still steal it but it would be useless. It’s a pretty effective theft deterrent.

He was pretty uncomfortable at first, but once he was riding he relaxed. It was nice to see, and I was happy to have wheels again. I think we were both the happiest we’d been in a long time. We rode to Ocean Beach then back to Oakland. It was great to work my legs again, but I really felt it the next day.

Speaking of heat dissipation, it’s been pretty hot. We were both soaking wet after our ride. The warming climate hasn’t affected San Francisco like it has much of the world, but sometimes our heat waves last a few weeks. Still, the cool Alaska current is a pretty reliable friend.

Since 2000, mean sea level has risen about 70 centimeters. In places like Bangladesh even that small a rise has been devastating. Much of the country’s arable land is vanishing beneath the rising ocean, and a few hundred thousand people were killed in the last great typhoon. The storm and flash flooding simply washed them out to sea. By the end of the century the oceans will be at least a few meters higher.

We have been luckier here. During Reconstruction, the City was built to accommodate a four-meter increase in sea level. And all we've really had to deal with in southern Pacifica - so far - is drought and immense wildfires, though the desalinization plants and water recycling help. In fact they pretty much make our existence possible. The Sierra snow pack has diminished over the past few decades, so we have desal and reclamation plants up here too.

Pacifica has a population of over 70 million. About seven million are American and Arab refugees that arrived after the war. Some have called us the promised land of the 21st century, but overpopulation is a real problem.

### **Wednesday, 18 October 2045**

I guess I'm ready to write about this now.

Yenner finally showed up at practice last weekend. He had missed two practices and a game, which we lost. I kind of avoided him, irrationally angry at him for disappearing, irritated at myself for caring. Afterward, I pulled off my shin guards and was standing up when I noticed him looking at me from across the field.

I found myself glad that Mark had to work, since that meant he wouldn't expect to hang out later. Then I felt guilty about it. I just stood there, probably looking stupid. Yenner walked up to me.

"Hi," he said. I looked up at him, but didn't say anything. Sweat was trickling down his face, and I found myself wanting to feel the thick, brown stubble on his cheeks. He hadn't shaved in a day or two. My heart was pounding in my chest.

He said he had been away on an unexpected business trip. I didn't press for details. I didn't care. I still didn't say anything. He grinned in a self-assured/confident way.

"How are you?" he finally asked.

"Fine," I said. "Welcome back." I felt very uncomfortable. I was angry at him for no good reason. Attracted to him for a reason I didn't understand. *Escape*. "Well, I should get going," I said quickly as I turned to walk away.

"Wait." He reached out with his hand and grabbed my arm, pulling me back around. I was surprised at his strength. "Do you want to have lunch again sometime soon?" he asked. "Now?"

I didn't hesitate. "Yes, but this time I pick the place."

"No problem there. Let's go."

“Don't you want to shower first?” I asked.

“No, I'm hungry.” He wiped the sweat from his face with a hand towel. “And you smell good,” he added with a wink.

I ignored the comment. “Let me grab my pack then.”

I picked the restaurant, a Japanese place in Dubose Triangle, yet we still ended up at his place.

He has a tiny studio apartment with no windows, but there are fiber-optic ducts in the ceiling that conduct natural light from outside, presumably from the roof. He lives alone.

“Would you like something to drink?” he asked. “I only have water and soy milk though.”

“No, I'm fine.” I looked at a stack of papers by what I guessed was the closet door. I didn't recognize the language. “Turkish?” I guessed.

“Yep.”

He knows Turkish, but he was born in America. I was also born in America, but I hardly know any Arabic at all. I was too angry about your death to bother studying it, but now I wish I had. It's not too late, but my classes are taking up most of my time. If I were to study it, I know it would continuously remind me of you. Is Arabic a link to my heritage that I need?

The cover of one of his Turkish mags had recent map of America on it. I wondered what it was about. I was staring at it when I felt his hand on my face. He had removed his shirt and was now standing in front of me. He looked inhumanly muscular.

“You are so beautiful,” he whispered.

“Please don't say that.”

“But it's true.” He brushed his fingers against my beard, removed my taqiyah, and kissed my forehead. “It's not just the way you look. It's how you move. How you carry yourself. You're like a diamond in a coal mine.”

I was half-listening to him as I stared at the size of his chest and arms and shoulders, bouncing between finding them gross and fascinating. *A manufactured diamond*, I thought.

He reached up, literally tore off my shirt, and gently ran his hands through my chest hair.

“You're shaking,” he said softly.

"I've never done this before."

"Have sex with a man?" He looked surprised.

"Have sex with anyone," I answered.

He stepped back. "Oh. I'm moving too fast."

I didn't say anything. Again. I just felt very self-conscious standing in front of him half naked. It's something I don't do. I am modest, like you were. Did you teach me this somehow in my early years or did I develop it for a different reason?

"Then why don't we just hang out for a while?" He suggested.

"Do you have a shirt I can borrow?" I asked.

"Are you sure?" He looked disappointed. "You really are exceptionally sexy to me. It's almost supernatural."

It sounded like a line, even to me, but part of me knew that he meant it. "Please don't say that, Yenner."

"There is nothing wrong with admitting you are attractive."

"You don't understand."

"You're right," he agreed. "I don't."

He pulled a shirt out of his closet and handed it to me. I quickly put it on.

"How are you so built?" I asked point blank.

He started laughing. "You can't guess?"

"Somatic gene replacement?"

"See?"

"IGF-1 production? Myostatin inhibition?"

He nodded. "Mostly."

"But that's so expensive." Yenner's shirt was like a tent on me. I liked it.

“Yeah. But back in Texas, before, I had a ... friend that paid for it. In fact, it was his idea. He was rich and I was young and gullible.”

“Doesn't it make you feel ... unnatural?”

“Why would it? When I was younger I really got off on it, but now it's just the way I am. I don't really think about it.”

I could feel my mood trying to crash. If it weren't for my meds I would have gone into a downward spiral. I would probably still be in a downward spiral. It wasn't fair. Here was this guy that was genetically modified - artificial - and didn't feel like it, and here I am feeling like I am artificial without really knowing.

Yenner's modification took place around 15 years ago. If there are going to be side-effects, they haven't expressed themselves yet as far as I can tell. He must know they are possible.

Why can't I feel normal? Why do I do this to myself? Why, even on drugs, do I still feel like something is wrong with me?

## **Tuesday, 24 October 2045**

Yenner can't believe I've never had sex with anyone. I know he wants to be the first. He probably will be. Not because he is my first choice but because he's ... safe? I don't know. He does turn me on in a strange way. I can sometimes feel myself getting excited when he is close to me.

He's so handsome. His eyes are so beautiful. Warm. It's weird thinking this about a guy, but I like looking at him. I wish I could touch him - I want to feel his stubbly face and his muscles, but I can't bring myself to do it

Yenner is 34, so he's a lot older than me. More experienced. And I have no idea what to do. What am I supposed to do? What does he expect from me?

He's 34. That means that he was 21 during the war. My age. I still haven't asked him about that. I don't know anything about him.

Sunday afternoon Mark and I joined Kelley at a physical therapy seminar at school that was also open to students. Kelley needed CPE credits. I wish I hadn't gone. It was pretty interesting, and some of it related to medical nanotech, but all I could do during the talk on “physical persuasion” survivors from the war was think about Yenner. I know he escaped well after the first detention camps for Arabs and Muslims were established in Texas. There are some things I just don't want to know.

Mark and Kelley are so much in love. They barely touch each other in public yet it has become obvious even to me. The way they glance at each other, the way they brush their fingertips across the other's skin, the way their hands automatically reach out for the other's at the same time. I've never really paid attention before, but for the first time, I felt jealous about that too.

I was in a bad mood for the rest of the day. I don't think they noticed though. Mark has been so happy since getting his bike and I can't let my issues bring him down.

Mom noticed I was down though. She asked me to fix the floor cleaner again. I still haven't done it. I'll look at it tomorrow after class. Sometimes I wonder what she would do without me, but then I realize that she would probably be married, have a real family, and be happier.

### **Thursday, 26 October 2045**

I finally looked at our floor cleaner. I missed my classes today because of it, but I can afford to miss occasionally. I connected to it through my pad because it has better troubleshooting tools than our home system. As I suspected, it had a virus. It also had something that terrifies me.

The virus is a variant of Catnix, which infects and instructs cleaningbots to attack house pets, usually cats. It's a pretty old one, which surprises me. The propagation method is old too. It generates an encrypted disassembly and re-assembly instruction, breaks itself into small, unrecognizable segments that won't be detected by data rate monitoring software, piggybacks on a wireless signal of some kind and re-assembles itself using the assembly key that was transmitted along with it.

You would find this interesting. If I could show it to you.

I'm not sure how it got through our home security system. If it did, in fact, come through the home system. Though there is no evidence of this, I should take the time to check the security system out.

Catnix usually doesn't cause a malfunction in the absence of a pet, however, so the behavior of the floor cleaner doesn't make sense. This infection should have never been expressed.

I combed through the cleaner's system update log to see if I could figure out when the virus was transmitted and where it was transmitted from. I did find out when the infection occurred, but not how. It looks like the virus just "appeared" out of nowhere. And the only reason I could tell when it happened was because the system software's footprint changed at infection, not because an update log entry was made. It's as if it were deliberately infected.

I wanted to look at some of the source code itself just for the hell of it and after a few minutes, my pattern recognition tools found a large block of code changed by the virus. That's when I saw it. A string of characters that simply said: I KNOW WHAT YOU ARE.

I panicked and told the home system to kill all feeds to and from the outside, but when the system requested command confirmation, I changed my mind. Such an action would be reported to the police and I didn't want to draw attention to myself.

I felt as if someone was sitting on my chest. I could barely breathe. What did that message mean? How could it be meant for me? Who would send it to our cleaningbot and how would they know I would ever see it?

I popped the strongest anti-anxiety med I had. That was two hours ago, and thanks to molecular engineering, I'm calm enough to write this out now.

I verified that I had disabled the cleaner's communication system before looking at it. It's just a good habit to get into. The good news is that it couldn't send a message reporting that it had been examined. If the message is meant for me, no one will know I read it.

But that also means the cleaner can never be used again. If fully reactivated, it could send a signal. I decided to destroy the system chip. I'd just have to buy a new one.

First I transferred the system and logs to a sealed dataspace on my pad, encrypted it, and saved it so I could look at it more carefully later. Then I manually transferred a copy to our home system, made the file invisible, and changed its attributes so that it wouldn't appear to the file manager at all. Do you remember teaching me this trick? The only way it can be detected is if someone fills the memory until it shows up as an unwritable block.

I took out the system chip and ground it to dust myself. I started to order a replacement, but decided against it. I would have Mark order it for me. Being on record as buying one would clue in my mystery stalker if he found out. If there even is a mystery stalker.

Nothing about this infection adds up unless the virus was simply a carrier for the message. A carrier that was deliberately altered to cause noticeable malfunctions in our cleaner and that someone knew or hoped would be investigated by me. But that would assume they already knew certain things about me. Like that I had the skills to investigate it.

Now I have to figure out what to tell Mom. If I tell her about the message she will worry. If I don't tell her she will wonder why I couldn't fix the cleaner right away and I'll have to lie.

But the worst thing is that I have to face myself when this drug wears off.

**Friday, 27 October 2045**

I KNOW WHAT YOU ARE.

I can't get it out of my head. I've been spinning about it since I read it.

I haven't told Mom. I avoided her last night and went to bed early. Thanks to the med I fell asleep, but then I woke up at 3am and the message was the first thing to pop into my mind.

I KNOW WHAT YOU ARE.

I was instantly in a cold sweat. I could feel adrenaline flooding my body. My heart pounded. *Panic.*

I never did fall back asleep. Instead, I got up and began scanning through the code again, looking for something that might give me more information. Concentrating on it as a problem to be solved helped focus my mind so it wasn't spinning pointlessly.

But there was nothing I could find, and I was back to not knowing what to do. I couldn't tell Mom yet. Could I go to the authorities? I've thought about what would happen if I were "found out." What could they do? I didn't commit any crime, but at least at the time of my conception when we were still part of America, I was a crime. Even now in Pacifica genetically altering a human being is illegal except for certain genes related to certain conditions.

Oh, Abuyah, why do I have to deal with this? Why do I have to be the freak? Where are you when I need you most???

Who would do this to me? Who could know? It would have to be someone involved with the project. Maybe an employee of NextGene, though it doesn't even exist anymore? Another one of the engineered kids?

Desperate for an objective ear, I pinged Jamal's private address. I'd never used it before. His face filled my comm window.

"Rabiyya?" He asked. His brow was furrowed. "What is wrong?"

"I'm so sorry to call you, especially this early," I said.

"It is alright. I have performed Al-Fajr" (*the dawn prayer*).

"Can I talk to you now? It's urgent."

"Of course," he said without hesitation. "Why don't you come to my apartment?"

"I'm on my way."

I had his address. It was in the Outer Mission. I was there in minutes and explained to him what happened. I showed him the message on my pad. He looked worried, which worried me more.

"Yet you are not certain it was for you," he said slowly.

"No, but it does seem intentional, which points to it being meant for me."

"When did the infection occur?"

"A few months ago."

He thought for a few minutes. "Do you mind if I look at the change log again?"

I felt like I was handing an aircraft control to a toddler, but I gave him the pad. He scrolled through the log. "Here is where the system hash total changes," he observed. "Eighty days ago."

"Yes," I answered. My surprise must have shown because he smiled and said, "I know about more than just the Holy Qur'an, Rabiyya." Then he was silent for a few seconds before asking: "When is your birthday again? Isn't it around then?"

I subtracted the dates in my head. "Oh, God. You're right. It was infected on my birthday. The message *is* for me."

I feel like an idiot for not figuring that out myself. Some genius I am.

Jamal thinks I need to tell Mom. And he thinks I need to go on as if nothing happened. Both things are easier said than done.

## **Tuesday, 31 October 2045**

It's Halloween.

Last weekend Mark and Kelley asked me to go to a party with them, but I turned them down. I really haven't been able to talk to anyone. Even going to school is a monumental effort.

Mom knows something is wrong, but my mood has been unstable and unpredictable for so long that she isn't too concerned and thus hasn't pried.

Mark did order the system chip for our cleaner. He didn't even ask me any questions. It arrived yesterday and he gave it to me at school. At least that's fixed.

Yenner asked me to go to a costume party with him this evening. It starts in two hours. I told him no, but he kept insisting. Finally I said yes.

I don't want to go. I'm not going to be any fun. And now I have one hour to come up with something to wear. Yenner wouldn't tell me what his costume will be, which almost compelled me to change my answer back to no.

I've been thinking more about why I am so afraid of people finding out about me. I think it's because I don't want everyone thinking I'm a freak. I am afraid of the social stigma that it may create. "Oh, look," people would whisper and point. "That's the engineered guy with two fathers."

Neither of which are alive.

### **Wednesday, 1 November 2045**

We didn't go to the party last night. I pinged Yenner at the last minute and told him I wasn't going.

"Yes you are, we are going," he said. His camera was switched off so I couldn't see him. Or probably more accurately, his costume.

"You go, I'm staying home. I have too much homework."

"What is it you kids say? Chizz? I don't believe you." He paused.

We argued for a while, but he was right. I was lying to him. I just wasn't ready to be social.

"Is your mom home?" He eventually asked.

"Yes."

"Why don't you come over here. We can just talk."

"Okay."

I took the subway to the Marina, got off at Chestnut Station, and walked the last few blocks to his building. It was dark, but the sidewalks bore families trick-or-treating and commuters coming home from work.

The building let me in and gave me access to his floor. He answered the door. "Welcome back," he said in his deep, rich voice.

He was just wearing shorts and house slippers. I again felt emotions and physical sensations swirling within me. I wanted him and was afraid of him. I was so attracted to him but repulsed. Was I repulsed at him or myself? His inhuman body or my feelings? I felt myself grow excited. He looked at me with his warm eyes. Those hypnotic green eyes surrounded by the thick mane of brown hair and apparently permanent five o'clock shadow.

"Hi," I finally said. I was, again, uneasy.

"Come here and sit down on the couch. Would you like a drink?"

"Just water is fine."

"That's not what I meant."

"I don't drink alcohol."

"Why not? I thought you said you weren't religious."

"I'm not. I just don't drink."

"You really need a drink. Rabiyya, you're too ..." He trailed off. I was expecting him to tell me I was uptight or limited.

He came around the couch and sat down a meter away. I found myself staring at the swirls of thick hair on his chest. He reached out and touched my chin, raising my eyes to his.

"What is it about you?" He asked. "You don't even seem comfortable in your own skin."

"This is just very new to me," I explained.

He stared at me for a while. "No. It's more than that."

I didn't say anything. I seem to find myself at a loss for words when I'm around him. And, of course, he was right.

"Will you tell me?" He asked.

"Tell you what?"

"Tell me what is troubling you so much."

I was silent for a long time. I knew I was implicitly letting him know he was on to something, but I couldn't bring myself to either confirm or deny his assumption. I wanted to tell him, but I hardly knew him.

"It ... is ... unimaginably difficult," I almost whispered.

His eyes softened. "Come here," he said, and he drew me to him, almost putting me in his lap. I could feel his hard chest against my back, it flexed as he put his arms around me. He began gently kissing the back of my head and neck.

I stiffened up and he sensed it. "Please ... just relax," he said under his breath.

We just sat there for a long time, and I did finally start to relax. I found myself running my hands over the fur on his huge forearms, then I remembered doing the same thing with you so long ago, Abuyah.

The pain of your loss came back more sharply than it has in years. "My Abuyah was killed at the Last Hajj," I said abruptly.

"Your what?"

"My Arab father. I had two fathers."

"Your dad was gay?"

"Yes."

"He was at the Last Hajj?"

"Yes."

"I don't know what to say ... I can't tell you how sorry I am."

"And that's not all. My American father was killed during the war. We think it was at the beginning, when the military began firing on the demonstrators in D.C."

"They both raised you?"

"Yes, since I was born." It was then I realized I was going to tell him everything. And the story poured out. I told him about the experiments and the war and Mom telling me and the drugs and shrinks and my horror at being different and my fear that there is something intrinsically wrong with me.

An hour later we were facing each other again. My heart was pounding. Yenner was silent.

"Look. I'm telling you the truth. I know it's impossible to believe."

Silence.

“Do you want to read my journal?”

He stood up. “No.” He said.

“Do you believe me?” I asked. This had never occurred to me - that my story might be too outrageous for anyone to actually believe.

Suddenly I was desperate for him to believe me. “I can prove it genetically, Yenner. All you have ...”

“Please be quiet for a minute!” He yelled.

I pulled my knees to my chest and put my arms around them.

“I’m sorry, Rabiyya. It’s just a lot to take in.” He walked to the other side of the small living area. “If this is true, then what you have been through ...”

“Is why I’m such a mess,” I finished for him.

“If this is all true then you are not a mess. You’ve had a traumatic childhood. Unfortunately, that’s not so unusual. But just because you are ... born of two men. That does not make you ... damaged.”

“But what if a mistake was made? I’ve always had emotional problems, and what if I was engineered to be unusually smart or more? Do you know how high my SIQ is? It’s 190.”

“Wait. Slow down. You feel unnatural because you were genetically engineered,” he said. “That’s why you asked me that question the other day. You asked me if I felt unnatural.”

“Yes.”

He came back and sat down. “Well, let me put it this way. I believe that you believe it.”

That was good enough for me. He pulled me into his arms again, and to my surprise, I fell asleep. Just like I used to with you.

### **Sunday, 5 November 2045**

A lot has happened in the past few days. Mom was upset that I didn’t come home Halloween night. I understand why, but I did fall asleep. Yenner let me sleep on him for hours. He told me he was awake most of the time but that he enjoyed it.

I think that’s kind of strange, but I’d do it again.

When I woke up I was on the couch and he was sleeping on the floor. Apparently the couch turns into his bed but he didn't want to wake me up. I must have been exhausted because I didn't take a sleeping aid and I slept the whole night through. The lack of sleep finally caught up with me.

Mom was full of questions. Where were you? Who were you with? Why didn't you call? I just said I was hanging out with a friend from my team, which is true. Then she wanted to know all about him. Unfortunately, I don't know all about him.

I decided not to tell Mom about the message, at least for now. It would just worry her further for no reason. But I have decided that I will do something about it. I'll need to find an unregistered pad. Maybe Mark can help me.

I had lunch with Mark at Herb's yesterday. I think my friendship with Yenner bothers him. He told me that people on my team have been noticing the way Yenner looks at me and that we have been hanging out.

I was irritated. "Do I need everyone's approval of who I hang out with?"

"What do you do with him? He's so old."

"We just talk. He's easy to talk to. He's interesting."

Mark just frowned at me. "Don't know about you sometimes, man."

*Neither do I*, I thought. But I decided to be more confrontational. "Are you jealous?" I asked.

He looked at me as if I were crazy. "Not likely," he said.

I asked him to change the subject. We finished eating in silence.

As we walked back to BART he said, "I started lifting weights."

"Yeah? That's good. What brought that on?"

He looked embarrassed. After a few seconds he said, "Kelley asked me to."

I didn't say anything.

"Maybe we could train together sometime?"

I hesitated. "Sure," I said finally.

"Where do you go?" he asked.

I didn't know what to say so I played dumb - very badly. "Go what?"

"Lift," he said a bit impatiently.

This was the conversation I didn't want to have with him. "I usually exercise at home."

"With what? No equipment there."

"I do sit-ups, push-ups, pull-ups ... that kind of thing."

"You don't get a body like yours doing push ups, bud."

"I've been doing it a long time," I told him. This was true. It helps me relax, and I do like the way it makes me look.

He scowled. I began feeling anxious, and the pressure that I've felt a few times recently was building in my chest again. Part of me wanted to get away.

"Please don't be jealous of me, bud. I'm having a tough time. There are things you don't know."

"Like you're gay?"

"What?"

"Sorry, bud. That was wrong." He looked away.

"Why did you say that?"

"I am ... jealous of you sometimes. You have everything."

I had to sit down on the BART platform. My heart felt like it was being squeezed and I was having trouble breathing again. Again it felt like someone was sitting on me.

In retrospect I'm amazed that he actually admitted weakness, even if it were perceived.

"You can't be jealous, Mark. You have to trust me." I looked up at him, but he was still looking away.

"It's hard, man. You're hiding something." Then he turned back and noticed that I was sitting down. "Bud, you okay?" He had a worried look on his face.

"I'll be fine, I just had a cramp." It wasn't true, but I wasn't sure what was wrong anyway. You taught me to never lie, Abuyah, but how am I supposed to be open about this?

We didn't talk about it anymore, but he's right. He's my bud and I'm going to have to tell him.

The pain in my chest was gone by the time the train came, but I should probably go see a doctor. The funny thing is that I've never been to a doctor other than a shrink. I've never been physically ill.

## **Tuesday, 7 November 2045**

There was a blonde woman on the train this morning. I don't see natural blondes very often. I wondered where she was from. She looked Scandinavian. When she moved her head the strands caught the light and glowed. It was remarkable.

Then I noticed several of the men watching her with varying degrees of discretion. Two stared openly, but the others just stole glances. She was pretty conservatively dressed, but her hair was longer than most women wear these days.

I wanted to feel and smell it. I pictured myself touching her cheek. As I stood there, looking at her reflection in the window, I found myself imagining her naked. Then my thoughts immediately turned to Yenner.

I am physically attracted to him. I accept that now. I am physically attracted to women. It's always been that way. And there is something else happening in my head too - my emotions - it's like Yenner satisfies something that I didn't know I was in need of.

I am attracted to him in very different ways than a woman, but I don't understand why. No. That's not true. I do understand why. It is unusual, but when the many genes influencing sexual orientation express in certain ways, the organism may find both sexes attractive.

I don't normally go for blondes. For some reason I find women from the Levant attractive - something about their coloration, I think. In fact, the sexiest woman I have ever seen, Katia Nasr, was Lebanese.

I did kiss her once - at a party. Or more brushed my lips against hers. It made me instantly erect, which she noticed through my pants. Her soft brown eyes smiled at me but she said nothing. I was so embarrassed that I left the party. I was 16 at the time. My last year in high school. It was also the first and last time I drank alcohol.

This would please you, Abuyah. I have no interest in alcohol.

We never talked about our encounter again, though I'm certain she would have gone out with me if I had asked.

I don't know where she is now, and for the first time I find myself regretting not asking her out. I can't let another opportunity pass me by.

Mark told me once to stop denying myself joy. I think it's time.

### **Friday, 10 November 2045**

I don't know why I stop by to talk to Jamal on Fridays. Subconscious guilt about not showing up for Jum'ah? Disappointing you? Jamal? He hasn't said anything about it in weeks though.

I had so many things on my mind. I wanted to talk to him about you and Dad, I wanted to talk to him about the message, I wanted to talk to him about my "creation," for lack of a better word. I wanted to talk about Yenner, but that would probably be the last thing I'd bring up.

"You look tired, *ibnyy*" (*my son*). He said. I like it when he calls me that.

"I am tired, I'm not sleeping well."

"Have you told your mother about the message?"

"No."

"Are you going to?"

"No. I don't want her to worry about it."

"She has a right to know."

I sighed. I really did not want to add to her stress about me, but I gave a bit: "Okay, but not right away."

I started at the Islamic designs in his prayer rug, which was pointed in the direction of Mecca, or where Mecca used to be. I remember the prayer rug you had at Mom's. You were very regular with your praying. When I was young I didn't question it. It had always been that way, like the sun rising and setting. You slept, you ate, you prayed.

You took your faith very seriously. Mom said that you and Dad were very intelligent too, though I don't understand how intelligent people could believe in some divine being whose existence could not be verified in any meaningful way, let alone allow so much pain and destruction.

But that is why it is called faith.

Jamal was almost reading my mind. "Hassan came to me to ask my opinion when they were considering having a child."

"As his best friend or Imam?"

"Do you think there was a difference to him?"

"It probably didn't matter," I said. I studied the lines on his face for a minute. "What did you tell him?"

"You are here, are you not?"

"You told him that if it was Allah's will then he would have a child," I responded.

"That is exactly what I told him," he confirmed.

"What else did he say?" I asked.

"He told me that he wanted a boy."

"And?" Suddenly I felt like I was trying to pry information out of him. He seemed very unwilling to say too much.

"Let me just say this. There is nothing in your genetic code that was not of Hassan and Dave. Neither of them would permit it. You are their son. You were everything to them. And I know that at least to Hassan, you were the greatest gift that Allah had ever bestowed on him."

My mind was swirling with everything that he said in those few short sentences. He had told me that I was not, as far as he knew, unnaturally genetically enhanced, but had not ruled out specific gene selection. He had told me that there was at least the option of artificial enhancement. He had told me that I was more important to you than even your life partner, with whom I know you were very much in love. And he told me, without really revealing anything new, who I was.

I am the son of David Patrick and Hassan Al-Shariif. I realized that I have always been proud of you and Dad, even if not of myself. I am just now beginning to understand this.

### **Sunday, 12 November 2045**

After practice Yenner and I went to Union Square for soy ice cream. We sat in the shade because he doesn't "want to look like a prune" when he's 100.

100. He's more optimistic than I am. I have doubts that we'll even survive the century.

He told me that he would find an unregistered pad for me to use to research my stalker. I don't know what connections he has, but after I told him about the message he became pretty upset.

"I can't believe someone is threatening you," he said. "Your situation is unusual, but how would it benefit anyone if it were made public? It's not like you are guilty of a crime."

"Well, this person didn't actually threaten me, but at best I would be a public freak if people found out. I don't want that. At worst ..."

"At worst what?" he prompted.

"American companies and universities patent genes, naturally occurring or not. Since Pacifica was part of America before the war, it is possible much of my genome is owned by one or more American organizations."

"That's ridiculous. They let companies patent natural genes? That's like patenting a mineral or a body part."

"I'm serious. If the war hadn't happened, I might have found my freedom greatly restricted. Don't forget that I was an experiment."

He looked away.

*I wonder what kind of releases you had to sign. What agreements you made. Dad was an attorney, but how involved in my development was he? I wonder now how much he really knew.*

"You're a perfect example, Yenner. Did you know where the genes that allow you to be so muscular come from?"

"No," he said. "I assumed they were designed."

"Too difficult," I said, shaking my head. "I'll bet they were taken from an unusually but naturally muscular guy, then identified and patented by some group. Meanwhile, the guy's genes were licensed along with a delivery vector and given to people like you for millions of dollars a head. The owners of the patent became rich while the donor got nothing."

"You're speculating."

"No, I'm not. What I just described happened in America for decades."

It began to sound like I was lecturing so I stopped talking and watched the bicyclists and occasional street car travel up and down Powell Street between us and the Neo-Victorian Union Square Hotel. Fifteen years ago, Powell was a cable car line. Now it was just

another street. The cable cars were consigned to history by the war. "Sorry," I said finally. "Guess we got off topic. So, about the message?"

"They went through some trouble to send that message. If it's not a threat, what is it?"

His question was unsettling. I do feel threatened by it and when Jenner verbalized it, it didn't help. "It could just be a cruel joke. Or a mistake."

"Maybe."

"Oh, God, why are they doing this to me?" I felt the anxiety growing in my chest again.

"Rabiyya, I won't let anyone hurt you." He put his hand on my thigh.

"It's not your problem. Besides, what could you do?"

"Anything you need me to do."

He was serious. At that moment, I realized that he was at my disposal. "Why would you do this for me? You barely know me."

"I know you well enough. I know you are something special."

*Yeah, I'm special all right.* "You just think I'm attractive," I said dismissively.

"The most attractive, but that's not why you are special."

"I need an unregistered pad," I said very quietly into his ear, barely moving my lips. It was unlikely anyone was eavesdropping, but I couldn't be too careful. It was illegal to have one. I still can't believe I asked. I don't know anything about him.

"You're going into the dark webspaces," he whispered back.

He was right. I hadn't hacked into a dark webspace since I was a kid (and was caught), but if I were going to do it again I needed a point of origin that was essentially untraceable, and that meant an unregistered pad.

"We should talk about this in private," I replied. Surveillance cameras may be everywhere in Pacifica, but at least we don't have ID chips implanted in our skulls.

He smiled. "My place?"

I rolled my eyes. "Where else?"

**Monday, 13 November 2045**

Yesterday, I finally asked Yenner to tell me something about himself. I still don't know much about him. He knows pretty much everything about me, but he's a mystery. I'm not sure how that has happened.

"Tell me about your experience after the war," I said.

"How old were you when it happened?" he asked me.

"Seven."

"What do you remember about it?"

"Everything," I said.

"No, not what you learned in history or by reading books, I mean what you remember."

"I remember everything, Yenner."

He took my hand in his and ran the fingers from his other hand across it. His hands are so big and strong. I'm certain he could crush mine with ease, yet he is always so gentle when he touches me.

He brought my fingers up to his lips and kissed them. "Is your memory another one of your gifts?" He asked softly.

"It is a curse," I said under my breath.

"You are hopeless," he half-joked.

Neither of us said anything else for a while.

"Where do you want me to start?" I finally asked. I had asked him for his memories first, but I was about to tell him mine. Was it too difficult for him to talk about? Or was he delaying for another reason?

"When did the war start for you?" he asked me.

*The war began when Dad knew you had been killed, Abuyah. When America bombed Arabia. Here, it was early the morning of Wednesday, March 24th, 2032. I woke to the sound of him yelling and crying your name. I remember standing in the doorway of your bedroom. Dad didn't know I was there. He was on his knees staring at the images on the media panel that were sent by an EU news satellite. He was shaking.*

The president was in a window next to the satellite images, announcing that he had ordered an attack on Arabia. He explained that the attack was necessary to destroy the

heart of Islamic extremism. Only then could America begin to eliminate the network of terror *madrasas (schools)* it had established across half the world and bring an end to decades of escalating terrorist attacks against American interests. He brought up the September 11th attacks of 2001 and 2031 on New York City. He evoked George W. Bush's war on terrorism and harshly criticized the succeeding presidents for failing to finish the job.

"The liberal weakness that infects the Democratic and Republican parties has permitted the Islamic menace to murder and destroy with impunity," the president said. "I was elected to take action and I am taking action."

Dad was crying. I had never seen either of you cry before, and it made me cry too because it seemed that only the end of the world or something very bad happening to you could make Dad cry.

He heard me and turned to face me with a helpless and desperate expression. He seemed like a stranger. Tears were running down his face, dripping from his chin. He howled with pain like a wounded animal. I ran to him and he grabbed and squeezed me, kissing the top of my head. "Rabiyya, my precious little man," he said to me. "Our government has launched missiles at Arabia."

I asked him, "at Mecca? At my Abuyah?"

We watched the screen in despair as the satellite picture showed in perfect clarity three great mushroom clouds roiling above Jiddah, Mecca, and Riyadh. Smaller bursts peppered the entirety of the peninsula. As the satellite camera zoomed in it turned to static. But they played that segment over and over until the government began jamming all wireless communications the next day. "I still have that clip on my pad," I told Yenner. Before the stations were blocked, the EU and Asian news agencies were estimating between ten and twelve million deaths.

We sat in front of the screen watching the coverage of the attack and invasion and an endless number of interviews and commentaries. There were protests and counter-protests and riots everywhere that day. The Homeland Security Force had already mobilized in anticipation of violence. Martial law was declared.

Because Dad had connections, he was able to get a permit to travel to Washington D.C. There were several large demonstrations planned across the country in defiance of martial law and the largest was supposed to take place there. That weekend he drove me to Mom's and left me with her. I can still remember screaming and crying as he left me. It still hurts now as I remember it. You were gone and now Dad was leaving too. He promised me he would be back.

I couldn't say any more. The pain was too great. Yenner pulled me to him and wrapped his great arms around me. We sat there for some time until I realized I was smoothing out

the thick brown hair on his forearm. It's interesting that I still feel compelled to do that after all these years. Then I started talking again.

A few days later there were a hundred thousand people demonstrating here. Everyone was saying that right-wing extremists had taken the 'War on Terrorism' way too far and had been making it worse for decades. I now believe it was intentional and that they knew what they were doing. They were trying to force a confrontation between Christianity and Islam.

I found out after the war that millions were demonstrating across the country but that the news was being censored on public and corporate webspaces. The president ordered the military, Homeland Security and the local police to use force to break them up and arrest the protesters. There were riots everywhere.

After the military and Homeland Security were ordered to use deadly force, the civil war began. Mom and I watched its beginning on the American news, which blamed Arabs and Muslims for starting the riots and atheists and Democrats for weakening and fragmenting society. The resistance would have quickly failed, but about a third of the military remaining in America refused to follow the order to fire on civilians.

*That, Abuyah, was how the war began.*

"I know you asked me first," Yenner said. "I know I haven't been very forthcoming about my past. It's just very painful to remember, let alone talk about. I've tried to put it behind me and forget."

I didn't say anything.

"I promise that next time I will do the talking," he said.

I still didn't say anything, but I leaned forward and lightly kissed his lips. I slowly moved mine across his, then pulled back.

He smiled. "I was wondering how long it would take you to do that."

I noticed that I had tented my pants. He noticed too.

I left shortly thereafter. It was late. Maybe next time I'll be ready.

### **Monday, 20 November 2045**

Today after class I finally went to a doctor - mom's doctor - about the pain I've been having in my chest. She insisted that I let her come too.

I suspected one of two things - either a heart problem, which would have really surprised me, or anxiety. The doctor thinks it's anxiety too. I even had an anxiety attack in the examination room.

"It's certainly not your heart," she told me as we watched a 3D image of my chest cavity. "You have the most efficient cardiovascular and respiratory systems I've ever seen."

I watched the numbers on the diagnostic panel. The efficiency metrics were above the normal range. I began feeling nauseous, but I don't know what else I expected. There was no doubt left in my mind. It was pretty clear that the doctors that engineered me selected what they thought were the best traits from you and Dad, assuming they didn't go against your wishes and introduce foreign sequences. What I want to know now is, did the doctors act on their own? Did you or Dad request certain traits?

"Your stress hormone levels are high," she said. She stared at me, expecting an explanation.

"I've been under some unusual stress lately," I said. "School." I added. It was a lie, of course.

"You haven't said anything about that to me," Mom said. She was very angry at me, again, for not telling her about my chest pain sooner.

"I don't want to worry you with everything."

"Can you tell me what is happening to you when you experience the pain?" the doctor asked. "Have you noticed a pattern?"

I had noticed a pattern. The first time was when I discovered the message. It happened again when Mark admitted that he was jealous of me and asked if I was gay. Then when I told Jenner about the message, and again when he said it seemed like a threat.

"Rabiyya?" Mom began. "Dr. Washington asked you a question."

"I'm thinking!" I snapped. "Sorry. I haven't really noticed a pattern," I lied again. "It just happens when I feel very stressed out."

"Your mom has told me a lot about you. I know you're already taking two anti-depressants and a mood stabilizer. You had a very rough time for a few years after the war."

"Yeah," I agreed.

"And now?"

"I really don't want to talk about it," I said.

She looked at Mom. I looked at Mom.

Mom looked pretty unhappy. "So there's nothing wrong with him," she said, effectively changing the subject.

"Not physically. Not that I can see." She turned back to me. "But... I'd like your permission to do a genomic work up. It will just take a few minutes."

"No," Mom and I said before the doctor finished her sentence. My heart started pounding. She had asked the worst question possible and we had responded in the worst way possible. The diagnostic panel chirped and the graphs and numbers spiked. I had forgotten about the sensor array. Dr. Washington looked at me. Her left eyebrow went up.

"That was an interesting response," she said.

My heart pounded harder.

"Are you feeling stress now?"

I couldn't lie now that I was aware that what was effectively a lie detector was aimed at me. "Yes."

"Would you call it anxiety?"

"Yes." I watched several metrics on the panel turn red. It was like a negative bio-feedback loop that was exposing the source of my anxiety. The pressure in my chest became worse. "Would you please turn that off?"

She paused for a moment then turned off the sensor pickups. "You felt it again," she said matter-of-factly.

"Yes."

I had to do something. It was obvious she was suspicious that we were hiding something. "OK, I'll tell you what caused that." I paused. She waited patiently. "I don't want you to do a gene screen. There are things I don't want to know."

"Have you ever used gene drugs? Replacement therapies? Are you afraid of some kind of damage?"

"No. It's just ... personal." Strangely, saying that helped me relax.

"Okay," she said finally. "We have ruled out obvious physiological problems, so you probably already know what I'm going to say. I think that you are experiencing severe anxiety that is initiated by certain trigger events. Otherwise, you are an extremely healthy

young man. I can't force you to tell me what ... terrifies you so much. But if you change your mind, and I hope you will, give Dr. Cohen or me a call. We really are here to help you. Confidentially." She emphasized the last word.

I know she meant it. An individual's genome is protected information that cannot be shared without a court order. However, I don't think in her wildest fantasies she could imagine the truth. As Mom and I rode the subway back to Powell Station we discussed that. "Do you think she will do a genetic analysis anyway?" I asked her. Of course, the more important question would be - would she compare it to Mom's?

"No, Dr. Washington would never do that. I trust her. That's why I thought you should see her." She just looked at me for a minute. "I was a little surprised you admitted what you did."

"I had to. She knew something was up that involved my genetics." Then I realized something. "You know, even if she discovers that you are not my natural mother, what does that prove? It just proves that my birth certificate is wrong. And now that I'm an adult, so what?"

Mom didn't respond. I've been spinning about that ever since.

### **Saturday, 2 December, 2045**

Mark and I rode down to Fort Funston today. He seems more relaxed around me again. I think he's more comfortable with me hanging out with Yenner, though we haven't talked about it again.

I did finally tell Mark about you and Dad. I'm realizing that it's not the end of the world if my closest friends know. Though I'm not sure how I can consider Yenner a close friend. I just think he will be someday.

We had a strange conversation. At first Mark didn't understand what I was trying to tell him. He couldn't get the fact that my biological parents are both men through his reality filter. Then once he did he thought I was joking with him. Eventually he realized I was serious.

"Man. Gotta think. Takin' a walk."

He locked his bike up and took the steps down the cliff side to the beach. It was foggy but warm along the coast, and by the time he reached the sand I could barely see him. I walked over to the picnic tables, pulled my pad out of my pack and sat down. Several people and families were out walking their dogs. A European-looking girl, maybe 5 or 6, was taking turns chasing and being chased by a terrier. It was pretty funny to watch.

I entered a newsnet and looked at the headlines. India and Bangladesh continue to experience massive flooding while the drought in China persists. As does ours. The EU has completed its first defense platform and launched a new class of attack satellite that it threatened to use against America's if they continue to disable European surveillance drones. The water war between Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopia continues to intensify despite UN attempts to enforce their 20 year old treaty. The thousands of executions resumed in America after its Supreme Court ruled that traitors against the country had voluntarily forfeited their rights as citizens under the True Patriot Amendment, and thus their executions were constitutional. The rest of New Orleans was officially abandoned as the country could no longer afford to protect the city from the rising sea and super-storms of ever increasing intensity.

I chose to view one story: the Arab Liberation Army claimed responsibility for destroying one of America's space elevators, including its floating platform. Most of the carbon nanotube ribbon flew off into space but the rest, including the weapons being lifted, fell into the Pacific. How it was destroyed isn't known or maybe just isn't being released.

The ALA is classified as a terrorist organization by America. It is the primary source of resistance against the American and Israeli occupation of much of the Middle-East. How people trying to fight off an invading force can be considered terrorists must require some pretty creative logic. But this is twenty-first century America.

Mark pinged me while I was watching the story. He was using his chat-shades. It annoys me when he does that because he can see me but I can't see him. The chat-shades are very popular, especially the oversized retro com-goggles that the kids like to wear.

"Yeah?" I answered.

"Bud," his voice overlaid on the story. I stopped its audio. I had never been so glad to hear him call me that. It meant he would be okay with my situation.

"You want me to come down there?" I asked.

"Yeah, must see this."

I climbed down the hundred year old steps to the beach and suddenly remembered coming here with you and Dad years ago. It had been a hot October day - and one of the few times you showed your bare torsos in public. You were both so big and strong. I used to pray for God to make me strong and hairy like you were. I haven't thought about that in ten years or so.

I pulled my pad back out and pinged Mark. "Where are you?"

"Go south, at the end."

I ran to the end of the cove, where the rocks jutted out into the ocean. Mark quickly came into view through the fog. He was holding a long, black sheet about a meter wide. It was paper thin. The end was shredded into long black hairs.

“Waaa!” I yelled. “It’s part of America’s space elevator! Case this!” I grabbed the other end. The ribbon was about twenty meters long and seemed unnaturally strong because it was essentially weightless.

We played tug o’ war with it for about ten minutes. I felt like a kid again, back before everything changed. We stopped after we were both covered with sand and exhausted. He had fallen into the water.

“I’m going to keep it,” he said finally, gasping for breath.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” I told him. “It has a tracking filament that runs along its entire length.”

He examined it closely. “I can’t see anything.”

“It’s nanoscopic, Mark. You *can’t* see it.”

He just looked at it. I felt like I was taking candy from a toddler.

“Just leave it here. I’ll ping the police,” I said.

After I called the police and showed them the ribbon, they assured me that someone would be there very soon to pick it up. As we raced up the stairs, a Coast Guard SkyScooter zoomed overhead. They didn’t waste any time.

Mark is back to acting like he did months ago, before things got tense between us. Obviously he’s okay with who I am. He doesn’t like to discuss our friendship, but I can tell how he feels and I guess he knows that. Now that I think about it, he doesn’t like to analyze much of anything. There is probably a lesson there than I am ignoring.

“Please don’t tell anyone,” I said to him before we rode home. “Even Kelley.”

“Problem not. Already forgot.”

“Thanks.”

We were both silent for some time. I kept wondering why he was acting like himself around me again.

“What changed your mind about me?” I finally asked as we rode up Portola.

“Nothin’. Just decided you’re the same guy I started hanging with years ago. I know more, but you’re still the same. Life’s too short to be jealous.”

“You know I am jealous of you sometimes,” I said.

“Chizz. Why?”

“A lot of reasons. You’d be surprised.”

He laughed. “Guaranteed.”

But he didn’t press me. Mark seems so simple sometimes, but also wise and pragmatic when it counts. Probably another lesson there.

### **Sunday, 3 December 2045**

I finished testing the search agent I modified. I’ve been working on it intensely for the past two weeks. As soon as Yenner can get the unregistered pad, I’ll recompile the code on it and cut it loose. Anytime a program is compiled the resulting machine code is branded with the registration ID of the compiling hardware. This is one of the values of an unregistered pad. If my agent is trapped and decompiled it won’t be traceable.

I am pretty happy with it. The agent is programmed to first target a set of webspaces that I’ve specified, wait for further instruction while I analyze the data it returns, then sweep the entire web while looking for key values, cloning, morphing or destroying itself as needed to detect existing security protocols and methods. It won’t actually attempt to enter any securenets or dark spaces, but it will encrypt and send data segments back to the pad. It can even passively monitor security systems by observing how data travels through locked gateways.

I created a testspace in our home system to see how well it worked. I tried to simulate the internet as best I could and used the latest commercially available security software. My agent was able to pass undetected and accurately described the nature of the new software. It did find a flaw. Tomorrow I’m going to see if I can exploit it.

I need to get on my homework. My instructors have noticed that I’ve been “distracted” lately. They have no idea.

### **Thursday, 14 December 2045**

My last final exam is tomorrow morning, then I’ll have a month off before beginning my last semester. I can’t believe the semester flew by so fast. It seems like just yesterday that Mark and I rode down there to register.

The last few weeks have been very intense. Mom even commented on how busy I've been. Between finals, projects and working on my search agent I haven't seen much of anyone.

Yenner was gone for a week anyway - another one of his business trips - but I am going to see him this weekend. He pinged and said he has a pad for me. When I asked him how much it cost he just said, "we can talk about that this weekend."

It makes me feel a little uncomfortable, but I can't wait to set my agent loose. I also can't wait to see him.

### Friday, 15 December 2045

While I was walking home from class today I could hear the *adhan* (*call to prayer*) from Abraham Square. I remember when I was very young, you taught me what the words meant and how the tradition began. Every time I hear it I think about you. And now that it is legal to call Muslims to prayer I hear it pretty often, though only the *adhan* for *salat al-Jum'ah* (*the gathering prayer at noon on Friday*) is usually amplified.

I remember the words.

*Allahu akbar, Allahu akbar.*

*Allahu akbar, Allahu akbar.*

*Ashahadu an la ilaha ill Allah. Ashahadu an la ilaha ill Allah.*

*Ashahadu anna Muhammadan Rasulullah. Ashahadu anna Muhammadan Rasulullah.*

*Haya 'alas salah. Haya 'alas salah.*

*Haya 'alal falah. Haya 'alal falah.*

*Allahu akbar, Allahu akbar.*

*La ilaha illa Allah.*

It calls me to worship a God I do not believe in.

After lunch I walked back to the masjid, pausing at the ornately decorated entrance to remove my shoes before entering. I do not believe in God, yet I stepped in with my right foot first as you taught me. I suppose it is a way of remembering you.

I know you would be disappointed in me for not praying. I know you would be hurt that I don't believe. But you aren't here to talk about it with me and I can't - or won't - bring it up with Jamal.

"Rabiyya!" Jamal's voice called out from down the hall. "You are late!"

I didn't say anything until I was standing before him. I gave him my best *as-salaamu 'alaikum* (*peace be upon you*).

He smiled. "Not bad, ibnyy. Wa 'alaikum as-salaam. How are you?"

"Full of questions, as usual. And you?"

"*Bikhayr, alhamdu lillah*" (well, thank God). "You are here to ask me more about Hassan, no?"

"I've been thinking about what you said last time."

"You think too much, ibnyy."

That made me smile. I had caught him in an unusually good mood.

We went into his small office and he closed the door. He motioned for me to sit down. "Would you like some chai?" He asked.

"No, thank you."

He poured some for himself and sat down across from me. "So, how are you really? Any more messages?"

"No."

"That's good. How are you handling it?"

"OK. I've told one of my friends. He's been very supportive."

He nodded his head and seemed to examine me for awhile. Finally he asked, "so, what do you remember about Hassan?"

I laughed. "I thought I was going to ask that question?" But, like Yenner asking me a question in response to my own, I knew Jamal had a purpose. I drifted back to that time, when I was 6 and 7, and my memories of you were still clear.

"I remember him being very large, although I know I was very small. He seemed so strong. Confident. He was warm and affectionate. Not just to me, but also Dad. And I used to sit in his lap all the time. I recently remembered running my fingers through the hair on his forearms..." *Like I do with Yenner.*

"What else?"

Memories came flooding back. "He would often take me to pray with him. He was very regular in his praying. It used to irritate Dad sometimes, but he never said anything about it. I could just tell.

“He used to tell me stories about Saudi Arabia and the prophets and Islamic heroes. He told me that he wanted to take me to Mecca to show me where he grew up, *Al Harram Ash-Shariif (the Holy Masjid, which contains the Qa'ba)* and the Qa'ba.” *You spoke Arabic to me a lot too*, but I didn't tell Jamal that. I don't remember much of it.

“He was always dressed neatly. He was always well-groomed.” I suddenly remembered Dad trimming your thick black body hair. It grew everywhere, and Dad would trim your back and shoulders every other Saturday morning before we went to Mom's. “I remember watching Abuyah trim his own chest and stomach, shave his neck and cheeks.”

Your grooming habits fascinated me. You were very meticulous, while Dad would just run an electric razor over his neck and consider the job done. Both of you were so hairy that the first time I saw a man with no body hair I asked you if he was ill.

I didn't tell these details to Jamal. They didn't matter. They were, as people in the old movies would say, too much information.

“Hassan was somewhat of a perfectionist,” Jamal said. “He wanted to do everything right. His work, his body, his appearance, his faith ... and his family.”

“His family? Dad? Me?”

“Of course.”

“He thought my Dad was perfect?”

“Close enough. One of the things he admired about Dave was that he accepted himself just the way he was. To Hassan, Dave's acceptance of his own imperfections were a form of masculine perfection.”

“That makes it sound like he wasn't comfortable with himself.”

“He had some difficulty with his sexuality and ... his faith.”

“Islam,” I clarified.

“Islam.”

I couldn't help it. I rolled my eyes. The amount of misery created by religion within a person and between people is so great, yet it persists even among intelligent, highly-educated people. Why?

“He told you all of this,” I stated.

“You know I was his best friend, Rabiyya. He told me pretty much everything. He would never go to a therapist, so that left me.”

Jamal fell silent for awhile, and I imagined that he was drifting into the past. A look of pain flashed across his face. "He told my wife once that Dave was the only person that he had ever been with."

It seems incredible that Dad was the only person you had sex with, but you were already 35 years old when you left Saudi Arabia. Mom told me once that you knew you would never find happiness in that most repressive of cultures, and were terrified of acting on your desires there. Then you met Dad while on vacation in Greece.

You spent two weeks together, not once having sex. You wouldn't do it. But you fell in love, and you returned to Mecca to apply for a Visa to the United States that was approved only because of Dad's connections. Within months you were living in a tiny studio in San Francisco and dating my dad.

It is so strange to think about. If one of you had not taken that vacation, or the Visa had been denied, I would not exist.

"I remember your wife," I said. Jamal had two daughters as well. They were all killed in the war. I suddenly felt self-centered for always talking about myself.

"But you didn't come here to talk about my family," he said, forcing a smile. He was always so gracious, even when I knew he was irritated or upset.

"No, but we can," I offered. I had never met his daughters. I really didn't know a lot about him. I simply trusted him because you had.

"Another time," he said.

"Then what you said before, that there is nothing in my genes that is not of my dad and Abuyah. That leaves a lot of room for genetic selection."

"Hassan wanted you to be..."

"Perfect," I finished for him. "He wanted a perfect son," I said bitterly.

"He wanted you to be able to survive in a hostile world. It is what every parent wants, and he had it within his power to increase your chances."

There it was. He said it. He confirmed what I had suspected and feared all along and what Mom had denied. I felt sick. I grew angry.

"Did my mom know?" My throat became tight.

"I don't think so. I'm not even sure that Dave knew."

You had given me what you thought of as a gift, and felt I betrayed somehow. I was becoming furious and Jamal could tell.

“Rabiyya, think about this for a minute. If you were to be a parent, would you not want your child to have the best traits possible?”

I fought to remain composed. *This isn't Jamal's fault*, I kept telling myself.

“I guess so, but ... a person's genetics are so complicated, even today we don't know how the genes all relate to each other. It seems unwise, maybe even arrogant to manipulate any except the simplest of them.”

“This upsets you so,” he said. It seemed to puzzle him. “Because you think of yourself as unnatural.”

“Partially, but also because I wonder if in the selection of their genes, something was overlooked. If some combination had an unexpected result. You know I have emotional problems. I always have!”

“Even before the war?” He asked.

*Even before the war?* I have been spinning about that question ever since. It was an excellent question. For three years I have felt like I've been put together with the best pieces of an enormous puzzle, but with a few of them in the wrong places. But what if everything is in the right place? What if the trauma of the war and losing them really is the source of my instability? What if there really isn't anything inherently wrong with me? Yet?

## **Tuesday, 19 December 2045**

I went to Yenner's on Sunday. The building let me in as usual and took me to his floor. I heard his door unlock as I approached it. His security system greeted me and asked me to enter. Yenner was sitting on the couch.

“Hi,” he said with a big smile on his face.

“Hi.” On the table in front of him was a new pad. “Is that it?” I asked.

“Yep.”

My heart was pounding. I was about to take something into my possession that is as illegal as a firearm and in the wrong hands, far more dangerous.

“Go ahead,” Yenner prompted me. “Check it out.”

I picked it up and flipped it over. It was Chinese. Powerful, light, and untraceable. I badly wanted to ask him where he got it, but did I really want to know? It didn't matter. It was beautiful. My two year-old pad is an antique in comparison.

"Turn it on," he said.

I did and began scrolling through the available software.

"I think everything you need is on there," he said. He seemed proud of himself, as if he had done me the greatest of favors. Which he has.

He was right. Every program and utility I could think of had been loaded ... by someone ... but I couldn't bring myself to ask him who. Whoever it was, they had anticipated my needs. *They knew what I was going to do?*

"Who is it imprinted to?" I asked.

"No one," he began. "Otherwise ..."

"... it would be traceable," I finished with him.

"You can still lock it, of course, but it will work for anyone."

I knew this. I also knew that the pad would randomly select an access number at each connection to the net from a pirated list. Luckily my connection times would be brief and infrequent. It was unlikely the owner of the access number would ever notice.

"So what do I owe you?"

"Nothing. I just pulled in a favor to get it."

"Nothing? This thing is worth thousands! I have to give you something."

"I don't want money from you, Rabiyya."

"That's not fair. What do you want?" But I knew the answer. I can tell by the way he looks at me.

"Whatever you want to give me. Even if it is just friendship."

I could hear Jamal's voice telling me that my dad was the only person you had ever had sex with. But I am not you, Abuyah.

I looked into Yenner's green eyes. I knew nothing about the man behind them, and yet I did want to give him what he wanted. I reached out and touched his hand. He

immediately grasped mine and pulled it to his lips. He kissed it gently while looking at me. "I cannot describe how beautiful I think you are."

I struggled to find something to say in return but could not. I am very attracted to him. This mountain of muscle and hair with gentle green eyes. I feel safe with him. Protected.

"This is so hard for me," he said.

Still I said nothing.

"Waiting for you," he whispered. He searched my face as if he would never look upon it again.

I feel like I am torturing him but I'm just not ready yet. I want it too. He's waiting for me, but what am I waiting for?

### **Sunday, 24 December 2045**

It's Christmas Eve. When I was very young, before the war, this was a very exciting day because I couldn't wait to see what you, Mom and Dad had gotten me for Christmas. We used to celebrate Christmas, *Eid al-Fitr (the celebration at the end of the Ramadan fast)* and *Eid al-Adha (the celebration at the end of the Hajj)*. I had the best of two worlds.

Even afterward Mom and I would observe them, but it was never quite the same. Now we just spend time together and exchange one or two gifts. This year for Christmas I got her a Kashan rug. Her last Persian rug was damaged in the floor cleaner incident so I think she'll be very happy. I hope so anyway.

...

Yenner just sent me an e-mail. At first I was irritated but now I understand why. I just read it. There is nothing else I can write.

My Dear Rabiyya:

I would like to thank you for being so patient with me. I know I haven't told you very much about my past. It isn't that I wish to keep it from you, although I wish I could spare you the stories, but it is that I can't bear to think about it. I have spent the last ten years trying to forget the past and it is difficult to speak of it now.

I decided that it would be easier for me to write it down for you. I know it will upset you. I know it may seem unbelievable. However you must remember that this type of thing has happened many times throughout human history and unfortunately continues to this day. This is the first part of my own story.

I will start with my last name. It is Seradjfar. It is not Turkish, but rather Persian. My grandfather, his name was Mahmoud, left Iran after the Islamic revolution. His father had raised sheep for a living and Mahmoud desired, like so many others, to seek his fortune in a big city. He moved to Ankara, Turkey, where he met my grandmother and started a family. They had two sons, one of them my own father, of course, and a daughter. In the late nineties Mahmoud brought them all to the United States, and that is where I was born, in Dallas, Texas.

Shortly after September 11th, 2001, my father experienced the beginning of the anti-Muslim / anti-Middle Eastern sentiment that would become so common in certain American populations: a note was left on his desk at school that said, "Go home or die." It proved prophetic.

My father was a doctor specializing in pediatric care. He loved children, had a successful practice, and was able to send me to college at Rice University in Houston. At the time I was studying architecture.

It was not easy, however. There had been more terrorist attacks against America by that time and hate-crimes against anyone who looked Middle Eastern were common. An Iraqi classmate of mine was shot after leaving a party. The police called it a drug-related crime, but I knew better.

I had been lucky because of the wealthy older man that I was seeing. I don't really know what else to call it. It really wasn't dating, at least to me. I knew I was gay by that time but didn't expect our relationship to last. He was the one who paid for the selective gene replacement therapy that made me unusually strong and muscular. As you will see, because of this I owe him my life.

Then came those fateful events: the nuclear explosion in New York City, the Islamic revolution in Saudi Arabia and subsequent oil embargo, America's attack on and partial occupation of the short lived Islamic Republic of Arabia, and the Second American Civil War, what you call the War of Secession.

During the war I returned home to Dallas to help my father who had lost his practice because of his opposition to the government's policies. Parents that he had befriended, children that he had treated, now threatened him and his family and spit on him in the street.

I hoped to move us to Canada but it was too late. The country was now under martial law and it was simply too far for us to attempt to flee.

The mosques were closed down by the government and burned. Most Muslims by this time were fired from their jobs. Simply having an Arabic or Middle Eastern last name could doom someone unless they could prove that they had been a Christian for over two years.

After the civil war my father's assets were seized and we ran out of money. My uncle, who had remained in Dallas, was evicted by his landlord and brought his family to live with us. Muslims and Arabs (it seemed to many Americans that anyone that looked Middle Eastern was an Arab) were shot daily. These murders were not investigated by the police. People we knew were arrested and taken away. There were rumors that concentration camps had been set up around the country.

Can you imagine the terror we all felt? None of us had thought it was possible for it to go this far. Not in America. We were living in a nightmare that there was no waking from. Some of the neighbors helped us when they could - it was difficult and dangerous for them with all the surveillance and people turning each other in, but it only put off the inevitable.

After a few months, we were broke and hungry but not allowed to travel, three men from Homeland Security came to the door and demanded to search the house for treasonous material. I knew this was the end. We kept the Qur'an at the top of the bookshelf in the study. Our house would be seized and we would find out where the others had disappeared to.

We were all herded into the living room while they ransacked the house. My cousin, who had tried to escape through the back door with the Qur'an, was shot at point blank range by an officer who had been waiting there. He was only twelve, but soon I was to envy him.

The four men had their weapons trained on us as if we were a threat, which I knew was what they believed. You see, they were not much older than me and they had grown up in a country whose government and media painted a picture of Muslims and Arabs as violent people while at the same time portraying the country's aggressive actions in the Middle East as liberation and self-defense. They had grown up in a country that was under a constant threat of terrorist attack, largely because of its own policies. When they looked at us they saw terrorists and heathens. I knew this, pitied them, but at the same time hated them for it. I hated them for allowing themselves to be so brainwashed. I hated them for hating us.

One of them held up my father's Qur'an, which was now soaked in my cousin's blood, and went on a tirade about it being forbidden and a creator of terrorism and tool of Satan.

My uncle was furious and yelled at the man, "Now look, son, you can't..."

My father interrupted him and told him, in Turkish, to shut up. The officer spun at my father and yelled, "another Arabic word and you will die!"

“That was not Arabic, you idiot...” my uncle began, but he never finished. His blood was splattered on the wall behind him and he fell to the floor.

His wife screamed and began to move toward him but was ordered to stop. “Nobody move!” the lead officer began. “By order of the President of the Christian States of America I am seizing this property. You will all be taken to a Homeland Security detention facility to be questioned and processed as necessary. The next person that speaks one word in any language will be shot. Do you understand me?”

We were all silent. I was trying my best to be inconspicuous. Even though I had lost so much weight because of our lack of food, I didn't want to look like a threat. Then my father said, “You animal! What's the matter with you? This country used to be the ...”

They shot him. He fell back into me. My eyes met his as he faded, but I didn't utter a word. I was going to do everything they said. I was going to live and make them pay.

#### **Thursday, 28 December 2045**

I haven't talked to Yenner since that e-mail. I can't right now. It made me so outraged. What happened to him and others like him - like me - and I don't want to go there again. He sent me a second one this morning but I haven't read it yet. I just can't right now.

New Year's Eve is Sunday. Mark and Kelley have invited me to go a party with them and this time I have accepted. Part of me wants to be with Yenner but another part of me wants to avoid him. It's not fair, but I know I will be angry and I don't want to feel the rage again. I've been pretty even for several weeks now and I like it. Maybe I should take a mellow pill then read it.

Listen to me. I'm always medicated. But I feel okay right now.

It's a clear warm day and I'm sitting in the sun up on Twin Peaks. It's been some time since I've been up here.

Our weather is getting warmer. It's subtle, but I can tell. There are more days between foggy periods than there used to be. It's nice - at least here in San Francisco - but it means we have to conserve water more and suck more out of the ocean.

As the climate has warmed the snowfall in the Sierra has greatly decreased. That snow pack had served as a natural reservoir for millions of people for a hundred years but it is pretty much gone now. We are lucky that we are on the coast.

What used to fall as snow now falls as rain and the levees in the central valley had to be strengthened and expanded. The additional rainfall combined with the increase in sea level has put much of the delta and river valley at risk.

A couple on motorcycles just rode up. A lot of motorbikes are still gas-powered, but very few cars are anymore. They are mostly solar, battery or fuel-cell powered or some combination of the above. Motorcycles are so fuel efficient that even many middle-class people can afford to buy gas for them. I think about getting a motorbike every now and then, I really like SparkCycles, but I know Mom wouldn't approve and it wouldn't be fair to Mark. I also like the exercise I get from pushing myself around.

It's a man and woman. Like millions before them, they are taking pictures of each other in front of the view. The 13 year old view. Now they are walking up to me.

They asked me to take their picture so I did. I talked to them for a while. They are from Los Angeles and are riding up to Seattle. Their bikes are beautiful too. Honda Sunstorms. They must be pretty well off.

I've never been outside of the Bay Area. Other than the trip to New York City that I don't remember. The idea of leaving actually scares me. Yenner leaves all the time but I don't know where he goes. I've never asked. I guess I don't care. That seems strange. Shouldn't I care?

I've never flown, again, that I remember. I've never taken the PacLink. I've never been in a boat. On a motorcycle. Driven a car. On a SkyScooter.

BART and a bicycle seem to be all I need.

Two tour buses just pulled up. It's time to get. I guess I'll go home and read Yenner's e-mail.

### **Friday, 29 December 2045**

I read Yenner's second e-mail. I'd been putting it off, but he pinged me twice and I let my pad answer. He knows I always have it with me and that I'm not busy, so I really can't avoid it any longer.

I took a Placidone first. It didn't seem to help.

Rabiyya:

I know this upsets you, but it has been building in me since you told me about what you remembered of the war. I have to tell someone. I'm sorry it is you.

I've told a few others - the immigration officers that granted me asylum, my boss at work who incredibly enough is descended from a Holocaust survivor, an old friend. But it's been years since.

Here it is:

In minutes my family was reduced from ten to seven. A few of us were sobbing. I was silent, fuming with difficult to control rage.

The squad leader, who had called for backup and a van, ordered us out of the house and into the late-afternoon heat. It must have been about 110 degrees. We were strip-searched, handcuffed, and forced, naked, into the back of a windowless van without ventilation or light. One of the officers told us that he hoped a few of us would die back there because "the less of you there are the better off the world will be."

The trip lasted a few hours, though there was no way to tell. We weren't allowed to speak. We discovered that early on when they told us to shut up through a speaker that we couldn't see in the dark.

It was unbearably hot. There was nowhere to relieve ourselves. There were no seats. We had to sit on the floor, finally leaning against each other's backs. My mom leaned against me for most of the trip. When I think about it, I can still feel and smell her there.

The handcuffs dug into our wrists and after a while my hands were numb. I was fairly certain I could have broken them but I didn't see what good that would have done at the time.

Once the van stopped we were kept in it for a few more hours. It reeked of our urine and sweat. Then we were led out into a large warehouse and separated. My two sisters, mother and aunt were taken away but were very weak from thirst and the heat. My aunt stumbled. They hit her in the back of the head and she collapsed, crying. My cousin tried to run to her but one of the guards tripped him and he fell on his face. My younger brother, his name was Ahmet, and I were forced out of the room. Other than Ahmet, I never saw any of them again.

We found ourselves in a room with around a hundred other male detainees. Our cuffs were removed, and at gunpoint we were ordered to shave each other from head to toe. One man got an erection. The guards pulled him aside, called him a "faggot sand-nigger", and shot him in the groin. He was left to bleed to death while we finished shaving.

We were then led out, one by one, beaten, questioned, beaten again, then branded. You will see that soon - I hope. The brands had meaning. They classified us. I will explain that to you later. We were tattooed with an ID. Mine was

TX86772. I had it removed once I could afford it. I thought something was inserted into my lower back too, but I wasn't certain at the time.

I was there for three months. There were around a thousand of us at first, a number which tripled by the time I left. We worked every day. Well, except the Christians. They were given Sundays off. Yes, there were Christians there. Christians who were traitors for hiding Muslims or publicly opposing the government's policies or caught trying to leave the country.

What did we do? Ahmet operated a machine that made ammunition. I loaded it into trucks. Even though our jobs would not have been physically difficult in normal circumstances, it was a struggle to make it through the 16 hour day. Remember, this was during the summer and fall and there was no air-conditioning. Only my burning need for revenge kept me going.

Their hatred of us was oppressive. They blamed us for the war, for terrorism, for what was happening in America. They blamed us for taking them away from their families. They couldn't wait until we were all dead. They said they wouldn't stop until every last Arab was killed. I didn't bother to point out that I wasn't an Arab.

If anyone was accused of breaking a minor rule - speaking a language other than English, showing any form of disrespect for a guard, being late, needing to relieve himself at the wrong time - they were punished. Punishment could range from being hit in the face, beaten, or forced to run at gunpoint until they collapsed from exhaustion, at which point they were beaten anyway.

We slept on the concrete floor of a huge room. It had a robot sentry on the ceiling that looked like a giant spider. It couldn't change its location, but it had optical sensors that glowed with a dull red and several appendages that turned out to be weapons. It shot anyone that tried to leave. We knew because someone tried. Although it didn't kill him, we never saw him again.

We were fed some brown paste each night, which thankfully had little taste. But there was never enough of it. We were always hungry and always thirsty. I lost more weight. I have never been so ripped, though, and some of the guards commented on it. A few of them would kick and beat me for fun. I'm sure it was their way of proving dominance. I never let on how strong I was.

One man, a Kuwaiti immigrant named Muhammad, was often singled out for abuse, probably because of his name. He was around 40 I think. Once he yelled something in Arabic at a guard who threw hot coffee on him and he was publicly lashed until he fell unconscious. Then he was revived and lashed some more. It seemed to last forever. When they finished, his back and buttocks looked like hamburger, but incredibly he survived. A few weeks later I could see the bones

where the skin and muscle was torn away. Finally it became infected. He died two weeks before I was transferred.

Then there was the torture. They used sleep deprivation, endlessly blasting music, painfully bright lights, and the “confessionals” as they called them. We called them torture tanks or hell holes. No one came out of them alive.

The hell holes, I later learned, were used as a final punishment or to extract false confessions that were used to justify raids on the homes of their family or friends. These “confessions” were played on the news and various web sites. They worked by keeping the immobilized victim, there really is no other word that fits, alive and awake while subjecting them to such extreme pain that their hearts would repeatedly stop.

It was all computerized. Vital signs were monitored, feeding tubes were used, no human presence was required. They were tortured for hours, days, weeks, while on life-support. The machine didn't let them die or lose consciousness. Only when a confession was extracted or the person “zombied” would they stop the machine. Then they would be killed.

One morning several of us were separated from the others. I never found out why. We were cuffed and loaded into a van. I never saw Ahmet again.

We traveled for several hours. There were ten of us crammed into the back, once again in complete darkness. I knew from before that they could hear us and I guessed that they were monitoring us in the infrared as well.

I wondered where we were being taken. Another camp seemed unlikely. Why not leave us where we were? Why the effort of transporting us?

I was terrified. As horrible as the last place was, I had become familiar with it, with the routine, and more or less knew what to expect. But this was new, and I was filled with dread and despair. I imagined us being selected for experimentation of some kind.

I thought about the men they had chosen: two were white, three were black, three more were Arabic, then there was myself and a Persian guy. We were pretty much a cross section of the facility's prisoners.

It had to be experimentation. My mind was filled with terrifying ideas. A pathogen? Radiation weapon? A biogenetic weapon of some kind? Was such a thing even possible?

Then several things happened at once. There was a loud snap outside the van, a sharp pain in my lower back (I later found out that everyone felt it), and the van

swerved and came to a stop. There was gunfire and yelling. I realized I was holding my breath.

The back doors opened. Two white men in Homeland Security uniforms with automatic weapons were motioning for us to get out. "Quickly," one of them said. "We don't have much time."

"We're with Take Back America," the other said. "We're rescuing you."

I had heard of them. They were a resistance group of Americans that used guerrilla tactics to fight the establishment. They had formed during the civil war, but the media reported that they had been crushed only months later.

I didn't believe the men at first. Most of us hesitated.

"Please hurry," the first one said urgently.

Seeing little alternative, I played along. The rest followed. As we walked around the van we could see two of the guards from our camp dead on the road. Two other men, also in Homeland Security uniforms, lifted them into the back of the van and swung the doors shut. They looked Hispanic.

I noticed that they all had weapons, but none of them were trained on us. One hopped into the van and steered it off the two lane road and down into a ravine while the others pushed. He jumped out as it vanished from view. I heard it crashing down the side of the ravine.

We stood there stupidly while this happened. I was tempted to run, but to where? My cuffs were still on, but I wasn't sure I could break them without tearing my wrists open, if at all.

"Let's go!" the first one, apparently the leader, called out. They ran for a short, white bus that was painted with the red and blue Homeland Security logo. With few other options, we all followed.

As we sped toward the west they explained that they had received word, from an insider I guessed, that prisoners were being moved. The snap we heard while in the van was an EMP weapon. It had disabled the van, its communication equipment, and more importantly, the tracking chips that our rescuers told us were implanted in our lower backs. We were in north-eastern New Mexico now and we had a choice. We could join them - they claimed over 100,000 members nationwide - or they would try to take us as far as Nevada.