

"Let's go explore some more Earthly experiences." The Time Police suggested.

The three looked around as they emerged from the fog.

"So, where and when are we?" Sendi asked.

"This is a moderately sized city and we are in a large park in its central district. We are still in the early part of the Twenty First Century. There is a lot of turmoil in this era as emotional stresses are being challenged by the upcoming physical changes, so we will probably be visiting several locals in this time frame."

"What country is this?"

"That doesn't really matter a lot. Its borders are about to change as a war is being waged by several entities over its possession."

"Are we in danger of being bombed?"

"No. First of all, we are not currently physical."

"Oh, right." She remembered.

"And, second, the armed battles are not being fought near this city. However, there are political confrontations at work here. And, it's to those that we will be lending our attention."

Sendi paused as they walked along the path. She looked out over the water. "Why are those people out wading in the lake?"

Rexx stared at her. "People? Those are ducks."

"Huh?" She shielded her eyes from the sun's glare on the water for a second look. One of the ducks looked back at her and quacked loudly. She turned to the Time Police. "He can see me?"

"He must be very perceptive." The Time Police laughed. "He thanks you for calling them people."

"Why did I see them as people and not ducks?"

"You saw their souls and because you are used to seeing people as the primary sentient beings, you associated them as people."

"Does that mean we are all prejudiced against lower beings?" Rexx asked.

"Yes. It does." He smiled. "But, don't be too hard on yourselves for it. It's because of your experiences. It's what you've been taught all your lives and have had no opportunity to experience any contradiction to it. The most you could have known would have been acknowledging the personality of a favorite pet."

"I guess we have to start looking for the 'people' in animals." Sendi mused.

"Yes. But, don't stop there. Everything is being and is experiencing some level of being alive. We become 'people' when we choose to associate and interact with other beings. And don't stop at human. There are a lot of levels beyond that."

Matu sighed. "So much to learn."

"Don't worry. There's lots of time for it...all the time in the world, in fact." He chuckled.

"Yeah, we get it." Matu laughed. "And I thought I was the comedian."

"Well, we'll let you keep that title. But, for now, we'll move on a bit further towards the center of town. There's a gathering ahead. Let's see what's going on."

"There seems to be two groups confronting each other." Sendi said.

"Oh, there are more the two groups, but the differences between them are subtle. Some think they all agree, but 'A' doesn't like 'B' and 'B' doesn't like 'C', but 'A' and 'C' have agreed to the same doctrine. That's an over simplification, but, we think you get the idea. It's complicated."

"So, what are they fighting over?"

"A lot of it over this on-going war. Why isn't it over...why is it still going on...and so forth...all this endless bickering without any real documentation on what's really happening. And it's all coming down to who's responsible. Each side is saying it's the other side's fault."

"I guess there's no point in suggesting that these people should actually talk to each other, is there?" Rexx offered.

"Well, we do suggest that and more, all the time. But, all too often, people are so blinded by their prejudice that they do not even notice that a suggestion has been made."

"Why is that?" Sendi interjected. "Oh, no, wait...I do know the answer to that." She shook her head "Blind, stupid...oh, I don't know what to call it...idiot sheep...too lost in their own fantasies to notice they can't see through the wool covering their eyes. What does it take to make them see?"

"Maybe, a good shearing?" Matu suggested. "You know...sheep...wool...?"

"I got it." She glared at him, then paused. "No...I take that back. I know that your jokes are meant in kindness and they're to lighten the mood and I don't mean to react harshly. I guess it's just a bad habit that I have to let go of..." She turned to the Time Police. "Is that part of it...what these people...these confrontations...are all about? Is it all just bad habits?"

"Part of it, yes. Habits, prejudgments...they come from experiences and indoctrinations...some intentional, some accidental. These things cultivate a hatred toward 'the other' and that feeling gets reinforced. You've seen advertisements...'if you want the world to like you, you have to...fill in the blank'. And that side steps to...'you don't want to be a loser, like them'. It's not long until 'they' are hated."

"I see."

"And now, you've got peer pressure added to that. Your friend's approval hinges on your conduct in the approved norm. And, when politics, or religion, get involved, there's even more pressure to align yourself to the 'right' cause."

"Politics...I guess you mean, for here, this war...but, religion?"

"I can answer that." Matu ventured. This pandemic...the people were pulled into what resembled a religious cult. They had to believe that the vaccine was their savior. And anyone who did not believe was cast out and condemned to 'a painful death'...so they were told...and believed...and consequently cast out their fellow men. People were beaten and some were murdered for spreading any blasphemous word against the vaccinated priesthood."

"That bad?"

"Yes. That bad." He nodded. "I'm just glad we were remote enough from the madness to have been overlooked."

"Why don't we go over and listen to what they are saying?" The Time Police suggested.

A man with a megaphone was addressing the gathering. A handful of his supporters stood behind him. Some were holding posters praising the military and others decrying the separatists.

"If he doesn't stop glorifying those murderers...I hate that racist scum...I swear, I'll kill him." One man in the crowd was heard saying to the one next to him. He shook his fist at the speaker as the megaphone squawked on.

Sendi looked to Rexx. "Do you think he's serious?"

"Not sure. How angry does he seem?"

"Don't know...hey! Where'd he go?"

"That was fast." Matu remarked. "He was here a moment ago...I don't see him anywhere."

A shot rang out and the bullet glanced off the lamppost just behind the speaker. His supporters scattered as the speaker dropped his megaphone and ran for cover. A few in the crowd of onlookers applauded and they and the rest began to disperse.

"That seems to have been a shared sentiment." The Time Police remarked.

Sendi looked at him. "Did you have something to do with that?"

"We may have made a suggestion or two."

"OK." Rexx said. "What did you do, and why?"

"Well, to begin with, the speaker with the megaphone...everything that he was saying was false. The events he related were constructed to simulate actions committed by the separatist group. This man in the crowd reacted in defense of his people and his beliefs. But, his reaction was emotional, not the premeditated logic of a military commander."

"But still, he tried to kill that guy!" Sendi complained.

"Yes, and later he would have regretted that hasty decision. We distracted him slightly as he pulled the trigger."

"How?" She asked.

"A small insect flew in front of his field of vision and his eyes refocused momentarily."

"But, isn't that interfering with his will...I mean he made his decision?"

"Yes, and no...we created the incident that caused him to flinch, but, if he was a trained marksman, the insect wouldn't have distracted him. And we didn't prevent him from being determined and firing a second shot. And, as we saw, he didn't. The missed shot gave him a moment to decide what action would be most prudent."

"I guess, maybe, not reinforcing the false claims against his people by actually killing the guy."

"Yes. That would be a part of it, and having the responsibility of committing a murder, among many other personal feelings. Now, the man who escaped his death...yes, we arranged the trajectory to the lamppost...that 'near miss' was a suggestion to the propagandist that there might be a more prudent direction for his future decisions."

"Or he might just brush it off and say fate was on his side and continue spreading the lies." Rexx commented.

"That's true, he might. And, that's his decision as well."

"And they all lived to consider cause and effect for another day." Sendi mused.

"Yes." Nodded the Time Police. "And, humanity has yet another chance to advance."

"That is what this is about...right?" She added.

"Yes." He paused. "As far as we know."

"What would have happened if he had actually killed that guy?"

"Well, life would have gone on with the survivors, evaluating and re-evaluating their beliefs and goals."

"And, the dead guy?"

"Another life, another chance to do something new, something more constructive...something."

"Nothing else?"

"We try not to judge." He sighed. "'We' or 'I' say we try. We don't always succeed. But, we try." He smiled. "After all, we're only human." He paused and thought for a moment. "Well, given a sufficient need, we could reset and replay the situation with a few alterations to the script."

"You can do that?" She looked incredulous.

"Of course we can repeat an instance...reset and replay...why not? Change what can be prevented and suggest alternative paths...these are all possible, and most people would never know any difference. The bullet that just misses your head or the one that injures, but doesn't kill you is one of our suggestions that might bring about a more productive conclusion. We've already done it several times. We brought you to Matu's world and that caused that experience to play out differently."

"You mean that without their influence my future would have been different?" Matu asked.

"Yes, with no Rexx, Sendi, or the TimePod, the association with the Alcaad, and the encounter with the entity would all have been different, as would all the rest up until Rexx and Sendi had their time travel tour incident."

"If you can go back and replay an event, how would you replay this one?" Sendi asked.

"Well, we did not interfere until we introduced the flight of the small insect. Everything that happened up until then was the natural unfolding of the events already caused by the decisions of the individuals involved. Without the insect's interference, events may or may not have played differently."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, we don't know what decisions might have been made by either the assailant or the victim. He could have pulled the trigger and killed him, or he could have missed for any number of reasons, emotional or physical. He could have decided not to shoot at all and just run off. The victim could have died, or dodged at the last moment, also for any number of reasons...a hand cramp from holding the megaphone switch, a distraction from the group behind him, etc. You see the possibilities are endless. Now, if we were to intervene with a judgment to force an outcome...say, the good guy wins and the bad guy loses, well then, we have to be very careful how we influence that outcome. You see, the question is not so much who is right and who is wrong as it is who is forcing their values or beliefs on the other. In this circumstance..." He paused to indicate the now dispersing crowd. "Both the assailant and the victim are more or less at fault as each were imposing their beliefs on the other. At least the damage was balanced as they both gained time to reflect on their actions."

"I see." She mused. "How much was reset when you sent us to Matu's time? I mean between killing the ambassador and coming back to the future to fix that incident."

"Matu's timeline had played out until your future time without interference until we introduced you back into it. After that, we only introduced items of interest...that is, suggestions...to see how you and Rexx, and eventually all three of you, would utilize them. And, depending on your decisions, anything could have played out."

"Such as?"

"Well, you could have followed the shiny dots on the downward tunnel and met up with the entity."

"It was down there?! Oh my god, we didn't know how to handle it back then."

"Or, you could have reacted hostility when you encountered the tunnel guard and he could have killed you."

"Hey! We're not that brutal." Matu interrupted.

"But, you see, you make thousands of decisions daily...constantly. And you never know how any of them will turn out. We only hope that given enough time and experience, we can actually learn something from all of it."

"So, if you were to reset and replay this situation..." She pointed to the now empty plaza. "What would you do to change things?"

"A lot would depend on what direction we would want things to take, and also, what beginning point we would choose. If we start from the point where we first entered into this situation, where this man was reacting to the speaker with the megaphone, what direction would you want the process to unfold? In other words, what final outcome would you want to see? But, remember, none of this really resets time. It adds an extra possibility stored in the mind, similar to a dream. You didn't physically do that event, but the experience lingers in your history. The path that was ended in favor of the new one is stored towards your advancement. You didn't continue in that direction, but you learned from it. So, what would you choose?"

"Well, peace is always a nice ending." Matu volunteered.

"Yeah." Rexx agreed. "That leaves room for dialog."

"What about you, Sendi?"

"Hmm..." She frowned. "I feel like I'm being set up."

"Good observation. So, peace...no murder threat, no gunshot, no near miss. The man in the crowd just stands there and lets the propaganda wash over him. Is he seething inside, probably...does he vent his anger, maybe, maybe not. And, the situation continues and has no immediate resolution. There is no chance of dialog, unless these two men have some sort of confrontation, violent or not. There is little chance that the speaker would approach the angry man...he isn't even aware of his existence. So, that leaves the angry man to decide on some reason to confront the speaker. In this case, he attempted to assassinate him. Now, since he didn't succeed in killing him, only scaring him off...and possibly also scaring himself because of what he just tried to do...he could confront him at a future demonstration in a less violent manner. And he may well do so, in a more humble manner, approaching the speaker after his lecture with questions...and there's the beginning of your dialog."

"Wow." Said Sendi quietly. "Do we have to have such dramatic situations in order to be able to have the opportunity to attempt resolution? Does it have to be this complicated?"

"Well, this was a rather simple situation, but, others can be much more complicated. Since we are such complex multiple beings with so much buried trauma...we're afraid so. You see, we have so much shared history, that other people mirror our selves. In our encounters with them we can recognize our attributes, both good and bad, constructive and destructive, hidden and visible, and how they play out upon the world. Of, course, this recognition arouses both positive and negative reactions. It seems we always hate the faults in others that we profess in ourselves. And, in such is one of the starts of confrontation." He chuckled. "Maybe, just maybe, someday we'll weed out one of those pesky faults. Tell us, Sendi, do you think, in your wise years, that it is possible?"

"I think, in about five hundred years in one lifetime, it might be." She laughed and they all joined in. "Though, I have seen where a person possessing an attribute, often expects the attribute to be universal behavior. A chronic liar seems to automatically assume that others, especially, his opponent is also lying."

"There is something else in this mirror thing...there was a growing behavior in my, well, this time. Well, I guess you could call it a fad." Matu added. "Some people would choose odd identities for themselves, perhaps it was a fantasy role playing...something a child might do. But, they would insist that others recognize this new identity...sometimes to extreme. My guess is they needed that "mirror" to reaffirm their belief in themselves...their new identity...'if you agree that what I say is true, then it must be so'."

"You mean like if I was wearing a blue shirt because I liked it, that I would have to get everyone else to like my shirt so that I could feel comfortable wearing it?" Rexx asked.

"No, worse than that. It's as if you told everyone that your blue shirt was actually red and they would have to agree with you. Some of these encounters actually came to blows."

"Gosh." Remarked Sendi. "We didn't see any of this while we were living with your tribe."

He laughed. "You wouldn't have. We kept a good wall between us and the outside world."

"Then how did you know about it?"

"The miners had communications...we learned through those."

"But, we haven't seen any of that while we've been looking around here."

"No." Commented the Time Police. "We've been looking at other human issues. Do you want to experience any of this unusual behavior?"

"I'm not sure...it sounds kind of dangerous."

"Everything is dangerous." He laughed. "Remember, we're not physical at the moment. However, we can be if you wish...but, we can't interact any more than with just a small suggestion."

"How would that work?"

"Oh, a smile, a nod of the head, a casual greeting..."

"Can you give an example?"

"Well, you see someone who's in a bad mood and cursing to themselves over some event...we could pass nearby and you could comment to us about how some terrible event that happened turned out good when no one thought it would and then smile to the stranger and wish him well...that kind of thing. It will either work and change his mood, or not, but you will have made the suggestion."

"I see. Why do we have to suggest that he change his mood?"

"Ah...negative thoughts can lead to destructive actions, which can add more stress, more trauma. If he lightens his mood, even a little, it provides an opportunity for more positive, constructive actions, thus allowing for the possibility for advancement."

"Does everything come down to advancement?"

"Well, yes, but not everything has to be hard work. There's always time for some pleasure...time to relax and reflect on the good parts of life. Time to pursue culture and creative arts. Time to build and decorate comfortable houses to make happier families. But, these too are an important part of advancement. The constructive building of humanity toward the future is on the path to eventually avoiding destructive influences and war. With enough knowledge from experience, we can get to the point where we can discuss matters without violence...maybe. We hope."

"Not very confident, are we?"

"Unfortunately, we are not yet that advanced."

"Just how advanced are you? I mean compared to Rexx, Matu and me?"

"The main difference is that we actively remember the totality of our past experiences. Whereas you three, since you are still actively living human beings, are still deeply tied to your current personalities with minimal memories of other incarnations. We're not necessarily better, just more aware, and clearer. If we were truly more advanced, we might not be able to communicate with you at all."

"Why is that?"

"Lack of sufficient common ground...we assume."

"Hmm...what do we need to do to remember past lives?"

"To remember temporal identity, pick a time outside of the time you that you currently live in, relax, and let your mind start remembering."

"And then, what do we need to do to remember everything?"

"Choose. Let go of the current dominate personality and allow the others to flood in."

"You mean...die?"

"Well, more or less, yes...letting go of the dominate personality also lets go of the physical decorations that accompany it. But, don't panic. There's plenty of time and experiences to be gained while you are still the incarnate you. And, you also have the option to return to life here, somewhere in the physical universe, if you find a situation that you would like to explore more deeply and completely."

"If we did, would we have to forget everything like when we could have gone back to our old lives?"

"Not necessarily, as it would be a completely new experience without any of your old ties. But, after time and immersion into new experiences and relationships, older unused memories would be shelved in favor of new ones...and life would go on. But, your new friends may consider you to be 'older and wiser', or at least more experienced than most of your contemporaries. You could end up being the 'guru on the mountain top' that everyone seeks answers from."

"I see. Well, I think I'm fine with everything as it is right now."

"I've had this dream..." Matu interjected from out of the blue. "...of being a diving instructor at a posh tourist resort somewhere in South East Asia...fun in the sun...the good life."

Rexx and Sendi both turned to stare at him.

"But, you lived in the desert..." He said.

"And, what do you know about diving...much less swimming?" She finished.

"Nothing. But, I could learn." He smiled, hopefully.

"Is this one of these weird personality aberrations you talked about?"

"No...just a daydream...a little romance, maybe some excitement, adventure...an escape from boredom, if you will. After all, I'm not demanding that you believe I am qualified as a diving instructor."

"How do you even know about such things?"

He glared back at her. "Just because our tribe is remote, we're not totally cut off from civilization."

"So, continuing on...?" Prompted the Time Police.

"OK." She started. "Back a bit, were you suggesting that we try something like that casual interaction on one of these people that have this unusual concept of personal identity?"

"If you like."

"Sounds a bit scary, but, alright."

"Not to fear. These events that we will be experiencing are all parts of the lessons of advancing humanity. Some of them may seem easy, and some of them will definitely be hard. But, all in all, it's what we learn from."

"So, where are we?" Sendi asked looking around at the dimly lit saloon. Two men stood at the nearby bar drinking beer while quietly talking. Their clothes were dusty from outdoor work and their manner suggested the end of a long day. "And who are they?" Sendi pointed toward them.

"They..." Explained the Time Police. "Are two 'hired hands' from a nearby ranch. They have ended their work day and are pausing for a brief rest and a bit of camaraderie before returning to their homes. And, we are in a small town in the Pacific Southwest part of North America. The ranch they work at raises cattle and also runs a small seasonal hotel side business known as a 'dude ranch'."

"A 'dude ranch'...what's that?" Asked Matu.

"It's a type of posh tourist resort."

"But, no diving, or fun in the sun?"

"Well, a different kind of fun in the sun. Here, tourists from big cities get to dress up and ride horses and pretend that they are 'wild West cowboys' just like in the movies."

"OK, got you. Now I understand."

"I don't." Blinked Sendi.

"Play acting, living out a fantasy." Explained Matu. "For a short vacation, they get to forget their dull lives and have a little romance and adventure."

"And some of that adventure can be very real." Added the Time Police. "Falling off a real horse hurts a lot more than the stick horses they played with as children. And they are getting real exercise with sore muscles at the end of the day." He smiled. "So, let them have their little bit of fun. Here come some now." He pointed to the saloon door as two middle aged couples overdressed as 'cowpokes' entered. "We'll see how it goes."

The two ranch hands glanced toward the door, then resumed their conversation.

"Jake! Zeke! How's it going, Pard?" One of the dude ranch 'cowpokes' shouted as he and his buddy approached the bar. Their wives quietly settled themselves at a nearby table.

One of the hands nodded toward him. "We're just fine, Mr. Johnson." He turned back to his conversation.

"Say, why don't you boys join us for a couple of drinks?" He pointed toward the table.

"We're sorry, Sir, but we're at the end of our shift and the boss doesn't want us fraternizing with the customers."

"Aw, come on...how's he gonna know about one drink?"

"Sorry, Sir." He glanced at the clock above the bar, then nodded to the barkeep, who nodded back. "It's getting late and we gotta get home to our families." They finished their beers and headed toward the door.

"Hey wait!" Shouted the 'cowpoke'. "Come on, just one drink. We wanna hear some of your tall tales about cattle drives."

"Sorry, Sir." He shook his head as they exited the room.

The bartender served their drinks. He glanced out the window and returned behind the bar. A moment later, he reemerged carrying a plastic case filled with empty bottles and exited through the same door as the ranch hands.

"Let's follow." Suggested the Time Police.

Outside in the parking lot, the bartender set the case down near the service door and approached the ranch hands who were talking next to a pickup truck. "Hey, boys, I'm sorry about those gringos. But, this is the only watering hole an easy jaunt from the ranch and I can't deny them service. Look...when it's tourist season, just come in around the back." He nodded toward the service door. "I'll let you have your drinks in peace in the kitchen."

"Thanks, Bob! You're a great pal." They shook hands.

The ranch hands climbed into the truck and Bob waved as they pulled out of the parking lot.

"Let's go back and see how the others are doing." The Time Police nodded toward the door.

Inside the men were complaining about the ranch hands as the bartender returned. He crossed to the table. "Sorry, I had to get those empties out for the delivery guy. Can I get you anything else?"

"Yeah, make it another round." Said Fred Johnson and Bob returned to the bar.



"Fred, you can't blame those guys." Said Fred's wife. "They're just doing their job."

"Don't hurt 'em to be a bit sociable." He grumbled.

"Not when they're not supposed to."

"Sure, sure...take their side."

"Don't know why you insist on coming to this place every year. You don't seem to have a very good time."

"Yes, I do!!" He slammed his fist on the table. "It's fresh air! It's healthy! It's as much as is left of the 'wild West' in this God forsaken country...going to the dogs...all of it!!" He took a drink. "Gives me a chance to feel like a real man, instead of just a desk jockey. I get to ride a horse...throw my hat in the air...actually feel the sweat and grit of a day on the range."

His wife just quietly nodded and sipped her drink.

"Man! Just thinking about it is making my hungry! I'm just about ready for one of those big T-bone steaks back at the ranch. Drink up, so we can get going!"

The saloon faded into the mist.

"So, think about these humans and their interactions. We purposefully selected a fairly mild scenario as an introduction into personal identity and assumed identities. An actor plays many parts. When he is in one, he is that person. Out of it, he is not, but if he's serious, he has learned what it was like to be that person for a brief time. Otherwise, what he really learned was what it was like to be an actor pretending to be the person he thought he was being. But, for now, we won't worry about interacting with these individuals until we've explored more situations."

"Made me reconsider being a diving instructor." Matu said.

"Somehow, I think your tourists might be a little more aware of reality." Rexx replied.

"Yeah, this guy seems to be a bit 'out there'." Sendi added.

"Expand on those thoughts." Suggested the Time Police.

"Huh?" She replied. "What do you mean?"

"Such as...who is he? What does he think of himself? How does he judge others? Where did those thoughts come from? What is he trying to achieve? All of you...think about these things. We're trying to understand what motivates an individual. And, not just this one person. The others involved in this situation, as well."

"Well, he didn't seem to show much respect to the two ranch hands." Rexx commented.

"Though..." Matu returned. "He is the customer and they are the employees...well, service providers."

"But, they were off duty and he wanted them to break the rules." Sendi countered. "And, he complained about their attitude."

"So, what's the other side...the other point of view?"

"Wow, that's tough. He doesn't seem like a very nice guy."

"He has a wife, and he has friends...obviously, someone likes him."

"OK...give me a few minutes to think."

"Well, he's not happy with his life...at least with his job." Rexx suggested.

"And he said that this fantasy makes him feel more alive." Matu added.

"So, why is he so surly if he's happier here?"

"I get that he needs to feel more important...maybe, more in command. That's why he needs to give orders." Matu suggested. "Maybe, in his job, he feels that nobody respects him. Or, in his life, as well. His wife seemed to humor him, rather than actually discuss the issues about his happiness."

"So, instead of trying to understand what bothers him, he just reacts and tries to bury the problem in fantasy." Sendi said.

"I've heard this from so many people, 'I felt my parents never loved me', and I sort of understand and can relate to the feeling." Rexx added. "I didn't actually think that my parents didn't love me, but I didn't 'feel' that they loved me."

"Was the issue that they didn't love you or didn't communicate that they loved you?" Sendi asked.

"I guess it was the method of communication. How can parents and their children be so out of touch with each other? They learned from their parents and we learned from ours."

"Ah, yes." The Time Police commented. "But, remember, between the time that they were children and having their own children, they had a lot of other 'teachers', willing or not."

She turned to the Time Police. "So, what can be done?"

"So, turn that around. Say you're someone he knows...how would you approach bringing his attention to his situation...because, obviously, nothing can change until he is aware of the issue."

"You mean something that won't get me punched in the mouth?"

"Precisely...something very diplomatic. And remember, he has to be open to criticism."

"That's a tough one." She answered. "I can't think of anything that wouldn't result in hurt feelings and the resulting burst of anger."

"Think of it this way...you're trying to be sympathetic, not trying to psychoanalyze him. You want to gain trust so that he will open to internal feelings."

"Is this for real?" Sendi asked. "Are we actually trying to figure out this guy's problems? I mean, this could get kind of scary...we're not qualified to actually, uh, release his inner demons."

The Time Police chuckled softly. "You needn't worry Sendi, we're not here to tear this poor fellow apart. We are not going to interfere with his life in anyway at all. We picked him as an example of a situation that would feel familiar to you...he's stock footage, as you will. And, for whatever it seems worth to you, you are as qualified as any one else in this school of human endeavor."

"Oh." She remarked, then considered. "Um, maybe, 'oh', again...we are?"

"Yes, you, as well as us, and everyone else. We are all here learning and our teacher is our experiences."

"Then, if we're not going to interfere with this guy, are we doing anything with him? And, if we're not, then who is going to give him the...I hesitate to say 'help' he needs to get him to a better...happier...place in life?"

"Ah!" He paused. "We're getting to the point of meeting some of the other members of our society here outside of time. You briefly met the 'helpers' when you assisted that woman through the trauma of her death."

"Yeah. Who, or what were they?" Rexx asked.

"They seemed to me to be some kind of medics..." Matu added. "...with the ambulance and all. Did they take her to some kind of hospital? I mean, she was dead, after all."

"The 'helpers' are similar to us." He pointed to himself. "They have chosen the occupation of assisting in the transition process between the living worlds. The place they have taken her has many different names in as many different cultures. In one, it is referred to as 'the park'...a place pleasantly decorated to resemble the world recently inhabited. It is a place where one can recover from the stress of transitioning out of the

physical...to rest and rebuild, to repair and prepare for the next journey into the physical realm. Some, who have had an easy transition, do not linger long there...others, whose stress was greater, may require much more rest, but each gets what they need, or feels they need. And it is not uncommon, in the hasty desire to return to the physical, that one packs up the trauma and brings the 'excess baggage' with them to the next endeavor."

"How much of that adds to the trouble already in this world?" Asked REXX.

"I think of the many past wars." Added Matu. "And in our haste to get back to life, how much Post Traumatic Syndrome have we brought back with us to even further trouble this world?"

Sendi just shook her head. "You're not a 'helper', are you?" As she cast the Time Police an askew glance.

"No." He chuckled.

"So, what are you?"

"Yeah, what...besides a trouble maker?" REXX added.

That brought a big laugh. "Yes, we guess you could call us that! We are...a talent scout...looking for individuals that might be ready to leave the human physical realm in search of new challenges."

"Us? Are we ready for that?" Sendi voiced. "I don't think I am."

"Me neither." Said Matu.

"I'm still kind of attached to this." REXX pointed to his chest.

"We know. And, we're not asking you to go anywhere at this point. We're merely offering a short break with a different type of schooling to see how you like it. It's that 'taking a year off to hitchhike around Europe between college and getting a job' type of thing."

"OK." Nodded REXX. "I kind of like that idea."

"Me, too." Agreed Matu. "Only, make that the South Pacific without the mosquitoes."

Sendi just blinked. "So, we're poking around at life finding out what it's all about without getting heavily involved...is that about it?"

"That's about right." The Time Police nodded.

"So, who are the other members of this out of time society and what do they do?"

"Well, to be honest, there are quite a few that we haven't encountered yet, so we don't know who they all are or even what they do."

"Really?"

"Really." He nodded. "But, by far the largest group are you."

"Us?" She looked confused. "What do you mean by 'us'?"

"You, the non-physical aspect of each and every human being that is in constant contact with your physical being...who lives life with you, looks after you, and learns...some call it your 'higher self', if that description helps."

"But, you said that we were here helping out people. Isn't that the 'higher self's' job?"

"Yes, in a way it is, but the 'higher self' is an integral part of the individual and is also sort of 'along for the ride'. He may or may not always be 'in control' and it certainly doesn't hurt to have a second opinion or an extra voice in the chorus." He smiled. "But, seriously, it's good practice for being human and, as we said, time out for a different kind of schooling."

"But, we had been talking about helping out this 'cowpoke' guy's life...so, how does this all fit together...and, since we're here, where are our 'higher selves'?"

"Look behind and slightly above you." He laughed. "Oh, yes, we forgot, you don't have eyes on the back of your head, do you? Come...let's step back a bit into the last scenario." He motioned them to follow, then spread out his hands.

The saloon re-materialized out of the mist. The men and their wives were sitting at the table talking over their drinks. In the background, Bob was washing glasses behind the bar.

"Look very closely at the people and tell us what you see."

Sendi squinted. "I think...maybe...a kind of haze, really vague, around each person."

"I think I see it...kind of some tiny pinpoints of something bright." Matu suggested.

"Yeah, I think I see something, too. It moves along with the person." Rexx added. "Is this what people call an 'aura'?"

"It's as good as any other name." The Time Police conceded. "Some people's perceptions are keener than others, and some just want to believe in magic."

"But, really...is that the 'higher self'?" Sendi asked.

"What you are seeing with your, currently, semi-physical eyes is the path through time that the 'higher self' leaves. Think of the wake in a pool that shows the progress of a duck swimming through the water."

"So, no chance of seeing the real 'higher self' then." Rexx mumbled.

"Look at the people...there's the 'higher self' in action."

"And us?" Asked Sendi. "Where's our 'higher selves'?"

"Do you need a mirror?" The Time Police laughed heartily. "You are you. Don't try to divide yourself."

"So...we are both physical and non-physical at the same time?" Rexx asked.

"And, both parts are learning together?" Matu added.

"But, if both parts are learning together, how does the 'higher self' guide...or, maybe, 'advise' is a better word...us?" Sendi asked.

"Yeah...how does it keep us from getting into deeper trouble if it's learning with us?" Rexx added. "I mean, isn't the 'higher self' supposed to be, well, higher?"

"The difference is that your 'higher self' has a little better memory than physical self. He, and he is also a 'they' with many lifetimes of experiences, remembers when you stuck your hand into the fire and suggests that even though the flames may look pretty to touch, it's probably a good idea to approach it cautiously and slow down when it starts getting hot." The Time Police said. "And, remember, you can still get into trouble, because both of you together are making decisions and the physical often gets caught up in the emotional which can override the most convincing logic...you know, sort of the two sides of the coin kind of thing, I see it my way while you see it yours and who gets to choose."

"I think the phrase was 'hold my beer, while I...'" Matu stated begrudgingly.

"Exactly!"

"Do we ever learn?" Sendi moaned.

"Someday, maybe someday, we all will."

"Are you ready for another encounter with humans and their interactions? We're thinking of looking at a typical extreme scenario similar to what Matu mentioned about personal identity. We won't worry about interacting here either. This will be 'food for your thought', as they say. We'll stay well back and just observe...unless..." He winked. "...you want to get involved, that is."

Sendi just stared at him wide-eyed. "Really? I didn't want to get involved in the last one."

"So, what are we in for this time?" Rexx asked.

"Well, let's expand on Matu's statement about some people indulging in fantasy role playing by choosing odd identities for themselves. Come on, we'll go find some."

"It's that easy?" Remarked Sendi.

He laughed. "It's all around us...all the time."

"Maybe I was wrong about Matu's tourists being a little more aware of reality." Rexx added.

"We will visit a couple of different scenarios so that you can have something for comparison." He spread his arms to dispel the mists.

"Say, what is it with all this mist?" Rexx asked.

"Special effect scene fades...kinda cool, you think? Besides, it's expected when you're in the nether world...makes it all eerie and spooky."

"Hmm." Rexx grumbled.

Sendi looked about in wonder. "Where are we? Is this somewhere in the Middle Ages?"

"Look! There's a guy dressed in a suit of armor." Rexx pointed.

"Looks heavy." Added Matu. "He can barely walk."

Rexx chuckled. "That huge tankard of ale he's carrying might have something to do with that."

"These people seem to be having a good time. Look." She pointed. "People dancing and musicians...and happy children dressed up with ribbons and flowers playing at some sort of game. Where is this?"

"This is an example of a kind of fantasy role playing. We are in the same era as Matu's time. It was called a 'renaissance fair'. People gathered together to celebrate an older era by pretending to live in it for a few days out of the year. They briefly revived the culture...but they did it for education as well as entertainment." He pointed to the edge of the gathering, to a large clearing where many vehicles were parked. "See, at the end of the day, the festive attire and baubles are packed away and people are returning to their normal lives."

"So they knew they were only pretending and were just having fun instead of trying to escape?"

"Yes. They were doing it for fun, but, they were also trying to escape from the everyday world, as well. It's all a matter of degree."

"And they were learning through experiencing instead of seeing pictures and reading texts?"

"Yeah, I see what you mean." Rexx pointed to a stall. "That man is making pottery...I always wanted to try that hobby."

"And that woman is making cloth...I think that device was called a loom."

"We'll take a look at another type of gathering in the same era." He waved a hand and the scene changed to a group of people in multi-colored clothing dancing in a street. "At first glance, it may not seem very different, but let's see what people are doing and how they are interacting."

"Well, they seem to be enjoying themselves." Sendi commented.

"They seem to have stopped dancing and now continuing down the street. Is this a parade?" Rexx said. "They do seem to be wearing some kinds of costumes more so than just being dressed in colorful clothes."

"And some have flags and banners of some sort."

"They don't seem to be just waving the flags." Rexx commented. "They're approaching the people along the sidewalks and seem to be expecting the bystanders to join in."

"So, what is this?"

"I recognize it." Matu sighed. "This is a 'pride parade'."

"A what?" She asked.

"A 'pride parade'...these individuals who professed a different lifestyle needed to assert that they took pride in who and what they were, so they organized these events to publicly announce the fact."

"But, you don't have to do that. All you have to do is just accept yourself."

"In the beginning there was discrimination against those who publicized themselves. Those who were quiet, were just left alone. Some wanted rights to claim non-related individuals as family. After time, legislation was passed to allow such."

"That seems fair."

"It was. But, it didn't stop there. If you keep giving a child candy, after a while, he demands it."

"What happened?"

"Well, for a while everything was OK, but then political interests became involved. They pushed their agendas and things rapidly went out of control. Commercial aspects joined in and what started with 'I'm not ashamed to be who I am' became 'I am better than you'.

"That's not good." Remarked Rexx.

"No...it wasn't. It evolved further. 'Respect me' became 'you have to live the same lifestyle that I do' or..."

"Or?"

"Some people died."

"Oh, no! How did it end?" Sendi asked.

"Who knows...it was still going on when I stepped out of time."

"Wow." Rexx whispered.

She turned to the Time Police. "So, how did this end?"

"In each time sequence, the playing out determines the end."

"Don't you know?"

"In this brief scene, no." He returned the mists to surround them. "But, Matu can tell you more of what happened during the time he experienced these events."

"Well, you know, of course, that our tribe never experienced all of this first hand. But, we had communications with the rest of the world and so learned about how these things went down in other parts of the world."

"Yes, please, tell us more."

"Mostly it was prevalent where civilization was more advanced, well, economically, technologically, that is. Maybe they had too much time on their hands and got bored."

"That does seem to be a trend." Remarked Rexx.

"In any case, whether through finding like minded people or some political promotion, these ideas spread. They were mostly promoted on an emotional level...caring for less advantaged people, help the needy, the underprivileged, that kind of thing. But, it was all of a sexual nature...going beyond what was normal behavior. People beginning to believe that they could change themselves through surgery and chemicals into anything they wanted...men believing that they were women, children thinking that they were animals. There seemed no limits. And it was spreading...adults teaching children things that were beyond their years physically and mentally. Children who had no sense of sexuality or any such experiences were caught up in the games of pretending with new

words and shiny costumes. And it seemed that everyone approved of this and accepted it as the new normal. In time, the people who held more traditional values started to rebel...they started calling out the damage that was being done...the innocents that believed in this fad were being mutilated, sterilized, left in mental anguish...many killed themselves over what they had lost."

"How terrible." Sendi commented. "And, so, you left before it ended. Did you have any idea why all this happened?"

"It seemed to begin when the vaccine push was dying down. I don't know...maybe it was all just a distraction from the war...keep people occupied so they forget what their government is doing behind their backs."

"Oh...I forgot about the war...God, what 'is' this all about?"