

THROUGH LETA'S EYES

I was almost awake when *I heard*, "Hi, I'm Leta. You must be Luis. When did you get in?"

I was trying to clear the cobwebs from my mind to answer, finally I was able to say, "I really don't know. I fell asleep in the car. I think we got in about 2:00 in the morning. Somebody woke me up and led me into the house. I think I met your folks."

Leta responded, "My dad actually. Mom and I went to bed around eleven after your dad called with an ETA."

"ETA?"

"Yeah, estimated time of arrival. I think he called from someplace in Arizona. We figured it would be another three hours at least before you got in. Dad volunteered to wait up, Mom and I crashed."

I was waking up more by the minute. "You know car trips are alright but they sure can get boring after a while"

Leta answered, "I can handle boring. My problem is that I've got a little brother Bradley. He's a bit of a pain all the time but six hours of sharing the back seat is tough."

"I know. Last year we went to Chicago to visit my grandmother. We were only staying a week but my six year old cousin was staying for the whole summer. We took him up then his parents went up at the end of the summer to get him. It was the longest trip of my life. Being bored is a lot easier than being with a little kid who's bored."

Leta said, "No kidding. So, did you see anything cool on this trip?"

"Yeah, we stayed two nights in hotels. They both had a pool and game room. We ate in restaurants, pretty cool actually."

Leta asked, "Are you hungry? We've got cereal and toast if you like. If you want eggs and all that you should wait for my mom. I know, how about some fresh orange juice? It's the first batch of the season."

"You've got orange trees? How cool. You don't get that back home." I said.

As Leta went for the juice I looked around the room. Everything was pretty normal except for the pictures on the walls. There were about as many pictures as there were paintings. Leta came back with two glasses of juice and saw me looking at the walls.

She said, "The pictures are mostly my dad's. The paintings are all my mom's."

"She painted these? They're cool."

Leta said almost apologetically, "Yeah, I hoped I would have picked up her skill but the genes missed. How did you like the mountains and desert?"

"I've seen mountains before. They're cool. I was kind of looking forward to seeing the desert. After about ten minutes it all looks pretty much the same. In addition to the cactus plants what struck me were the roads."

"The roads?"

I said, "After being on those winding roads up and down the mountains you drive into the desert and find it all so flat. The roads were totally flat and straight, like some giant had laid down his belt in the sand."

"Great image", Leta said as she thought, "This guy is pretty sharp, mom said I'd like him."

I wondered if dad will mind that I stole his belt of the giant story. I thought it was cool yesterday in the car and it looks like Leta thought it was cool today. Dad won't mind.

Leta asked, "Now that you're here in California what do you want to see?"

Mom and dad keep saying this is primarily a business trip and that we shouldn't load it up with tourist attractions, but mom says we've got to see Sea World and the zoo. I want to see the ocean too."

Leta had a small smile when she said, "I love it when people come to visit. I get to tag along on all your neat trips. As far as the ocean is concerned I go almost every day."

"Really?"

"Yeah, it is so great. I have to check on my butterfly garden but after that I'll show you around and we'll head down to the beach."

"This sounds cool, wait a minute, You grow butterflies?"

She responded, "No silly, come on I'll show you."

As we walked to the back yard the first thing I noticed was that it wasn't hot. "I Thought it was going to be hotter than this."

Leta said, "Hey we get winter too. It just isn't as bad as what other people get. Actually it isn't winter anymore. Sometimes it is hard to notice the passing of seasons. The daytime temperatures are usually high sixties or low seventies unless we get a Santa Anna."

I asked, "Is that like an El Nino, I've heard of that?"

She said, "No that's different. A Santa Anna is when a massive high pressure settles in just East of here in the desert. You know when you watch the weather and these storm fronts travel across the country?"

"Yeah"

"Well when these storm fronts bump into this massive high pressure they bounce off to the North leaving us basking in sunshine with temperatures in the eighties. El Ninos happen about every five to ten years. Unusual heat and high ocean temperature cause lots of rain. We even get local flooding once in a while. We had one two years back."

I said, "That Lots of sunshine stuff sounds great."

"Yeah it's comfortable, but not without its problems. Regular non El Nino years we get so little rain we have to tap into our reservoirs for farming, industry and regular people stuff. What bugs me is that some people are so stupid they don't even try to conserve. Yesterday my neighbor, Mr. Conover, was washing both of his cars in the driveway. He just left the hose running in the driveway while he soaped up a car, rinsed it and then soaped up another car then rinsed that one. He left the hose running all the while. The hose was running for two hours."

That's how I wash the car. I don't think I need to share that.

Leta continued, "So I went up to him and told him what he was doing was wrong."

"You did what? You went up to your neighbor and told him he was washing his car wrong. Did he yell at you? I probably would have sprayed

you with the hose.”

She said with a smile, “No Mr. Conover is cool. He just wasn’t thinking. We talked about it and came up with two different plans, either turn off the water when he wasn’t rinsing or let it run in his garden that needed watering anyway. He went for the garden watering plan.”

“Leta, you’re brutal. I still don’t believe you told him he was washing his car wrong.” I thought, now I know I’m not telling that’s how I wash the car or used to.

Leta stood up straight and boldly said, “Hey when I’m right I’m right...and I’m right” She paused for a second and then said “I am vested in the stewardship of my planet.”

I looked at her for a second and then said, “What? What does that mean? Where did you come up with that one?”

Quickly Leta said, “What it means is that I love this planet and I feel responsible for taking care of it and getting others to take care of it as well. As far as where did it come from, I made it up for Earth Day.”

“Leta you are too weird. It’s a good weird but seriously weird.”

“I hear that once in a while” I responded, “I bet you do.”

She continued, “I don’t consider it weird at all. I’m an environmentalist. I love birds, flowers, raccoons, dolphins, trees, fish, butterflies and even people. People have to be responsible. People do things wrong. When I see people doing dumb things that hurt the environment like dumping motor oil in the sewer or squandering limited resources like water or electricity, I get mad. To me it is like walking to the playground and seeing two kids beating up your little brother...you’ve got to step in.”

I tried to gather it all in and finally I said, “Leta, I take it back, you’re not weird. You’re incredible. I’ve only known you for a couple minutes but I understand what makes you tick. You are beyond involved, you are

committed. I don't think I know anyone who is committed to anything. I've seen people get excited about their sports team but that's not commitment. I bet it causes you some trouble now and again."

"I used to be more aggressive."

We had been walking along at a pretty good pace so it was noticed when I stopped and said, "More aggressive?"

"NO, really I don't stand outside supermarkets anymore. I went down to our supermarket carrying a sign saying 'SAY NO TO PAPER AND PLASTIC'. I had a one page pamphlet and a poster telling people to bring their own bags back to use them again instead of taking new ones."

I can't believe she would do that. What am I thinking, I absolutely think she would do that..then with further thought...it really isn't a bad idea...it would be good for people to bring their own bags back...wait a minute...if she isn't doing this any more...there is more to this story.. "So what happened?"

I could tell she has told this story before because she began right in "Well some yuppie lady came out of the store wearing about a quarter pound of make up and a fur. Honest to God a fur. You know I wonder about people who are brain dead enough to own a fur but to wear it to the supermarket in San Diego...give me a break. When we looked at each other we clashed. It was just a look, no words but boy what a clash. I was just going to let it go but for some reason she came over to my table and told me "Why don't you go home and play with dolls?"

I was into the story, I said, "I don't believe that lady, what did you do?"

"I told her I don't take advice from people who are shallow and self-centered."

I was in the story deep when I said, "Leta I can picture this whole scene in my head but for the life of me I can't come up with a happy ending."

Leta tilted her head and said, "Well there really wasn't one. My dad showed up about the same time as the police."

"The Police".

"Yeah, the yuppie lady didn't like my shallow and self-centered comment so she went off on me for lack of respect and all that stuff."

I then made the comment I knew didn't happen.. "Let me guess, you immediately apologized.."

"Wrong. Actually I began pointing out all the environmentally hazardous products she had in her shopping bag, like hair spray, cleaning materials, pesticides. Then I kind of mentioned the dead animal she was wearing."

I said, "Oh Leta, she must have gone bonkers."

The story kept getting better as she said, "She stormed into the store and demanded to see the manager and then went nuts. She told the manager I was insolent."

"Insolent?"

"Leta continued, "I didn't know what it meant then but since then I found out it means big time lack of respect, anyway ... she went on and said I insulted her, I was a public nuisance...she shopped at this store all the time...she doesn't have to put up with it... then demanded that the manager do something..."

I asked, "What did he do?"

"Mr. Cummings knows me. He came outside to try to calm everyone down. Unfortunately the yuppie lady kept screaming over his shoulder. I tried to tell my side of the story but she kept screaming. I didn't know that before Mr. Cummins came outside he called my parents."

"Uh, bad?"

Leta said, "Actually good. The commotion outside the store started to draw a crowd. A passing police car pulled up to see what was going on. The lady climbed all over the cop. She wanted me arrested and hung I think. Just then my dad showed up."

"What did he do?"

Leta continued, "Well Mr. Cummins and the police were happy to see him. They really didn't know what to do with this lady and they were getting tired of me talking about my First Amendment rights."

I don't believe she's talking about her rights in the middle of this. "What did your dad do?"

"Well the lady started to jump all over him for raising such an insolent child when dad raised his hand and said stop. He looked over at Mr. Cummins and said, Bill, Leta won't be demonstrating outside your store anymore. We're sorry for the inconvenience. Then he looked at me and said, Leta, you owe this woman an apology. I started to question his decision when I looked in his eyes and saw that he wasn't open for a discussion. Then he said to me but for all (especially the lady) to hear. Leta you are entitled to your thoughts, and within reason you are entitled to express your thoughts and even peacefully demonstrate. As my daughter, you are not entitled to insult anyone especially an elder regardless of the provocation."

I asked, "Provocation?"

"Yeah, who started it. I know the way my dad operates. It was time for me to do as I'm told. The problem was that every time I LOOKED AT THAT FUR I either wanted to laugh or spit. I controlled myself. I looked at the lady and said I'm sorry. I almost threw in a 'but', but I saw my dad's face.

Dad then looked at the lady and said, we're sorry for any inconvenience that we have caused and we assure you it won't happen again. If it is alright with everyone I would like to take my daughter home now. The lady actually wanted to continue the argument but Mr. Cummins and the

police started thanking my dad for coming down and saying things like 'learning experiences'. Dad quickly grabbed my supplies in one hand and me in the other, said thank you and led me to the car."

The whole story had me shaking my head. I said, "Wow, I bet your dad was mad. He must have chewed you up one side and down the other."

Leta calmly said, "You'll get to know my dad better during your visit. He's really cool but he's a strong believer in showing respect for everyone and everything. When he heard the whole story especially the part about her telling me to go home and play with dolls he just nodded his head a couple times and then said, 'Leta you have to learn when and how to fight your battles, especially because you are still a kid. I know you freaked out with that doll remark, but what did you think you would win by arguing with her?'"

'I told him maybe she would learn how dumb it is to wear a fur, use hair spray with fluorocarbons, spread pesticides around her yard. Dad stopped me and said, 'Leta do you think you were going to change her buying habits or the way she thinks? I said, "Probably not".

He then asked why do you think you attacked her? I then said, Hey dad, I didn't really attack her, I just.. he then interrupted firmly, Leta you know what I mean. Why do you think you confronted her?

I thought about it a little bit and said, 'I was mad'."

Dad continued. 'Right. When we do things when we're mad they usually turn out wrong. Leta, I know your love for the environment and I think it's great. You are going to run into people that either don't understand, don't care or don't agree. If you get mad when this happens you will lose. If you get smart you will still lose some but not as badly and you might win a couple times. We don't know much about this lady, she could be a nice person just having a bad day."

"I tried to say come on dad when he said", " Hey it's possible. You are way too young to get judgmental about how others live their lives, even

when you are pretty confident that they don't have a clue about what's important. Remember, important to you and important to them might be two different things."

"I paused for a moment and then said to dad," I know but wearing a fur to a supermarket?"

He nodded but then said, "you're going to run into things dumber than that. When you do you can't let anger dictate your action. If you want people to change the first thing you have to do is to get them to think. There wasn't much thinking going on with either of you in this argument.

I said, "That was it? He didn't even ground you? You've got to be kidding me."

She responded, "Well, he told me to leave Mr. Cummins and his store alone and redirect my energy."

I asked, "Does he really talk like that?"

"You'll see. Dad is cool and smart."

As I thought about this gutsy, near crazy girl, who is really cool I finally said, "Leta, you could have been a jailbird. How did your mom react?"

Leta said, "She agreed with dad on the respect your elder thing. When dad described her, then told her about the play with dolls, she tried to look stern but couldn't quite swallow her smile."

"That story is amazing. Come on, show me that butterfly thing."

"You're looking at it."

"It's just flowers."

Leta put on that teaching look and said, "It's not just flowers, it's a habitat. What do you know about butterflies?"

I thought for a second then said, "They start out as caterpillars, each a bunch of leaves, spin themselves into a cocoon and come out as butterflies."

"You've got the basics, sort of...you forgot about the egg part."

"OK before they are caterpillars they are eggs and after they're butterflies they lay a bunch of eggs that later turn into caterpillars."

"Right, that's the life cycle of a butterfly but did you know that butterflies have been flying around millions of years before man came on the scene. Did you know that the life cycle takes 14 weeks with 4 weeks being in the cocoon? Did you know that there are dozens of species of butterflies just in California alone? Check this out, did you know that some butterflies migrate thousands of miles which is harder to do today than long ago?"

"Why?"

"Because man has been paving the planet. Hillside after hillside and meadow after meadow have been destroyed making room for plazas, freeways, office buildings and housing developments. In the process countless feeding, nesting and resting places for butterflies and birds have been destroyed.."

"Did you learn this stuff in school?"

"It got mentioned but not enough so I read up on it."

I said, "Get out! That wasn't homework or anything, you just read up on it."

Leta said, "Yes Luis, You are allowed to learn without somebody having to teach you. With the internet it is so easy. I've looked up stuff on butterflies, birds, plants, whales, dolphins, all kinds of stuff. "

"Why?"

She asked, "Are you interested in anything?"

“Yeah, lots of things.”

“Like what?”

“I like computer games, rollerblading, baseball, soccer, football,...yeah especially football. I like playing all sports, I follow a couple professional teams but I’m really a St. Louis Rams fan.”

She said, “That must be hard with all the turnovers they give up.”

“Come on you know football too?”

“Remember Dad came from St Louis too. I like watching the games with him. Anyway, so you like football right?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you ever read the sports page?”

“Yeah sometime.”

“Do you watch pregame, postgame and interview shows?”

“Sure.”

“Why?”

I began, “Well it’s interesting. By knowing the players I feel more involved when I am watching the game. By knowing what kind of plays work in different situations I can guess what they are going to do before they do it.”

“So by putting in the effort to read up on your team and watch the sport shows you develop a better level of appreciation and have more fun, right?”

“I see where you are going with this but I’m talking football and you are talking butterflies.”

“No, you’re talking football and I’m talking about the environment. Butterflies are just one beautiful and interesting part of it. Look, there what do you see?”

“A bird, no two birds circling in the sky.”

“Yeah, they are both red tail hawks. They’re hunting, which is what they do all day long. When they see, from way up there, something as small as a mouse they flutter, kind of a backwards fly to get ready for the dive.

When they are zeroed in they dive and some unsuspecting mouse becomes history. Do you know how they eat?”

I didn’t know if I wanted to know but I was pretty sure I was gonna find out, “No, how?”

“They swallow the whole dam mouse. Just like owls. Actually owls can swallow bigger prey. Anyway they swallow the mouse and digest it. Their insides grind all the food off and then they poop a pellet.”

“I think this might be disgusting but they do what?”

“Once they are done with the food part they pass the skeleton, it’s called a pellet. One of my friends has the best rodent bone collections.”

"You don't even know how weird that sounds. Now that I'm looking at them I never noticed how big hawks are."

Leta looking up with almost a glow on her face said, "Yeah, they're a pretty good size. Wait until you see Screech."

"Who?"

"Screech, my owl. He nests in the top of that palm tree. He doesn't come out until just about dusk. He's huge. His wing span is larger than mine." Leta said as she spread her arms to complete the image. "To us he looks enormous and graceful. To rodents he is the terror of the night skies. Maybe you'll see him one of these evenings. You know how people make a wish when they see their first star of the night?"

"Yeah."

"I watch the stars all the time. I figure I don't deserve that many wishes. Seeing Screech for me is special. So when I do, that's when I pop off a wish."

I asked, "Does it work?"

"Works as good as wishing on a star." We both laughed.

I paused for a second, studying the garden that Leta had built then said, "So by providing nests, food, water and selecting flowers that they like you attract butterflies and birds."

"I'm creating a habitat. If I build it they will come. I'm putting out the welcome mat and they are flying in."

I kept looking at the hawks. Watching them circle so effortlessly as they looked for food was great but when they saw food and dove down to attack, that was exciting. "Leta, this is really great. I've never paid too much attention to this kind of stuff before but I can see why you get off on it. Do you introduce everyone to the environment this way?"

“Not everyone. Just the special ones.”

I felt good.

We went back in the house as everyone was waking up to begin their days. I met Leta’s folks who seemed nice. As I was meeting them, their image after the supermarket encounter filled my mind. Everybody had plans. Leta asked her mom if she could pick us up at the wale at noon. Had anyone else asked that question I would have been surprised. With Leta and now her mom, it just seemed almost normal. After some toast and another glass of juice we headed out.

Her yard was huge even by St. Luis standards and certainly not what I thought I’d see in California. I asked, “Your place is so big, is that normal?”

“No, we rent. I’d rather rent here than own one of the boxes out there.”

“I’d be happy to rent one of those boxes just to get here. I hope my dad does good today. Do you know this guy he is meeting with?”

“Yeah, Bob Thornton. He’s dad’s boss too. He’s a good guy. Your dad is an illustrator right. They’re working on a fun project. My dad likes what your dad sent him and so does Mr. Thorton. He’ll get the job.” She said confidently.

I said, “God, I hope so. I really want to move out here.” I paused for a second and then said, “Now more than ever.”

We walked up a small hill to a two lane road and turned left. After a minute or two we came to a clearing where Leta said, “We’ve got to come back here after dinner to see the balloons.”

“Balloons?”

“Yeah, every late afternoon a bunch of trucks pull up with trailers and unload their balloons. It’s cool. They spread out the balloons on the ground. The top of the basket that the people ride in has these big hot air

generators. They lay them down and shoot the air in the balloon enough for it to take shape and rise. While still on the ground they make final preparations as the passengers load up. Then they really turn on the gas and take off."

I said, "Really, I've got to see that. You said balloons. How many take off here?"

She said, "I've seen as few as one but some days they've got ten or so. There's room for about three to fire up and load up at the same time. Once they clear the tree line the guys in the chase truck follow them while they stay in touch on their radios. The next batch unload and make ready to do the same."

I asked "Where do they go?"

"Up and East. You can't really steer them but you can change your altitude by either giving it more gas or letting some of the hot air out. Different altitudes have stronger winds and sometimes even different direction. By going up and down they change the speed at which they go sideways. They pretty much follow each other. It's real pretty when you see a bunch of them."

I couldn't wait for that. But before that I've got some stuff to look forward to. "Where are we going now?"

She answered, "About a mile up is the lagoon. The beach is just past that. Along the way I've got to stop at my bud, Sarah's house. We're meeting with Raul and Woody there. After that I've got some killer things to show you. It'll be fun."

I'm in California, the sun is shining, I'm following a pretty girl, I'm looking at real cool stuff, eventually I'm going to the ocean, this is all good. "Hey I'm just happy to be tagging along. What are you meeting about?"

Leta answered "This is a planning meeting for the real meeting that takes place later this afternoon. We're trying to get organized for Earth Day."

"You mentioned this Earth Day thing before. What are you planning?"

"It will be easier to wait and hear about it at Sarah's. See all this open flat land?"

I said, "Yeah, horse pastures right?" I felt comfortable with my answer because I saw barns and corals.

"Yeah this is horse country. What I wanted to point out is how low and flat it is. When we get El Nino type rain this whole area floods. Do you see that horse trailer over there?"

"Yeah"

"Three years ago the water was up almost to the top of that trailer. When it comes it comes. All the land back of my house drains through here. Even after it stops it takes days for it to go down and weeks to dry out."

I said, "I understand flooding, Back home it happens a lot. My house is up high but I've got friends that live closer to the river and when it floods it's unbelievable. What a mess." As I looked at the land I noticed the homes that were built on the hills beyond. "Look at those houses, they look like castles. They must cost a million bucks."

She calmly answered, "And then some. Conspicuous consumption doesn't cause problems, but it doesn't cure them either."

"What? Where do you get these from. You talk like a bumper sticker."

She questioned, "Well did you understand it?"

"That's when people buy things so that others can be impressed. It's buying things to be noticed."

"Very good."

I started to get the feeling that talking with Leta was like taking an oral test. OK, I'll play the game. "It's like that other bumper sticker that says LIVE SIMPLY SO OTHERS CAN SIMPLY LIVE.."

Leta nodded and said, "Exactly. I'm impressed."

It was hard not to smile. I've got to be cool.

Just then they rounded a bend and caught the first glimpse of the lagoon. It was a huge open area about half covered with water with the rest being bushes, grass and trees. It was kind of neat but not what I was expecting. I thought lagoons were like in the movies. This looked like the marshy areas back home. There were some cool birds. "What's that?"

"An egret. They migrate North from Mexico this time of year."

"Well we don't see birds like that back home. Look how their feet stick out behind them when they fly. They're beautiful." Leta got this glow about her whenever she was looking at nature stuff. She was pretty but when she got that glow on she was really special. We kept walking not saying anything. We came upon a chain link gate that opened on to a one lane dirt road about four feet above the surface of the water that ran through the lagoon. "Are we allowed to walk through here?"

Leta smiled, "Oh yeah, even encouraged."

As I asked what she meant I knew the answer was going to be good.. She began, "The biggest problem with people and the environment is that people are usually so busy that they don't notice the beauty around

them. If you can get them to take the time to walk the lagoon, catch a sunset at the beach or just lay on their back and watch the clouds go by they begin to notice how magnificent it all is. Once the light goes on in their head they start thinking about preserving it.”

I had to say it. “They get vested in the stewardship of the Earth.”

Leta smiled at me tossing her quote back her way and then said, “Luis, I’ve got to tell you when mom said you and your family were coming out for a visit I figured I was going to get stuck babysitting the city kid.” Then she turned and looked straight in my face and said, “Luis, you are a new friend. I think you will be a good friend. You seem to care. You listen, you are quick, smart and funny.” Then she extended her hand and said, “I’m glad to meet you.”

I immediately reached out my hand but had no clue as to what to say. My mind and heart were racing but my mouth wouldn’t work. I’ve always felt uncomfortable with this hand shake meeting people thing. The “glad to meet you” phrase was just something you said when you got caught having to meet friends of parents. But this time Leta was saying and actually meaning that she was glad to meet me. We just kept shaking hands looking at each other waiting for my mind to come up with something to say. I wonder if she noticed that my hand was sweating. Finally I said, “Dad has got to get this job and move us out here.”

We dropped the handshake and started walking up a path on the hillside towards what I guessed was Sarah’s house. We stepped over a guard rail and entered an area that looked like a back yard. It wasn’t a back yard to a house, it was a back yard to a bunch of houses. Condominiums.

There were three kids sitting near the edge of a cliff that overlooked the lagoon. Leta ran the last five paces up to Sarah, gave her a quick hug, stepped over between the two guys and said, “Hey guys, this is my new friend Luis. He is visiting from St. Louis.”

I heard, "Hi, Hi Luis and glad to meet you." The glad to meet you comment took me back to the intense time just minutes ago. Nobody shook hands, just kind of nodded, smiled and waved. Leta then said, "Luis, this is Sarah, Raul and Woody."

As I stumbled through a smiling nod with a half wave I decided I've got to get better at this meeting people thing. I ended it with a "What's going on?"

Sarah said, "Raul is getting me set up with my bird book"

"I've been learning about birds all morning, butterflies too. I guess the secret is taking the time to notice."

The four of them looked around smiling then Raul said, "Well if you are going to hang with Leta you don't have much choice." Smiles broke into laughter.

"Yeah, I'm kind of figuring that out. But so far so good, I like it."

Woody broke in, "That's good. Your stay with Leta would be brutal otherwise."

Leta protested, "Come on guys, I'm not that bad."

Everyone reacted at the same time laughing, joking and gently picking on a friend they respected.

Raul then asked me, "Did she tell you about the supermarket thing?"

While grinning I said, "Yeah...interesting story. Hey it took guts."

Sarah reached over and took Leta's hand and said, "We all love Leta but sometimes she gets out there."

I said,

"I'm learning that. My new friend is different, no not different, special."

Leta beamed.

Leta and Sarah started talking about something as Raul, Woody and I stared out over the lagoon. I said, "It's just so beautiful."

Sarah then asked, "St Louis huh, What brings you to San Diego?"

"My dad and Leta's dad went to college together. Leta's dad had a job opportunity opening up so my dad is out here for the third interview, this time with the boss. Mom and I tagged along to see if we would like living here if he gets the offer."

Sarah jumped in with "Who wouldn't rather live in San Diego than St. Louis?"

I felt obligated to push back a little. "Well on the surface it appears so. It sure is pretty and warm but St Louis is neat too."

Sarah continued, "OK louis, St Louis is alright I guess but here you have the ocean, the beach, the lagoons, the wildlife and sunshine almost all of the time.."

"Yeah, I know I'm impressed. All I'm saying is St. Louis is cool too."

Raul broke in , "Sarah, you're being almost mean. There are probably lots of great things about St. Louis that we don't know. It sounds like you are cross examining our new friend.

I could see that Sarah felt bad about her questions so I quickly spoke up. "It's ok and there are a lot of great things about St. Louis..

Raul, fearful that I was uncomfortable said, "You don't have to defend.."

"Actually I'm not defending. I'm sort of bragging if you want to hear."

The collective response was, "sure, cool, go for it "

I thought to myself, Am I going to be able to do this? I just got through writing the report for school on the history of St. Louis. What parts do I want to use, can I remember enough facts, can I tie it all together without making a fool out of myself. Ok here goes. "What do you know about St. Louis?"

Woody was first to respond. "It's in the mid west, it's a big city and oh, it's on the Mississippi river."

Then Sarah said, "No, it's on the Missouri, you know Like St. Louis Missouri."

Woody again, "No, I'm sure it is on the Mississippi."

Leta looked like she didn't know but was enjoying what was going on. Raul did look like he knew but was more interested in seeing his friends try to figure it out.

"Mississippi, Missouri, Mississippi..."

Finally I said, "You are both right. St. Louis is like any other big city like San Diego. We've got professional sports teams, theatre, concerts and all that stuff along with schools, factories, malls, colleges, little league and everything just like most communities. What makes St Louis unique is its location at the convergence of the Mississippi and Missouri rivers."

This is going well. I liked the sentence with convergence. It sounded so cool when I was writing the report. They look interested. Keep it going,. "What do you think our river location means?"

“Transportation,” Said Leta.

Distribution and Commerce were mentioned by the others. “Well you are all right but there is more. Before all of that stuff for millions of years you still had the flow of the rivers. Between the two of them they drained the whole mid- west. The rivers supported wildlife of all forms. Early man used the rivers as a source of water and food. Fish obviously, but also the game attracted to the river’s edge gave needed food to the native Americans and settlers alike. As time continued man harnessed the power of the river initially to float their product downstream to New Orleans and then out to the world. When man developed steam power then product could flow up and down river. This obvious transportation hub became a starting point for wagon trains headed West. At the beginning of last century St. Louis was already a thriving city when most of California looked like this”. I pointed out at the lagoon.

“So in history we’ve got Huck Finn stories, riverboat stories and wagon train stories. We were the gateway to the west. St. Louis was the place where people gathered to do more than dream. They gathered there to take the first steps to make their dreams real.”

OK, I got most of the good stuff in. I think it flowed ok. I got an A on the report. I wonder how I did here. I looked over to Leta for a reaction. She was glowing again.

Sarah was the first to speak. “Luis, that was great. If I sounded smug about San Diego I’m sorry. I guess there are neat places to live almost anywhere.”

Then woody asked, “Does everyone in St. Louis know how to tell that story?”

Raul then said, “Luis, it would have been easy for you to have followed Sarah’s lead and make some joke about your home town in order to fit in or at least not defend yourself. Not only was your story great but it was told well. Leta, I like your friend. Not only does he know what he’s talking about, he has courage.”

Leta said, "Yeah he keeps surprising me. I'm glad he's here, now I only hope he stays."

I thought, It doesn't get much better than this. Let's get off me and on to somebody else. "Sarah, How long have you been watching birds?"

"I've been watching birds for a long time now just because they're here in my back yard, and they're beautiful. A couple years ago I ended up with some extra time on my hands so I bought a book to figure out what I was looking at. I was hooked in about a day. Raul then started teaching me. What I really like is sometimes I see the same bird on his way North then again on his way back South."

Raul interjected, "You know it might not have exactly been the same bird, but yes you saw the same kind of bird heading up and back."

Leta jumped in, "Hey if she said it was the same bird..."

"Yeah, I know, I know, it was the same bird." Raul looked over at the guys and shrugged his shoulders with a gesture like 'why argue?' Then he changed the subject and asked, "Is everybody ready for the meeting today?"

Leta and Sarah said, "We are." Sarah continued "So far we've got over 20 volunteers which is just about everybody we asked. My science teacher Mrs. Newman thinks we are doing great, she said she'll help either in or out of school".

Woody jumped in, "I've got the sign- up sheets done, the posters done and a couple sample bumper stickers that I don't like ready to print out. My dad said we can use his button machine."

Then Raul said, I guess we're about as ready as we're going to get." Then he looked at me and said, "Do you have any idea what we're talking about?"

"An Earth Day project, I guess."

Woody said, "Actually it's an Earth Day program with lots of projects.

I said, "Leta started telling me about it but said it would be easier if I heard it from you guys."

Sarah then said, "Raul, you do it, it's your baby and you tell it the best."

Raul quietly began, "Luis, if you've been with Leta all morning you've probably heard more about the environment than you have all year."

I answered, "More than my whole life actually. Every spring our class would do something for Earth Day. Nothing very exciting actually. I never got into it much. One year I helped clean up a park down by the river. It was fun I guess. It took about three hours."

Raul said, "That's the typical reaction. Earth Day swung into high gear about ten years ago, after trying to get people to think and act. The enthusiasm of the environmentalists created some horrible projections."

"Yeah, I heard all that gloom and doom stuff."

Raul asked, "Did you believe it?"

"Not really. Looking back it looked like a lot of chicken little stuff."

Leta jumped in with attitude, "Hey it's not chicken little. We're destroying the ozone layer, we're dumping oil into our ground water, our water isn't safe enough to drink, we're indiscriminately killing innocent animals, What are you guys talking about?"

Raul said to Leta, "This is exactly the point, the believability of the movement has been hurt by negative predictions that didn't come true. Good people that were environmentalists 10 years ago have turned off. Now with Global warning making news again people are starting to listen.

Leta said , "The facts are the facts. We're raping the planet. We're taking a poop in our own drinking water, We're heating the planet and melting

polar ice. We're losing the battle and there might not be another before the war ends."

Everyone looked over at Leta that had worked herself into a position of frenzy. Raul said calmly, "I know and you know but it won't mean much unless everyone knows. We've got a hill to climb. We have to work hard and smart if we are going to make a difference." Raul then turned to Luis and said, "Will you agree with me that people do dumb things when it comes to taking care of this planet, their home."

"Yes"

"Why?"

"Why,? I questioned again.

"Yes why?"

I thought for a second and said, "A couple things come to mind. First would be that they don't care."

Raul said, "Well, that's one of them. Can I give it to you the way I see it.?"

With my nod Raul continued, "First is ignorance. These people just don't know. It astounds me every time I see it but a lot of people just don't get it. Maybe they weren't taught, maybe they weren't listening but they just don't know that recycling is good and dumping oil in the sewer is bad. Maybe they see what their parents do or don't do but they just don't know."

I answered, "Yeah I can see that there's still a bunch of that."

"Second is apathy. These people know but just don't care. As long as they have water when they need it, or can turn their TV on then they're happy. Many people feel that somebody else somewhere is working on the big problems and as far as the little messes they are making, It's no big deal."

Woody added, "That's where the chicken little stuff comes in. People figure that this big planet can cure its problems with time. Miami isn't under water so why worry now?"

I said, "OK I get the picture, but what are you guys doing?"

"Well it's a series of things all happening the week end of Earth Day. That Friday is the Eco fair at the Junior and Senior high. The teachers already announced that up to 10 points extra credit will be given to all that turn in a project for the fair. We've got speakers coming from the Zoo, the Water Authority, Sierra club, Surfrider Foundation and the Audobon Society. We've got them scheduled a half day at each school. They switch at lunch. We're inviting all the parents through the school Newsletter and the community through the press that Sarah is setting up."

"Wow," was all I could say.

Raul kept going. "Friday late afternoon we're having a tidepool walk at the base of Swamis. Do you know Swamiis?"

Leta said, "I'm taking him there after the lagoon."

"Good. I've got a couple people help me to take small groups of about ten each through the tide pools. We've checked, it will be low tide."

Saturday morning at 8:00 we've got bird watching here and lagoon walks starting down there. Again I've got 8 or 9 volunteers that know their stuff to help out. Saturday afternoon the Rotary is sponsoring a beach clean-up. We're getting volunteers from both schools to help out. Then to individualize the whole thing we are making these bumper stickers, buttons and t shirts. Once we get the samples made Leta and Sarah's group are going store to store asking them to sell the product. Woody, have you worked out all the prices?"

Woody responded, "Yeah, I used my dad's connections. Once we settle in on what it says I can get them made up in less than a week. Our cost for a

bumper sticker is \$.40 We sell for \$1. We'll sell groups of 10 for \$6.00 to stores. The buttons and shirts work out about the same way."

Back to Raul, "Earth Day itself we aren't doing much except going to the big rally downtown. If we have any product left we will sell it there."

I asked, "What are you going to do with all the money?"

Woody who had been tracking projected income and expense said, "First it won't be that much. \$400 to \$500 would be a major success. So far the best idea is to give it to the Audabon Society to build some nests here and at the lagoon just North of here. We'll see."

Raul continued, "The money thing isn't that important. We have some expenses to cover and whatever is left over we can find somebody to give it to. The big thing is to get as many people as possible thinking about preserving the Earth. It's not just a one day thing. It's every day."

I had an idea to share. "I've got a suggestion for the bumper sticker."

Woody said "It's got to be better than what Leta comes up with. Her's are either militant or wordy."

Leta quickly defended herself, "They are not. Well maybe that one about imprisoning corporate executives that pollute is pushing it a little."

All laughed.

I asked, "What's the name of this community again?"

"Encinitas", Sarah said.

"Well how about, In Encinitas Earth Day is Everyday"?

"Killer", Woody screamed.

"I like it, " said Sarah.

Raul turned his head towards the group, "Simple, memorable, pointed. Very good, I like it a lot."

Leta looked at Luis and said, "I've been working on bumper stickers for over a month. None of them are as good as what you just came up with. You keep impressing me Luis."

I was trying not to show my excitement. What a day.

Raul and Woody had someplace to go so the meeting started to break up. Raul said to Leta, "What do your tour guide plans include?"

"We're going through the lagoon to the coast. We're stopping by the Foot and the Caves. Then we are on to Swamiis. We'll walk through town. My mom is picking us up at the whale."

Raul asked Luis, "Do you ride a bike?"

"Sure."

"This ride would be over 10 miles with hills, turns and traffic to deal with. I mean really, do you ride a bike?"

I said, "Yeah, I can handle it but I don't have any equipment here."

Leta said, "My mom's bike is your size. We've got helmets and stuff." Then she looked at Raul and said, "Where are we going?"

"Lake Hodges, just to the dam."

Leta said, "I love that trip. What time?"

Raul answered, "After lunch. How about 1:30 at your house?"

Leta said, "We'll be ready, see you then."

THE CAVES

We said goodbye to all and started down the steep path to the lagoon.

I then asked, "How did she get in the wheel chair? I've got to tell you when we first walked up and I saw she was in a wheel chair I freaked out a little. I was kind of ticked off at you for not warning me. Then I figured it out. You figured if you warned me then I would act differently. And after I met her and saw how full of life she was that I would come to the conclusion that it didn't matter that she was in a wheelchair. Right? I got you figured out, right?"

Leta paused, then looking straight in my eyes said, "Actually, I forgot. We were cruising through the Lagoon, checking out a few birds, heading to the beach. I wasn't thinking...Are you one of those bigot people?"

"What?", I exclaimed.

Leta came in quickly with, "Hey because if you are.."

I interrupted, "Are you calling me a racist?"

"Hey, because if you are my set of friends..."

"Leta don't do this. Call me stupid, call me funny looking, tell me my ears are too big but don't call me a racist. I've been on the other side of that one, I know the hurt..don't call me a racist."

Leta responded calmly, "I didn't call you a racist. I asked if you are one of those bigot people because if you are my set of friends will give you lots of reasons not to like them if you keep score by gender, race, creed, color, religious preference, whether you are riding in a wheelchair or have too many freckles to get a date for the prom." She then looked dead in my eyes and killed me with my own words, "So now consider yourself warned."

How did I get into this. I'm not a racist. How did she do that? Am I the only one she does that to? I should talk to the neighbor Mr. Conover. I bet he's got something to say about his side of the story with the car washing bit. She's got me defending myself about not being a racist. The problem is she's got me on that dumb thing I said about "you should have warned me." I don't see how I am going to win this thing but I don't want to lose too bad. Finally I said, "Leta, in answer to your first question about me being one of those bigot people. No. Please believe that. As far as my remark about being warned, I'm sorry. I've known you for about two hours. You've got me looking at birds and butterflies. You've introduce me to some incredible people. I'm really trying to keep up here and I thought I had you figured out with the wheelchair thing. So I blundered out my words that you grabbed and crammed down my throat. Leta, I think you did this on purpose."

Leta spoke through her sheepish grin, "Do you know that your nostrils flare when you get excited?"

Exasperated I said, "You got me Leta. A guy has to stay on his toes around you. Are we alright on me not being a racist?"

"Nor are you one of those bigot people."

"Good. Jeepers you had me going. Now, how did she end up in a wheelchair?"

"A little less than two years ago some jerk drunk driver jumped a curb and ran her down."

"OH no."

"Yeah, it was ugly. To make matters worse Sarah's parents know the guy. As they were loading her into the ambulance he was crying and screaming I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

"Oh bummer."

Leta said, "Beyond bummer. They arrested the guy. He lost his job. His life is trashed. Sarah has had two operations so far with one more to go. She got over the anger about a year ago. I think the birds helped. Sarah's dad is still mad. It really changed his life. It stole his spirit."

I said, "Anger and guilt are powerful forces."

"Her dad doesn't know but Sarah met with the guy to get all that anger and guilt on the table."

"What happened?"

Leta continued, "They talked, yelled, cried and prayed. Sarah forgave him. The guy doesn't drink anymore. He says he's forgiven himself."

"Did he go to jail?"

"No he was a first offender with a clean driving record. He got community service."

I shook my head and said, "It doesn't sound like much compared to what Sarah is going through."

"No maybe not but he selected what to do for his community service. He goes around to high schools and colleges and tells the story. He leaves Sarah's name out but other than that he tells the whole thing. Each time he relives that hot summer day that he pulled into a bar for happy hour to have a couple cold beers before he headed home from work."

“That must hurt.”

Leta said, “Yeah it hurts. It takes guts, but it helps too. Sarah and her mom went to see this guy talk at the local college. They said the college kids were overwhelmed by his story.”

“Do you think it will keep them from drinking and driving?”

“Some. Some not.”

I said, “Meanwhile, Sarah seems so full of life and happy.”

“She’d be happier still if she could run down the path to the lagoon instead of being pushed. We’re all hoping that this next operation”

I jumped in “Yeah I know, I know...but there are a lot of kids that can run, jump, rollerblade, the whole bit but they haven’t got it together like Sarah. They aren’t even as happy.”

“You don’t have to tell me, Sarah is one of my closest friends. She’s got a ton of heart, a heap of courage and a great laugh.

We kept walking. I looked back and noticed how far we had come. With the whole racist thing and then the Sarah story I had lost track of time and distance. I remember that once during the walk we came close to two big birds that took off from the surface of the lagoon and soared just a couple feet from the water. I know Leta normally would have made a big deal out of it but she was too busy yanking my chain with that ‘bigot people’ thing. Boy, she’s brutal. The highway noises got louder as we approached the underpass or bridge of the freeway that cuts through the lagoon. I looked up and saw a gillion bird’s nests that appeared to be glued to all the flat surfaces. I asked, “What are those?”

“Swallows.”

“Like the Capistrano thing?” I thought she would jump all over that because I saw on the map that Capistrano is just North of here.. But instead she just said, “Yeah.”

By now we had made it over to a base of a cliff that must have been 80 feet high. The trees at the bottom were weird. There was no grass around them at the bottom and their limbs were covered in such a way they looked almost human like. Actually they looked like the trees in the wizard of Oz that threw apples at Dorothy. They were cool. As we walked on Leta asked, "Are you a climber?"

"I guess so. What are we climbing?"

She looked up.

I said, "I imagine I can do this. Have you climbed it before?"

"Yeah, a couple times. You can make it."

So without knowing where to or why, I began following Leta up this sheer hillside. It was hard in a couple spots. At one point I passed a no trespassing sign. I pointed it out to Leta who merely shrugged her shoulders. I didn't know what that meant but I kept climbing. Finally we came to the first cave.

“Wow, this is cool. Who dug it?”

“I don’t know. There are three of them. They’ve been here for a long time. They’ve probably hidden people and animals over the centuries. It’s a cool place to rest while you look out over the lagoon and ocean.”

This was my first view of the ocean. Man that is big. From this spot you could see how the cliff dropped off to the lagoon and then rose up again on the other side. There was a highway, a freeway and a railroad track running parallel with the beach through the lagoon. Leta saw what I was looking at and said, “People way back when were even dumber than we are. Transportation between Mexico and Los Angeles was a big thing. Instead of building roads and railroads close to the beach they could have done it a mile East of here. Before man screwed it up the ocean used to come in to the lagoons and clean it all up. We’ve clogged it up with our development. Now we have to dig out passageways or it would only have what we feed it from the East.”

I asked “How bad would that be?”

“Well, first of all we are a bunch more dry than wet. You can tell by how low the water is now. When we do get rain, we get a bunch. The storm

flushes this whole area. Toxins fill the lagoon and spill out into the ocean.”

I asked, “What toxins?”

“All the crap we use around the house. Remember me pointing out all the open area that I said flooded out?”

“Sure where the horse corals were.”

“Remember me saying all the area at my house and beyond. Well unfortunately, you get more than water. Go into your garage some day and read the contents label on stuff we buy and use. You’ll freak out when you see the stuff that’s in there. I can’t pronounce half of it. So we go about cleaning paint brushes, getting a ding out of the Chevy with some rubbing compound, growing bigger tomatoes with chemistry. We’ve got herbicides, pesticides and fertilizers. All that stuff sits around our driveways, lawns and yards, until it rains.”

I said, “I think I see how this works. This stuff ‘goes away’”.

Leta again, “Yeah, you flush it, it goes away. You wash something down the drain, it goes away. You dump your cleaning bucket in the back corner of your yard and it goes away. Well guess what? It doesn’t go away. It goes somewhere else.”

I said, “In St Louis it’s the same thing but we get a ton of industrial waste too. It goes in the river and then down to the ocean with the problems of every other city along the river. How bad is this stuff?”

“When we get up here to Swami’s we’ll talk to some surfer friends of mine. These guys are nuts. They go out when the waves are bad, both ways. They surf in water that’s 50 degrees. But most of them know to stay out of the water for a couple days after a big rain. It’s putrid until the ocean works it over and even then it just goes away.”

These lagoons are critical for migrating animals. At least back then people didn't know any better. Today we do the same kind of dumb stuff and we do know better. It's all about making money."

Just then a train appeared heading down through the lagoon. "Hey look at that."

"Yeah, that's the Coaster. We've got two kinds of trains. Regular trains that carry passengers and cargo up and down California. The Coaster is much more local. It is an attempt to get people to leave their cars home and commute to work by train. They even built free parking stations along the way to make it that much easier. Still, when you see the freeway in the morning it is filled with cars with only a driver burning gas. People are stupid."

"It sounds like Raul and your dad are both trying to convince you to attack the problem in a softer way. Maybe a start would be to say some people are stupid."

Leta thought for a moment and said, "I can do that."

"That's progress. Tell me about Raul. Has he really got it together as much as I think he has it together?"

Her smile got even bigger as she said, "And then some. He's what I call the total package guy. Let's start with he could have any girlfriend he wanted. He's smart both in school and out of school. He's a great athlete, surfer, rock climber, anything like that. He's a nice guy who really cares. He's fully tuned into the environment. He's been birdin' for over 6 years. He knows more stuff about more stuff than you could imagine. I don't care if it's birds, fish, seaweed or trees. He just knows so much stuff."

"That's disgusting."

"It's worse than that he also plays the guitar, sings and draws."

"Not fair."

Leta continued, "Yeah, you'd like to not like the guy with so much going on for him but in fact you can't not like Raul. He teaches at surf camp, gives tide pool and lagoon walks for kids, coaches a roller hockey team. It just goes on and on."

I asked, "Did he cook up this whole Earth Day thing of yours?"

"Yeah, he thought it up and has been the driving force."

"It seems like you're biting off a big chunk. Do you think you can pull it all off?"

Raul says it takes planning and networking. We've been planning for over two months now. The first couple meetings we just kicked around a lot of ideas. The more we got into it the more we got into it. We started listing all the things we could do if we had enough help. Instead of creating our own cleanup project we decided to recruit volunteers for the one that the Rotary was doing. We met with the teachers and then the principals of both schools to see how much they wanted to get involved. They liked the ECO Fair idea. Raul and his science teacher called around and got all the speakers from the different organizations that are coming. It all started falling together.

I asked, "What about this tide pool, lagoon walk thing?"

That was the easiest part to put together and maybe the most important. Raul and many of his friends have been doing these walks for a while now. He keeps telling me that you can't beat people over the head all the time. Instead we have to get them interested in the environment...then they will want to help."

"Have you been listening to his advice?"

Leta said almost apologetically, "I'm trying, I'm trying. You know how I am, it's hard sometimes. A couple days ago I saw Joe Parker's big brother dumping a jug of oil down the sewer. My first reaction was to go nuts as

you know I'm capable of doing. But I kept my cool. I still went up to him and stopped the jerk. But I didn't yell, scream or pluck his eyes out."

"Well, I guess that's progress."

Leta responded quickly, "Come on, do you know what that stuff does downstream?"

"Yeah Leta, I know, but you can't beat people up all the time. What did Raul say?"

"He knows the jerk. He says he's an ok guy most of the time. Raul called him up and talked to him. The guy apologized. He said he wasn't thinking and he was late for work. All kinds of excuses like that. Raul invited him to the meeting later on."

"Really?"

"Yeah, the guy said he's going to come."

I said, "I take it you wouldn't have thought to invite him to the meeting?"

"Are you kidding? I wanted to call the police, impound his car put him in jail."

"Electric chair maybe?"

Smiling Leta said, "No, that's for a second offense."

"But you do see what Raul is saying?"

Reluctantly she said, "Yeah, he took a guy doing bad and got him to do something good. It's all in how you do it. Raul says my heart is in the right place but I have a few rough edges."

I thought of a couple things I could say but decided against it. Instead I said, "What's with this bumper sticker thing?"

"I don't believe you came up with that bumper sticker. I've been making up bumper stickers for two months now. You pop into town and before lunch you come up with the idea that they all love."

"Just lucky."

Leta continued, "Well I can't argue with it being a good one. You creep. We were looking for something that could get the whole community involved and last more than just Earth Day. We figured a bumper sticker would be good because people don't take them off their cars. Then you come up with something that's simple, local yet carries a great message. By the way your St. Louis Story was hot."

I said, "Thanks. Raul knew about both rivers didn't he?"

"I tell you Raul knows almost everything."

I thought about it for a second and then decided why not. "Leta, I've got a confession to make."

"What?"

"I just handed in a report on the history of St. Louis for school. All I did was remember the neat stuff and put it into a story."

"So what? It was still a great story. You scored strong with that one. Even Raul was impressed."

"Just lucky again."

She smiled and said, "yeah luck."

I thought, here she is saying all this nice stuff about me and ten minutes ago she was calling me a racist...no one of those bigot people. She is something. Time to change the subject. "Tell me about Woody. He's way cool too."

She began, "He's one of those computer guys. His dad makes and sells all those promotional things like hats, t shirts, pens and calendars for car

dealers and other businesses. He's got two full computer systems. Woody got into it. You should see the stuff he can do. His dad says he's better than his employees. For Woody it was no big deal to make all our posters and stuff. I bet he'll have the bumper sticker done by the time we have the meeting this afternoon."

"Well it's not too tough to see what he's going to do later on. What about Raul?"

"He says he wants to work with young people and the environment. He'll probably be a teacher."

I added, "With all his skills, he'll have lots of things to choose from but I bet he'd make a great teacher."

We climbed up out of the lagoon into a restaurant parking lot then on to a highway that ran along the beach. I really wanted to get to the beach but I knew that Leta had a plan. Patience. Finally we crossed the street, took our shoes off and stepped into the Pacific Ocean. Leta said, "Taste it."

I leaned over and put my hand down near my ankles then raised a wet finger to my lips. "Salty."

Leta nodded as I said, "There's so much of it. There would be no water shortage if we could get the salt out."

"We can, we do, but it costs."

I said, "Hey, if you are out of water you'd pay."

"That's not the point. To take salt out of water you need heat. Currently to get heat you burn fossil fuels. So to make fresh water, helping one shortage, you create a demand on a finite resource and puke stuff into the air causing other problems. People need to use less. They're just lazy, or greedy."

I thought for a second and said, "I understand lazy, like the car wash thing, but greedy?"

"Yeah, farming and fracking."

I knew this was going to be good so I just looked on waiting for her to start.

"Let's do farming first. I could rage on for hours. So many of the family farms have been gobbled up by corporate giants. Decisions have gone to what is profitable as compared to what is right. We know how to deliver water to the plant or tree without having to water all the land around it. Drip irrigation. It cuts usage a ton or acre foot actually."

"A what?"

"Acre foot is how you measure big amounts of water. I bet we'll hear more when we get to Lake Hodges. Raul is meeting a guy from the Water Authority up there. That's why we're going. Anyway, back to those corporate thieves. It's cheaper to use more water than put in the irrigation."

I asked, "How do you fix that?"

"To me it's easy. Double the cost of water and irrigation pencils out better."

"Can people afford it?" I asked.

“To be on the right side of saving the planet, absolutely. They just don’t think so yet.”

I could tell that this would be another mission she was taking on. Leta continued. “Some decisions are simple until special interests get in the way. Money again. That one is bad but fracking is even worse.”

I remembered fracking from science class, sort of. I never got that it was bad. I’m about to. “Tell me about it.”

Leta took a breath as her eyes got a little bigger. I could tell this was a hot one for her. “These oil jerks pump water into the ground to make it easier to suck the oil out. Again, it’s profitable. Stupid but profitable. Not only is it a shameful waste of water it causes earthquakes.”

“Wait a minute, you’re making stuff up now.”

“I wish I was.”

“Earthquakes, really?”

Leta continued, “Well, think of it. First, you’ve got a man- made hole in the earth’s surface, that taps into pockets of oil and sucks it out. Then you force water in the hole. None of this is remotely natural. The subsurface now rearranges itself to make way for the new stuff. There’s enough complicated stuff going on down there without the need for our meddling. More than just earthquakes happen because of this money grubbing rape. Ground water sources get fouled, the earth shakes and the cash register bell keeps ringing in “oil land”. My dad says there used to be an expression in the Army, ‘pissing in your own mess kit.’ Well guess what? Even when we see the hugely negative results we don’t stop. The only difference is the CEOs of these oil companies don’t have their own mess kits. They just take a leak in other people’s.”

I could see Leta’s expression physically change as she told this story. “So why don’t we stop them?”

“The politicians that have the power to do that are receiving re-election contributions from these criminals. Remember, the only thing that is important to an elected official is getting re-elected. That takes money. Oil companies have money. Big farm companies have money. Normal citizens and the planet we live on end up getting screwed. What these guys do has to get so bad before ‘we the people’ even notice. Once we do, we need to make our opinions known. The typical response is to ‘call for a study’. That’s just another delaying tactic that allows the bad guys to keep plundering. The whole thing makes me sick. That’s why people like me have to support environmental groups that have the power and know how to fight these crooks.”

Leta was actually breathing faster after this speech. I wanted to change the subject. We had been walking along this beautiful beach. In front of me on this overlooking bluff was a whitewashed building with gold balls mounted in the corners. It looked like something from ‘Aladin’. “What’s that?”

As soon as Leta’s mind got off corporate greed her smile returned and she said, “Swami’s. The real name is the Self Realization Temple. It’s a religious thing. The nickname for it has always been Swamis. In addition to it being a killer location, it is also a killer surfer spot. It’s been written up in all the surf magazines. The city built a parking lot and overlook with steps down to the beach. That’s where we are going.”

We walked along the beach until the sand disappeared leaving us on the tide pools. Basically it was a bunch of rock formations that were pretty much the same height. In the midst of them were pools of water that filled in the low spots. Some pools were big, maybe ten feet across. Others were tiny divots in the rock's surface. In these watery spots lots of animals lived or just got caught when the tide pulled back. Leta showed me different critters that she knew by name and whether they lived there or were just temporary residents waiting for the tide to take them home.

We probably could have kept exploring for hours but Leta saw a friend coming ashore. She called out, "Hey Badger."

Really, I thought, the guy's name is Badger?

He waved and came over carrying his surfboard. Water was dripping off his long hair. His smile was bright.

"Hey Leta, 'sup?"

She said, "Come meet a friend of mine."

He said, "Come over here, Gwen is waiting for me."

We went through that meeting thing as we walked up a little where a couple of his friends were waiting. When we were all gathered Leta began, "This is my buddy Luis, he's moving here from St. Louis."

I met Tom, Badger and Gwen. I was concentrating real hard not to stare at Gwen. I think she was wearing her little sister's bathing suit. It was barely big enough to cover the essentials. She was pretty and 97% visible. I guess everybody else was used to seeing skimpy swim suits. It was a big time first for me. Thankfully the conversation moved on to surfing.

Badger said it was getting 'glassy' but was killer before. Tom told about a new guy that got embarrassed because he saw a shark and yelled out a warning. The good news/ bad news was that it was actually a dolphin. When you are new to the ocean and you see a fin in the water you get a little freaked out. I understood that.

Leta reminded Badger about the meeting going on later. He said he'd be there. We all said goodbye. I made a point of only looking at Gwen's face as we said goodbye.

We must have walked over 4 miles so far today. That climb up the cliff to get to the caves was neat but tiring. Now I'm looking at about a hundred steps to get up from the beach. I'm definitely not showing Leta that I'm getting tired. She looks like she does this every day. She probably does this every day. Ok, about thirty more, then a sit and relax. God this is beautiful. Neither of us said anything. She and I were both drinking in how awesome the view was. I was also catching my breath. Finally I said, "This is unbelievable."

Leta said, "I'm surprised you noticed the ocean with Gwen's bikini filling your mind."

"Hey, come on, I thought I did good. I'm not used to seeing pretty girls with almost nothing on."

Leta just said, "I know. I don't know how she can wear that."

"I don't know how her dad lets her wear that."

"You know my dad is pretty cool, but he is not that cool. Lets get to the ocean. I never get tired of looking at the ocean. Do you have any idea how big it is?"

"I've looked at a globe. It's big."

Leta was about to make a point. "You know how long it took you to drive here from St. Louis? " As I nodded she pointed to the ocean and said, "If there was a road heading to Hawaii what you drove would take you less than a quarter of the way. Then you get to do that again heading to Asia. It's huge. Remember the mountains you crossed getting here? There are bigger mountains out there under the water. Because you can only see as far as the horizon people lose track of just how massive it is."

I was picturing in my head how long it took to drive here and that was nothing compared to what I was looking at. I didn't have anything clever to say so I just said, "Wow, big." In addition to looking out, it was cool to look up and down the beach. The length of the waves was cool. Leta pointed out how the waves broke as the bottom half of the wave hit bottom. Finally she said "let's go, there's more to see."

We walked onto the grounds of the Temple. It was beautiful. The gardens were amazing with lots of benches for resting. I found out they

weren't for resting, they were for meditating, which is restful. We walked over to this big fish pond. There were gold fish almost a foot long. That's when I found out they aren't gold fish, they're Koi. It appears I'm always finding out things with Leta.

"So this is a religious thing."

She paused for a second and said, "Yeah, religious, spiritual. I think Self Realization is a good name for this place. If I sit in a beautiful, peaceful place like this, it becomes easier to shut off the busy world and think. I think of the earth and my place in it and on it. I then go further out and think of the Earth as a speck in the Universe. You can keep going back. Somewhere in there the concept of God comes in."

I said, "Sometimes I believe in God and sometimes I don't. My folks go to church and I tag along because it makes mom happy. I heard a guy once say there are people in church thinking about kayaking and people in kayaks thinking about God. I think I might be one of them. I know over time there has been lots of bad stuff done for religious reasons."

Leta was quick to jump in with, "Yeah I know, but there's been a lot of good stuff done too. I don't claim to understand it all but I know our church does a bunch of good stuff. We feed the homeless we collect clothes for the refugees, my youth group went to Mexico last summer and helped build houses for people. It was way cool."

"You're in a youth group?"

"Yeah we meet every Sunday during the church service. I make it most of the time. Our teacher is cool. Most of the kids are too. There's one jerk, but there's always one jerk. Other than the big trip we usually just do fun stuff like go to the beach. We went to Laser tag this year. I'd never done that before. It was fun. They don't really hammer a lot of God stuff. Sometimes they take the bible reading for the week and try to put them in our world. It makes you think sometimes. They always think pro Earth. It's where I learned the word stewardship. It all keeps me thinking."

As she was talking I realized I never really thought about much of this. I was going to say something but decided to stay quiet and listen. Leta got up and motioned to move on. We walked through the entrance with the minarets on top of the gate posts and on to the street. You could tell this was the main drag. There were shops and restaurants, one after another. I asked, "Is it always this busy?"

"In the summer it is. Now it's busy because it's spring break. Not only are the locals out but we've also got tourists. Do you know how to tell they're tourists?"

"No."

"White, pink and wet."

This is going to be good. "What?"

She began, "Yeah, people are here from Chicago, Milwaukee, Buffalo.."

I interrupted, "St. Louis."

"Yeah, St Louis too. These guys have snow in their veins. They see a 72 degree day and they think it is the dead of summer. When they get here their skin is totally white. They overdo the sunshine the first day and it turns pink."

I asked, "I get that but what about wet?"

“Yeah, they go swimming in the ocean.”

I said, “We were just with your friends who were in the ocean.”

Sometimes when Leta says yeah she spreads it out into two syllables with a bit of a funny voice as if saying obviously or you missed it. That was the case this time when she said, “Yeah, but they’re wearing wet suits. The water temperature is 59 degrees. You’ve got to really want to swim to submit yourself to that. Actually, I’m going in as soon as I can. I’m finally cleared to surf. I’ve been waiting so long. If you get lucky you might get a shot at it before you leave.”

I was thinking if I had my suit on I would have gone in. Yeah, I’m a tourist. I hope not for long. We kept walking down the street mostly people watching. We came upon a sign that ran from one side of the street all the way to the other. It was kind of old fashioned, it read ENCINITAS.

We crossed back over the street. We walked under the marquis for an old movie house called La Paloma. I asked what that meant. Leta said, “The dove.”

All this while I had been wondering what Leta meant when she asked her mom to pick us up at the whale. As we turned into the parking lot of a small plaza I saw it. On the side of this two story building someone had painted a mural of a whale jumping out of the water. It was beautiful. As

I was staring at it Leta asked me to move to a spot in the parking lot. She motioned for me to stay, kind of like you would to a dog, as she moved closer to the mural. Finally she stopped and raised her hand in the air. It was so cool. From where I was standing it looked like Leta was holding a fish or something and the whale was jumping up for it. What a picture that would make. We both laughed. Just then her mom pulled up. Good timing.

As we were driving home Leta's mom, Sandy, said that she heard from the dads. The morning went well. Mom said she was planning a celebratory Mexican dinner. Dinner sounded great but the message was even greater. I asked, "Did he get it?"

Sandy said, "I think so. I guess they were deciding on when he would start."

Leta and I both said "Yes!" at the same time. We looked at each other and laughed. Then I said, "Way to go Dad. I knew you could do it."

Leta and Sandy were both smiling at my rooting my dad on. Leta asked/told mom about the bike trip. They talked about the bike and equipment. Sandy questioned if we were ready for a trip that hard after a full morning. Leta answered for both of us. "Yeah, we're good. And before you ask, yes we will be careful."

We made ourselves PB and J sandwiches along with a big glass of milk. I didn't realize how hungry I was. I wolfed down two sandwiches. I could hear someone pull into the driveway. It was Raul.

Raul said hi to everyone. You could tell by the conversation with Sandy that Raul was a regular. Sandy asked, "I know it's a cool trip but why are you going to Lake Hodges today?"

Raul answered, "It's for my term paper. I'm writing about the other water cycle." Raul sensed that Sandy knew what he was talking about but he said, "You know, where it comes from, how we store and deliver it and where it goes once we use it."

Sandy said with a smile, "Sounds like a good paper."

"Hope so. It's all interesting stuff. I just need to make it interesting for the reader, my teacher."

Leta said, "You always do Raul. You always do."

After being asked three times if I was ready for this trip, it finally got through to all that yes I can ride a bike, in traffic with hills. They set up the order of march with Leta leading the way, me in the middle and Raul in charge from the back.

We started out. It was easy and pretty. This was not only horse country, this was rich man's horse country. All the fencing was freshly painted

white. The chorales were beautiful and the barns were unbelievable. These houses for horses were a bunch nicer than lots of houses for people I've seen. I could see a lake coming up so I said, "Is that it"

Raul smiled and said, "No, we aren't even half way there. Lake Hodges is a lot bigger." I just kept peddling. We coasted down a pretty good grade and stopped where the road ended in a T intersection. I didn't know that this stop was planned. I was glad. The corner lot was huge. I bet it was 1,000 feet in both directions. The house set way back in the property. The guy's front lawn wasn't grass, it was orange trees.

I said, "Do you believe this guy's lawn?"

Leta and Raul looked at each other then to the orange trees, then back at me. Leta said, "I've been by here a hundred times and never thought of it as lawn. That's cool. Like each tree is a blade of grass."

Raul added, "I never looked at it like that before." Then he asked, "how are you doing?"

I knew they were both concerned about how well I was handling the trip. "I'm good. What a pretty ride. I wanted to talk about a couple things back there. Just before we made that zig turn, that barn..., really, How rich do you have to be where your horses live like that?"

Leta and Raul were smiling. They knew the ranch I was talking about. Leta said, "Yeah, you need huge money." She pointed to my orange tree house. "That's not cheap either."

Raul said, "Yeah, this is one of the richest neighborhoods in the world. The weird part is one of the poorest communities in California is about 25 miles from here. OK, we stopped here on purpose. One to rest up but two, to plan the next part of the ride. The first 10 minutes is the toughest. It's all up hill. If we can clear the next crest the rest will be easier. Now we are into real traffic. Just stay focused and keep peddling. If one of you has to stop we will. No big thing. If not we will go to the fruit stand and take another break. For this next part don't talk unless it's important."

Leta and I were both nodding agreement. With that we took off. He was right about one thing, this hill is brutal. I was never so happy to see a fruit stand. We got off our bikes and walked around a little. Again the scenery was amazing and rich. On one side of the road you could see this Country Club with mansions dotted around the golf course. On the other side, going even further up was a housing development for millionaires. I asked "Is everybody crazy rich around here?"

Raul smiled and said, "Well on this trip you are going to see more rich than poor, or even normal."

I went into the fruit stand to buy a bottle of water. Even the fruit stand is rich. I guess you could buy an apple or orange but what they were really selling were cutsie fruit gift baskets for big money. It was the first air conditioned fruit stand I ever saw. After I convinced both Leta and Raul that I was feeling fine and ready for the next leg of the trip, we headed out.

This was another pretty good climb. I looked at the empty land running up hills on both sides of the road. Without structures of any kind, it was easy to visualize cowboys on horseback coming through this path that now is a two lane road. Then I saw it. When they said dam, I didn't know what to expect. I've seen pictures of big dams like Hoover. I've seen little dams on streams back home. This was kind of the 'momma bear' of dams. It was probably 150 feet across and 100 feet high. It was strange seeing the lake held back and the dry side being that much lower. We had another couple minutes of riding before we parked to get a better view.

There was a guy in a parked car who got out when we pulled up. Raul went over to greet him and we followed. We were introduced to Jim Bond. Honest, that's his name. In the introduction I found out that he is on the Water Board and used to be the mayor of Encinitas. Both Leta and I shook hands with him as part of the introduction. It wasn't that weird. We were told to call him Jim.

Raul had called the Water Authority and said he was doing his term paper on water. They suggested calling Jim. When Raul called, Jim suggested meeting at the dam.

Raul was the one asking all the questions as Leta and I listened. Basically what I learned was that Southern California got most of their water from the Colorado River, Lake Mead actually. If it wasn't for this source of water this whole area would be almost desert like.

I learned that the water travels through pipes so large that you could drive a truck inside. The water is stored before filtration in various places like Lake Hodges. It eventually gets to one of many water processing places and then is pumped to huge water tanks that you see on hillsides. From there it goes to houses. An average house uses about 350 gallons of water a day. That sounded like a lot to me. Jim explained that an average water heater in a home holds 50 gallons. I know how big that is. A house uses 7 of those tanks a day. That sounded like a lot of water. Then I

found out that over half is used outside for gardens and lawns. That really sounded crazy.

Jim said that everybody, water districts, fight for more water. There are old deals and new deals but everybody wants more. He got on to agriculture and their huge usage. It made sense to me that you need water to grow food. Leta said that if the corporate farmers actually cared about anything but money that they would invest in better irrigation systems instead of spraying down the whole field. As always money became the driving force. I could see the anger on Leta's face.

Once we got passed the water getting to the house we talked about where it goes from there. First is sewage with pipes and pumps taking it to treatment plants. Most of the water used outside gets absorbed in the land. Some goes into the storm sewers that are totally different pipes than the regular sewage. This water flows into the ocean along with everything like oil and pesticides it picks up along the way.

Those are the high points I picked up from listening to Jim and Raul talk. There were more details that Raul wrote down in support of the paper he was writing.

We said goodbye, got on our bikes and began the trip home. I don't know why but trips home from anywhere always seems shorter than the trips to get there. In this case there was good reason. It's downhill. There were still some uphill spots but the elevation of Leta's house was 2,200 feet lower than the dam. As we were getting close I saw a sign advertising a Circus that was opening in town. I thought maybe that would be fun to see. I'd never been to a circus. I called up to Leta, "Hey, look a circus"

Leta turned and quickly said, "Yuk!"

We were still riding so the conversation never got going. I knew I would hear more when we stopped. We got back about 4:30. The meeting for the Earth Day thing was in an hour. Sandy said Dinner wasn't until around 7:00. She agreed to take us and said either she or Leta's dad would pick

us up when we call. That gave me about 45 minutes to unwind. I thought.

Leta started in on me at the first available moment. "Do you know what goes on at a circus'?"

I thought for a second and then said, "Clowns? I don't know I've never been. Bearded lady?, strong man?, trapeze guy?. I don't know."

"They abuse animals there. Beautiful animals like tigers and elephants. Yeah, I'm going to go but I'm going to picket."

Well, I've never been an activist in anything. I never pictured me picketing anything but especially not a circus. I'm guessing all of that is going to change. So I asked, "What do they do wrong?"

"Are you kidding me? You're losing all your atta boys if you don't get this one. These horrible people make money by abusing animals. These big animals live in tiny cages. It's even worse than a zoo. They are poked and prodded to perform for paying customers. It's shameful. How can you not see?"

I thought for a second and then said, "Leta, I never thought about a circus at all. I certainly never thought about how animals are treated there. Just because somebody doesn't know that doesn't mean that they disagree with you. I'm happy to learn about the plight of tigers and bears."

"Lions and elephants too" she said with a smile. I could tell that she is finally getting the point that just because someone doesn't jump up and down like she does that they can still be convinced to do what is right. I bet my first trip to the circus is going to be different than most folks.

We loaded up for the meeting. We were going to Moonlight beach that is real close to where the whale was. When we pulled up some people were already there. I saw Sarah. Woody and Badger talking with another 4 people. No Gwen, pity. There were built in concrete tables between the refreshment stand and three volleyball courts. I could tell that is where

the meeting would take place. I looked over at Leta and asked, "Play volleyball?"

"Yeah but court 1 only. Ah, sometimes 2 but never 3."

I guessed there was a pecking order. I didn't really say anything but Leta could figure out what I wasn't asking. She said, "1 is beginner, 2 is intermediate and you really have to be good to even walk on 3. Some people are serious about volleyball out here. I'm ok but I can't play with those guys, they'd eat my lunch. I've seen teams wait in line for court 2 when 3 was empty."

Raul showed up with about 4 others bringing the crowd to about 15. He called everyone to order. Leta had made claim that Raul knew tons of stuff. What I was impressed with was how he delivered his message to others. He introduced his committee of Leta, Sarah, Woody and Badger, after welcoming and thanking all. Sarah read her press release and told when and where it was going to run. Woody introduced the web page.

That Woody is something else. In the time we went to Lake Hodges he fired up the web site to include the press release, sign up sheets, schedule of activities, schedule of speakers, and the theme as shown on a bumper sticker. IN ENCINITAS EARTH DAY IS EVERY DAY. My slogan! So cool.

Raul encouraged everyone to share an invitation to participate with all their friends. In one section of the page people could post what they are doing. Raul said, "If you are making a project for the ECO Fair share it on the web page. If you are successful in recruiting any participation share that as well. "We need to build energy and keep it coming"

Everybody actually clapped. Raul looked confident and Leta was beaming again. I looked at her and said, "Looks like you've got it going."

I looked over at the sun not quite setting. I was about to ask when Leta said, "I wish we could but we can't. I promise I'll get you here for a sunset, but today we've got to go celebrate with your dad."

"Now that you put it that way, I guess my Dad just got me a bunch of sunsets. It keeps getting better."

About 15 minutes after we called dad pulled up in our car with Leta's dad. I ran over to the driver's window to give a high five as I said "Way to go Dad!"

He was almost embarrassed but certainly happy. I could tell Leta's dad was happy too. Dad said, "Yeah, believe it or not they like me."

Leta chimed in with "Never a doubt Mr. G." They both felt comfortable with that name. "So I hear mom is cooking up a Mexican feast to celebrate."

Dad said, "Well I haven't heard of that but it sounds good to me. Even though I got the job at 11:00 I was still too nervous to eat lunch. A feast sounds good."

When we got home the preparation for the dinner was in full swing. It smelled great. I was starving. I must have walked 6 miles and biked over ten. I wolfed down those two peanut butter sandwiches at noon, and that was it. Fortunately the food was almost ready when we got home. By the time I washed up the food was served. I was eating so fast I didn't join in on the conversations. There were lots of particulars about the

interviews, with an occasional , “Yeah, he really liked when you said,... Eventually the discussion switched to what Leta and I did today. I was glad to let Leta explain.

She talked through walking to the lagoon to Sarah’s. She told about meeting her friends. She made a big deal about my St. Louis story and then said, “This creep comes up with a perfect bumper sticker for our project. I’ve been working on that for two months and he just pops out the right message like that”, With a snap of her fingers.

She then told about the caves, that brought a “You know you shouldn’t go there” from her mom. It was one of those times when the parent is obligated to tell you what you shouldn’t do even though they know you’re going to do it anyway.

She continued through Swami’s and pick up. She then started on the bike story. About half way through I broke in to give her a break. I talked about the horse palace, the guy with orange trees for blades of grass and an air conditioned fruit stand.

Leta then began the story of what we learned about water. I could tell that mom and dad were impressed with our day’s journey and with Leta’s skill as tour guide..

I could wait no longer. “OK, great you got the job. When do we move here.”

Mom said, “I’m looking at apartments and houses to rent, tomorrow. “

I interrupted , “Have you checked what school I would go to in different areas. My life would be so much easier if I went to Leta’s school. Today I met a bunch of her friends, and believe me, there the kind of crowd you want me hanging with. Check schools for each place. I don’t care if I have a small room, no yard and no air conditioning. I will give you back my allowance.”

They really weren't surprised with my plea. Dad looked up and said, "Your mother and I already discussed this. We know moving can be tough on a teenager. And we know that Leta and her friends are exactly the kind of kids we want you hanging with. We are only looking in areas that go to her school."

I did a quick fist pump and looked over and saw Leta doing the same. We walked to each other and did the high five thing. That's perfect. Next question. "When?"

Dad said, "I've got to start pretty quick. Your mother needs to do the movers, utilities and all that stuff. We're looking to occupy the beginning of next month. We figured you could help mom as you finished this school year. Then you and mom would drive out in June."

I thought for a second to see if what I was going to ask for was reasonable. "I know you are concerned about my education but, I could easily finish the year out here. I could stay with dad and make more friends before summer hit."

Leta said, "Nobody other than you wants you out here more than me. And I'm down with the sooner the better. But I think you need to help your mom. I remember when we moved, it was a nightmare. It will be a lot easier on Mrs. G if you help her through it."

My mother was about to talk when I politely raised my hand and said, "You're right. It would be selfish if I left mom back there with all that to do."

Leta's mom spoke, "You have no idea of how proud I am of both of you. Your empathy and caring are things of beauty."

Finally my mom got her turn. "I agree. I had volunteered to take care of things back home and send you out early. Dad thought you should stay and help me. We decided to ask you. You stepped up before even being asked. You earned some serious 'brownie points' here son."

I thought it's only six weeks. I actually need about half of that to finish up stuff and say goodbye to folks. This is all good. I asked "What kind of places are you looking at?"

Dad said, "This market is different than back home. There are lots of houses to rent. Everything is expensive, but a house is about the same as an apartment. So I think we decided to go for a house. Once you are into houses then there are more three bedrooms than twos. Thankfully the new job is paying me enough to pay this crazy rent. I think we will land well."

Mom added, "There are a couple that are near here." She got out a local map that had big red dots on the places she was scheduled to look at. Leta began examining, then said, as she placed her hand on the map "These here are all good. The neighborhood is good and they're between our house, school and the lagoon. Any of these would be killer."

Mom drew a big circle around the area Leta was talking about and said, "I'll keep that in mind."

Everybody was cleaning up after dinner. The folks were sitting down to have coffee. Leta and I headed to the back yard. As soon as we made it through the door Leta hugged me. She said, "This is so cool. Everything worked out great. Think about it, you are moving here." As she excitedly finished she kissed me on the cheek. Time froze.

I had never been kissed by a girl before, and I certainly never kissed one. I got close once with Mandy Clifford. Just as it was going to happen I nervously talked instead of just doing it. In that instant the opportunity went away as her little brother invaded the scene. I wasn't going to let that happen again. Leta and I were holding each other, both smiling. I thought 'I'm going to step too far and she is going to pull back and I'm going to be so embarrassed. I really shouldn't try. Oh screw it, here we go. I leaned in, and to my surprise so did Leta. We kissed on the lips. It certainly felt good. But more than that it felt right. It wasn't a movie kiss

but it was a real kiss. After a quick breath we did it again. As we pulled back we smiled at each other.

Actually my smile was more like a dumb grin. I said, "This is embarrassing but I've got to tell you I've never done that before."

Leta answered, "I only did once and this was way better." Just then I heard a noise and Leta said, "Look, It's screech."

This huge bird, about the size of a turkey took off from the top of a palm tree. As he spread his wings he began to soar right towards us. He banked right and with a couple of flaps he soared out of sight. Leta quickly said, "OK, make a wish."

"I already got my wish"

She said, "Well you could wish for another one."

We both laughed and kissed again. What a day!

Everyone was turning in. I grabbed my spot on the couch. Between the excitement and exhaustion I was asleep instantly.

THE WILD ANIMAL PARK

I woke up to the sounds of people in the kitchen making breakfast. I walked in and said good morning to all. Mom said that breakfast would be done in a couple minutes. I had a glass of that killer orange juice as I said, "Leta still asleep?"

Sandy said, "No, she is in the back yard."

I grabbed my juice and went outside. Leta was watering her butterfly garden. I joked, "Are your butterflies growing?"

"Come here" she said quietly. I walked over and saw two butterflies on the same branch of a bush. They were pretty, orange and black. Leta continued, "They're monarchs. They love milkweed. People tear this weed out of their gardens not knowing that if they left it these beautiful creatures would hang out in their yard."

I now better understood 'butterfly gardens'. I lamely said, "Wow, that's great."

She had finished her watering so we went back in the house as people were discussing Zoo vs. Wild Animal Park. My mom had heard of the zoo and wanted to go. Sandy was saying, "Yeah we have a great zoo but the Wild Animal park is even better."

Mom was convinced but Leta continued with "Yeah, the Park is way better. The animals have a bunch more room to live. They have this cool train that takes you around with a guide that talks about the animals. You'll like it."

Mom said, "Sold." There were too many of us for one car so travel arrangements were made. Even though it was a day off from work the dads had business talk to do. They went in one car with the moms and three kids in the other. I had met little brother Brad. He seemed ok. So the three of us piled in the back of the car and the moms sat in the front.

A couple miles in Sandy mentioned that Brad was joining a cub scout pack. I said, "I was a cub. Are you going to be a bear or a wolf?"

Brad didn't know the difference. I explained, "No matter how old you are, everybody starts out as a bobcat. Then depending upon your age you are either a bear, wolf or webolo. It's all fun. You do a lot of neat stuff in scouting." Then, looking at Leta, "Did you ever join scouting?"

"I almost did. There were some nice girls in it and they do some cool stuff but I'm kind of busy with my own stuff and I never got into that uniform thing."

I had a hard time picturing Leta doing anything uniformly. After a little more scouting talk, especially about the Pine Wood Derby Brad asked, "Hey Louis, when we get to the park do you wanna play the 'rotten kid' game?"

Leta began to say "We don't.."

When I interrupted, "Brad, how do you play?"

Leta again quickly said, "Ok, if we are going to play you need to know the work up. Mom and Dad take us places. We go to parks, museums, restaurants, lots of places. We were taught early on 'restaurant behavior.'"

From the front seat Sandy added, "When dad was going to college he worked in restaurants. He would see parents come in and not discipline their children. Kids would be running around the restaurant bothering other customers and driving dad nuts."

Brad spoke up, "Yeah, we aren't allowed to go to the bathroom."

Sandy again, "Well yes, kind of. Dad is a believer that if you go to the john before you leave the house, there is no need to go for the one hour you are in a restaurant. He says the kids don't need to pee they just want to explore. Anyway with a few exceptions kids don't need to use the rest rooms."

Back to Leta, “Anyway because we get to go to lots of neat places we’ve picked up a few rules. First, NO WHINING. Second, no souvenirs. And third, everybody be happy and respectful. Once you accept these rules the first thing you notice are a bunch of families that should have the same restrictions. When you get around a bunch of families like we will today you will see some rotten kids and clueless parents.”

Brad said, “So we compete on who can find the most rotten kid. They have to be over three.”

Leta said, “Yeah and older rotten kids score more points than younger ones. We figure if they are older they should know better. Many times they don’t. You’ll see a kid not much younger than us throwing a tantrum because mom won’t buy her a snow cone. It starts as soon as we get to the parking lot and ends when we are loading up to go home. If it’s close parents might have to help with the judging. They usually try to stay out of it.”

“I’m in. I thought it was just me. I can’t handle watching kids act out. The parents just listen and eventually give in to the little devils. It drives me nuts. I’m definitely in.”

Once we got in the park I could see why people preferred it over the zoo. We got on the train just after getting in. Leta and I sat together without Brad who was riding with his mom. Each time the tram stopped the guide would point out animals along with some interesting facts. I was sitting closer than necessary to Leta thinking I’d love this ride if it was going through a supermarket parking lot. The animals were cool too.

The next stop was the butterfly pavilion. You had to walk through two sets of doors designed to not let butterflies out. They were everywhere. I had never seen so many butterflies in one place before. There were thousands of them. Leta kept telling me the names of the different types. I think it was my imagination but it looked like the butterflies were attracted to her. Wherever she went there were always a group around her. It wasn’t a swarm. It looked friendly, whatever that means. As we

left I told Leta how cool that was when she said, “Yeah it’s great but a little noisy.”

I didn’t know what she was talking about. It wasn’t noisy. I was about to ask what she meant when Brad took off like a shot. She ran to catch him before mom went postal.

We went to three different shows. The one I liked best was the ‘Birds of Prey’. Falcons, hawks and eagles would fly away from the arena one at a time and then return to the glove covered arm of the handler. We had lunch inside one of the restaurants to get away from the heat.

I thought I had won the ‘rotten kid’ game when I called this boy who was about 9 or 10 years old. He was crying and making this huge fuss because the ice cream cart only had vanilla and no chocolate. My victory was short lived when Brad called this girl who must have been 14 yelling at her mother, insisting that they go to see the monkeys NOW. As soon as Brad called her Leta and I nodded that he won. He clearly found the most rotten kid. It was actually fun. We made it back to the car.

On the way home the Circus came up. Leta went off on the money grubbing creeps who make their living by hurting animals. She told all that she would be picketing. I suggested that we go over and meet the circus people. She didn’t see any reason until I suggested that she might make more meaningful signs if she knew more about the actual conditions. She and both moms agreed.

THE CIRCUS

We got home about 4:30. It was still hot but not as bad as it was at the Wild Animal Park. She asked if I was ready to bike over to the circus. I asked to rinse off first. It had been a sweaty morning. It was only about a mile to the circus, so it was a much easier ride than yesterday. When we got there the big top was up as were most of the rides. There were lots of people running around building things and setting up.

We saw an older man that looked like he was in charge. We walked up and Leta said, "Are you the boss here?"

This stylish eloquent man said, "Yes, young lady I guess I am. I'm sorry but we have hired all of our local laborers."

Leta said, "We aren't looking for work. I just wanted to tell you that I am planning on picketing you while you are here."

He said, "Well, that is refreshing. I am picketed all the time but you are the first to come in advance to announce your intentions. May I ask why you chose to picket?"

I thought oh God, here we go. He doesn't know what 'on' switch he just flicked. Leta began her speech about cruelty to animals by the money grubbing.....

I found out later that his name was Madigan and he was the owner of the circus and also the ring master. Madigan quietly listened to Leta's rant. Then he quietly said, "I see that you are a concerned young woman whose

heart is in the right place. Some of your facts are incorrect. Do you want to hear the other side of the argument or are you so vested in your position that you seek no new data?"

He really talks like that. I could see that Leta was confused. She wanted to rally in her anger but she was taken by this funny man. Finally she said, "I am willing to listen but I must tell you that my mind is made up."

Madigan said, "Well, listening is a major pathway to knowledge. I've been in the circus for most of my life. In the past there were many incidents of cruelty to animals. Thankfully most of that has gone away. Our animals are all fed well. They receive regular veterinary treatments. They are not physically abused. In almost all cases they are shown genuine caring or even love from their trainers and handlers. The most common concern voiced by good people like you is where they live and sleep. Our horses, zebras and even the ostrich live pretty much like they would anywhere else. Our four elephants live together in a pen that is as roomy and clean as any zoo. Our seals live great. Our big cats and bear live in cages. They are good size cages but due to the ferocity of the animals they need to be segregated from everyone else."

I could tell that Leta was listening but not buying it all. Madigan continued, "Many say they should all be returned to the wild. The problem is most have never seen the wild. They're zoo babies. I don't know how long they would survive in the jungle. Please remember there are natural dangers there as well as poachers killing indiscriminately for hides, trophies and husks. Here there is no fear. I can tell you are not convinced. One thing I can tell you for sure is that there is no money grubbing going on. We are barely breaking even. Between protesters, skyrocketing insurance bills, huge feeding bills and a customer population more interested in video games I've decided to end my forty year illustrious career and retire. This is my last year. One of my upcoming problems is to place all my animal friends in proper homes."

Then Madigan asked Leta a question. "Miss Leta, may I inquire why you choose to picket my circus instead of the factory farms that regularly treat

animals far worse than I ever could. You are concerned about my lions, elephants and seals. Why not the cow, pig and chicken. Is this bigotry perhaps?"

I love this guy. I wonder how Leta likes wearing the bigot tag. This is going to be great.

Leta was initially shocked at being called a bigot. She got over it quick and said, "Factory farms are also horrible. Just because somebody else is worse than you doesn't mean that what you are doing is alright."

This was so much fun to watch.

Leta looked pleased that Madigan had challenged her. I could tell that she was thinking about how many pigs live in tiny cages until they die. She wanted to fix that too but for now she was happy this business was going under. A young woman was walking by. Madigan beckoned, "Jinty, could you join us."

Jinty came over and Madigan introduced her as the Prima acrobat. He asked her if she would be willing to show us around. She answered yes with a smile and we headed off. I had hoped the pig bigot thing would have lasted longer but a behind the scenes circus tour was hard to beat.

Jinty was nice. She started out with her story as we walked to our first stop. She was a high school gymnast and got a college scholarship. She didn't say why but she didn't like college. She tried out for the Olympics but didn't make the team. She heard of a circus that was looking for a young female acrobat. She auditioned two years ago and has been working here ever since. She likes it. She now has a boyfriend who is the captain of the team. Leta and I were fascinated with her. We had arrived at the elephants.

Jinty said, Elenore is the trainer of the elephants with the help of her little brother Paul. Elenore came out and greeted us. She said, "Let me guess, animal rights activists?"

Leta quickly said yes. Elenore continued, "I think you will see that my elephants are more than treated well. They actually do a little work, especially in raising the big top. Other than that we rehearse our act daily and perform for the shows. They seem to like it. Lamar is a bit of a ham but all of them seem to enjoy the crowd clapping. If you want to know the animal that is abused you should meet my little brother Paul. He's responsible for large quantities of stuff going in and out of these four."

We all laughed. I then started to figure out the quantities she was talking about. You need a lot of feed to fill an elephant. I didn't even want to think about the other end. Almost on cue to make my point one of the elephants dropped a load right next to me. Leta thought that was funny. After talking a little more you could tell that she genuinely cared for her pachyderms. Somehow the subject moved to stories of poachers and ivory. Everyone shared the same anger. We thanked Elenore as Jinty guided us on.

On the way over to meet Larry the Lion tamer we walked through the big top. A small voice from way up called to Jinty. We looked up as Jinty waved. This girl was standing on a wire that must have been 60 feet in the air. She did a cartwheel on the wire, waved back, said "wait up" and jumped to the net below. Leta and I couldn't believe it. She got to the end of the net and came down.

"Hey Jinty, whose your friends?"

As Jinty was introducing us we said how amazed we were at what she did. What we didn't say that amazed us even more was that she looked about our age. Finally I said, "Wow, that was amazing. First the cartwheel, then that drop, blew my mind."

We found out her name was Sissy who said, "Oh, that's nothing, Tomorrow night is the scary one for me."

Leta said, "I don't know what you are doing tomorrow but what you just did would have scared me to death."

Sissy said, "I've been performing on the tight rope for two years now so to me it's no big thing. Tomorrow I become a flyer."

"Trapeze?" I asked.

"Yep, I'm the youngest of the Flying Fellini's"

Leta said, "Do you mind me asking how old you are?"

"NO, I'm sixteen"

Let and I looked at each other knowing that we are sixteen and there is no way you would get either of us up there let alone jumping down. This was weird.

Sissy knowing what we were thinking said, "Yeah, you're the same age right? I thought so. That's why I called out to Jinty. I don't see kids my age much, I thought a talk would be fun."

I said, "We're just kind of boring teenagers. What you do is so out there."

Leta asked, "Do you go to school?"

"We're home schooled. My mom is one of the primary teachers. After all I'm half of the high school. Yes I do get homework. I don't need a gym class."

We all laughed. Sissy continued, "Jinty is like my big sister. She helps me with school but other stuff too." For the next ten minutes we just talked like kids. She wanted to know about our school. She was fascinated that I was moving here from St. Louis, and then she told us about her two tricks she would be performing for the first time in front of a crowd tomorrow. This incredible performer was a real kid like us. We couldn't stay any longer. We had to get to the big cats.

You could hear this low guttural roar as we approached. We soon found out that sound was coming from Abel the Lion. Jinty introduced us to Larry who seemed nice. He had a slight European accent, I think German.

He introduced us to Abel and Borris the bear. They were in this good sized practice cage. Larry explained that Borris and Abel got along with each other. They could spend most of their day in this big cage. Unfortunately, Anna the tiger wasn't social. To give her time in the big cage he would move the other two back to their sleeping cages. Everyone could tell by the look on Leta's face that she was not happy with the way these beautiful animals had to live.

Larry began, "I know what you are thinking. This is too small for these animals. Well maybe so. They would have no more room at a zoo. If they were sent to the wild they would die."

Leta asked, "How do you know that?"

"They've never been in the wild. They have never hunted for food. They have never been attacked by anything or anyone. I don't think they have the skills to survive. Here they are fed and well taken care of. We actually enjoy working together. Anna can be a pain sometimes, but we love her just the same."

Leta looked at Anna for a second or two. She then walked closer to the cage and began staring at her. The rest of us looked on a little confused. After another moment Leta said, "She's in pain."

Larry said, "What!" as Jinty and I looked at each other, confused.

"Yeah, she has a toothache. Look how she keeps touching the right side of her face with her paw. She's in pain."

Larry, Jinty and I looked at each other. Finally, Larry said "She had a full check- up last year and they looked at her teeth. How do you know she has a tooth ache?"

"Look at her."

Now that it was pointed out we could see that she was favoring that side of her face and hitting it softly with her paw. Jinty then said, "I think she has a toothache."

First the three of us all looked at Anna and then almost in unison turned to look at Leta.

Leta looked back defensively and said "What?"

I asked the question everyone had. "How did you know that?"

Leta started right in. "Well first, listen to her. She's growling and groaning. Can't you hear the difference? Once I got that she was groaning I just looked for signs of what she was complaining about. After a couple seconds I saw the paw thing to the face. Yeah, she has a toothache."

All of us began listening intently. I couldn't hear anything different. Jinty spoke up. "Yeah listen, that's the growl...and that's the groan."

Leta was nodding her head as Larry and I kept listening. Larry said, "Yeah I hear the difference." I still couldn't tell. I never heard any big animal make any kind of noise so I didn't feel bad about not being able to tell the difference between a growl and a groan.

Larry said, "I definitely hear it, I'm calling the vet. " with that he left. The three remaining kept looking at each other. Finally I said, "Leta, you are spooky."

"Come on, I'm not spooky. I just hear better than you do."

Jinty and I looked at each other and without a warning both said, "Spooky."

Leta whined "Guys"

Jinty then said, "OK, not spooky, gifted. You should be a vet."

I was nodding my head as Leta said, "I've really thought about that."

Jinty saw me motion with my eyes to move on and did so gracefully. We said goodbye to Larry, Anna, Abel and Borris. As we were leaving Borris stood up on his back legs and did this kind of dance. He would hop two steps to the left, raise his arms and growl, then hop two steps to the right, raise his arms and growl again. It was great.

Larry said, "Yeah, that is Boris' trick. He loves doing that for people. He likes it when you clap."

We were happy to clap. To our surprise he raised his arms again and growled even louder. He was enjoying this as much as we were. You could tell Leta felt better.

We made it over to the seals to see them splashing around in their own above ground swimming pool. There was a deck with larger than normal stairs obviously designed for them. Jinty called out "Sam."

A couple came out of their trailer. One was obviously Sam and we found out the other was Olga his wife. They both called out "Hi Jinty."

We were introduced to them and to Quincy, Clara and their pup Danny.

Leta walked over to the pool and began playing with the seals. Dad was a little bigger than mom but I couldn't really tell as they swam through the water. Danny was a kick. He was a hog for attention. He kept swimming up to us, clapping his flippers, diving down, swimming up again and clapping.

Olga said, "He wants you to clap for him. He's a ham."

We all began clapping and he kept performing, always coming back for more attention and applause. It was fun. You could tell that Sam and Olga have been interviewed by other people with animal concerns. They started in on their story about how the seal are well taken care of, fed and more importantly loved. The seals travel in the trailer with Sam and Olga and on particularly long journeys they are washed down in the shower. As soon as they arrive at a circus site they set up the pool and

even add the right amount of salt to make it approximate sea water. They sleep pretty much where they want, the pool deck, the yard or in the trailer. They love performing. After a little more playing with Danny we moved on. That ended the animal tour. Jinty walked us back to Madigan who asked, "How do you like my animal family?"

Leta began, "I can see that you take care of them the best you can but I would still rather see them in the wild."

He responded, "You realize that would be the death sentence for many. Many don't have the prerequisite skills for survival."

She said, "They would had they not been captured in the first place."

"None of them were. In most cases it was their parents and in some their grandparents that were captured decades ago."

Leta continued, "No offense Mr. Madigan I just think that circuses and the like should not now or ever existed."

Madigan sighed, "Well I'm afraid you are getting your wish. I appreciate your sincerity. I can tell that you feel for the animals. Larry told me you diagnosed Anna with a toothache. Quite impressive."

Leta tried to shrug off the compliment as Madigan gave her his card and some tickets. He said, "The tickets are for tomorrow night's show. I hope you and a few friends can make it. The card is for you to get in touch with me in a few months. With my retirement I will need some help with placing my family friends. You look like the kind of person that would be helpful."

I thanked him for the tickets as Leta thought through his offer for her to help as well as whether she would be breaking some environmental code by coming to see the circus. After some pondering she said, "Thank you. I will see you tomorrow night."

With that we walked back to our bikes. "OK. There's lots to talk about but I want to start with Anna. How did you do that?"

"I don't know. I guess I listen closer to animals than most people do. I was amazed that you couldn't hear it. Jinty was cool wasn't she?"

"Yeah, Sissy too. Do you believe she is our age? I try to imagine her life."

Leta nodding her head said, "I guess she is trying to imagine ours."

We talked more about each of the animals. I said my favorites were Borris and Danny.

Leta said, "Yeah, Borris is fun loving and always happy. Danny is a kick. I know people who need to be stroked all the time. Danny is cooler."

We got on our bikes and began heading home. Another, out of site day. I had the Animal park in the morning and a private tour of a circus in the afternoon. Now if I can figure out how to hustle another kiss today will be perfect.

As we were getting close to home Leta turned and said, "Great! Our timing is perfect."

I had no idea what she was talking about until I saw the top of a huge balloon starting to rise from a vacant lot just up ahead. We peddled up to short fence in front of the show and got off. We ran as close as we could get. I could tell she had done this before.

There were three separate teams in various stages of lift off. The first thing that got me were the colors of the balloons. They were wild. Most

were multicolored with a Caribbean kind of look. The one that had already taken off was a solid red. You could hear the people talking in the basket of the balloon. The next one had his balloon all spread out on the ground. He was directing the hot air he was making into the bottom. As it started to fill the balloon began to angle up. When it was filled and standing straight the passengers boarded. They looked excited. With all aboard the pilot kept firing the engine that was beneath the balloon and over the basket. Each time he hit the throttle it made a noise like a dragster taking off. When he let go of the throttle the noise stopped instantly. After a couple medium spurts he hit a sustained blast and the balloon rose into the evening sky.

Number three was starting the fill process as a completely different crew drove in and began unloading to become the fourth balloon to take flight. The chase truck for numbers 1 and 2 were pulling out of the lot with hand held radios communicating with their crew. The whole thing was so cool. We kept watching until the last balloon and chase crew had left.

When you looked up you could see all four balloons. It looked like they were following each other. I asked "Where do they go?"

"Southeast. Remember, these guys do this a lot. They choose their take off site depending upon the weather forecast. With these winds, from this location they know pretty much where they are going. They know all the friendly places to land. Now they just try to hit one. I'd love to go up but it costs a hundred dollars."

"I think it's exciting just watching." When we got back to the house I could smell hamburgers and hot dogs cooking on the grill. I was famished again. This environmental stuff makes you hungry. After washing up we sat down with the folks and told circus stories. Leta's dad was particularly interested in Anna. He asked Leta, "Could you hear more than a growl and a groan?"

That was a weird question. I looked at Leta who was obviously thinking about her answer who finally said, "Not really, why?"

He answered, "Sometimes I've felt like I can sense what animals are feeling even saying sometimes."

They looked at each other for a couple seconds and then just nodded. I was the only other one noticing what was going on. My guess is that her dad has some of this 'spooky' stuff going on as well. The subject changed to eating.

As I was gobbling down my second hamburger with a big side of potato salad I noticed Leta was eating a grilled cheese. I asked, "Where did you get that and why?"

"It's a grilled cheese, I made it and I'm a vegetarian, sort of."

I knew in advance this was going to be a bizarre answer but I had to know. "Why and how are you sort of a vegetarian?"

"There's lots of reasons to be a vegetarian, the 'sort of' thing is that I skip sometimes. I love steak."

I knew if I wanted to I could get her raging on about why everybody should not eat animals. I didn't have the strength to go there so I just said, "I know some vegetarians back home. I understand many of the principles but I also know how good meat tastes. I think I'm going to be a carnivore for quite some time."

Leta seemed to think that being a carnivore isn't as bad as wasting water. At least she wasn't looking at me funny with every bite of my hamburger. Finally the subject changed to housing. Mom and dad had looked at a house when I was at the circus. They're still feeling the sticker shock. They kept telling each other that there was no escape. You just have to factor in that rent would be at least \$1,000 more than in St. Louis. Even though they had successfully worked that in to the new needed salary it was still mind blowing spending that kind of money. Tomorrow when Leta's dad and young people are at the beach mom, dad and Sandy are looking at a bunch more houses. Although I'm interested in the final selection, I'm really happy about getting in the ocean.

As we loaded up for the beach I noticed three surf boards were included. Leta was bubbling. Today is the first day that she is going to get to surf. She said, "Dad wouldn't let me try surfing until I could swim 20 lengths of the pool. I did that last week and this is the first trip to the beach since."

Last night this came up when my dad gave me permission to try. Because I was on the swim team, there was no doubt I could pound out 20 lengths at will. Leta still thought I got off easy. We went to Moonlight, which I remembered from the Earth Day meeting. We were actually at the other end of the beach. The spot was chosen because it was a regular swimming beach right next to an area devoted to surfers. We carried all the stuff, spread the blankets and began waxing the boards. Leta took off her sweatshirt. She had on a two piece suit. It wasn't really a bikini like Gwen had on but it sure looked nice on her. I wondered if I should say something like 'you look nice in a swim suit.' Fear ruled and I kept my mouth shut. Dennis, I finally got permission to call him Dennis was starting his instructions with a lot of safety stuff. We did the buddy thing, the stay focused thing and the watch out for the other guy thing a couple times. It appears that one of the problems with surfing is that other surfers might grab the wave that you thought was yours. I guess you kind of learn how to assert yourself just enough.

We were then told that the first couple days are all about falling and getting back up. Wiping out actually. Leta and I decided to get used to the water before we tried the surf thing. It was cold. Somebody said it was 62 degrees. It felt colder than that.

Oh dam. Leta caught me looking at her boobs. This is embarrassing. Again I chose not to say anything in hopes my looking went un-noticed. Wrong again.

"Hey, I've got boobs. There's nothing I can do about it. I guess all guys are wired to look at them whenever they can. Some of the girls at school, like Gwen, sure try to flaunt what they've got. As long as you don't leer at me I think we can both handle it."

I said, "OK, but just for the record, you look nice."

"Thank you."

While the boards were still on the sand we practiced the move that would plague us for the rest of the afternoon. You're lying face down on the board. Then in one fluid motion you move to a crouched position ready to stand. Then all you do is stand up.

The next two parts of the training were actually quite meaningful. How do you get out there? And what do you do when you fall? I've only seen surfing on TV and that little bit the other day after the lagoon walk. It never occurred to me that you have to get through some waves in order to be in a position to ride one. It appears you can either go over an incoming wave or go under it. Going over seemed natural and worked well for the smaller waves we would be practicing on. As the waves get bigger you have to do a 'duck dive'. Before the wave hits you, you push you and the board down, to let the wave pass over your head. That sounds simple but it isn't.

The 'what to do when you fall' lesson was timely. Before I even started I could tell I was going to do a lot of falling. Last year I learned how to snow board on vacation with the folks. The first two days, I fell continually. For both days I was cold, wet and sore. Then magically on day three I was able to make runs without pain. Once you get it, you get it. I thought this was going to be pretty much the same thing.

Leta had gotten a new surfboard for her birthday. For the past month she has been looking at it in her room, waiting for her qualifying swim to use it. I borrowed her mom's board. Here we go.

Either I had gotten used to the cold water or panic tweaked my adrenal glands to the point where temperature wasn't an issue. Dennis, who was wearing a wet suit, paddled out between us. We went over three waves without incident. The three of us formed our own small pack. Dennis showed us what to look for, where to position ourselves and how to 'paddle like hell' when the moment was right. My first attempt was

tragic. That 'moving to the crouch thing' is a little tougher when your board is floating back and forth reacting to you weight being moved around. As I brought my feet up into position my board flew out from under me. I made it back to the surface just in time to see Leta mimic my move.

We looked at each other, both laughing. I said, "I think I've got it now."

"Yeah m,,p, we were both almost perfect. Here we go again."

After another eight tries with pretty much the same results we headed to the beach to rest. Dennis had been helping us on his way by. He kept paddling out and riding in as we kept floundering. He saw us heading to shore and joined us.

As we reached our blankets he said, "Not as easy as it looks huh? Don't worry, you'll get it. You've got to log in the falls for your mind to learn what to tell your body to do."

I thought about that. My mind wasn't telling my body anything. I was just muscling up and hoping for something good to happen. I needed to visualize. Leta and I were both wolfing down some sandwiches we brought with us. I laid back in the warm sun, closed my eyes and tried to 'zoom in' picture each step of the 'getting up' process. Leta looked over and saw I was concentrating on something and asked, "What are you doing?"

I told her. Without any hesitation she began doing the same thing. "I'm watching myself do it wrong, and then I watch myself do it right. I know what I'm supposed to do. Now I can see myself doing it. This is cool."

I chuckled. "Yeah, but now we have to do it in the water. Let's go."

It actually made a difference. We still kept wiping out, but somehow each time I knew specifically what I did wrong. A couple times I just chickened out. I had gotten to the crouch and pretty stable. All I had to do was stand up. My head was higher than before and the view was great and

frightening. The excitement of almost being there caused my brain to shut down. The wipe out followed shortly thereafter.

I was getting tired. I could tell Leta was too. I said, "I'm good for two more waves. Let's get this."

Leta nodded her head as we paddles out again. We both took off on the same wave. As I was falling to the right I could see that Leta was standing. I surfaced as quick as I could to see her still up. I screamed. "Leta, all right. Way to go."

She was waving both arms screaming back. Then she yelled, "Your turn."

Now I'm determined. I've got to do this. My back is against the wall. It's do or die. I kept trying to think of more things to say that would keep me from trying yet again. Finally, here I go.

It started out just like the last thirty or forty attempts. A thought ran through my mind in a millisecond. Don't even think about the crouch position. JUST STAND UP! I don't believe it. I'm up, oh my God, I'm up. I can steer this thing. Oh hell, crash. That's ok, I got up.

Leta was swimming to me yelping. As she got to me she screamed "You did it. We both did it."

Without even thinking about it I got my first salt water kiss and underwater hug. Amazing.

We came into the beach. We were as happy as we were exhausted. Dennis was full of congratulations. As he said he saw both of our positive runs. Leta and I realized that he probably saw those kisses too. He wasn't yelling at us so let's just move on.

I was exhausted. We've got that circus thing tonight. I hope I can schedule a short nap in there to recharge my battery. As we were loading up Dennis got a call on his cell. After a little conversation he said, "OK, we'll see you in about 20 minutes." He hung up and said, "We've got a house to look at."

This is all really happening.

I soon learned that no matter how hard you try, you can't get all the sand out of your bathing suit while you are still wearing it. It made for an annoying trip to my new house. I soon didn't care as we pulled up behind our car that was in a driveway on this cool street. The street was cool because the house was at the end of it, kind of. I found out it was a cul de sac. That's a dead end street with a house at the end. The street got a little wider at the end to make room for the three driveways. Mine was the pie slice in the middle.

The house had three bedrooms, two baths and a two car garage. The back yard was big. Which bedroom was mine was already settled by the time I got there. I couldn't have chosen better. It's way bigger than my room back home, with two windows. The downstairs was cool with a living room and a family room. Everything was better and nicer than I anticipated. My folks kept looking at me for a reaction. Finally I looked over with a smile and said, "Sold."

Leta liked it. My local geography was still limited, but I soon found out it was only five blocks from her house. This is all good. After sufficient ohs and ahs we went back to Leta's where I jumped in the shower to finally get the last of the sand out of my butt.

We unloaded all the beach stuff. Dennis suggested that we grab a nap before our circus trip. As he said it I could tell that he wanted to say "in different rooms" but didn't need to. I am paranoid.

I woke up to the smell of dinner. It was pizza that was delivered to the house. I've never done that before. The moms had made up a big salad to go along. Discussion got to the circus and travel to get there. Sarah's dad was picking up Badger, Woody and then us. Raul was meeting us there. The parking lot was crowded but the van pulled up close to lower the wheel chair. Everybody else knew what to do so the chair got unloaded without much fuss. We found Raul on the way to the Midway. Wow, there is so much to do.

“Let’s go on the rides”, “I want to win a teddy bear”, “I want to eat” were all said when Raul cautioned, “OK, OK, we’ll do all that but remember the show starts at 7:30”

I said, “Hey Leta, let’s ride the cyclone.”

“Let’s go.”

We waited in line for a while but finally got on. The music was so loud. It started out slow but got fast, fast. As it speeded up the centrifugal force pushed Leta into me. I liked this ride. Leta smiled up at me. I could tell she liked it too. A guy talked over the music and asked “Do you want to go faster?”

The crowd screamed yes and it actually got faster. When it stopped the lap bar sprung back and we jumped out and ran down the ramp to the exit. We both had tears running from our eyes. They didn’t run down they ran back towards our ears. We saw Raul and Badger coming down the other side. Everybody’s hair was messed up. We were all talking about how great it was when Sarah, who had been waiting at the bottom said, “For once I didn’t mind being left behind. You guys are nuts.”

We continued walking and stopped for food. I had a cotton candy and Leta had caramel corn. Sarah just wanted a coke. The other guys ran off to play the games. Sarah asked me if I was any good at the games? I joked, “Yeah, the duck pond. You know, winner every time.”

Leta added, “Yeah, you win junk.” We all laughed.

I said, “Some games are impossible, others are just hard.”

Sarah said, “I’ve never seen anyone climb that balance ladder thing except the guy that works there.”

“I know one we can do, the squirt gun.” Leta said.

In Raul’s absence, I had become the pusher for Sarah. That was OK except when you had to go over those cables that run from the generators to

the rides. I never noticed them before. It made me wonder how many more hassles Sarah must go through on things that I take for granted. I could tell that Leta has been through this thought process before.

As we got to the squirt gun the other guys showed up. Raul was carrying a teddy bear that he quickly gave to Sarah. Woody handed Leta a three inch plastic frog that had a suction cup on the bottom. I could tell that you stuck it on a flat surface. After a second or two it unstuck and jumped. Woody said, "It cost me more for this dumb frog than Raul spent on the bear.

Raul said, "I got lucky at the baseball throw." Everyone smiled at the modesty of the school's starting pitcher."

I said, "We want to shoot the squirt gun."

Woody said, "Cool, let's go."

There were ten numbered spots at the game, we took five. The guy working the game was calling out for others to play. He got three more. Spot #1 was cut away for easier access for wheel chairs. I guess there are lots of Sarahs out there.

Raul said, "The secret is to get the first squirt in and then keep it steady." The bell rang and we all began shooting. Your balloon would blow up as the water from your gun hit the target. You had to force yourself not to look at your balloon or anything else and just keep hitting your target. Just then a different bell rang as my balloon popped. "I won!" Everybody cheered. The guy came over and gave me a bear about half the size of what Raul gave Sarah. I gave it to Leta and said, "It's smaller than Sarah's."

Leta said with a big grin, "I love it just the same."

Raul said, "We better get to the big top to get our seats before the circus starts." Everybody agreed. We started our way to the tent entrance. Because of the wheel chair we got special seating. We were just settling

in as the lights dimmed and a spot light shown on the ringmaster, Madigan.

He looked a lot different, with his top hat, tails and high boots then the nice man we talked to yesterday.

I never really thought about a circus band before. Actually, I never really thought about a circus before but anyway. Most bands play songs. This band did that but the primary purpose was to add percussion or a brass 'da da' after some kind of trick. I watched for it. Whenever the acrobats finished a floor exercise run, the band would punctuate it with sound. Also, if there was a suspenseful moment before a trick was begun the snare drum would hammer out a rhythm until the conclusion when the rest of the band joined in the celebration of the trick's conclusion.

Clowns are dumb. They aren't funny and barely silly. A bunch of them climb out of a tiny car. One chases another with a bucket of water, throws it at another with the intended over splash going on a member of the audience. It's not water, it's confetti. It's not funny either.

We had told everyone about the people we met on our tour. Everybody loved Jinty, her boyfriend Kevin and the rest of the acrobats. The hit was Sissy. Knowing that she was our age was kind of crazy. We all clapped for her tight rope stuff, but gave a standing ovation for her flyer tricks. She saw us and gave us a wave. The rest of the flyer act was way cool.

I guess our favorite was Danny the pup seal. The whole act was good but the scene stealer was Danny raising his flippers encouraging the audience to clap for him. Leta and I looked at each other with a silent memory visit to yesterday. We both had big smiles.

The elephants were ok. When Larry came on he began introducing Anna, Abel and Borris. His description of each was totally wrong. He kept saying darkest Africa, or 50 miles from the Taj Majal or the Rocky Mountains because saying they are all zoo kids wasn't too exciting. Two things in the act were cool. Larry got all three animals to go through this mini obstacle course as the crowd shouted, "Over under around and through, take a

bow and start anew. In and out, to and from, now you're back to where you begun. The three animals pretty much kept up with the chant. We had to stop once as Anna needed a little prodding from Larry.

The other neat thing was Borris' dance. He got the crowd leaning left and then right as he went back and forth. We even growled with him at the end. Very cool.

Two crazy guys finished the show. First was Motorcycle Martin dressed in red, white and blue leather. There was a big ramp with a huge gap before you had a down ramp. Suspended on top was a ring that would be lit on fire. The idea was for Martin to speed up the ramp, jump through the fiery ring and then land on the down ramp. Prior to the jump he and Madigan talked back and forth trying to make it more exciting. I've seen enough motorcycle jumps on TV where this wasn't that thrilling.

The show ended with this pudgy guy, barely fitting into this cannon, and then being blasted up in the air, then down to the waiting net at the other end of the big top. It was pretty cool actually.

We were getting up to leave as we were surprised by Jinty and Sissy coming over to say hello. Our guys all felt special being introduced to real performers. We talked a little as the crowd shuffled, waited and shuffled out the exit. After we said goodbye to our new friends we walked out without having a crowd to deal with.

Sarah had called her dad just before fat guy took flight. I wanted to sneak in another cyclone ride with Leta but the plan to leave was now set. We were able to squeeze everyone in. It was just a mile before Raul and Badger got out. Then it was on to home.

All the moms and dads asked about the circus. I could tell that Dennis and Sandy were figuring out if it would be fun for Bradley. You could see them nodding at each other then telling Brad. He was stoked. We were reminded that we have church in the morning. I was told to look for something nice to wear. I was going to say that I didn't think God cared

but decided not to be a jerk after such an incredible day. I just nodded compliance.

Leta and I went for a walk. She and I both knew that kissing would be involved. I think Dennis knew too. I'm still paranoid. Leta led me to a place in the backyard that had a bench. It didn't look like a place for a bench. I soon found out that the bench was there because it was the best place for looking at the stars. The opening in the trees gave the widest view and the darkness helped the visibility. I really liked the dark part.

After our second kiss Leta said, "I need to say this. I really like kissing you and hugging is fun too. I know there are a bunch of kids at school that are doing a lot more than us. Actually, it's hard to believe the stuff I'm hearing. I'm not there."

"Me either. I'm so happy with the way things are. I wouldn't feel comfortable moving any faster and I especially like that we mean something to each other. It's not just some random person. Kissing you not only feels great, it's special. I know I'm going to miss kissing you when I go back home for a month."

I could see that Leta was thankful that we both felt the same. Smiling she said, "You better store some up for your trip"

Excellent idea.

CHURCH

The next morning we all had this real big breakfast. Bacon, eggs, pancakes, home fries and that great orange juice were enjoyed by all. Leta skipped the bacon. After clean up it was time for 10:00 church. We probably could have all fit in Sandy's van but decided to take two cars. It was only just over a mile.

When we got there Brad went to Church School. We found out there was no youth group because it was spring break and lots of kids were traveling. We just went to church.

Their choir was good but old fashioned. The service was just like at home. The one big difference was that their priest was a woman. I've know we've had women priests for a while. I've just never been to a service run by one. Her sermon was ok. I didn't see any other differences. When it was over we had to stand in line so we could meet the priest and some other folks.

We then went to coffee hour. They had cold drinks and pastries too. I was still stuffed from breakfast. Some guy that was older than our folks came over looking for Leta. He asked, "Hey Leta, have you got a minute?"

Leta said, "Sure, let me start by introducing my friend Luis, who is moving here from St Louis. This is Tim. He's cool. He cooks for the homeless, does ministry work in prison and tells great stories."

I shook Tim's hand and said, "Prison huh? How'd you get into that?"

Tim Answered, "Yeah, I'm a bottom rung guy. I always get more than I give. It's all good. Leta, you might be able to help me with a problem."

Leta said, "For you Tim, anything. What have you got?"

"Rabbits in trouble."

Leta lit up like it was Christmas morning. "What have you got, what can I do?"

Tim began, "I've had these rabbits living under my deck. They kept growing in number as rabbits do. Then they went away. It was weird. I had a bunch of them and then they all moved across the street to this big vacant parcel."

"Maybe they needed more room and they took the whole family with them."

Tim said, "Yeah I think so and that's ok with me but I think they're in trouble. They're developing that land, which is a big pain in the butt for me but I'm afraid it could kill them. I know your reputation so I figured you might know someone that could help them. Had you not come to church today I was going to call you."

Go figure. Leta has a network of people that know she is committed to the environment and everything in it. Especially rabbits. She said, "I'm a member of the Wildlife Preservation Society. They deal with stuff like this, fighting developers and actually moving animals to safer ground."

Tim said, "I knew you'd know somebody that could help. What do we do?"

"I'll ask my folks if I can get a ride out to your place. I'd like to see this first hand before I make any calls."

Tim offered, "If it's ok with your folks I can drive you. I'll bring you home when you're done."

"Let me check."

As we looked for Leta's folks I asked, "Are you sure about this guy?"

"OH God yes. 15 years ago he started feeding the homeless a hot meal every Friday. He's been there every Friday since. When I'm out of school and can get a ride I come and help. Besides, I have you to protect me."

We both laughed. She got the nod and we got in Tim's car to go see rabbits. On the way Tim told this bizarre story about how they are building this big thing. To do so they need to put in a new bridge. To put in the bridge the street he lives on is being raised 9 feet. Leta and I looked at each other and then at Tim with a look of "really."

"Yeah, crazy I know. But it's true. The street at the end of my driveway is going up 9 feet. The city is turning my driveway into a boat ramp dropping nine feet until it touches my current driveway near my house."

I asked, "Can they do that?"

He responded, "Well they are. I've been negotiating with them for two years. I've been so worried about my problems that I totally forgot about the rabbits. They've got equipment on site to clear the vegetation."

Leta added, "And everything that lives there. We've got to stop this."

Oh boy here we go. Instantly a picture flashed to my mind of Leta lying down in front of a bulldozer. I'd be willing to bet that the City wasn't planning on Leta. This is going to be something big.

When we got out of the car we walked to the end of the driveway. You could tell that Tim had told this story many times before. His gestures

were great. He lifted his hands over his head with the index fingers pointing up indicating that the road would rise higher than he was reaching. He then walked the front property line with a two armed gesture showing how a hill would slope down to his grass. He then walked his driveway showing the 'boat ramp' image. I couldn't picture any city doing that to a home owner. I said, "It just isn't fair."

Tim paused and then said, "Well, you're right it is probably not fair. Sometimes sacrifices have to be made to support the greater good. What wouldn't be fair would be if they did this and didn't pay me for the damages. We're in final negotiations. I hope it turns out ok. None of that helps the rabbits."

Leta asked, "Is it ok if I go over there and check it out?"

"Go ahead. They've got that orange fence up for no apparent reason. To get through you have to go over there." He said as he pointed to the break in the fence.

Leta and I crossed the street and made our way to the fence entrance. As we moved she gestured for me to be quiet. We came upon an adult rabbit. What happened next was real spooky. I mean way, over the top, really out there spooky.

RABBITS

Leta started talking to the rabbit. Although I couldn't hear what the rabbit was saying, it was obvious that he was talking to her. It was kind of like when you hear someone talking on a cell phone. You can't hear the other guy so you just get half of the conversation. Then you try to figure out what he is saying by the responses that you hear. So I heard, all coming from Leta, Hello, I am a friend, I am Leta, That's a nice name, I want to help, I will try, I will find out, I will bring a friend that can help us, Tomorrow at this time,

Don't be afraid, How many are in your family,
Really?,

Tomorrow, this time, good bye,

The rabbit ran away, Leta turned to me and I said, "We've got to talk."

Leta motioned to a big boulder that was a dozen paces away. We walked over, sat down and Leta said, "OK, I know this is weird or spooky as you say, but you have to hear me out. I thought this might happen so I've

been practicing how to tell you. Let me just ramble or I'll screw it up. Yeah, I can hear animals. For the most part I understand what they are saying. I don't know how or why but I can hear what they are saying. I've been noticing it more and more lately. At first I just thought it was coincidences that I thought what the animals thought because I was tuned into them. But I started hearing words and knowing what they meant. You noticed it, didn't you?"

"Yeah, certainly with Anna but even before that with the butterflies."

Leta said, "Yeah, I said it was noisy. That was a mistake."

"Only if you are trying to keep it a secret. Hey, you don't have to convince me, I believe it. I've seen it. You have a gift. If anyone was going to be given such a gift, I can't think of a more caring and loving person to get it. I don't know what you do with it."

Leta shrugged and said, "First we help Gary and his family."

I said, "Gary, huh, How big is Gary's family?"

"47 and four mommas with babies in their bellies."

I tried to stay calm as I said, "That's Dalmatian level. What are you going to do with all those rabbits?"

"I don't know, but it's actually worse than that."

I thought for a second then said, "When you tell your wildlife people what you know they will wonder at best how you found out. We need to keep a lid on this until we get some advice. This is life changing. We need to talk to your dad. He's got some of this spooky stuff too."

Leta was nodding her head. "Yeah his questions about Anna showed he understands something. I certainly need to talk to him and I want Raul too. Maybe Sarah."

“You know if the word gets out you could end up a freak show. You could be a show in Madigan’s circus. I don’t know how you got this gift but you need to be responsible in how you use it.”

“I know, I know. I couldn’t sleep last night. I didn’t know about the rabbits then but I talked to Screech. My God, I talked to Screech.”

I could see she was border line losing it. I needed to soften things up a little. “How’s Screech doing?”

We both laughed and hugged, She was almost crying when she said, “He’s doing fine. He thinks we kiss too much.”

“I never trusted that owl.” Again we laughed.

Finally I said, “Let’s try to be adult here. We know we have to talk to your dad. Who else do you want there?”

After a pause she said, “Raul and Sarah.”

“OK, let’s go home and make it happen.”

We got back to Tim’s. As he was driving us home he asked what’s next. Leta said she would contact the Wildlife people and probably come back tomorrow.

I was sitting there knowing that I knew one of the biggest secrets, ever. When and if this gets out lots of bad things could happen to Leta. Once you get over the spooky part you think what a great gift for my friend to have. Then you think about how bad people could use it. It’s a small problem by comparison but Leta could have paparazzi following her. God, she would hate that. Yeah, we need her dad.

When we got home Leta asked her dad if he and mom would be available for an hour or two sometimes today. Her Dad came back with a little fear in his eyes and suggested a 5:00 meeting after an early Sunday dinner. Sarah and Raul were called and said they could make it, only knowing it was important but not what it was about.

My mom and dad saw that something was going on so they took Brad for an ice cream as Sarah and Raul arrived. We all gathered on the back patio. Everybody was a bit nervous.

Leta began, "Ok, I can see everyone is a bit shaky. I'm not pregnant. I'm not gay and I am not joining a nunnery. I can talk to animals."

Pause.

Finally Dennis said, "You mean you can listen to animals. Do they know what we are saying?"

"The smarter ones do."

Sandy, Raul and Sarah were looking at each other knowing that they are behind in the game. It was evident that Leta, Dennis and I were at a different place in understanding what Leta was saying. Finally Sandy said looking at her husband, "OK, my daughter can talk to animals and you know about it. Maybe knowing is the wrong word, you aren't surprised?"

As Dennis was preparing to answer his wife Raul said, "Have you adequately tested this?"

Leta said, "Yes."

I said, "Yeah, I saw it firsthand. It is amazing. She doesn't know how she got it or why but she can definitely hear and understand animals."

Sarah broke in, "Congratulations Leta. What a gift. What a great person to get this gift. It makes sense if anyone could talk to animals it should be Leta."

Sandy was still waiting for Dennis' reply. He said, "There have been times when I thought I could understand what animals were saying. I dismissed it as some weird thing going on in my head. When Leta told the Anna the tiger story I thought she might have the ability at some level. It appears you have it to the extreme. The question now is how do we handle this?"

Sandy actually stood up to better make her point. "OK, OK, I get it. Isn't anybody else as amazed, dare say shocked that my daughter can do what nobody else on the planet, with the possible exception of her father, can do? This isn't playing tennis well or piano. This is communicating with other species." Then looking directly at Leta, "Does it scare you?"

"A little." She ran and hugged her mom.

The rest of us looked on and felt good. Finally Sarah asked, "Do we tell people?"

Everyone said, almost in unison, "No."

Sarah asked again, "Well what do we do?"

Leta lifted her head from the comfort of her mom's shoulder and said, "Well, first thing is I have to save 47 rabbits."

With that the discussion turned to Tim and his rabbits. I told the story of the development, the bridge and the necessary raising of the street by nine feet. That part of the story was almost as shocking as listening to animals. Leta took over the story telling as she described Gary and his plight.

The conversation moved to the practical. Dennis volunteered to find out what contractor was clearing the land and his schedule. Leta said she would go to the Wildlife web site to find out what she can and get the number for an early morning call. Sandy said she would clear her schedule so she could drive Leta wherever she had to go.

I was amazed how it took just a moment for everybody to work on a problem, knowing that they would be using Leta's gift. It was so 'matter of fact' as if it was no big deal that, this one in a billion person was my friend standing before me.

Once the rabbit plan was worked out we got back to the bigger issue. Sarah asked, "What good can you do with your gift?"

Everyone paused then I said, "She would be a great veterinarian."

Raul said, "Actually she would be a diagnostician. Lots of people can be trained to fix. Leta would be unique in determining what's wrong."

Sandy said, "Like a horse whisperer."

Raul again, "Yeah an animal whisperer who hears whispers."

Dennis said, "I imagine there are hundreds of situations that could benefit by having dialogue between man and some gathering of animals. What bothers me is what bad could be done if you had control of Leta?"

I said, "I bet if you owned a commercial fishing fleet you could fill your boats a lot quicker if you had Leta on the flag ship."

"I would never do that." Leta responded quickly.

Raul said, "You would if they held your family hostage."

She flashed back, "Come on."

I said, "Leta, it's true. In that example a corporate fishing giant could make millions with your power. Come on, you know greed makes people do crazy things."

I was surprised to hear Sandy say, "Some crazy Jungle General wouldn't mind having animals in his ranks. We need to think about security."

Raul said, "I have the first suggestion. " He looked at Leta's folks. "You made a vow on your wedding day. The rest of us probably have never made such a promise. I say that now, we all vow, or promise before God, never to reveal anything we know about Leta's gift."

Silence came over the group. I broke it by saying, "I promise, no I vow never to tell anyone anything about Leta's gift."

Without hesitation everyone including her parents said, "I vow."

I had never made a vow before. On three occasions I promised and said 'cross my heart and hope to die'. That worked one of the three times. Once my grades had dropped to almost all 'c's', at the same time I was asking permission to join the swim team. My dad, while looking directly into my eyes asked for a promise to bring my grades up. While looking back I promised. That meant something and I complied. But a vow is a whole level beyond even that.

You could tell that everyone was exhausted from the weight of the conversation. The meeting broke up just as my folks and Brad came home. Sarah called her dad for a ride. She and Raul left with normal farewells. Sandy went into the house as Leta and her dad took a walk. I just sat in the chair and tried to re-think all that happened today. It was mind blowing.

I looked over and saw Dennis and Leta walking up the driveway. He had his arm around her. They gave each other a big hug as they parted. She ran over to me and said, "What's new?"

It started with a grin that soon moved to a chuckle. This intense mixture of feelings drove both of us to a silly place. I started, "I went in the ocean for the first time."

"Oh really, I finally got to use my new surfboard."

While laughing, "Oh yeah, I went surfing too. I fell a hundred times or so."

Leta quickly said, "Me too, but I got up."

"Yeah, I did too. I kissed a beautiful girl in the water. That was nice."

Leta again with laughter, "I got kissed and hugged too."

"I think the girl's father saw me kissing her."

"I know he did."

"I saw my new house. I've got two windows in my room and a big back yard."

"I went to the circus, twice actually and met people who perform there. Oh yeah Anna the tiger said she had a toothache."

I said, "Yeah well today I went to church."

"How was it?"

Still laughing, "Boring, just like home until I met this guy with a rabbit problem."

"Well that's interesting, what did you do?"

I added, "I went to his house and saw that he used to have rabbits but they moved across the street. Then he found out that his street is going to move nine feet up in the air and they are building something big where an open field is now."

Still laughing, "Nine feet huh. Yeah, that happens a lot. I walked across that street and met a rabbit named Gary."

"Gary is a nice name for a rabbit. What did he say."

"He said unless I do something, he and 46 members of his family are going to die."

I said, still laughing, "You found this out because you can talk to rabbits? Can lots of people do that?"

"First, it's listening not talking. Everybody can talk but for some reason I can listen to what they say. Not just rabbits all kinds of animals. And no, my gift is very rare."

"Well good for you."

Leta stood up, still laughing but getting somber and said, "Yeah but it appears there is a drawback. If bad people find out what I can do they will want me to cause a million tuna to jump in their boats."

"I like tuna sandwiches."

"Yeah, tuna might be cheap for a while, until I kill them all. Unless a different bad guy, this time a Jungle General forces me to have all the lions and leopards attack the villagers who don't believe he is God. He keeps me on a leash like Jabba the Hut held Princess Leah while his soldiers hold a machete to Brother Brads throat. They are persuasive."

I said with the voice of a hero, "Don't worry. Raul and I will come in like Hans Solo and Luke Skywalker to save you and your brother."

Leta knew it was her turn. She paused and then said sadly, "Of all the crazy stuff we just said, that's the only part that isn't true."

This fun game had ended in a bad reality. We quit laughing and hugged. After a while of not saying anything I said, "I vow to protect you."

Leta looked up through her tears, smiled and kissed me.

The next morning was weird. Actually the weirdness that had already started got even more weird. I think this is the first time I actually hid something from my parents. I knew there would be a time that that would come. What I didn't expect was to have other adults in the conspiracy.

The two dads left for work. About an hour later Dennis called home with the message that the clearing process won't begin until Thursday. He also found out that they are starting on the other end and won't get to the rabbits until early next week. That news gave us a little breathing room.

Leta had been on the computer and telephone all morning without much luck. She had clicked through a number of organizations. The major

thrust of all the web pages was to send money. As she clicked, and dialed she kept coming up with organizations that would take wild rabbits into a shelter to later be given out as pets. Nobody was set up to move a family of rabbits to a different location. Finally she came upon the name of a guy who had relocated a couple foxes. She called and left a message.

Sandy had called Tim to ask permission for Leta and I to use his home as a base camp while we did our rabbit thing. Tim was more than agreeable. Sandy and I didn't have to lie, actually, as we responded to my mom's questions about today's plans. It was awkward not telling the whole truth.

When we got to Tim's house, he was smiling and inviting as always. He and Sandy talked for a while after introducing my mom. Leta and I went across the street to talk to Gary. When we got there we found two rabbits. Again, I just stood there and watched Leta communicate with these two new furry friends. The one third of the conversation that I heard went something like this.

Hello Gary. Nice to meet you Jack. Brothers huh. I am trying to help. I would never hurt you.

I don't even eat meat. I have no reason to hurt you I don't know that yet

Yes yes They start in a couple days yes No, over there

They'll be here in a week Yes seven days I'm working on it

No I'm working on it Yes I know how important it is To me too

You're right But I am concerned, I do care Thank you

As soon as I find out I will be back
I know

Hopefully tomorrow

Hopefully tomorrow
I'm really trying

By the way, this is Louis, he cares too

OK, hopefully tomorrow
tomorrow

You're welcome

Yes, hopefully

The two rabbits hopped away. I looked at Leta. "They're scared huh?"

"Petrified."

I said, "You have no idea how weird it is listening to one end of a conversation. Let me see if I got it. There's a brother Jack. He doesn't trust you. He thinks you are trying to trick them so you can eat them, or kill them."

Leta responded, "Yeah, well it makes sense. I'm the first human that ever heard them. That's weird enough along with other humans using big machines to kill them. A little fear is in order. I think he trusts me now. He's aware now of the timing and hopeful I'm going to pull a rabbit out of my hat."

"Leta, really."

Smiling she said, "I had to. I'm nervous. I haven't got a plan."

"Yet."

"Yeah, yet. I haven't talked to anyone that does what I need."

I asked, "Think about it, What do we need?"

Up until this moment Leta had thought the answer to the problem was finding someone who relocates rabbits. Now as we look at the problem differently the answer appears to be, How do we relocate rabbits? I

could see that Leta came to the same realization. She said, "OK, If we are to do this, what do we need."

I paused for a second and then said, "We need a safe location."

"And a way of getting them there. A truck. I can get a truck."

I asked, "How do you get them in the truck. We catch all the rabbits, put them in cages, load the cages.."

"Wait. We don't need no stinkin' cages. We need a ramp."

"Like Noah?"

She said, "Kind of. Yeah two by two. The rabbits have to help too. I need to check with the boys."

We walked back to where we met with the rabbits.

Leta called out for Gary and Jack. They were already there. Wait a minute. I couldn't really tell them apart yet but the one with the spot had followed us to the boulder and was listening to what we said. After a second of feeling a little outsmarted I realized that their eavesdropping solved the problem of trust. They heard our true intentions when we thought we were alone. They, especially Jack, trust us.

As Leta looked around and figured out that the rabbits knew our intentions, she asked, "Tell me what I'm looking for in a place for you to settle?"

Jack said and Leta translated , "First it needs to be something that the humans won't build on."

"There's a lot of that. There are canyons that will never be developed."

To me there was a pause while Jack and Leta discussed more particulars. After a couple minutes of what appeared to be a one sided conversation,

Leta shared, "Any canyon would be big enough. Having access to water was the next big concern. They like fallen trees. When the subject of coyotes, foxes and the like came up I said, 'Hey, I'm protecting you from humans. You've got to take care of the coyotes yourself.' They quickly agreed but said letting them out next to a 10 coyote pack would be unwise. When I confessed that I don't know where coyotes are, Jack suggested that I pick out a site or two and let him look it over."

I said, "Wait a minute, they want a scouting party to check out the site before we move the whole family. Actually that makes sense. We just need a car for that. It's like the real estate lady with my mom. She showed her some houses and then mom made her choice. Yeah, Dad and I in theory got a vote but mom had already made up her mind. Jack wants to go shopping for houses. "

I heard Leta say to the boys, "Yeah he is funny. But he's right. I will call my mom and see if we can go today. If so, I'll have to pick you up and put you in the car with us. Are you OK with that? We'll check out a couple canyons and you choose. Then a day or two later I will get a truck to move the whole family."

She paused, obviously listening to one or both of them. Then she filled me in. "Jack wants to spend the night at a site. He said it's necessary for lots of reasons. That means at least two car trips and then one truck move. I think mom and dad will help with this."

I said, "Why don't you tell them that we need to leave to call your mom. Depending upon her schedule we could do this today."

"You just did." Yeah, I've got to remember that they can hear me. It's just that I can't hear them. I keep forgetting. I said, "Yeah, right. I'm sorry. But that is the situation isn't it?"

Leta said, "Yeah we need to go across the street and call mom. Then come back here with a time for pick up. How many need to go on this first trip?"

There was a pause and then, Yeah, we can do that. We'll be back in a little bit."

With that she turned and began walking towards the fence. I followed for a second and then asked, "How many on the recon party?"

"Two maybe three."

THE RECON

Leta called her mom and filled her in on the situation. Timing was good because my mom was going to what would be my new school to get me registered for next year. After that she wanted to do some shopping for the new house. Sandy was free.

While we were waiting we talked about places that might work. Water was the issue. I asked about Lake Hodges. Leta agreed that that was a worthwhile possibility. She said there is another smaller lake way up the hill from Tim's house that could work also. Then I said, "I don't know if this would work but we passed a small lake on the bike ride to the dam. I don't know the name of it but it looked like it could work."

Leta said, "Yeah, I know the one you are talking about, I don't know the name either, Lago Linda I think, but it looked like it could work. You know it's not like we are trying to provide an ocean view or convenience to shopping. They're still rabbits. We just need enough room, no human

development and water. I think the three we just mentioned should be enough for Jack to choose from.”

“Sounds like a plan. How long did your mom say she would be?”

“Should be about 15 minutes. Lets go tell the boys.”

We went back to the warren and called out for Gary and Jack. They appeared with two other adult rabbits. After a quick hello Gary introduce his uncle and father. I could tell that they were the resident wise rabbits of the family. The boys wanted them involved in the decision and wanted them to see the female human that could actually listen. As Leta translated I learned that their names were Ben and Harper.

I was getting better at understanding a conversation by only hearing Leta talk, followed by silence. If I didn’t understand she would fill me in on what I missed. The plan was to take Gary, Jack and Harper, the dad, on the first trip. Once a site was selected then Jack would spend the night. The next day, if all went well then three or four would go to make initial preparations for the family. Leta told them that we would be back in a couple minutes when her mom arrived. There was an obvious place to park. Leta reminded them that we would need to pick them up for them to get in the car. They all nodded. We went back to Tim’s to wait for Sandy.

When she got there we loaded up after a quick chat with Tim. Leta said, “Mom, this is going to be weird at first. Remember they can hear and understand you. You just can’t hear them. They’re nice. They are very scared and for the first time they are trusting me, a human.”

Sandy said, “A very special human.”

“Yeah, they think I am special.”

I said, “So do I.”

“Yeah, but they’re thinking like supernatural or something kind of special.”

I said, "Ok, well I'm starting to believe them."

Sandy and Leta both looked at me. Then Leta gave me a smile.

We pulled up and parked. Leta and I got out to get the boys. When we arrived the three were waiting. Leta asked, "Are you ready?"

She could tell by their hesitancy that they were scared. She consoled them. "Come on guys, you know we aren't going to hurt you."

After a while Leta said to me that they were afraid of the car. They have always looked at cars as nasty monstrous machines that kill animals. I thought it would be like climbing in to an alien spacecraft. If I were them I would be afraid too. They followed us to the car. Sandy was sitting there just trying to remain calm. Leta carefully lifted Gary and put him in the back seat. I picked up the older rabbit, Harper, and did the same. When Leta picked up Jack, he asked to ride up front. I got in the back as Leta and Jack got in the front.

As Leta was introducing her mom it came over me just how weird this whole thing is. Sandy felt the same way. She started out the same way I did with telling Leta to tell them that she is happy to help them and their family. When Leta said, "You already did." I saw how Sandy was trying to work it all through in her mind. I could see her saying to herself, "They can hear me but I can't hear them'. It took a while to get your mind around it.

As we started the mile and a half drive to the first site all rabbits climbed on laps to look out the windows. I had two. They were standing on my legs with their front feet against the window. Jack was doing the same thing in the front with Leta. They looked like dogs riding in the car. Leta put down her window. Jack freaked out, first at power windows and then at the wind blowing in his face. After a second or two he liked it. Leta suggested I do the same. God they were fun to watch.

We got to the first site. After a bit of a rabbit huddle it was decided that Jack and Leta would make the first quick inspection. That turned out to

be a good plan when Jack noticed the many poison pellets that were spread around. This small lake was a popular walking or running trail. It was city owned. They wanted to control the wildlife population so it presented no danger to the walkers. Rabbits aren't dangerous, but if you have rabbits you get coyotes. This site wasn't going to work. It was so funny watching Leta and Jack walk along the path together talking to each other. They returned to the car and we were off to site two.

My knowledge of local geography is such that I didn't know where we were going. I was busy enough balancing two rabbits on my lap watching their ears flop with the wind from the open windows. I recognized the second site when we drove up. This was the lake I saw on the bike trip. With all of us looking out the windows Sandy was able to drive around the lake. In a couple places the roads turned from the lake but then came back in close. When we got back to where we started Gary asked if we could go around again. Sandy agreed post translation. We stopped after the second trip.

Where we parked was quite deserted. All around us there were mansions on huge lots. This looked like a real upscale neighborhood. My family couldn't afford to live here but it had strong possibilities for Jack's family. We all got out. Leta started talking, pointing out that the area could never be built upon. The water was present all year, even in the hottest of summers. She also mentioned that some coyote presence is possible but the rich people that live near here would never let that population get out of hand. She sounded like a real estate lady.

Jack said that they'd be back in a couple minutes. The three of them ran off. Sandy was happy to be able to talk freely. "This is so hard for my head to grasp. I'm watching these wild animals communicate with my daughter. This whole 'they can hear but I can't hear' thing is a mind blower too. I can't believe you can do this. It's wonderful, I think."

I said, "Yeah I know. I've got a one day head start on what you are thinking. Even after a day it's still weird. I think it's great what we are

trying to do. They are nice rabbits who are in trouble through no fault of their own.

Sandy said with a grin, "I'm glad it isn't coyotes we're moving, or porcupines."

Leta added, "How about skunks?"

We all laughed as I added, "Yeah Leta, you might have been on your own."

After a little more nervous conversation we saw the trio returning. We had a meeting in front of the car. Jack started out telling us that this was a good site. There was a presence of predators that came through the site, but no evidence of any dens of foxes or coyotes. The water was good and there was enough natural resources for him to build a defense for a warren. The whole lake and significant shore line is surrounded by a chain link fence. Jack already found a spot that he could use for the family entrance. The fence is a plus because it will ward off many possible predators. Leta asked if he wanted to look at the third site but he said it wasn't necessary. He felt he could work well with this one.

The plan was for Jack to spend the night and for us to return tomorrow mid-afternoon. If the inspection turned out well then tomorrow we would drop off the work party of three more rabbits. Then if we could check two days later we would know when to schedule the big move. It all seemed so weirdly normal. Jack said goodbye to his brother and dad, said thank you to us and ran off quickly into the bush. We loaded up Gary and Harper and began the trip back.

When we got back to Tim's we decided not to go in. Instead we went to the place we loaded up before. We all liked Tim but we didn't want him watching what was going on. It's hard to explain picking up and returning rabbits without letting on what Leta can do.

We dropped off our friends and arranged to pick them up tomorrow afternoon. They agreed and ran back to their home. The three of us

headed home. It took a couple minutes to break the silence. I started, "Well Sandy, how was that for you?"

"I want to say weird but that isn't right. I think the best word is magic. Yeah, that was magic."

Leta said, "Yeah, Magic is good. I am so happy that I am able to help. "

I said, "You are rescuing almost fifty animals. And now after communicating with them they aren't just animals. You are saving fifty friends."

That night it got weird, again. Mom started telling me the courses I would be taking next year. It was the standard college entrance program . I had all the regular history, math, English and science stuff. The choices she made for me that she wanted me to approve were a computer class and Spanish. I thought both were cool. I still felt guilty about not being able to share this incredible story about Leta. Hey a vow is a vow.

Leta could see my discomfort. Before talking to me she went to her dad and asked to expand the group that 'knew' to include my mom and dad. He thought about it for a moment and then agreed. We waited until Brad was in bed and then began the story.

Initially their reaction was one of "you're kidding". When they saw that Dennis and Sandy were nodding their heads it became easier for them to believe. We went through the whole thing including Anna, butterflies and finally rabbits and the current project. Once they accepted this crazy story they immediately volunteered to help.

This was good in lots of ways. It certainly made me feel better about not having to lie to my folks. It also eliminated our need for a truck. With Sandy driving her car and mom driving ours we wouldn't need a truck. After the talk died down Leta and I went for a kissing walk.

I said, "You know you didn't have to include my parents."

"I saw how uncomfortable you were, besides this makes it easier."

I said, "I know, but thank you just the same. Tomorrow we move the work party. I think we should leave my mom home for this one and just use her for the big move. The rabbits are nervous enough."

Leta said, "Yeah, they're going to be nervous enough. If Dad's schedule is right the clearing of the other side begins tomorrow. That will freak them out."

After a wonderful amount of making out we went in the house. Dad was still awake and wanted to talk.

He began, "Are you OK with all that is going on?"

"Actually I'm great Dad. You got the job, I'm moving to California, I've got great new friends and one of them happens to talk and listen to animals."

"Yeah, about that one.."

"Leta."

"Yeah Leta. Her gift is bizarre. Being a friend of a person with such an unusual gift will be a game changer for you."

"I can handle it Dad."

"OK, about you and Leta."

Here it comes. This is the first time that I have ever been close to a girl. Our kissing has been noticed by all. I could tell that Dad wanted to do "the talk"

I figured I could make it easier if I began. "Dad, yeah the Leta animal thing is big and way unusual. I know that everyone knows that Leta and I really get along and we show that to each other. First, I understand all the human plumbing stuff. What is more important is that Leta and I are both new at this kissing thing and we like it. We both know what some of the other kids are doing and we aren't ready. Even if we didn't have this crazy

animal thing going on we still wouldn't be ready. We both decided we've got time for that later on. We're doing OK Dad."

I could tell he was relieved but not completely. He said, "That's great Luis. You know I like Leta. I couldn't picture a better girlfriend for you. That doesn't mean I don't worry about your animal instincts. I've always trusted you. I guess I'm going to trust you again. This is a confusing time in your life even if you didn't pick a girl that can do what nobody else on the planet can do. Continue to be smart son."

"I will Dad, I will."

I think we made that as easy on each other as we could. I went to bed thinking about Leta and rabbits, in that order.

The next day Sandy, Leta and I drove over to meet the boys. When we got there we saw a bunch of rabbits gathered to meet us. I thought I've never seen seven rabbits in one place before. The machines had started digging early that morning and they were scared. Leta and I were surprised at the size of the work party and asked Gary, "Are all these rabbits coming?"

"If that's OK?"

Leta said, "Yeah, sure. I hope Jack still likes the site after his visit."

Gary said, "We all do."

Leta asked Gary if everybody has been warned about being picked up and put in the car. Gary said everybody is ready. Here we go. There is only room for two in the front with Leta and Sandy. That leaves me with five in the back. Everybody wants a window seat. We weren't counting on this many but we did prepare a little. Sandy found a box at home that she put in the car by the other back window. It was the right size to allow a couple rabbits to stand on to look out the window. Everybody got a place with a view.

The rabbits instinctively knew to duck down when we stopped at a sign or red light. When we were driving they all found a way to look out a

window. I don't think anyone saw us but it was quite a sight. Three of the windows of the car had at least two rabbits sticking their head out in the wind. There were lots of ears flapping.

We got to the site and found Jack waiting for us. As we were unloading we heard Jack's report, through Leta, about how great this site was. He felt with this big of a work team that he would be ready tomorrow to welcome the whole family. He asked Leta if we could do that. After a quick huddle with Sandy and I, we agreed to a tomorrow move. Leta suggested that Gary return to get the rest of the family ready for the move.

Then we got the possible bad news that Gary and Jack's mom might be too afraid to make the trip. Harper said that he needed to go back to try again to convince her to come to this new home. Gary and Jack both went up to their dad to encourage him to convince their mom. That's when we became aware that if he was unsuccessful that the boys wouldn't even have a chance to say goodbye. You could tell the three of them were worried.

After Gary and the work team followed Jack into the bush we loaded up Harper and began the trip back. Leta tried to tell Harper that he would be able to convince his mate to come along. I could tell by the look on Leta's face that Harper wasn't so sure about it. When we got there we all wished him good luck and said we would be back tomorrow with two cars to make the big move. Harper said goodbye and ran home

On the way back we talked about how hard it would be for the whole family if Harper and Ule couldn't make the trip. That's when Sandy said, "I know it's hard but what really impresses me is Harper's willingness to do what he really doesn't want to do in order to please his mate."

I said, "It's more than please his mate, if she won't go he would have to leave his mate. He has already made up his mind that if she won't come he would sacrifice being with his whole family. He really loves her."

The three of us silently thought about that for most of the ride home.

Fortunately Brad was over at his friend's house for dinner so we were able to talk about what is going on with the rabbits. A lot of the talk was about Harper and his problem. I could tell that both dads wanted to come on tomorrow's trip. More than wanting to help they wanted to see Leta communicate with the rabbits. Two of our three cars were vans with three seats. If we had the dads drive we could put someone in each seat to help with the rabbits. We agreed it was a good idea. I could see that both dads were happy.

After dinner Leta and I went out to 'watch the stars'. Everyone suspected there wasn't going to be a lot of star gazing going on. We did see screech. That was cool. Between a couple kisses Leta and I talked about Harper's commitment to his mate. When you think about it, it is impressive.

Dennis called the boss to tell him the he and Dad were taking the morning off to do stuff. Dad was impressed that his new office was informal enough that this kind of a request was granted with no problem.

We all loaded up for the big adventure. Both dads were told over and over not to make any fast moves or do anything to scare the rabbits. They were also told that rabbits can hear us, but we can't hear them. We decided to split up Leta and I in two different cars. I couldn't hear the rabbits but I was the most comfortable in talking to them. Just after we got there we had one more surprise.

I should have known that Tim was too smart not to know that something strange was going on. As we were loading up the first couple rabbits Tim calmly walked up and said, "Hi everyone, rabbit moving day?"

None of us really knew what to say but Sandy gave it a try. "On the surface this might seem a little strange, but in actuality it is stranger than that."

Tim said, "Don't worry. I think I figured it out. Leta has a special gift and it frightens everybody. Is it just rabbits or more animals?"

Sandy said, "All the smart ones."

“Wow. You really need to keep that a secret. I promise I won’t tell anyone.”

I said, “Tim, this might sound weird but I need you to do more than that. Like the rest of us I need you to vow never to tell anyone about what Leta can do. Are you OK with that?”

Tim was actually impressed with my request. “I vow , before God, never to tell anyone about Leta’s gift. Is that good enough?”

I smiled and said, “Thank you.”

Tim asked “Where are you taking them?”

He was familiar with the spot and agreed it was a good place for them.

We began loading rabbits. It was amazing how organized they were. We all wanted to ask Harper if Ule was coming but were afraid to ask. They were both there organizing the move. All of the younger rabbits had a parent or two keeping count. They all had two except for the families that had someone on the work party. Leta and I did all the rabbit lifting. She listened and knew each family unit and made sure they were kept together.

The dads were a kick to watch. They were amazed by the one sided conversations. Leta was so cool. We all knew that the rabbits were scared. She would talk to each mom, telling them how pretty their family is. She would pet each rabbit before lifting it into the van. I learned to do the same thing without the listening part. You could see the rabbits relax as they were given simple kindness.

We needed to get about twenty rabbits into each van. It actually broke down into 17 and 23 when you kept the families together. After about 20 minutes of loading we had two rabbits left.

Leta said to Ule, “You must be proud of your boys. They have helped so much and they sure are proud of you”

After a second Ule said, "Yes, I have a great family. I am proud of all of them."

Then Leta asked calmly, "Well, are you coming?"

"You don't know how afraid I am."

"Jack says your new home is perfect. It has everything your family needs and no coyotes inside the fence."

Ule, almost shaking, "I am afraid of the unknown. I am definitely afraid of getting in that machine."

Leta stroked Ule and then lifted her into her lap as she sat on the bumper. While continuing to stroke her she said, "I will hold you just like this all the way over there. When we get there your sons will gladly escort you to your new nest. Do you know how lucky you are?"

"What do you mean?"

Leta said, "Let's start with having 46 family members who love you. Even more important is having a loving mate like Harper."

"Harper is a good rabbit."

"He is so much more than that. He wants you both to go and enjoy family for the rest of your lives. He really wants it but he loves you so much that he is willing to sacrifice all of that to stay with you. Maybe that amount of love and sacrifice is common for rabbits but it isn't in my world. You are lucky."

"You think I am being selfish, don't you?"

Leta said, "I know you are afraid but you are being selfish too. Your whole family needs you. When they get there, get settled and notice that you and Harper didn't come they will be crushed. Jack and Gary will need to calm them all down. Everything will be harder if you stay behind."

"You'll hold me just like this when we are in that thing?"

With a smile Leta said, “Yep, Harper too.”

I had been listening to the conversation, well at least half of it. As soon as Leta said, “Yep, Harper too.” I knew it was a done deal. Leta got it done with just enough kindness and firmness. It’s going to be a happy night in rabbit land.

The trip was a trip. Mom and Dad were in the front with Ben and Josie. I was in the back with a dozen and a half or so. All the real little ones were on the floor with their moms. The bigger ones were on the back seat all trying to look out the windows. They were all taking turns. This whole trip was easier than trying to move this many humans.

When we got there a welcoming party waited for us to unload. They were all thrilled as soon as they saw Ule and Harper. You could see each rabbit get excited as soon as their immediate family was visible. It didn’t take long for all to be unloaded. Gary and Jack gathered up Ule, Harper, Ben and Josie and led them to the nest. A couple minutes later Gary and Jack came back. They hopped right to Leta who picked them both up.

I couldn’t tell what they were saying but I could tell it included a lot of thank yous. Leta was being humble. Finally she said “I’d like that. I’ll see you then.”

With that the last two rabbits hopped off into the bush. I asked, “What did they say other than thank you?”

“We’ve been invited to come back any time we want. All we do is bang on the fence and they’ll come out.”

The two dads got in one van and went to work. Leta and I joined the two moms to go home. As we drove the moms kept talking about how neat it was to move rabbits. They said both dads were knocked out watching Leta communicate with them.

Then my mom said this horrible thing. “Just think, it’s only two days before we fly home.”

Leta and I looked at each other in shock. With all the rabbit stuff going on we both lost track of the calendar. Wow, two days! The only good news was that Dad was keeping his car and mom and I were going to drive back in hers. We get to fly one way.

Leta and I were pretty quiet for the rest of the trip home. She did reach over to hold my hand.

When the dads came home the talk turned to rabbits. Leta could tell that there was a problem about not telling Brad. Finally she said, “I want to change the list of people who know. We’ve got to tell Brad. He’s family. Can we convince him to keep his mouth shut?”

There was a pause, finally Dennis said, “I think I can impress upon him how important it is. Actually, I want to get his promise to keep an important secret. If I think he’s ready then Leta should tell him.”

Sandy said, “Yeah, I think he’s ready too.”

With that Dennis took Brad for a father son walk around the back yard. When they came back you could see that Brad was excited about something that was going to happen. He had no clue what it was

Mom, Dad and I decided to skip this meeting. Leta did most of the talking. Brad was young but he was cool. I liked that Leta decided to share with her little brother. It showed trust. After the talk, all gathered to discuss the day. I could tell that Brad was anxious to see his sister do her thing.

Leta and I went out to look at the stars. All we could think about was me leaving. I said, "It's only seven weeks."

Leta said "Six weeks and five days. Four days if you drive straight through Arizona."

The next day we weren't saving any animals from developers so we walked to the lagoon and on to the beach. No surfing this time just walking ankle deep in ocean. I asked, "I forgot all about Earth Day, what are you doing for a project?"

"Well, I could talk about a tiger tooth ache or moving 47 rabbits."

I smiled and said, "And choice three?"

"I think I'll do my butterfly garden with pictures and instructions on how and why."

I said, "That sounds cool and almost normal. I'm bummed I'm going to miss Earth Day." I thought that is the first time I have ever said that.

Just then a bigger than normal wave came up and hit us up to the hips. We laughed.

Late afternoon we called for a ride home. I could tell something was going on but I didn't know what. Sandy then told me that they were having a going away party for me and inviting the new friends I've made. This is cool.

It was hot dogs and hamburgers on the grill with one grilled cheese coming out of the kitchen. They even had a cake with "Hurry back Luis" written on it. Sarah, Raul, Woody and Badger all came. Again there was stress because Woody and Badger weren't aware of Leta's gift or curse.

Most of the talk was about the Earth Day project. Woody brought one of his bumper stickers. It looked great. Sarah said her article was coming out in the press this weekend. Raul reported on all the volunteers signed up for the tide pool and lagoon walks. Badger said he's got a bunch of

surfers coming to help with the beach clean- up. They were making it happen.

Badger and Woody were the first to go. The conversation moved to rabbits. There was a look of amazement on Sarah and Raul's faces as we described the move to include Ule's reluctance and Ben's love.

Sarah started imagining different things that Leta could do in the future. Before the conversation went too far Leta said, "It was fun helping the rabbits. It was even fun telling Larry about Anna's toothache. I guess I'm going to have other fun things happen along the way. I'm wondering how many normal things I'm going to miss out on because I'm saving some wildebeest somewhere. I want a smart phone. I want a driver's license. I might even want to go to the prom."

I interrupted, "Leta, I so much want to go to the prom with you. I don't know when or even what it is but I know I want to go with you."

"Luis you are so sweet. My point is that maybe I'll have to show a beached whale how to get to open water."

I said, "Well then I'll probably do that in a tuxedo and have more fun than other people going to the prom. Leta, you have great friends and I'm one of them. We'll all be here to make your life as good as it can be."

Raul said, "Luis is right. Your life will be different. You've got friends and a great family. You are going to have fun while you do incredible things. We're all here rooting you on.". Then looking in her eyes said, "It will be good."

I could see that Leta felt better.

The party ended and everyone left. Leta and I went out in search of stars. What little talk that was going on was about the fact that I was leaving the next day. We decided to say goodbye tonight and skip the airport embarrassing time.

Early the next morning Dad had loaded the car and Mom and I were ready. Dennis, Sandy and Brad were all there saying goodbye. Leta had tears in her eyes as we hugged in the driveway. With one, parent watchable, kiss I got in the car to head East.

Mom and Dad tried to brighten my spirits with “It’s only 7 weeks”, and “You’ll be so busy getting ready to move the time will fly by.” Even when you know something is true, you don’t have to feel good about it.

It was almost two hours at the airport. Finally we loaded and Mom gave me the window seat. We had a direct flight that was two days quicker than the car ride out. Aunt Helen picked us up at the airport and drove us home.

I don’t know why I was so tired from just sitting all day but when we got home I could barely unload my stuff before I went to bed. The next day I started thinking about all the things I had to do before I left St Louis for good. I hardly noticed the phone ringing.

Mom yelled out my name for the phone. I figured one of my buddies found out I was home and gave me a call. Then Mom said with a big smile, “It’s Leta.”

“Leta, oh my God I didn’t think you’d call so soon. This is great.”

After a bit of a pause Leta said, “Luis, I know I miss you already. I think I love you”

I said, “

