

CHAPTER EIGHT A PENCIL A TULIP

The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams.

Eleanor Roosevelt

As Asha finished writing the quotation on the blackboard, Julian is showing everyone the game of rock, paper, scissors. Trying it over and over, Shilli and Emilie can't stop laughing. When Lapis' cousin, Irena, comes into the room, Shill hands her a package. "This is for you." As Neil begins playing with his new harmonica, Samuel asks him - "Why do you pat your pants pocket all the time?" "It's just a habit. My mother told me to check my pocket every time I left the house, to be sure I had my keys."

The talk about religion is in full swing. Asha - "Samuel, didn't you say your family works in the Greek Orthodox Church? Is that the same as the Catholic Church?" Samuel - "No, it's different. Your confession is not spoken to anyone. You confess inwardly. Everything is between your conscience and God. You ask yourself "Do I hold any anger in my heart?"

Emilie - "It seems most wars are started because of the world's different faiths and religions. I guess that makes sense if what's right and wrong isn't the same for different people. Irena - "Is it possible some holy texts could have been mis-translated?" Emilie - "Infanticide is in the Bible. If you take it literally, you'd kill your own disobedient children." Asha asks Emilie - "Do you go to Church?" "Only at Easter and Christmas." Asha - "Hinduism has different gods and goddesses. Brahma was the creator, Vishu the Preserver, Shiva the destroyer. Lord Vishu watched over the world and comes back in different forms when there's a crisis."

Having been told, repeatedly, how candid and blunt he was, Lapis hesitates, but decides to go ahead. "I believe there have been many great teachers, Buddha, Christ, Lao-Tsu, Muhammad. For me, the God everyone talks about is a mystery."

Wayne joins in - "The Hopi Tribe believes the sun father and his nephew created the world. Humanity was created by spider woman, who was the first creature. When humanity became corrupt, the world was destroyed, and only a few stayed alive. This happened twice. Our people wandered everywhere until they reached the Mesa in Colorado."

When Marcus arrived, jumping to the center of the table, everyone took their places. Samuel - "Do animals have a religion? Is there a religion in the natural world?" Marcus - "No. There are many different cultures in the human world. In the natural world, every living thing has an essence, a value, a purpose.

You each know the importance of education, responsibility, hard work, honesty, kindness and courage. Remember, intuition is a learned skill. It can be developed. There will be times when, at a critical moment, you will find the strength you need. There will be other times when you choose poorly. Any time you purposefully and maliciously deceive or mislead, it will backfire a hundred fold."

Neil runs into the room, more animated and excited than anyone had ever seen him. "Sorry, I'm late. You won't believe what I did yesterday. I went to a pencil factory. I know you all miss your tech gadgets, but I made a pencil - from scratch! Graphite and clay. We took a block of wood and cut it into slices. We stained the slices and made grooves into one side, put lead into the groove and glued another slice on top, just like a sandwich. Then we cut it into six different pencils, painted them and put an eraser into the end. I made a pencil! Let me quote myself - "Congratulations!" Next, I'm going to figure out how to make a match, *without* using any dangerous chemicals."

The first day Asha visited a home for the elderly she was instantly drawn to one woman. Vasilissa was Russian, had lived in Prague since she was a girl. Now in a wheelchair, she had a uniquely regal appearance. Noticing Asha had a flower in her hair, Vasilissa smiled, speaking with an unusual cadence, saying each word distinctly, as if it were a musical note. "You must love flowers. So do I. Have you ever watched a tulip die? It starts to stretch, very slowly, then very, very gradually it continues to distend, beginning to lose color, until it becomes completely translucent. That's how I would like to die, like a tulip."

At the end of their visit, Asha asked - "Will you meet me tomorrow afternoon? There's something I want to show you. It's not far from here. I'll leave the address at the desk."

The next day, when Vasilissa arrived, a glistening black Labrador named TAR pushing the wheelchair, Asha realized she'd made a mistake, forgetting something very important. What she wanted Vasilissa to see was at the top of a flight of very steep stairs. "I am sorry, so sorry, I never thought. . ." Vasilissa smiled at Asha. "Do you know you've paid me the greatest compliment anyone ever has?" Asha - "I don't understand." "You wanted me to see something. You thought about *me*, not about someone in a wheelchair. Thank you, dear Asha." Seeing the situation, two men passing by carried Vasilissa in her wheelchair up the steps, Asha and Tar following behind. "We'll be back in a few minutes to help you down."

As the top of the stairs was a very small courtyard. Though the area looked overgrown and wild, in fact, it had been intricately planted and pruned. At the center, on a small pedestal, was a three foot high bronze statue, a rendering of a single tulip, its petals stretching and reaching out in every direction. Vasilissa sat, quietly, for several minutes, smiling.

Arriving home, Vasilissa turned to Asha. "I'd like to ask you to remember one thing. When something is not right, speak up. You will be speaking up for many of us, many generations, that weren't able to." When Asha returned the next day, she was told that Vasilissa had died, peacefully, during the night. Asha would remember her every time she saw a tulip.