

As Snug, Youri, Silas and Chopper led the way through the forest to the Guesthouse, no one spoke. Leaving at the crack of dawn, everyone was ready for the sleepless night ahead.

Asha - “When we were told to ask a question, did any of you see an image?”
 Shilli - “An odd shape and lots of numbers.” “Asha - “Do you remember the numbers?” This time it wasn’t Asha whose memory had everyone’s attention, but, amazingly Shilli, Julian, Emilie and Lapis who each recited long lists. Julian - “I saw an oval face with two eyes.” Lapis - “A male or female?”
 Julian - “Neither, no gender.”

It was 3 A.M. when the Admiral walked in, a pleasant interruption. “Do you remember my asking you to find out about the indigenous people where you live? Now I’d like to ask you to look at prejudices. You each have very different temperaments. Try to find time to spend with someone you know who is old. You’ll be surprised at what multi generational conversations can turn up. Your ability to see what’s far from obvious is extraordinary, shattering people’s preconceived ideas of their world is just beginning. It’s way past my bedtime.” Hugging everyone, “Stay well and please keep in touch.” Snug, leaning with his three legged gait, nodded as he left the room, followed by Youri the Kelpie, Silas and prancing Chopper, all looking for a cozy place to settle before tomorrow’s flight.

At first light, three things had been decided. The four attorneys had left the morning before. Asha would send them an explanation of what had happened in the forest, asking their advice. Shilli and Julian would begin the first steps to organize a world wide day of thanks to the natural world. It would take place in eight months, a perfect way to begin their next visit to Bhutan.

Instead of peaceful protests, demonstrations, boycotts and rallies, people from different countries, (cultures and languages), would commit to sit silently for a half hour thinking of an animal, a flower, an ocean breeze, snowflakes, a fresh fruit picked from the tree, a remembered sunset.
 The natural world.

Emilie and Lapis would do their best to write a factual chronology of what had happened since everyone first met in Sydney.

The last thing to be decided was a way to let each other know if ever one of them was in trouble. When Asha suggested using using flowers to send messages, Emilie laughed. “I’d receive bouquets of impatiens.” Finally, after a rousing debate, it was agreed the signal would be to mention their favorite food linguine, *little tongues* in the Italian language.

Arriving home in Namibia, the first thing Shilli spoke with his parents about was prejudice. His mother had an immediate answer. “People with disabilities,” his father adding “That’s changing, slowly, but with education, it *is* changing.”

The following afternoon, when Neil didn’t show up to meet Shilli and Matheus for their hike, both remembered Samuel’s advice. “Pay attention to your instincts.” Something was wrong. Neil had told them that, for weeks, he’d felt someone was following him. Walking into town, going to the prison to teach handwriting exercises of graphology, where ever he went, he felt the same thing. Each time he turned around to check, no one was there.

Walking across the dunes to meet Shilli and Matheus, Neil recognized someone running toward him. It was the Russian boy he’d known years before, Gloopy, the school bully, who thrived on creating disruption, always picking on him, making fun of his Progeria. Angry that Neil had told their teacher, Gloopy approached him, saying “you chose how you wanted to deal with this; keep that in mind when the end comes.” The following school year, learning that *gloopy* was the word for stupid in Russian, Neil felt only pity.

As Gloopy raised his arm to hit Neil, the sand suddenly began shifting, both of them disappearing, slowly, swallowed up by the dunes. Out of nowhere two gophers appeared and began to tunnel. When Neil was finally able to sit up and take some deep breaths, he was, strangely, not afraid. After being still for several minutes, he started walking home, the two gophers, (standing on their hind legs, long tails behind), following behind.

Like Neil, their heads were abnormally large with no hair, oversized eyes, their skin wrinkled and coarse. “Thank you. You saved my life.” “I’m Trevor. I have big teeth and can tunnel up to two hundred yards, moving more than two tons of sand. Neil - “Doesn’t the sand get in your mouth?” “I’m Parker. No. We close our lips behind our teeth to keep the sand and dirt out.” Neil - “Do you know what happened to the other person ?” “Trevor - “No. We tunneled you, to speak with you.” Parker - “Do human minds feel?” Trevor - “Do human hearts think?” Parker - “Teach personal responsibility, minds and hearts.” Gloopy’s body was found later that day.

Before entering the University of Namibia Medical School, Shilli knew he had to deal with what had happened during the trial in the Netherlands. With no memory of his kidnaping, he had started picking at himself, any small spot he would irritate until it bled. Matheus hoped that daily handwriting exercises and sound wave treatments might help.

On his daily walks, Shilli began talking out loud to himself, a new habit he enjoyed. “Does it mean something that both Matheus and I were kidnaped? Did we do something wrong, maybe at some other time. . . which we don’t even remember?” One afternoon , Escher the cat answered. “I don’t know anything about what some people call karma. Is there a reason for what happens to everyone?” Later that night Escher came into Shilli’s room, carrying a white helium balloon and an ink marker in his mouth. “Write down what happened.” Shilli completely covered the balloon with his words. Escher - “Come outside.” The wise cat looked Shilli in the eyes. “Let it go!” When Shilli released the balloon, it rose slowly, moved to the side for several seconds, then shot straight up, as if jet propelled, until it disappeared.

On the flight back to Denmark, Emilie asked Lapis - “What question did you ask, only you know the answer?” Lapis - “Something I’m really ashamed of. Last year there was a spider with long legs in our bath tub. When I tried to wash him down the drain by pouring a glass of water over him, he crawled back. I keep doing it over and over again. Why? The spider wasn’t hurting me. To him I was a giant. He keep fighting, again and again until, finally, he didn’t come out of the drain. Then I felt horrible. All I could do was hope he was all right, somewhere safe in the pipes, that I hadn’t killed him.”

Emilie - “You didn’t know Hygge before he died. He had a tiny stomach and had to eat all through the day. The veterinarian said he’s never seen anything like it before. My father had the same abnormally small stomach, why he had snacks all day long. Eating a regular sized ice cream cone would have frozen his stomach. I think some animals are here for us to care for, others are here to care for us. When I went to the shelter after Hygge died. . . Lapis interrupted “Matthiessen has a small stomach too?” “First Hygge, then Snug, now Matthiessen.” “Do you believe it’s your father watching over you?” “Yes. Do you think Argos is Samuel watching over you?” “Yes.”

Lapis - “Remember when we were driving to Copenhagen and heard a sound like animals sobbing, we didn’t know what to think? It was the exact moment my parents were killed. The animals knew even though we didn’t find out until later that day.” “Emilie - “What about the Admiral’s question about prejudice?” “For Russia, discrimination against certain sexual orientations. Homophobia. Denmark?” “Ignorance as well, about the Muslim faith.”

Acclimating to a new country turned out to be far easier than Lapis had expected. Since becoming a father he was calmer, had more self control, his days in medical school fueling his passion to study the psychology and theory of music and color. Would his son have the gift of Synesthesia? Emilie was equally busy, a new mother working to raise awareness about the dependence on fossil fuels and effects of carbon emissions.

Walking Chopper the bulldog, watching him chase his tail, jumping in the air to catch a stick, Emilie remembered his biting her wrist, guiding her to Professor Swelling. She made an appointment, anxious to hear his thoughts about what happened in the forest. Inter species. Inter galaxy.

It would be Samuel Abin Lishin’s first Christmas, a magical time in Denmark. The colors, smells and flickering candles, ending with the traditional Christmas Eve Toast, on December 24th, Emilie’s birthday.

“The world is a den of thieves and night is falling.
Evil breaks its chains and runs through the world like a mad dog.
The poison affects us all. No one escapes.
Therefore, let us be happy while we are happy.
Let us be kind, generous, affectionate and good.
It is necessary and not at all shameful to take pleasure in the little world.”

Because of his trip to Bhutan, Julian had missed the first week of orientation and classes. Catching up, his first time away from home, both excited and scared, he was startled, in his first class, to hear the professor say exactly what he'd been thinking since arriving. "You all know you're bright. You're now surrounded with others as bright if not brighter."

With all the work to do, there was almost no time to miss home, pictures of family, including Silas the yellow Labrador, a daily reminder of how lucky he was. Making new friends, the accessibility of the professors, he loved learning how to think, not how to memorize answers.

Meeting with his faculty advisor, he asked if Bhutan had ever been considered for the Junior Year Abroad program. Explaining about the upcoming day of thanks to the natural world, he was surprised and pleased to hear the University might consider being one of the sponsors. Leaving the office, seeing a notice on the bulletin board for an open discussion on prejudice, Julian remembered the Admiral's question. He would be there.

Back at the freshman dorm, two letters were waiting. His friend Wayne had started a home for the elderly, humans and animals. Unable to reach him by phone, Jane Green had sent a note. Her colleague, Rene Hibou, one of the three attorneys who'd represented the five of them at the trial, had been bitten by an infected mosquito and died suddenly from encephalitis, swelling of the brain. In French, Hibou was the word for owl. Fond memories of their long talks together, in the Hague and Bhutan, flooded Julian's mind: owls to onomatopoeia, France's role in the American Revolution, UNESCO recognizing that French food, considered the best in the world, was "an intangible cultural heritage." A masterful lawyer and a sensitive man. That night, Julian didn't sleep.

Christmas vacation. He couldn't wait to tell everyone about his new life: the tradition rich environment, differences between the east and west coasts, his decision to become a vegetarian, the Ganzfield Effect, and how, for the first time, freshmen were now allowed to compete in rowing.

The first thing Asha did arriving home was to contact the attorneys, asking their advice about the series of numbers. Shilli, Julian, Emilie and Lapis each received a copy of their answer. Once again, the five of them had something that needed legal protection. As before with JASLEMS, a patent had been filed in their names for an inter galaxy communication corridor. AOU. The lawyers would explain the details at the next meeting in Bhutan.

Hearing about Rene Hibou's death was a terrible shock. She would always remember the many conversations they'd had in Bhutan about the vicissitudes of life. Having asked his advice about the best way to begin changing the views toward women in India, he smiled. "Start with one person. Don't try to change the whole world all at once. Start with one, then the next, and the next." One of Asha's closest friends had been raped, terrified to do anything about it, afraid no one would believe her. Asha would help her through the process of filing a rape charge, doing everything she knew how to support her. Start with one person.

Asha noticed she was becoming more and more intuitive, her latest dream one of the most intriguing. A forest of crystal trees, over ten feet tall, shaped like asparagus. Not used in Indian cooking, asparagus was not a vegetable she and Rukmini particularly liked. Having studied all the plants and flowers in Chandigarh's Zakir Hussain Rose Garden the year before, she remembered reading that many believed in their medicinal value.

Putting bird seed on all the outside walkways was the first thing Asha did every morning. Her parrot, Shakkar, always there to remind her. Arriving home, the day she had found out she was pregnant, with a girl, the yard filled with white owls and owlets circling overhead. Rukmini put his arms around her. "Did you know the word for owl in French is Hibou?" Her commitment to be an advocate for women's (and children's) rights and safety in India was just beginning.

Eight months had passed. The night before boarding their flights for Bhutan, (thanks to the generosity of Vestas Wind Systems), Shilli, Emilie, Julian, Asha and Lapis had a dream. Waking up, each could remember only one piece. Escher the cat, Chopper the bulldog, Matthiessen the Turkish angora cat, Silas the Labrador and Shakkar the parrot explained. “When you see one another, the pieces will fit together. Then you will understand.” Their first month working together on the Interspecies Interface was about to begin.

With anywhere from ten million to a hundred million species in the world, only two million had been identified. Over the past several months, new and distinct animal and plant species began to appear in the forests, oceans, deserts, mountains, lakes and ice caves. Not a cross between two others species, but unique. Scientists couldn’t think of names fast enough to keep up with the discoveries. Never before seen flowers began blooming worldwide.

Threatening to undo decades of conservation results, taking a huge toll on wild elephants, rhinos and tigers, channeling billions of dollars into powerful crime syndicates, destabilizing governments and economies, wildlife crime could no longer be ignored.

Was it a coincidence that words from Lapis’ song, *Changes Free the Hearts of You and Me*, were the most listened to lyrics in the world, having been recorded by several different artists, now playing internationally?

Everyone would arrive in Bhutan on the day devoted to giving thanks to the natural world. The response had exceeded everyone’s wildest dreams. What had been intended to attract young adults had now captivated and compelled all humanity. Silent thanks.

Once the pieces of the dream puzzle were put together, everything would change.

