

Sinterklass and his mischievous helper, Black Peter, stood at the embassy door welcoming one and all. The stately twelve foot Noble Fir Christmas tree was ablaze with lights, decorated with old fashioned sparkling metal tinsel and paper chains, glass ornaments shaped as animals, birds and flowers. Three feet tall gingerbread cookies (boys and girls) and beribboned pine garlands added to the fragrance, instantly transporting each guest to their unique holiday memory bank. A Christmas elf sat at the grand piano playing carols.

The evening began with a toast to Samuel. Shilli, Emilie, Julian, Asha and Lapis raised their mocktail glasses. “To Samuel, who taught us to be as good as our word. . . and how important it is for us to laugh.” Since their son’s funeral, Samuel’s parents had kept in touch with all his friends, everyone would always be welcome at their home in Lebanon.

The conversation quickly turned to what had happened the day before in the courtroom. Was it a technology, a trick? Lapis - “We all saw the light and heard the voice.” Asha - “Maybe what we heard had nothing to do with humans, animals or the natural world.” Shilli - “Are you talking about extra-terrestrials?” Lapis - “No one really knows what energy’s all about.” Emilie agreed. “You’re right. It’s arrogant, actually ridiculous, to believe we’re alone in the Universe.”

When the Admiral arrived, it seemed as if a lifetime had passed since their first meeting in Australia. The Admiral was quick to remark how everyone had changed. “Confidence is contagious.” Then, very much out of character, he asked “You’ve learned a lot these last few years?”

Shilli- “Different cultures have different interpretations of what’s right and wrong. Intelligence and intuition are a great combination.” Lapis was thinking. “I’m still dealing with controlling my temper, slowing down, listening. We have to challenge our own cultural assumptions.” “Asha?” “To speak up when I see something wrong. If I can’t do it alone, find other people to join me.” Emilie remembered a formative conversation she’d had with one of the Vesta Wind Systems’ pilots. “I’m learning how to communicate better, more effectively. Language can be tricky.” Julian - “How to use available resources. So many things I never took advantage of were right in front of me.”

Emilie - "What about you, Admiral?" "Thanks to a story Lapis told me, I've learned that things are not always as they seem." Ten years earlier, driving his wife and infant son to a Christmas party, the Admiral had fallen asleep at the wheel, crashing the car. He was the only survivor. His last memory was the Moonlight Sonata on the radio. Moving to Australia, he'd never told anyone. One year, to the day, after the accident, animals began communicating with him.

Admiral - "You'll never know how much you all impressed me when we first met. You're the closest thing I have to a family. If you have the time, please keep in touch. I'll always help any way I can." Shilli - "Are you still at the Albemarle Inn?" "Albemarle will always be home." "How are Youri and Snug?" "Missing you."

Though relieved the lawsuit was over, everyone knew their work had just begun. Talking with Jane Green, Asha explained. "You've heard us all talk about Marcus. He was a yellow Labrador who met with us every morning; none of us had ever known or felt such devotion and love from an animal before. He taught us so much. When you did what no one expected you to do in court, Marcus immediately came to mind. He used to tell us "They're expecting you to do that. Sometimes, you have to do what they don't expect."

After a half hour, everyone seated around the tree talking nonstop, Emilie decided the moment was right. "I'm pregnant" Amazement followed by hugs. "Lapis and I are married. I'm going to work as an environmental activist." Lapis - "Do you believe I'm going to be a father? And. . . would you believe. . . what we're now discovering using tone and color in medical treatment is beyond anything we could have imagined, even last year?" Asha - "I'm to be married next July. Please, will you all come? I chose my husband! So many people want to help us improve women's rights in my country." Shilli - "Medical School for me. You can call me Doctor Louwrens!"

Nicholas and Irina joined the group. Nicholas - "I proposed to Irina." Irina - "I accepted. You're looking at an animal rights attorney." That Julian already had a plan to begin implementing his ideas re global literary and education was a given. Neil explained his work with handwriting exercises, quick to add "I'm the oldest living person with Progeria!"

Mattheus loved working with animals using sound wave therapy. Wayne, as usual, was quiet. Asked what he planned to do, his passion for the elderly was clear. “Engage them, pass their wisdom to future generations.”

When Black Peter arrived with five surprise balls, everyone remembered their Christmas together in Prague, the wonderful morning meetings with Marcus. Unraveling the different colored strips of paper, finding a balloon, a piece of toffee, they knew the best surprise was at the center. A circle of tan leather, smaller than an American penny, white stitching around the edge. a gold letter in the center, the initial of their first name; a small red card handwritten in beautiful calligraphy with white ink *See St. Nicholas*.

Asha - “Shilli, did you make these? They remind me of the lucky pieces you gave us, the ones we left at Marcus’ grave.” Shilli - “No, those were carved out of wood, these are leather with gold. They’re beautiful.”

As Emilie was re-reading her surprise ball quotation by Emily Dickenson “The truth dazzles gradually, or else the world would be blind”, St. Nicholas handed her an envelope. It was a ticket to the upcoming performance of the Globe Theatre’s production of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* at the Kronborg Castle in Elsinore, Denmark. The thought of watching the story unfold at its true location was a dream come true.

When St. Nicholas gave Julian his gift, Jane Green explained. “Many years ago, I met Aldous Huxley. We talked about Lake Atitlan in Guatemala, one of the most beautiful places in the world. He gave me this first edition of a book he’d written. It’s your *Brave New World* now.” Julian was speechless.

When Lapis was given a letter stating he’d been granted a full scholarship at Pavlov State Medical University in St. Petersburg, he was overcome with emotion. From a talented teenage singing sensation (with a temper) to a husband and soon to be father; using his gift of Synesthesia, union of shared senses, tone and color, working at the Research Center, he would always do his best. Did most people know that color is the most important element in non verbal communication?

The animals had asked Shilli to learn about frequencies. From the bloop, underwater frequencies causing harm, to the positives of meditation, crows hearing lower frequencies than humans, cats higher, it was a never ending puzzle. Not sure if entering medical school immediately was the right choice, when St. Nicholas approached to hand him his gift “A full scholarship to the University of Namibia Medical School,” Shilli knew the answer.

Since she was a little girl, Asha had always dreamed of seeing the Seven Wonders of the World. When St. Nicholas gave her a trip itinerary, the Colossus at Rhodes to the Lighthouse of Alexandria, the Hanging Gardens of Babylon to the Great Pyramid of Giza, she was disbelieving. Looking at St. Nicholas, tears in her eyes, “How did you know?” “Your grandfather told me.” “My grandfather died six months ago.”

Not knowing Julian knew some of the embassy’s secrets, Jane Green had a surprise. “St. Nicholas has a few more gifts, but you have to find them. They’re hidden somewhere on the first floor.” Everyone scattered to look behind curtains, under tables and chairs. Hearing something no one else could hear, Emilie wondered “Could it be true?”

Julian ran to the closet, lifting up the trap door. The race was on. Like runners at an Olympic start line, Matthiessen, the Turkish Angora cat, followed by Silas (c-lass) the yellow Labrador, Libuse the white Siamese cat, Argos the Golden Retriever, Marco the Dalmatian, the orange Tabby cats Penny and Pentacles, Gentil the perennial puppy, Xenia the white cat with black tail and paws, Chopper and Arnaldo the English Bulldogs, Escher the grey feral cat, Cord the Golden Retriever, Elske the white Tabby, Youri the Kelpie and Vaclav the Prague Ratter raced up the basement stairs. White Crow walked majestically before taking flight landing on the fireplace mantle. Mal’akh the Mourning Dove followed. Words couldn’t describe the joy in the room.

In the midst of the commotion, Julian, (Marco trying to jump into his arms), yelled “Check the clock!” When Neil opened the door of the grandfather clock, there was three legged Snug, having a difficult time jumping out.

After several minutes of pandemonium, everyone began to wonder who was responsible for this. A man in a pilot's uniform was trying to explain, having difficulty being heard over the barks, caws and meows. "My name is Hans Andersen." Emilie - "Forgive my rudeness. Your middle name doesn't happen to begin with a C?" "Indeed it does! But what I'm about to tell you is no fairy tale. As our gift, Vestas is going to fly you and your families to Norway the day after tomorrow." The puzzling response was unanimous. "Norway?"

Jane Green walked to the fireplace to stand next to St. Nicholas. "Five days from now, December 10th, Ayres and Victoria are to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, the first time in history it will be given to non humans. They want you all to be there."