



The Cities

a.k.a "The Prison Cities"

By Michael Erlewine

SCREEN TREATMENT

THE CITIES

(AKA, THE PRISON CITIES)

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This is an extended (non-standard) treatment for film that is in the general lineage of “Blade Runner,” a no-tongue-in-cheek drama, with no camp. A finished screenplay also exists, but to get an initial impression, it is hoped that this treatment will suffice. The film takes places in the future, but not very far into the future.

Background for The Prison Cities (establishing)

Our story begins after the election of Republican Colin Powell in 2001 at the end of what amounted to a three-candidate campaign. Colin Powell eventually emerged as a Republican candidate for the presidency in 2001. This was not entirely unexpected, seeing his growing differences with Barack Obama after the end of the war in Afghanistan and Iraq. However at the time it was a surprise of the Republican Party when Powell declared himself in the primaries and managed to beat the best that the Republicans had to offer.

More unexpected was the defection of Senator John McCain from the Republican Party and his decision to run (even with his age) as an independent against both Powell and Democratic candidate, Senator Hillary Clinton. In the ensuing melee, with the Obama administration polling some very low numbers and the country still feeling very conservative, McCain and Hillary Clinton lost to Powell in the general election. With the voters split three ways, the election did go to Powell, but by a VERY narrow margin. There was no mandate.

The rise of John McCain and the growing number of independents caused not only severe polarization within the country itself, but also led the way to some never-before-experienced acts of political compromise. And, although McCain and Clinton were ultimately defeated, Powell was forced to compromise on a number of hot issues to pull a majority of the voters to his side.

Chief among these compromises was the Prison Reform Act of 2016, a favorite of John McCain, and certainly the most striking of the political results to come out of that election, and one with, as we shall detail here, far-reaching consequences.

During the campaign crowded prison conditions and the ever-increasing expense of supporting criminals sentenced to life once again became a major issue. It was clear to the nation from McCain's statistics that we were paying an exorbitant amount to keep all of the criminals with life-sentences-without-parole -- something like a million dollars each and counting. This concept of convicts-as-millionaires at public expense struck a raw nerve with the public and became a key campaign issue. The total amount spent on the U.S. prison system was staggering (some 40 billion a year!) and this number continued to capture the popular imagination during this difficult election.

The concept of creating an entire prison city for convicts with life-sentences first appeared toward the end of that presidential campaign. The idea was startling in its simplicity:

Set aside a large area of land in one of the less densely populated states to build a new kind of prison, actually an enclosed prison system that contained within itself a number of complete cities devoted entirely to convicts and hopefully eventually self-sustaining. And this prison was designed exclusively for lifers, a one-way street. If you go in, you stay in for life - no parole. And entry was by inmates' choice,

although it soon became the case that inmates with sentences of even 20-30 years chose to go to the cities prison for life rather than stay cooped up in a cell for the best years of their lives. Another factor in all this was the failure of the courts to rehabilitate criminals and keep them from quote "re-infecting the public," unquote. The judicial system as a whole during that time was not an object of pride, but more one of derision.

The debates over the Cities Project were fierce and the whole country got involved. In the heat of the campaign came a groundswell of citizens who were simply fed up with the cost of imprisonment and the various non-functioning release programs. No politician dared oppose this issue and those few who did soon regretted it. This popular outcry helped to push the bill through both the House and Senate soon after Powell 's election, and it became a law -- a new kind of federal prison system, actually: prison cities.

A site in Utah was originally chosen by the government, but this was universally opposed by the citizens there, and, in the end, it was a desolate area of south-central Colorado that was finally selected and with the full support of the Colorado legislature, except, of course, for those in the immediate area of the prison. The prison has become a source of pride for that state.

The final area selected consists of some 2000 square miles of land located about 100 miles south of Denver, actually a rectangle 33 miles (east to west) and 60 miles (north to south).

This became the site for USP Colorado (United States Penitentiary Colorado), which soon became known as the Prison Cities, and finally, just "The Cities." What this area amounts to is the upper part of the San Luis Valley, a four-thousand mile, semiarid desert - the largest alpine valley in the world. The valley floor sits at an average elevation of over 7,000 feet (a mile and a half high) and gets less than five inches of rainfall each year. The valley area is surrounded by mountains on all sides, including the majestic Sangre De Christos (Blood of Christ) chain that runs north/south and forms the entire eastern side of that valley, with peaks over 14,000 feet high. And this is outside Tibet!

This awesome piece of real estate to view is very difficult to live in, with little or no rain, extremely high elevation, and desert-like conditions year „round. It was used for centuries by no less than twelve Native American tribes for summer-time hunting, but pretty much abandoned by all in the harsh winters. The Native Americans named the region the "Bloodless Valley" and declared it a sacred place, which included the "Sipapu," the original place of emergence of humanity.

WORLD FASCINATION

Americans (and eventually the world) were more than just a little interested in life in the prison cities. In fact, from early on, almost everyone on the outside was fascinated and thirsted for news about what life was like inside. It soon became a kind of national obsession that, even today, rivals almost any

other news events. There is a 24-hour cable channel devoted to life in the Cities. Cities newspapers are in publication and are as widely subscribed to and read by those on the outside as by those within the prison. In fact, outside subscriptions outnumbered inside use almost from the first day. Like some forbidden fruit, average Americans can't get enough of this strange new society. Rumors about city life soon reached and today maintain a high-water mark in the tabloids. Of course, much of this is pure speculation.

The cities were never cut off from news from outside. In fact, every attempt has been made to make available to the inmates all of the music, movies, books, newspapers, etc., that are available on the outside. They have access to TV, VCRs, cable, everything any other American has, if they can afford it. At least these are available to those who have the money to purchase them through the large warehouse facilities reminiscent of military PX stores. There is a prison PX store at each of the two main gateways. And of course, there are all manner of smaller stores and businesses within the cities, although many are more reminiscent of the kind of shops one might find in third-world countries.

In the beginning, after the outside military police either quite or were savaged, communications between the cities and the outside world changed dramatically. Direct information coming in and out of the cities more or less just ceased or was carefully altered by the prison political machine. It

became hard to know what was really happening inside and what was hype that those inside wanted you to hear. A series of undercover "lifer-spies" introduced by the government to gather information ended up dead or barely escaped with their lives. In time, the primary information and most accurate indicator (even today) as to what goes on inside is the examination of the endless credit and debit sheets that accumulate from providing raw materials and other sundries to the cities in exchange for goods produced in city factories. It is only recently that the cities have become more or less self-supporting. And, as we all know too well, this experiment in what amounted to self-sustaining prison life has become the talk of the globe and a particular point of pride in this country.

THE COURT BATTLES

It is still not that many years ago that the first court battles took place -- challenges that arose from civilians who wanted to enter the cities for family reasons, out of sheer curiosity, as reporters, or just for adventure -- whatever. Certain women, in particular, having heard how much in-demand their sex is in the cities, naturally wanted to go there. The initial answer was, of course, no. Federal officials were adamant. This could never be permitted. There was just no way for an average citizen to visit the cities. After all, they argued, this is a prison!

However, that was not the answer the public really wanted to hear, whose virtual love affair with life in the Cities was only increasing. In extreme cases (and more and more frequently)

crimes were committed just to gain entrance to the prison system. In brief, interest in the cities became just too great for the officials to ignore.

In the end, as we now know, the furor only grew and this issue went all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court: Could a U.S. citizen, provided they signed a waiver of all their civil rights, enter the cities on a temporary pass without having committed a crime? Could they be permitted to visit their relatives or just go there to satisfy their own curiosity?

The prison cities are not a normal prison (so it was argued), but a new type of society and any citizen should be able to (at their own risk of course) visit there, just for the hell of it or for whatever family reasons they might have. After a protracted national debate, and fueled by pure politics, the Supreme Court, under extreme pressure from all sides, voted yes, and a new era in the life of the Cities and the U.S. began.

“TOURISTS”

"Tourists" (as these non-criminals are appropriately termed by the inmates) go through an elaborate process before they are allowed entry. They are finger printed, blood typed, psychologically tested, photographed, and thoroughly searched. Their dental records and retinal scans are taken. This elaborate testing process is so that they can be identified and eventually released when they want out. In addition to a stiff processing and court fee, they sign away all rights of suing anyone, anytime.

Touring the cities is currently the rage, particularly among the younger generation (you have to be over 18 to enter the cities). Perhaps the last great adventure area on earth, it is more than just a little dangerous, for there is no guarantee that you will ever emerge alive and in one piece. And there is no one to protect you. No appeal. Nothing.

And “tourists” are instantly recognized and despised by the lifers on one hand and valued for the money and connections with the outside they bring with them on the other. The cities have become a bizarre tourist spot. Weddings and honeymoons there are perpetual food for the National Inquirer and other tabloids. Many biker groups from the outside make a tour of the cities a mandatory part of initiation. All manner of inmate tour groups have sprung up, offering tours of the city along with guaranteed personal protection. The Internet is full of them. Inmates even take out ads in national publications. They are waiting for you as you come in. Ignore them at your peril.

THE SAN LUIS VALLEY AREA

A pretty much non-issue was the valley's history as one of the premiere spots in the U.S. for UFO spotting. The public could have cared less and the main UFO watching station in Hooper, Colorado ended up just outside the south entrance to the prisons, and has done well for that. Today it is making more money selling prison t-shirts than it ever did UFO paraphernalia.

More problematical was the area surrounding the town of Crestone, Colorado, which for some reason, had become, over the years, home for a wide variety of new-age communities, including many different styles of Buddhism (Zen, Tibetan, etc.), Hindu groups, retired hippies, psychics, and even a monastery of Carmelite monks. The hue and cry was so strong on this issue that the town of Crestone (some 40 residents) originally considered as part of the prison territory was cut out of the plan and the perimeter modified to jog around and to the south of that town. Of course the inhabitants still were not happy because the perimeter wall still remained just too close for them and did much to eclipse any sense of beauty (and real estate value) in the area. Anyway, that is how it came down.

Last, but not least, was the inclusion of a good share of the northern half of the Great Sand Dunes National Monument, a fifty-square mile pile of sand that almost no one had ever heard of, much less visited. Of course there was brief, but furious, screeching on the side of conversationalists, but in the political climate of that time, a deaf ear was turned to these protests. The dune area has the highest sand dunes in the world, some reaching over 700 feet. Almost all of the commercial aspects of the park, buildings, entrances, etc. are in the southern half of the park, anyway, and remain open today as they did before. Very few visitors had ever ventured to the northern half or for that matter more than a mile or two from the entrance. It is just mountains of sand and

there is plenty there for both the park and the prison.

The small towns of Cottonwood, Duncan, and Liberty, Colorado, little more than ghost towns, were more or less commandeered and all their inhabitants well paid to move south or west to where the climate and land were better anyway. The residents were thrilled for an excuse to relocate and an exodus began almost immediately. This potentially litigious situation became another non-issue, which leaves the Tibetans, an issue that would not go away.

THE TIBETANS

Sometime in the late 1970s a group of Tibetan Buddhists had been given a considerable amount of land just south of Crestone. The land fell within the area set aside for the prison. Of course these Tibetans were offered all manner of encouragement to leave the area. They refused. Not only did they own land, but they had established a retreat center and more important yet had built a 40-foot stupa, which is a Buddhist monument of some kind. The Tashi Gomang Stupa was erected in the foothills of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains and towers above the plains below. It can be seen shining from almost anywhere in the valley.

As it turns out, the leader of this Tibetan Buddhist lineage, the Gyalwa Karmapa, himself came to the Crestone area in 1980 and personally selected and blessed the land. The Karmapa is like the Dalai Lama, only he is the

head of another Tibetan Buddhist sect, the Karma Kagyu.

To make a long and somewhat-legal story short, the Tibetans simply refused to leave. No amount of reasoning or money incentives had any effect. Most of their western students, who had been living and working with the Tibetans, thanks to a lot of finagling and "encouragement," finally moved out and on with their lives, but the actual Tibetans (and others, who soon joined them) would not sell and would not move.

This small group of Tibetans (we could almost call them refugees) were not about to budge. For them, this was sacred ground, land consecrated by their leader the Gyalwa Karmapa himself just before he died, and they had been instructed to remain there and to establish a monastery devoted to medicine and healing. And that is what they did, but not without a struggle.

It was a fierce debate that got national attention and the prison authorities, who assumed at one point they had rights they did not concerning this issue, went so far as to demolish a small monastery and retreat center in the foothills of the Sangre de Cristo mountains. And there was an attempt to remove some of the Tibetans for lack of proper visas. And it was this foolish act on the government's part that finally turned the public tide against them and led to the Tibetans being allowed to remain on the land within the prison confines, mind you, but at their own risk, of

course. They were free to leave the prison at any time, but few ever did.

In the end the Tibetans gave up any rights they had (not that they had many, anyway) in exchange for just being left alone. And in time some of the Tibetans moved even higher up the Sangre De Cristo slopes. Where they live today is mostly inaccessible, even to the most determined Cities dwellers, and they have been left, for many years now, virtually to themselves and continue to maintain a lay as well as a monastic community. The prison authorities went so far as to declare the extreme eastern area of the prison land as more-or-less off limits to convicts without a special pass. It is referred to as "The Sector." Few prison inmates ever went there with or without a pass.

THE PRISON AREA

To sum it up, a 22x60 square-mile (some 2000 square miles) section of Colorado desert was selected, its residents relocated, and the enormous task of building the perimeter wall begun. Actually, there were two perimeter fences spaced some distance apart. A high, inner, electrified fence, and an outer perimeter fence with razor wire (located a half mile away) which contains an elaborate system of high-tech motion detectors that automatically monitor anything larger than a coyote that moves on land or sky within the flat desert area between the fences. Electric underground sensors monitor attempts to tunnel and a small air force of attack helicopters stand ready to handle threats from above or attempts to cross

the zone between the perimeter fences. Like firemen, these helicopters are poised to scramble at a moment's notice. To date, no convict has ever escaped the prison. Few have even tried.

The Cities (as they came to be called) is a place where criminals with long sentences could opt to be transferred and where something approaching normal life is supposed to be possible. Early release programs and paroles for those receiving a life sentence are now obsolete. The death penalty (also a thing of the past) has been replaced almost always by life imprisonment. And, although it is usually a voluntary decision on the part of the prisoner, just about every lifer opts for life in the prison cities instead of spending the rest of their life in a single cell, with virtually no hope of parole. Due to the Prison Act of 2013, the normal prison populations were drastically reduced. Inmates who chose life in the prison cities could, should they change their mind, appeal to be returned to standard prison cells on the outside. Few ever did. Only the criminally insane were not given access to prison cities.

An enormous amount of taxpayer money was saved which had been previously wasted. Not only did the prison cities not cost taxpayers, but they eventually even turned a profit.

STERILIZATION

A very unpopular requirement for admission to the prison is sterilization. Again, no one is forced to undergo it, but if a lifer wants to be sent to the Cities, he has to produce proof of

sterilization or undergo the procedure at government expense. If you opt for life in the cities, my friends, your child-making years are over. There were to be no children in the prison cities. At least that was the intent.

And through the various prison exchange programs with other countries, a great number of foreign nationals today reside in the cities prison. Dozens of nations are represented. It is a veritable Tower of Babel.

CONSTRUCTING THE PRISON CITIES

At any rate, you now have the idea of the prison cities at their inception. It was simple. The outer perimeter walls were built, at a considerable cost (but very quickly), and three mid-sized cities and a number of small towns were confiscated and brought up to code. Any existing structures remained as they were and were utilized. The entire prison area is roughly square shaped (actually a rectangle) bounded by the Sangre de Cristo Mountains on the east and the semi-arid desert on the west. There are only two gates to the prison, one located at the northwest corner of the prison and the other at the southwest corner some 22 miles apart.

Near each of these gates is a city named, appropriately enough, "North Gate" and "South Gate." Somewhere between these two gateway cities and more centrally located is Center City, a much smaller place. There also currently some attempt to establish a town in the dunes area called Dune City, but it is unclear when or if this will be completed. As

you can see, not a lot of time has been wasted in naming these places.

Also of some interest is what is called the "perimeter zone," a line of demarcation running on a slight diagonal from north to south on the eastern side of the prison area, the one bordering the mountains. Effectively, the perimeter zone marks off the extreme eastern part of the prison area as an area that the prisoners cannot travel into without a permit. The reason for the zone is simply that the eastern edge of the prison area is bounded by the Sangre de Cristo mountain chain and is much more difficult for the government to seal off and protect. It is also where the Tibetans live. Inmates wishing to travel in the "Sector" as it is now called need the equivalent of a visa and their movements are closely monitored. It is difficult to get a permit to enter the "Sector."

The construction of the actual cities within the prison would take a small book in itself, but in brief, it was a kind of field day for U.S. construction firms, who flocked to bid and soon set up shop on the alpine plain. And it all happened very quickly, in something short of two years. These three cities were similar in many respects to any average US city, only with more built-in industrial strength. And, since they were built in one fell swoop, certain economies of scale were achieved.

One of the downsides to this is that everything pretty much looks the same in there, but after all, so people have commented, it is a prison. Even so, these newly-built cities are, for the most part, new or newly refurbished, and every

effort was made to provide all of the standard comforts – hardware stores, bakeries, and factories, you name it, at least in some rudimentary form. The plan is that these criminals -- these lifers -- can spend their time together in a more productive and less-expensive-to-the-government fashion than in the more traditional prison systems where they lived their lives out in bleak cells at public expense. Remember that the cost of supporting the state and federal prison systems in the year 2000 was some 40 billion dollars a year! Of course, these were not all criminals with long sentences.

Although designed with state-of-the-art technology in mind as regards water and sewage and so on, once the cities were established all did not continue in that style or according to plan. It is true that the central parts of the cities are new, but sprawling suburbs (sound familiar?) soon sprung up around the cities. More like shanty towns, there seems to have been no attempt to follow building codes in these areas and eventually no city inspection or code compliance. This is not how it was planned, but is just how it has turned out.

These add-on suburbs resemble what we might expect to find in third-world countries, where any old kind of building or shack will do. And each street leading from the cities is lined with makeshift stores and debris. The refuse problem within the prison is fierce.

Although the cities themselves were designed for modern garbage and trash collection, in fact

much of this never took place. It started out well, but corruption and many other factors (some of which we will detail later on) took over with the net result that today there is a severe refuse problem. It is not so bad in the newly built cities, but the so-called suburbs are out of control in this regard. In a word, there is almost no garbage or trash pickup, which has resulted in huge standing mounds of refuse established almost randomly, here and there. These piles can reach eight and ten feet in height and in the summer months are covered with vegetation, and the smell of this refuse flow through the streets like vaporous rivers. Traveling through these areas means negotiating these random piles of refuse. Not pleasant.

Once inside the prison, lifers are given the opportunity to work (or not to work) at a variety of occupations. Like all of us here, they are expected to find work, and, after a few years, all supplemental food from the outside was gradually discontinued, replaced with a very active exchange program of prison-produced goods-for goods, foods, etc. from the outside. It had been the intention of the authorities to create an environment as much like outside life as is possible. And it works pretty well. Of course, there will always be the hopeless quality of life in the cities. And, while it is true that their freedom is still limited, they are free, at least compared to living in a 6x10 foot cell.

Training schools and other educational opportunities have been made available, but so far under utilized. And from the first, the prison

cities have been co-ed, although in the beginning most of the occupants were men. During those first years women were at an extreme premium. There just were not enough of them to go around. Even today, there are about one third as many women as men, although the percentage of women to men continues to climb.

No firearms or weapons of any kind are allowed in the prison cities. Although knives were soon readily available on the street, handguns, rifles, and automatic weapons were never present in any significant quantities, at least until somewhat recently. How they got in there is a matter of some speculation and concern.

There are three separate decent sized cities within the perimeter, but only two of these acted as portals, North Gate and South Gate, which also serve as an area where lifers can receive a limited amount of visitors, goods from outside could flow in, and through which goods produced in the prison cities can be exported.

THE SQUADS

The only armed persons in the cities are the police squadrons. With a minimum of four officers per squadron, the squads (as they are called) sometimes number upward of 20 or 30 officers (or more) when there are riot-like conditions. Fully armed, the squads make only a minimum effort to keep the peace. They regulate the worst disturbances. Your average bar fight or murder is not worth a squad's attention. It takes some extensive attempt to

destroy cities property to bring them or their firemen brothers out in force. And the firemen are also armed and only appear in the company of police squads.

From the outset, the squads wielded almost unlimited power. Although originally staffed by federal employees, within six months, they operated more like a local Mafia than anything else. Despite efforts by authorities to the contrary, the squad members were bought and sold by the inmates, almost from the beginning. It is a dangerous occupation and squad members that did not go along with the local power thugs met accidents or death in fairly short order. This quickly weeded out those who tried to live up to their intended purpose. Looking back, it is amazing that this was not foreseen.

This very real problem was soon acknowledged by the authorities on the outside, and, as many of you may recall, much time was spent (especially in the tabloids) in trying to puzzle out a solution. After some time, it was regrettably decided to withdraw the government-employee squads completely in favor of an all-inmate police force, one made up of the lifers themselves, who had been controlling the police force anyway. It is interesting to note that some 20% of the police squad members opted to remain in the prison cities rather than return to normal public life. The perks and the experience of sheer power were just too tempting.

WOMEN AND CHILDREN

One might think that all of the world's adventurers would have been the first to flock in. Not so. Instead, for a long time the greatest influx of tourists were women, mostly coming because they have heard of the great shortage of their sex and want either the attention, money, or both. The rumors on the outside are that life for women in the Cities is a charm. They are treated like queens. Although technically they are tourists and could leave at any time, they don't. Women have come to comprise a separate, but important, category of the prison population. And they are a tough and politically powerful bunch. Those women who do not pair off with a man always move in groups and they are well armed or have hired thugs to protect them.

As mentioned earlier, perhaps the thorniest conceptual problem has been the children. The government has done everything it can to prevent childbirth. All inmates are required to prove sterility, but even this has not been sufficient to prevent a generation of prison kids from arising. It is generally thought that the papers of many inmates regarding their sterilization were forged - bought and paid for. And many female 'tourists', who were administered drugs that prevented conception for the time they were visiting the prison, somehow got pregnant anyway and gave birth inside the Cities. And this kind of sloppiness has resulted in one of the sadder aspects of prison life, the prison kids. In time this will become a whole, albeit small, generation.

The government is beside itself on the kid issue. And the public agrees. Pressure from the outside has been great and relentless. About all the government can do is to declare that any children born in captivity can be offered for adoption to the outside at any time. Registration of all children born in the Cities is mandatory, but this has mostly been ignored in recent years, so there are who-knows-how-many unregistered children on the inside.

The end result will be a generation of kids who were born and raised in the Cities. Many are in fact put up for adoption to the outside. Adopted Cities children continue to be in great demand. A child can choose to leave at any time. All they have to do is to show up at either of the gates and ask for release. As long as their fingerprints and retinal scans are not on file, they can leave the Cities that day. Still, it is a real mess and perhaps the worst feature of the prison concept.

TAKING THE FULL TOUR

Aside from the influx of women, thousands more have entered the cities, carrying with them money to buy enough protection to take the "full tour," as it is called. A certain percentage turn up robbed, hurt, dead, or are never heard from again. Some few opt to remain inside, preferring life in the Cities to life in the so-called real world. A standing joke in the news-media cartoons is that there is no real difference, inside and outside.

From the perspective of those outside the prison cities (certainly in the tabloids), there

seems to be a kind of endless celebration going on within the prison cities. No curfews. Bars and nightclubs are open 24 hours a day, if they wish. Life resembles one big but dangerous party. It is very much a case of grab life while you have it and enjoy it to the max. Anything can and does happen, good and bad. People eagerly pay to come and see what they struggle so hard to avoid getting close to in their own inner cities. Ironic. The comedians love this riff.

I could continue to describe the incredible life in the Cities. And in the course of our story, you will see enough pieces of it to get the idea. Still, what has been presented so far is not the main point here. The rough-and-ready life is not the most interesting aspect of the cities. And we are just getting to what is.

THE PRISON ARTS SCENE

It became a matter of intense interest to the entire nation to discover that life in the Cities offered something more than just a unique solution to the problem of criminals or an endless dark celebration of life. By most historical accounts, it seems to have started with the music. As you might imagine, life in the cities has its own unique pressures and flavor. Prison life is hard and uncertain. Moments of joy and tenderness must be few and are to be savored. Beyond this seeming endless celebration is a desperate thirst for life and peace. It would seem that any simple pleasure is more precious when experienced in the prison. At least outsiders have come to believe this. Life inside is a challenge to the

imagination. Whole shelves of magazines and books on the Cities can be found at any large bookstore.

Prison cities have their own bars, nightclubs, and, their own style of music. And all agree that Cities music is unlike any that has come before it. There is a sense of reality and depth that you just can't find anywhere else. It somehow has more than soul, or at least outsiders think so, and it captures something in the mind itself. Like Shakespeare, it has become more language than language itself. It has redefined music or at least become a distinct genre: Cities Music. And it defies imitation. Here at last it seems is the very heart and mind of the music of this time, at least in North America.

And although born of life in the Cities and produced for the city inhabitants, this music is hugely popular here on the outside. Cities Music has become something like a global preoccupation. It makes a significant amount of money for some of the Cities groups that perform it and even more for those outsiders who market it.

Following close on the heels of Cities Music we might add Cities stand-up comics, Cities poetry and literature, and Cities art -- much of it with something of that same special quality. In fact, Cities music and the arts have amounted to one of the most important renaissance arts movements in the early 21st century, if not THE most important.

Yet, Cities artists never go on tour. You can buy their CDs, but you are never about to see them live. They are not coming to a town near you. There is no doubt that this forbidden quality has made outsiders love Cities music and culture that much more. Cities paraphernalia (t-shirts, mugs, etc.) are way out of control. There just is not enough information coming from the cities to satisfy the curiosity of the world outside.

And this has led to more and more outsiders risking money and life for even a brief tour of the prison. It has become the "in" thing to do -- a status symbol. People honeymoon there! Tourism in the Cities rivals any tourist attraction in the world. During the post turn-of-the-century years, Cities tours were the most talked-about (if not the most frequented) attraction on Earth, and among the most dangerous. Having been inside the cities prison says something about you. It is better than any gold earring.

Thousands of pages have been written about the cultural renaissance movement in the cities. And it is multi-cultural - almost all races and nationalities are represented. Since the majority of life imprisonment sentences were handed out to minorities, Caucasians were outnumbered from the start. The Cities is perhaps the first truly multi-national, multiracial experiment, ever.

Looking back, once you got past the amazing facts of life within the Cities, it is the quality of the music, art, comedy, and literature that most have captured the attention of the nation and

the world. You would think that the depressed environment of life in the Cities would have produced dreary, dirge-like music. In fact, the opposite is the case. Cities music and art represent some of the brightest moments in 21st century culture. It is this clarity and brilliance, this promise that draws so many to the Cities: to read and study about them, and to actually want to go there in person.

And this brings us to our story.

The Story

It is an early summer morning in Ann Arbor and Professor Richard Malcolm hurries across campus toward the Literature & Arts Building where he is about to teach his first class for this semester, one on popular culture.

He is well dressed yet still comes across as casual. Richard has a light navy blue scarf wrapped around the shoulders of his natty herringbone sports coat, one end of which trails in the wind as he moves along. Although well into his forties, his curly hair has remained black (oddly enough) and seems always to be just a little out of control. His wire-frame round glasses send the message that this guy is not only good looking, but smart too. And finally we note his much practiced look of preoccupation, as if what he has on his mind is just a little more important than your or my thoughts. Students along the campus walkway manage to keep out of Malcolm's way but are only too aware of his passing by. As he whirls along the wide walkway, all take notice. And this effect Malcolm has always encouraged. He is a minor

celebrity on campus. Everyone knows that. He vanishes into the large limestone block building.

Professor Malcolm was one of the youngest professors ever to be granted full tenure at the University of Michigan. From the first day he was the darling of the English department, mostly due to the popularity of his first two books on popular American culture. In fact, fairly early on he was removed from any English-related teaching activities and allowed to establish his own course on popular culture (music, film, and the arts), which he still teaches today, some twenty years later.

And he was handsome, especially back then. His lovely foreign wife was the envy of all the grad students and the two together had a stunning effect on university social events. His classes were packed and the ladies loved him, and he them. Now, quite a few years (and one divorce) later, Malcolm is still very popular, if perhaps not the stellar being he once had been. His penchant for women, in particular his own students, has by now cast some stain on his reputation, but he will not give them up. His colleagues, while still perhaps jealous, see him more as a pearl in the department rather than the diamond they had once hoped or feared.

Malcolm's jet-black hair has never aged one day and by this late date all understand why. And aside from being some kind of genius, he is also considered very fashionable with impeccable taste in clothing. Malcolm always plays to his strong points. He is still cool and knows it.

However, all is not roses. Time is catching up. For one, he has never written another book as good as his first two, but he still manages to have the occasional column or feature article in major magazines like "Rolling Stone," and others. He is working on a book about the Cities Prison art scene, but it is long overdue, and the truth is that Malcolm has reached pretty much a dead end with it.

His reputation as a womanizer is now common knowledge and precedes him into just about every situation, so the young women know JUST what they are getting into. In short, the bloom is a little off the rose. However, he is still considered somewhat of a trophy by the coeds.

Worse is that fact that within his own mind, he has tired of it all. For one, he has fallen into the very unfortunate habit of having to imitate his own past successes, trying to keep up the image that has sustained him all this time, and he finds that humiliating. Re-inventing himself, he knows, is doomed to failure, and he does it only temporarily (or so he tells himself) while he treads water hoping to segue into another phase in his life, perhaps one with a little more dignity. That phase is long overdue. This brings us to our story.

Malcolm is now moving smoothly through the crowded hall. Students wish him good morning. He nods politely back to them as he threads his way through the crowded hallway. He is not unfriendly, but his gait and look tell us that he is on a mission and we are just hanging out, watching him.

“Dr. Malcolm, see you tonight at Rackham Hall,” a student calls out.

He nods, smiles, and moves on. His classroom door is up ahead and to the left. With a single move, he darts in. Everyone has been aware of him all the way along.

His classroom is not your usual lecture hall, with a podium and wrap around seating, but an old fashioned classroom with a blackboard in front of which is a screen for the slide projector. There is a bank of windows on the far side from where Malcolm enters and the room is filled with large dark-stained oak tables. Students are milling around trying to find a seat since Malcolm is there.

Malcolm is a very popular professor and the classroom is full. This is the first time that Malcolm is giving an entire class on the art scene within the prison cities. The students for the most part, are casually dressed, intelligent looking, and obviously excited to hear what Malcolm has to say. They are spread around the room, mostly still not in seats yet, talking with one another.

Richard Malcolm comes through the door, briefcase in hand and with an armful of folders in his left arm, clasped to his chest. He places the folders on the small desk and takes off his scarf. Without so much as a hello, he turns to the blackboard, and writes "R. Malcolm, Pop Culture 205. He then turns around, faces the students and begins speaking. There is now complete silence and a little awe.

“Good morning everyone. Welcome to Popular Culture 205. I am Dr. Richard Malcolm.”

Pause.

“Is everyone in the right room? Is there any question about which class this is?”

Students are now heading for their seats or already there. They are nodding. A woman student toward the back raises her hand and Malcolm gestures to her and nods his head.

“Dr. Malcolm, will you be speaking about the Prison Cities at your lecture tonight at Rackham Hall?”

Malcolm responds, “Yes, that and other pop culture events of interest. As you all know, the art scene inside of the prison cities is our subject for this entire semester.”

Another student hand goes up, another gesture and nod, “I looked for your new book at Borders, but I could not find it.”

“The reason for that is because I have not yet finished it. My apologies, but it should be out soon. My publisher is here with us today and we will be going over some of the final details later today. I thank you for your patience.”

He gestures toward a sophisticated-looking woman in a business suit sitting at the back of the room. She smiles in return.

“And now let us turn to what has brought all of us together here and that is the incredible art scene that is taking place within the walls of the prison cities. Before we get into that let me briefly go over the history of the Cities, just so

we are all on the same page. I ask you to bear with me on this. Please feel free to ask questions today, as we go along....”

MICHAEL

Michael is spending this afternoon at Mark's coffee house where he spends a lot of his afternoons. And he has managed to commandeer his favorite table, just far enough back so that he can still survey the street and its passers by, without being too conspicuous himself and yet still have his back up against the wall, as good Feng Shui would have it. From this table he can see everyone and everything that goes on, just who comes and goes, and can either make himself available for conversations or hole up and just "study."

It is a fair question what he is studying because Michael has long ago given up going to college (which he never did finish) and has stayed well beyond his accepted allotment of years for being a student. He has now, for all practical purposes, become just another campus hanger-on. If he thinks about this too much, it makes him squirm, for he knows he should be out of the student scene by now and launched in one career or another. But here he is, still living in Ann Arbor, and for that matter somewhat of a permanent social fixture here, at that. What little money he has comes from a part-time job cleaning the bathrooms for a small group of stores on State Street. This gives him just enough cash to pay the rent each month. He is content. He can be in and out of that job in about half an hour which gives him some 23 and one half hours a day to do whatever he chooses. And he needs that much time to really feel free and contemplate his prospects.

He has, however, some accomplishments. Through sheer age and experience, Michael has worked his way up the social ladder, so that just about everyone in the hip Ann Arbor scene knows him - students, faculty, and townspeople. Having grown up in Ann Arbor, Michael is a townie and has always hoped that this does not count against him. He fears it does. He has been around Ann Arbor all his life and knows the ropes. Michael is intelligent enough to command respect from almost everyone and yet indecisive enough to have stayed on as part of the extended student body. If we had to sum up what it is that Michael does, we would not go very far wrong by saying he is still considering his options.

Yet, at 31 years of age, those options are beginning to show signs of wear. He knows he has to come up with something more definitive pretty soon; he does not want to become just another old geezer hanging around the student body. Michael has little respect for those who have, and from what he can see by observation, it is a painful (and humiliating) way to go - old men preying on the student body, either intellectually and/or physically.

Michael lives very simply, renting a room on the second floor of a house shared by several others and this has over the years evolved into his being more or less the house manager. At least he is responsible for gathering the rent and putting it in the landlord's hands each month. Michael has taken possession by now of what are probably the best rooms in the house, or room, since aside from his one large

room, the other is more like a long hall or entryway than it is a room. This entranceway is crammed, floor to ceiling, with books and we are talking high ceilings here. His entrance room also has a small wash sink in it, something the other housemates do not have. In a pinch, he can always piss in the sink if the bathroom is being hogged. Michael is thankful for such small blessings.

Michael's corner room is spacious, with double sets of windows on two sides. In one corner is a narrow mattress, more bookcases, and a desk with a computer – his connection to the Internet. A few hundred CDs and a pile of clothes round things out. This is where Michael spends most of his time, often just reading or browsing the web. Since he has made a point of avoiding formal education, Michael has perhaps over compensated by reading just about every book of literature and philosophy you could name, including all the Loeb classics – every piece of Roman and Greek literature, a tour-de-force that he is not about to repeat.

Like so many others these days Michael is fascinated by the Prison Cities, in particular with the music and art scene there, and he soaks up everything he can find on the subject. There is something in the Cities' music that caught his attention early on and he knows that whatever it is that inspires these artist-convicts, he could use a dose of that himself. He is not unhappy with his life, but Michael feels there is something inside himself that is missing and perhaps something or someone, somewhere out there waiting for him. At least he hopes so.

As for romance, Michael is on short rations. Sure, he wanted to marry his high-school flame, but who doesn't? And he was deeply hurt when she ran off with the motorcycle guy. Again: almost everyone experiences something like this. In recent years, there have been plenty of opportunities and several women he even really liked. After all, this is Ann Arbor.

Yet, when all is said and done Michael finds himself alone most of the time. He is either too shy to make himself known to the few women who actually look interesting to him or does not want the responsibility that comes along with a relationship. As often as not they fall in love with him, and he not with them, which leads to Michael extracting himself from the situation, which he always finds particularly humiliating. He is still looking for someone like himself and hopes that someone is still looking for him.

And he has plenty of free time. As mentioned Michael's current passion is (and has been for some time) the art scene in the prison cities. In truth, even without the art scene the prison life itself fascinates him. He has listened, of course, to whatever CDs have been released or bootlegged from the Cities and devoured every interview and Internet piece he can find on the prison. At least around Ann Arbor he is a walking expert on the Cities artists, although the sum total of what he knows so far has not given him any real insight into what makes these artists tick. There is not much solid information on the art scene available and he is unmoved by Professor Malcolm's take on the

whole scene. Michael wishes he had the balls to go there and see for himself, but that thought is just too crazy for him to consider. He figures that if he waits long enough their "secret" will leak out and he will have that.

As mentioned, Michael is by this time quite educated, not through the university that surrounds him on every side, but always on his own terms. In fact, although he probably has never realized it his self education program runs more-or-less parallel to a college education, only Michael prefers to follow out whatever he is currently interested in. He has educated himself and knows more than a little about literature, philosophy, the fine arts, and, of course, music. In the last year or so he has weaned himself from European philosophy (which he had never been able to find all that practical in real-life situations) and been discovering Asian philosophy or more to the point what we could call Asian psychology, in particular Tibetan Buddhism. And it is this interest in Buddhism that brings him into our story.

Michael had approached Buddhist philosophy as he has any other philosophy by reading a lot and discussing it with anyone interested, and in particular arguing with any graduate-student experts foolish enough to take him on, mostly through the ritual of staying up all night, smoking cigarettes, and drinking far too much coffee. He tried auditing any number of university classes, but always found the academic environment just a little too boring for his taste. By now, Michael is a familiar figure in

the Ann Arbor coffee houses, going until dawn, locked in one grand dialogue or another, often with a whole table of participants. Although he does not have the celebrity of Richard Malcolm, Michael is a well-known fixture on the U. of M. campus. Michael and Richard have never formally been introduced.

As mentioned, lately Michael has particularly taken to Tibetan Buddhism because as far as he can see it really is mostly psychology rather than then the rarified abstractions or mathematics he has grown tired of in Western philosophical works, and that actually means something to him. In fact it is a great relief compared to all the dry European philosophy he had forced upon himself over the years. He likes the feel of what the Tibetans are teaching. He can talk about it all night and does, which leads us to the singular event that is somehow catalytic for Michael, meeting the Tibetan lama Tenzin Nyima Rinpoche.

This particular Tibetan is not only a tulku (a re-incarnated lama), but he speaks flawless idiomatic English and is Michael's age, perhaps a year older. His books have become more and more popular (Michael has read most of them more than once) and he is coming to Ann Arbor to speak. Michael is not about to miss this event and ends up phoning the professor who is putting on the event for the university to find out more information about the coming visit.

As it turns out the organizing committee for the rinpoche is small and Michael finds himself not only offering to chauffeur the rinpoche for the

weekend, but agreeing to design and distribute the poster that announces the event. Michael is excited about the visit and is counting the days until he will pick up the rinpoche at the Detroit airport.

Michael has already read a ton of philosophy books, probably more than he really felt like and is long past enjoying the process or learning that much from them. Yet he is driven by a desire to discover any kind of radical thought, anything new, and hopefully something strong enough to help him somehow change his own life. He loves his life just as it is, but also knows it can't last forever like this. He hopes some life-changing event will rescue him from becoming just another fixture of the campus. He is still waiting to grow up.

Michael is always looking for something new, so when he wandered into Nyima's books as examples of Asian philosophy, what he found was not just another philosophy to consider and talk about. Nyima offered a method or way to work with day-to-day life that did not demand a degree in logic as so many of the abstract European philosophers require. More important, Nyima's philosophy was interactive; it insisted that one put ideas into practice and take action on a daily basis. In other words, it offered a method. And this, to Michael, was a new feature - a path through everyday obstacles that made sense to him. If Michael could struggle through all of Hegel's books, then he pretty much inhaled those of Nyima

Rinpoche. He was really looking forward to meeting the man.

AT THE AIRPORT

On the day of Nyima's arrival Michael, true to his worry-wart nature, has arrived early at the airport and the plane, as it too often happens, is late. He has plenty of time to pace back and forth in the gate area, look out of the narrow terminal windows at not much at all, and mostly just wait. Michael is almost always early. He is so into anticipating events and arriving everywhere ahead of schedule that life has forced him to wait. Despite his natural impatience, he has become an expert on waiting, to looking forward. And now he is waiting for Nyima Rinpoche.

Whoosh, click.

Across from Michael, the jet-way door swings open and an attendant emerges, locking it into place. Passengers begin to emerge through the door and behind them others can be seen moving, walking with heads bobbing almost in slow motion. There are layers of people moving through the long enclosed passageway. Michael is looking at each one, making sure he has not missed the lama. Not this one; not this one...

But then, THIS ONE. A short, somewhat stocky Tibetan is walking through the open doorway. He is dressed in a light-colored western-style suit. Michael moves forward, steps into his path just enough to get his attention, and introduces himself.

“Rinpoche? “

The man stops in front of him and Michael continues

“Welcome to Detroit. My name is Michael X.”

Michael extends his hand. The lama looks him over and slowly extends his hand and shakes Michael's very gently, with just a tiny bit of a wry smile on his face. He is looking Michael over.

Speaking very slowly, rinpoche says, “Hello Michael.”

Michael can now see the lama's face, close up. He is young, full faced, and quite handsome – striking. His eyes look strained, almost yellowish in tone, not healthy looking, and not particularly alert. Then rinpoche, who now is standing very close to Michael (with eyes now locked) rolls his eyes up and toward the back of his head so that Michael can only really see the lower whites of the eyes. All this takes only a little longer than just a flash, something more like a slow roll, and this is a little disconcerting for Michael. Then the eyes slowly roll back down and are again looking right at Michael.

However, now there is not a trace of the yellowish tone or the tiredness and there, staring at Michael, is an extremely alert, inquisitive (again, with humor) set of eyeballs. Michael is almost taken aback by this transformation and moves back a half step. Rinpoche smiles and turns to the young man at his side.

“Michael, this is Larry, who is traveling with me.”

Michael and Larry shake hands. Michael, not knowing what to do next, stammers out, “The baggage claim is this way.”

The three of them walk off down the hallway toward the baggage claim area. As they walk away, the rinpoche is already speaking and gesturing, with Michael and Larry, one on either side, his retinue. They have immediately become a world unto themselves, a tiny microcosm of dialogue. Michael is in heaven.

Later, outside in the parking lot Michael is holding the front passenger door for the Rinpoche, seating him, and gently closing the door behind him. The trunk of the car is up and Larry is putting the last of the bags in and closing it. Larry gets into the back seat of the sedan. Michael walks around and gets in the driver's seat. They drive off.

THE PROFESSOR'S HOUSE

We are at the professor's home where Nyima will be staying. Gathered in the living room (which is quite spacious) is a small group of people who have assembled to welcome Nyima Rinpoche, just sort of just standing around admiring the lama and talking. Next we see Michael appear at the entrance to the room along with Larry, helping to carry in rinpoche's bags. We can only hear snippets of conversation. Everyone is excited and happy. Michael returns into view, standing at the back, and just kind of hangs out in the background, trying to make himself invisible. He is obviously

a little nervous about what he is supposed to do at this point... stay, leave, join in? He is not sure what his place is. Michael was impressed at meeting the rinpoche and is looking for some way to just hang around and soak up more of whatever it is the rinpoche is about. We hear rinpoche saying, "Larry, would you go with the professor for the tour. I want to rest for a short while..."

We can't hear or see all of it, but there begins a general exodus. Michael, now really sheepish and still standing along the back wall prepares to file out with the rest of them, but has stepped back making way for the others. He stands in the rear while they leave, but he wishes he could stay behind with the rinpoche and, as he leaves the room, Michel glances back to catch a last glimpse of the Tibetan. Nyima catches his eye. He still has that funny little smile and says, "Michael, do you have time to give me a hand?" Michael, thrilled to extend the moment, "Yes. Glad to!"

Suddenly the house is empty and they are alone in the front hall. Michael has no idea what to do next. Nyima Rinpoche who does, spots a small library in the next room, starts for the door, saying "In here is good." Michael follows.

The library is small, maybe 6 by 10 feet and filled with books as you might expect a professor's library to be: shelf after shelf of them, but also with a wide variety of knick-knacks, small vases, paperweights, art work on the walls, artwork in small standup frames - all manner of stuff, and almost all with a distinct

Asian flavor. Michael stands awkwardly to one side while the rinpoche begins a slow and thorough examination of each object in the room.

Although to describe here what happened next sounds quite ordinary; it was not. The rinpoche is intrigued and delighted by just about everything he picks up, books, items (what-have-you), turning what would have been, for Michael, a more-or-less boring moment in a small somewhat stuffy library into some kind of magical mystery tour. Michael, who has loosened up just a bit by now has forgotten about his own awkwardness and is taking this all in. He is already learning something. Still uncomfortable, Michael wants to break the (what for him is now a somewhat awkward silence), “I have been reading your books...”

Speaking, but not turning toward Michael, the rinpoche continues in his inventory of delights, “You know, no matter where we are, we can always be aware of our breathing. We take it with us.”

Michael nods, a little discouraged that the rinpoche ignored his statement, and he realizes that he is following Rinpoche around the room as the lama continues to pick up and examine various objects, holding them up to the light, peering, chuckling. Michael is watching. With a glance toward a chair in the room, the rinpoche says, “Michael, have a seat.”

Rinpoche turns the chair around until it is more or less in the center of the room and it faces

himself. Michael sits down immediately, without question. He feels now more like he is in an examining room.

Nyima continuing, "It can be as simple as breathing in and breathing out, which we are always already doing. All we have to do is follow the breath... observe it. You try it."

Michael, now even more self-conscious, exaggerates his breathing, as he inhales and exhales, glancing up at the rinpoche, and looking around as if to see if anyone else is watching him. The rinpoche is now observing him quite closely, and has bent forward and down until he is looking Michael almost right in the face. He says, "It is all about awareness, being aware of the breathing in and the breathing out, observing it, using it as a focus." He pauses, and then: "Allow the air to come in to your lungs and go out... very slowly."

Michael, who feels even more like he is in a doctor's examining room, is still breathing in and breathing out, and desperately trying to slow his breath down. His eyes only dare to catch glimpses of the rinpoche standing before him. Michael is obviously on the spot. The rinpoche, who is unperturbed, "That's right. Breathe the air all the way in. Notice the pause? And now let it go out. Easy. Eee-asy."

Michael is slowing down just a bit, and not tensing up as much. His breath is smoother. The rinpoche is still right there, "Are you focusing on the pause after the "in" breath and before the "out" breath? The breath does not

stop; it just can't get anymore in and you start to let it go out. That's right, now just exhale.”

Michael exhales, sort of choppily. The lama continues, “With the „out“ breath, it is different. There is no pause at the end; you don't have to worry about that. Just let it go out.”

Michael tries to let his breath go out, quite consciously.

“It is ok to just let the breath really go out,” says Nyima Rinpoche.

Michael is trying to let it go, but this whole experience has taken on another dimension. As Rinpoche speaks of letting the breath go out, Michael's own life-long fear of letting go, of death and of dying (whatever that is) flashes in his mind. His general overall uptightness is now very apparent to him and he is aware of his fear of losing control. He has a death grip of fear of just letting go. Rushes of images spring to mind... clinging, unable to let go, to really let things go... to let things just go on, as if he could stop things, anyway. Michael is struggling here.

“Letting go is not always easy,” the rinpoche continues, “Just let the breath go out, but deeply. Let it go all the way out.”

Michael lets the breath go out in a long deep sigh, deeper than he has any memory of. As he speaks, the rinpoche touches him gently on the shoulder and catches Michael's eye. Their gaze locks. Something magical is happening here, as the lama says:

“That's it. Let it go all the way out. Don't worry, it will come back. It always does. Breathe out and let it return on its own. In fact, you can't stop it.”

With this, Michael experiences some real inner release. His white-knuckled grip on the chair arms lets go and he relaxes. His fingers extend out. The darker images which were kind of clinging to Michael are freed up, wither, and vanish. In their place are images of bounding free, of green hills, and a sense of joy. He has an image of himself coming over the top of a hill, school books in hand along with other students. They are heading down into a golden green valley where they will go to school. This flashes through his mind.

Nyima rinpoche remarks, “Now you've got the idea. Gently now. Follow the breath back in... quieting the mind.”

Michael is relaxed. He looks up and around. His eyes meet the rinpoche's eyes. There is a softness and openness around both their eyes, like a little glow. Their minds are relaxed. Rinpoche smiles. They are looking at each other. Michael smiles.

Rinpoche continues, “Good. That is enough for now. Larry can show you more about the best posture for doing this later.” The rinpoche turns slightly away and begins to move on. Michael wants to continue this moment, “Rinpoche, what is this you are showing me?”

Now turning back, the Rinpoche again looks at Michael, and says, “You are just looking at your mind by following the breath. In Tibet, we

call it Shiné [Shee-neigh], it means residing in the calm. In English, you might call it meditation.”

Michael responds, “That was something. Thank you, Rinpoche,” and the lama responds, “Of course, you are very welcome. My pleasure.”

Rinpoche has gone back to examining things in the room and Michael is now on his feet and more or less again following the rinpoche around the room again. Michael is much more relaxed now, and speaks freely.

“Rinpoche, have you heard about the art movement in the prison Cities?”

Rinpoche nods, “Yes, somewhat. I have read about it and heard some of the music. It is very beautiful.”

Michael continues, “I want to learn what it is about those artists that makes them so sharp, and their art so profound.”

Rinpoche nods, “I understand... You know, I have heard that Khenpo Rinpoche is now in the Cities and that would have an effect.”

Michael, now questioning, “Khenpo Rinpoche? Who is that?”

“Michael, he is a great lama and I get the feeling that you might want to go there and ask him what you just asked me. He would have the answer.”

Michael is now listening intensely.

Rinpoche, continuing, “Now, I should get some rest. I have to speak tonight. Thank you so much for driving me here. I am glad we met.”

“Thank YOU, Rinpoche. When you showed me how to meditate, so much happened in my mind. I can’t explain... it was like letting go of a lot of old stuff..,” says, Michael.

Rinpoche takes Michael's arm, gently and looks him in the eyes, saying, ”I understand. That is a good sign. If you like, you can practice that some each day.“

The rinpoche extends his right hand to Michael, quite formally, as if he knows how we do this here in the West. Michael gets the idea and extends his hand. They shake hands, and rinpoche leaves the room. The scene closes out with Michael's face looking after him, relaxed and somewhat radiant, in fact.

They walk back out in the entranceway.

On a small table in the entranceway is a saffron-orange poster with red type advertising the Nyima’s visit. The main image is a wood-block print of a flying dragon, with some kind of pearl or jewel held in each of its four paws. Nyima rinpoche stops and looks at it. Turning to Michael, “I understand you made this poster.”

Michael nods, looking a little sheepish. Rinpoche, continuing, “Why did you choose this particular image?”

“Someone gave it to me,” Michael responds, “I am told that it came from Tibet.”

“I know,” says the rinpoche, “Do you know the story of this dragon?”

Michael picks up the poster and looks at it, “I don't. I just loved the image.”

Rinpoche gently takes the poster in his hands, “Every Tibetan knows this story. The dragon holds four precious pearls in his hands, one in each paw. As long as he holds onto all four pearls, he can fly, but if he drops even one, he plunges to the ground.”

“The four pearls stand for the "Four Thoughts That Turn The Mind." Since you like this dragon, you might like to learn more about those four thoughts.

“Where can I learn more about this?” asks Michael, Nyima responds, “Khenpo Rinpoche can explain it to you.”

“Now I am off to a nap. I hope you will stay for the lecture tonight.”

“I wouldn't miss it, Rinpoche,” says Michael as he steps out the door and heads for his car.

Rackham Hall

Rackham Hall is a mid-sized but very finely decorated auditorium. Although not large, it is the premier lecture hall in Ann Arbor. Michael brings rinpoche in early, and there is a small gathering beforehand just for invited guests. There are drinks and sandwiches. Michael is present as are a number of rinpoche's students, some faculty members, a few local Ann Arbor businessmen, and some interested hangers on. Mostly everyone is trying to get as

close to rinpoche as they can, so they can hear what he is saying.

Nyima Rinpoche's English is not perfect, but his command of idiomatic English and slang is. In fact everyone present is delighted as he reveals again and again that he understands the subtle nuances of American speech. The lama is literally playing with the English language.

Michael recognizes his friend Robert, the owner of a local metaphysical bookstore, who is not above challenging the lama. Robert and his friends are more or less bunched together, gawking, listening, not really wanting to disturb the rinpoche, but obviously taking in as much as they can get away with. Nyima rinpoche is standing in the back, holding court. Robert is amazed to see the lama take out a cigarette and light it up. Robert, who is deep into macrobiotics, cannot hold himself back, "Rinpoche..."

Rinpoche looks up and turns slightly toward Robert.

"You are smoking. I thought that lamas..."

Rinpoche gives that wry little smile of his and looks at Robert, and says, "I thought someone might want to see me smoke."

Everyone laughs, and then rinpoche laughs, takes a long slow puff on the cigarette, looks up in the air, and blows the smoke out in a long plume. Everyone laughs again, and rinpoche adds, "You know, I don't plan to live forever, at least not right now."

Everyone laughs again. The small crowd of watchers is encouraged and they close in on the rinpoche, who is still smiling, and smoking. They are getting acquainted now. This is what they all hoped for.

The lecture is fairly well attended, Nyima Rinpoche not being as well known then as he later would become. Michael is sitting right up front, captivated (as is the entire audience) by the lama's words. It was a perfect evening. Michael keeps running through his mind the part about his going to the Cities and asking Khenpo Rinpoche. What is that all about?

AIRPORT

The next day Michael drives rinpoche and Larry to the airport and walks inside. Larry has rinpoche's bags and is standing a little behind the lama, just out of earshot. Rinpoche and Michael are standing together, speaking. They are just outside the final gate through which Michael cannot accompany them. Michael is saying goodbye, "Rinpoche, I am so glad you came here. Thank you for everything. I had no idea... you were like this. I have no personal resistance to you. It is wonderful... I have never met anyone like you..."

Rinpoche cuts in, very gently, now taking Michael's hand in his and holding it. This would be very unusual in Michael's world, but he sees that rinpoche is completely sincere.

"Well, Michael, here we both are, and we are about the same age. You know, right place, right time, as you say."

Michael, continuing, "I just want to say thanks... .. so much."

Michael actually clasps rinpoche's hand at this point. They look at each other. Rinpoche smiles his little wry smile, "You are very welcome.... And please give my best regards to Khenpo Rinpoche, when you see him. He is very special, as you will find out... This has been fun. Let's meet again! Goodbye, for now."

Rinpoche shakes his hand in a more formal manner and turns to Larry and insists on taking hold of some of the luggage. They turn to Michael and rinpoche gives a very slight bow of acknowledgement and they are off. Michael is still assimilating the comment about his meeting Khenpo Rinpoche, and he calls after them.

"Rinpoche, how will I find him? How will I find Khenpo Rinpoche?"

The rinpoche stops, turns, and speaks, "He is with the Tibetans, in the Sector. You will have to go into the Sector. Good luck!"

And the rinpoche and Larry pass through the gate and are gone. Michael stands staring after them.

Michael is intrigued by what he has learned about Khenpo Rinpoche and even entertains a few daydreams about going to the Cities and finding the man. But that would be crazy and these are just daydreams. He is busy enough just coping with things as it is and doesn't have time to go off on what could be some wild-

goose chase, and a very dangerous one at that. Michael soon (mostly) forgets all about trying to get to the city.

Then one night Michael is at his table at Mark's coffee house and the girl who hooked him up with Nyima Rinpoche comes in. Michael beckons her to join him. She comes over.

They talk about the visit and Michael tells her how deeply moved he was to meet Rinpoche, how much it meant to him. As Nyima Rinpoche's student, she of course, understands and asks him to tell her every little detail. When he tells her about the time he spent with rinpoche in the library, she stops him. She has a puzzled look, "Two hours. Wow! That IS unusual. How did that happen?"

Michael explains that everyone else went for a tour of campus, and rinpoche asked him to stay behind with him. The girl, now showing increasing interest, "Well, what happened?" Michael tells her, "We hung out for a while and then he had me sit down and kind of watch my breath. A lot of things went through my mind while he did this. I saw a lot about how I hold things in and am afraid to let go..."

"And then I asked him about the music in the prison cities. He told me about a rinpoche that somehow is inside the Cities. He said that I should or could go and ask him about the music there and he would have something to tell me." The girl, still, taking this all in, "Whoa! This is heavy. Are you going there?"

Michael pauses and actually thinks about the possibility and turns to her, "I have thought

about what he said a lot, but don't seriously consider going there myself." "I understand," she replies, "Me neither, but rinpoche would not say something like that lightly. He was telling you something."

Michael, who had not thought about it quite like that, reopens the possibility in his mind. The girl tells him he is one lucky dude to spend so much personal time with the rinpoche and that he should consider what rinpoche told him. After she leaves Michael looks out across the room, obviously distracted and looking inward, thinking about all of this.

It is early the next morning just before dawn and Michael is sleeping peacefully. You can see behind him out the window just the merest tinge of morning light. Michael has a dream.

In his dream he is traveling to the Cities to meet this wonderful being, this golden Asian man who is waiting for him there. When Michael arrives before him is a really radiant being with like stalks of light coming out of his eyes. In the presence of this rinpoche Michael feels better than he has ever felt. He is just so happy. The rinpoche recognizes Michael and welcomes him. And then he wakes up.

There in the early morning light, sitting up in bed, Michael tries to grasp at remembering the dream, savoring whatever pockets of memory still remain. But they are already almost gone. He can't quite get back into that state and soon Michael is left sitting there, just wide awake with this great empty feeling. He is mostly sad that such an event is not really happening. His

whole current life kind of rushes upon him. He feels deflated.

He moves to the side of his bed, puts his legs on the floor, and looks around his room. What is he really doing with his life? Here he is a hanger-on in Ann Arbor, someone who has grown much older here in this student Mecca than those around him. He has stayed on when most students have graduated and moved ahead with their lives and out into the world. The clock is ticking and he still does not know exactly what he wants to do with his life.

In this early morning light, sitting there in bed, staring at his alarm clock, he feels sadness that his lifestyle has shut out any possible gaps or openings that might let him interrupt the daily process of mostly doing nothing and break out into something new... like the dream he just had, the feeling that something or someone was waiting for him; someone knew who he was and was looking for him too.

His whole current thrust and direction just turns gray in his mind and pops like a bubble. It evaporates. He feels empty and feels sorry that he has filled his life so full of busyness and noise so that a magical event like meeting this great being is no longer possible for him. He is too busy for this kind of dream. And busy doing what? Not a lot, he agrees. This fact depresses him and he is not sure just how he can go on from here. All of this, the dream, his deflated feeling, is totally unexpected. Everything had been going along so well and then the dream and now this empty feeling and loss of direction. All of the momentum he had going

for him about his life is gone. He mostly feels badly that his life is so poor that it cannot afford such a magical event to even happen.

This is when Michael first knows he is going to the Cities. It is clear to him now that this is the way to go, his path. He has to do it because he wants that experience, to see if his dream is real, to see if the golden man is really there, to fill that empty spot within him. He is shocked that he is going. In their own ways he and Richard Malcolm have a lot in common.

What a busy time it is. Suddenly Michael has everything to do and no time in which to do it. The first thing he does is to attempt to book tickets within a month. In that short time he has to apply for and receive a Cities visa, to have a tour set up, inoculations, etc. Although in the U.S., travel to the Cities requires a standard passport and all that it entails.

Visas, too, come in slow and expedited forms. Here, too, he has to pay extra to expedite the process. Even then, it just comes through in time. And for visas and passports you need up-to-date birth certificates, the ones with an imprinted seal on them! It turns out that his birth certificate, that is, the one from his birth, is no longer valid. This precipitates a frantic search (and extra fees!) to get a fresh copy of what he already always had and he paid to have it overnighted to him. The passport people just held up everything until they got exactly the birth certificate they required.

Inoculations were a mini-drama in themselves. What shots to get? What shots to ignore? What

about the wisdom of shots at all? Some are required. He pulled all the information he could get from books, the internet, and local doctors, but they did not agree. Michael began calling disease control centers and national experts. One thing is for certain: few people know the whole story about getting immunizations for traveling to a place like the Cities, although most local doctors firmly believe they know the facts. Somehow he got all the shots he needed, including five or six in one fine day.

As for the itinerary, that was pretty much left up to him. Aside from the shelf of books he had accumulated on the Cities and Colorado (most which were pretty sketchy anyway) Michael had access to a couple of individuals who had actually been there, but they had no experience with the artists and had never heard of Rinpoche. Forget about watching the latest movies. Every night found Michael burning the midnight oil trying to figure out a million angles. Let's see, there was the convict jargon, the medical supplies, the trekking equipment, the places to visit, the maps to find, the clothing - the works.

As for the convict language, as dumb as it sounds, Michael got a few books and made some laminated cheat-sheets. On a pocket-sized sheet he listed all of the most important phrases he might need. That took a lot of time because he had to digest it all in order to condense it. Pretty soon he was talking like an inmate.

As for a list of what to take he collated that from all the books he had plus the experiences

of those who had already been there. Their notes included things like "You can't bring enough Kleenex!" and "Don't forget the Tuck's pads." Michael boiled down all of these lists into a master list of items that he had to consider. There was a limit to what he could physically carry and keep track of.

Michael made many trips to K-Mart and Wal-Mart with lists in hand, snagging various items as they presented themselves to him in the aisles. His sister, who favors homeopathic and natural remedies, worked to that end while Michael made sure he had the allopathic items that would at least address the symptoms. He collected things like laxatives, diarrhea medicine, antihistamines, and all those things we love to hate until we need them. He also scored some antibiotics from a friend.

As for clothing Michael soon found that most of the old standard mail-order catalogs that used to carry outdoor wear had gone upscale and now had more preppy clothes than substantial garments. Even the venerable L.L. Bean is now selling dog beds and Christmas wreaths, looking more and more like a J.C. Penney's catalog. This forced him for some items into hiking catalogs like Patagonia, Marmot and to whatever expedition and outfitter stores he could find. It was fun when the local cliff-jockey who was telling you about the advantages of this or that sock combination, asked Michael, "Where are you going to be hiking?," to answer "The Cities." Their eyes would bug out despite their best efforts at self-control. Not that he was going to do that much climbing.

When it came to hiking and camping gear he really got sidetracked. Michael bought something like five different pair of hiking boots, four of which he took back. It took time to figure the boot angle out and he settled for a pair of comfortable Nike hiking boots rather than the more uncomfortable real thing. And you know that he had to have some \$14-a-pair Thorlo hiking socks which were in fact worth every cent.

Michael had metal mirrors, mosquito head nets, Swiss-army knives, candles, flashlights, waterproof matches, hidden money pouches, Nalgene water bottles, and so on. About the only thing he didn't take were his dad's old decoder rings and Ovaltine labels.

But Michael really spent some late nights on the itinerary for the journey. There being no detailed map of the Crestone area, he photocopied tiny section maps from army publications and pieced them together to create one large map of the areas he was planning to visit. He used the internet to download aerial maps and spliced them together. Then, with books in hand, he read and plotted out a path that he hoped he could follow. Of course, the central point in the journey was his visit to the Tibetan monastery, high in the Sangre de Cristos Mountains. Everything else after that was gravy. It was a high-energy time -- those weeks preparing for the trip -- and visions of the Cities danced through his head.

And there were delays, the worst happening right up front, right after he arrived at the

airport, on the day of his flight. He had just bid all his Ann Arbor friends (who were in awe that he was going) goodbye and finagled a ride to the airport where he was dropped off.

There he stood in the airport with his backpacks on the floor, listening to the announcement that his flight had been cancelled, due to high winds at Chicago's O'Hare airport where he was headed. To make it worse, his ride to the airport had already left. It was less than climactic, having to rent a car to drive himself and his gear back home. Worse yet was the 24-hour wait for the next day's plane, not to mention more or less hiding out indoors so he did not have to explain to his friends what he was doing back in town after all his braggadocio in leaving. It was a watch-the-clock moment and just try to sleep. Not much on the sleep.

But dawn came and Michael is back at Detroit-Metro, bags in hand. This time the flight is not cancelled and he is finally on his way. His trip takes him from Detroit-Metro Airport to the Denver International Airport, where he changes planes. This is an understatement. It turns out that only small planes can land at the tiny prison airport which is located just south of the Great Sand Dunes National Park area. How small a plane, Michael is about to find out. At Denver, just a trifle short on time, Michael, rigged out with his backpack and other gear, negotiates all the endless conveyor belts, colored neon lights, and loud music and heads for his terminal. As it turns out his terminal is at the end of the end of the line. In fact, his

gateway is little more than a stairway down to the tarmac, which for now is roped off. And there he waits.

And waits. In time the gate is opened and an attendant shows Michael and the few other folks taking the same flight down the stairs and out on the tarmac, where sits a very small plane indeed, perhaps seating 11-12 people, at best. As they enter, the attendant offers him a tray on which are two things: pieces of cotton for his ears and candy to help him swallow.

How novel, he thinks. Then, to Michael's surprise the attendant climbs in after Michael, closes the plane door, puts on a flight hat and becomes, Voila!, the pilot. The cotton and the candy were cute, but the segue from attendant to pilot was over the top. All of the five or so passengers are amazed. And off they fly. At 32,000 feet the country marches on beneath him. The endless flat farms and the bumpy air as they began to cross over the Sangre De Christos mountains and beyond to the small airport at Dune City.

The flight from Denver begins to descend from the clouds into the beautiful Great Sand Dunes National Park Valley and thus Michael gets his first real view of the Colorado Mountains. In the approaching twilight he can still see clearly the rugged mountain range below, with very little touch of green. As the plane moves lower, Michael can see the perimeter wall and towns and then individual houses. It is exciting. The plane comes to a bumpy landing and finally wheels around in front of what is a small terminal.

Michael is cranked and waits impatiently while the other passengers in front of him gather their gear, file out, and begin the walk across the field toward the terminal. Once there, he walks along a path filled with blooming plants alive with the loud sound of field crickets. It is warm out and smells great. After his initial flight delay Michael has finally arrived somewhere he actually wants to be at last. And after, the whole thing is like a dream. It is warm, standing there in the runway, with the mirage-like heat shimmering on the tarmac. The sky is a clear blue with not one cloud. Backpack in hand, Michael stands waiting for the bus to the prison cities.

Time just keeps unfolding, moment by moment and it seems natural for the whole plane trip to be over and in the past. He is not really all there, certainly not very present. Michael is wrapped in some suspended state of himself like the deer in the headlights, watching what is happening, but more holding himself for the moment when he will actually arrive at the Cities. The prison airport is more like a mini-military base than an airport for all of the planes, except the one he came in on, are military issue and part of the small air force that polices the Cities, mostly attack helicopters. It would normally have given him chills to look at them, but for some reason he is in the zone and oblivious to most of it.

Even the long crowded mini-bus ride never really gets to him. He hates to be jammed into seats, whether in a theater, bus - wherever. This time it does not faze him, for he is in a

state somehow once removed from what is going on around him. Michael is just floating out there, waiting. This whole thing has him in some mild state of shock. The road runs along the perimeter of the prison area, and mile after mile of barbed wire fence flashes by, with Michael just staring out the window. It is hypnotizing. All of this is still very unreal to him.

Michael also takes it in stride when they are told they will not be stopping at the South Gate entrance to the prison but must proceed north to the North City. It appears a whole group of prisoners were being transferred inside and the authorities thought it was too dangerous to process them along with civilians. Michael relaxes for the additional twenty or so mile drive north.

INTO THE CITIES

Michael has trouble sort of waking up even after being dropped at the North Gate entrance. Everyone else piles out and heads inside. There is Michael, standing before the gate, fences all around, just staring at them. Somewhere in the distance, he thinks, must be the Cities as he peers through the huge fences. He can vaguely see something way out there across the desert. What he can see clearly right in front of him are the high fences topped with barbed wire, more than a little intimidating, as are the guards policing the front gate. Even the heavy green doors that loom over his head send a clear message: this is indeed a prison. He slowly picks up his packs and walks through the tall doors. Inside is the area where visitors are processed.

During the rigorous processing that follows, Michael still finds himself being wafted along, sort of half awake and still not quite all there. The paperwork, the physical stuff... it all drifts by in a kind of troubled dream. He is stripped and searched from head to toe. He is photographed, fingerprinted; various parts of his body are measured, gauged. And then there is the psychological testing. It takes the most time and is the most painful.

And when all of that is done, as a last-ditch effort, Michael is presented with some sort of master psychologist whose job it is to try to talk him out of ever entering the prison at all. And the guy is good. There are times when what the man said makes sense and even a moment when Michael has doubts about going

inside. But in the end he keeps to his decision. He would go in.

His belongings are searched thoroughly. Michael is aware this would happen and was careful not to bring anything forbidden. Still he is surprised when they confiscate his small Swiss Army knife which leaves him with a bitty pen knife for any cutting he might have to do. It is ironic because he later finds that every last convict has some kind of knife and few as small as that little army knife. They make them in there.

At long last he is done being processed, told to pick up his things, and pointed toward an exit. Once through, he is outside again but this time on the inside of the prison. Only a one-half mile stretch of flat land separates him from the actual prison which he can faintly see rising up before him in the distance.

And there Michael is walking that last mile from the gate to the cities, still watching himself watching himself, like a hall of mirrors. Looking at looking at, as he likes to call it. It is a numbness that holds him, like trying to wake up from within a dream. He knows he had better be there, be mindful and he keeps trying to wake up, but still his mind drifts on, locked like a deer in the headlights. He knows he needs to snap out of it.

All along Michael knew this was a crazy thing to do and yet he let it happen. Something inside him doesn't care. He flashes back again and again to the times earlier in his life when he had taken acid for the first time. It is the

same kind of feeling now. Part of him just doesn't care. Or part of him wants a change, any change, and is ready for the next something, anything it might take to get him moving toward whatever future he has, at times, dimly glimpsed.

He is indeed out of control or beyond control for a time. It is, in some strange sense, a comforting experience to be in a situation that is totally beyond his control. It reminds him of the plane he just got off of -- being strapped into a plane that is racing down the runway for takeoff... like a carnival ride. It is too late then to do anything but abandon oneself to the sheer experience. He feels the same way now as he slowly walks toward the Cities. Somehow he is glad this is happening, glad he is beyond the control of his known life - a kind of freedom that he has seldom experienced. Of course he is terrified.

But Michael is also bemused. Where have all his plans gone? Where is all his philosophy now? Where the focused attention? All out the window, at least for the moment. A clear mind is something Michael can only hope for in a controlled situation and then only for moments or maybe days at a time. It has never become a permanent part of his life. He has not "realized" it, to use the meditator's term. He has experiences of clarity and presence, on the good days, but no permanent realization. It is something he can only aspire to, hope for, and work toward.

But here at the edge of the Cities it is a totally new and fresh situation for him. All his training,

poise, or clarity -- whatever you might call it-- is not with him. Gone. Nada. He can feel his own rapid breathing, feel the sweat running beads off his elbows. He is much too excited to have any control, much less really be aware of anything other than his own fear. He will try to establish that later, he tells himself, but right now he is in the midst of it all, with incoming experience and just plain: out of control.

It is all very humiliating from a philosophical point of view, from any point of view. Michael is back to square one with his mind, like a teenager - just too excited. And the noise of his own excitement drowns out any finer impressions that might be there.

So much for philosophy. Later. He is now at the final gate to the Cities and gawking like a tourist in this strange land. Michael is shocked at how clean things are, at least the buildings right before him. After all, much of the Cities are still like brand new.

There is another delay while Michael waits for his I.D. card and generally just waits until they say he can go. Finally he and a small group of others are ready to leave the protected area of the gate and venture out where mobs of taxis and touts are waiting for him. By now it is quite dark. Originally there was to be a car sent to meet him from the guest house where he is staying, but now, more than a day late, there is little chance of someone he does not know being able to track his belated progress through to this arrival.

Michael, wearing his daypack and clutching his larger frame pack, carefully surveys what waits outside. And it is indeed scary. In the semi-darkness he can see what amounts to a wall of men looking for all the world like homeless people, waiting to greet him. Behind these men are all manner of cars, parked every which way. On all sides men rush forward to try and seize any baggage the new inductees might be carrying. Each speaks, many in broken English, with authority that they alone can help you, that only they can see to your safety, and yet they are just what at the moment Michael is most afraid of. The fact that most of these men are probably in here for murder (or worse) is an idea that Michael has no stomach to entertain at this moment. How to choose from the array of cars outside which taxi (and man) you can trust from the ones who might drive you off who-knows-where and do who-knows-what?

As Michael emerges from behind the police line he moves toward the wall of people across the road; all beckoning to him. It is not like there is an obvious choice here. They all look equally frightening, taxi-driving lifers waiting impatiently for a succulent morsel like him. And then in the middle of this wall of people he spots one man that looks somewhat more human than felon, and who seems to be waving at him, almost as if he knows who he is. Michael takes a chance and, beckoning to the man steps away from the police line.

As he moves out from the line suddenly he finds himself fighting to keep track of his two backpacks as many hands from unwanted

helpers reach out to grab them. They are everywhere. The man, who has stepped forward now helped by the others struggles to control the flow of Michel's packs toward a nearby vehicle. It is all confusing to Michael as he slowly realizes that most of these so-called helpers are not with the man at all. Somehow they get the packs into the front of the jeep and Michael starts to squeeze in himself. The un-requested helpers, who have obviously been drinking, are now demanding money, but Michael has not had the sense to get any small bills at that point. He has nothing for them except huge bills and these guys are not pleasant looking. The man at the wheel is laughing. Michael, his baggage, and the man are now jammed in the front seat of the small jeep, the back being filled with all kinds of other materials and rubbish. Michael hands the driver the address of the place he is staying. Much of Michael is hanging out of the side window as they pull away from the airport with the shouts of the unpaid men following them into the night.

Words fail Michael to describe that initial ride from the airport into town on that first night at the prison cities. He is about to get his first taste of the Cities, not from an account, but in fact. As mentioned, he is jammed into the passenger side of the small jeep, literally leaning and hanging out the window, so everything along the streets is crystal clear to him and far too close for his comfort. It is by now night and there are as yet no regular street lights, and damn few lights of any kind. Although this high plateau gets almost no rain

each year, for some reason it has been raining here recently and the road is filled with small and very large puddles, many of which have to be driven around. All kinds of small frogs or toads are hopping around in the headlights as they move. And they are moving at what Michael feels is considerable speed, given the road conditions. And the road is in bad shape.

Worse, there are all manner of things in the road, a totally new experience for him. Hurtling through the dark they come upon cows just standing there and packs of dogs everywhere. And people. People are all over the roadway, walking, standing, alone and in groups. And the extreme poverty of this city impresses itself on him along with all of the other input. Beyond the road people are just everywhere in the dark, in small groups, smoking, exchanging things, watching him, always barely getting out of their way.

And the jeep's constant leaning on the horn does not give anyone or any animal enough time to escape their forward motion or so it seems to Michael. The car's horn becomes in the hands of his driver something entirely new. The man is literally controlling the street traffic with his horn.

Michael keeps looking for the main city or for the bright lights of civilization to appear before him, but sees only the dark of the streets, with brief glimpses here and there of what is happening around him. The city he imagines with twinkling lights never materializes and it begins to sink into him that there is no city like

that, and that he is in a very different kind of place than he has ever been or even imagined.

Michael is gradually numbed by the constant jolts of the car on the street, lurching from side to side, as it hits the potholes. It is a crazy ride that seems right out of a movie like "Blade Runner" or "Road Warrior." Everything has a post-apocalyptic feel to it, like a bad acid trip. Michael knows that he is very tired, but is now also very awake and taking all of this in. He hopes they will reach the main center of the city soon.

But it only gets darker and darker and the streets narrower and narrower until they are crawling through alleys with only inches of side-room to spare, passing faces only right before his eyes. "What have I gotten myself into?" he thinks. Michael is far from anywhere he knows and with no obvious place to get to, no city lights, no Holiday Inn. By now the alley is so tight that the driver is forced to move very slowly, foot by foot. Just alleys and smells and dogs and darkness and... STOP.

They have reached a dead end, a narrow cul-de-sac from which Michael doubts they could even back out. He thinks that maybe this is the end of the line for him, that the driver has brought him here for some dire purpose. The driver startles him by leaning on the car horn one last time and in a few moments a large gate swings open. "This is your hotel," he said, driving forward into some kind of walled compound. He is at the Lotus Guest House, his hotel. Amazing!

Piling out, Michael is by this point quite numb. He pays the driver, is helped to a room, his luggage deposited, and left alone. Horned toads with their spiny backs have made a ring outside his door in the one tiny bare bulb and are catching insects. Dogs bark in the distance. The rooms are shabby, dirty, soiled, used. There are no towels and the bedclothes make Michael sure he will use his sleeping bag. Any lighting is stark and minimal. The bathroom is a new experience entirely, with a showerhead that uses the entire room as its stall. The water just drains out a corner of the room. A toilet with no seat completes the effect. By now Michael is a little in jet-lag shock, culture shock too. And at the same time, he is so glad to be there. So this is the Cities.

That first night sleep is all upside down. Keep in mind that Michael's internal clock has just taken a hit, having had little or no sleep the night before. Trying to sleep that first night is one of those never-quite-drifting-off affairs, not helped by the exhaustion that he is experiencing. Outside his room, in the alleys below are all kinds of sounds, sounds of people moving around, arguing, but must of all, of packs of dogs barking. It goes on all night. Just before dawn, the incessant barking of the dogs began to subside, but never completely. And then it starts to get light. It is strangely beautiful listening to that first dawn in the Cities. Michael is so tired and yet so awake.

But rest he cannot. Michael has ongoing problems. Because he had been delayed one day on his trip, he has lost the time window

that he needs to apply for the visas into the Sector and the mountainous regions. He has almost lost the time needed to obtain this special visa, which is only available two days a month. He hopes to drive into the mountainous region sometime during the following days, but the three-day waiting period for that visa application has vanished. Worse, this one day he has left is a Cities strike day, something he will come to know only too well.

It seems that the U.S. government, now that the Cities are almost self-supporting, is trying to regain some control of the population and has instituted several punitive measures, chief among them being some kind of tariff or sales tax on all goods sold. They know better than to try to exact the tax from within the city itself, so they are implementing it on all Cities goods, as they are exported.

Perceived as an additional hardship by the prisoners, they have organized a series of city-wide strikes in protest. On strike days, no motor traffic (cars, buses, etc.) are allowed, thus strangling business and communication for that day. The penalty for violators is stoning of the vehicle and the persons inside. The result is that today Michael is stranded in the hotel area, unable to take any action on getting his mountain visa. The visa office is, Michael is told, some 7 miles away.

Michael asks the guest house proprietor if he can help him get to the mountainous-region visa place, but the man just shrugs his shoulders. Sorry, he cannot help. If Michael can somehow get to the visa office, which is

located outside the city in the new (so-called) suburbs, something still might be done, he suggests.

Michael is suffering from sleep deprivation, travel-lag, culture shock and he has not had any breakfast, but he is unwilling to give up on the Sector, because Rinpoche is there, the lama that had appeared to him in the dream. He resolves to find a bicycle and go there himself. By god, he will go.

At first, no one seems to even know exactly where the office he wants is, much less show a willingness to accompany him there on a bicycle. However, Michael manages to find one middle-aged man who knows and he says he will show him the way. As for bikes, all he can find are some not-too-bad old-style one-speed American bicycles, you know, the kind with foot breaks and one loop of chain. No ten-speeds. As for the man who would guide him, well, it turns out that he really has in mind for the trip his young helper, not himself, and the helper speaks very little English. And so the two of them, with the young man leading, in a sort of Mary Poppins kind of way, start out on the 15-mile round trip through the city streets and into the suburbs.

One lucky thing is that there is no traffic, so the normal dangers of the Cities traffic are reduced to police vehicles and the odd car or truck that dares break the strike. On the down side, the streets are unbelievably potholed and rough, not to mention the dust. Everywhere there are clouds of dust. The least effort or movement is enough to raise the clouds and they fill the air

and choke the lungs. Michael is forced to tie a t-shirt around his mouth, and to breathe through that. Regardless, Michael gets an instant introduction to city culture, close up. He is so tired and zoned that the whole thing is almost beautiful, if somewhat surreal. And so, through the streets they goes.

Here is poverty like he has never imagined it to be. While the two main cities are new and well built, not so for these outlying regions - ramshackle buildings, hardly worthy of the name houses, jammed together in rampant decay. And the filth. There is no sanitation system here in the outlying regions, so this whole part of the whole city is one big dump. There are mounds of garbage at certain locations, the spots perhaps arrived at randomly, with month upon month of rotting garbage piled high. Some of the rotting garbage is so old that it has been reduced to something resembling potting soil and has plants everywhere growing in it.

The streets themselves, aside from the dust, are also filled with debris, in particular animal (and human) feces. Dogs in packs and singly are everywhere in the streets, as are goats and cows. They wander at will, although the meat animals (cows, sheep, etc.) must belong to somebody and are not just there for the taking. People just throw the remains of their kitchens and meals into the street. Michael has constantly to watch out for buckets of slop, which are just tossed onto the street right in front of him as he rides.

And the accumulation of garbage and debris is so great that it has encroached on the actual width of the streets themselves, narrowing them in places until only one car at a time can pass. And the smell is incredible. The close-packed houses form great channels for winds that move through the city along the street bed, carrying all manner of foul smells. Intersections and side streets became wide channels through which the bad breath from still other sections of the city can flow. When he rides into one of these smell streams, about all Michael can do is to hold his breath and peddle harder, hoping to ride beyond its choking grasp. Some are killer, with chemicals and who knows what else.

And people are everywhere, moving through the streets, there not being any sidewalks. And there are shops everywhere packed side by side, each manned by a man or a group of men, sometimes by what seemed like a family. Hundreds of tiny coffee shops with little more than card tables and folding chairs, coffee or tea and some kind of bread, often very little.

Michael is conspicuous to all watching as he slowly rides by with his head down, searching for the ever-present pot holes. Some people call out to him but he just keeps moving. Any concentration lapse, like looking up, means, as often as not, his rear end gets slammed as the bike hits another hole in the road. Also, Michael does not want to engage anyone by eye contact. He has no idea what might happen. Weaving among the pot holes (not to

mention people and animals), Michael kind of peeks out at city life as he rides along.

And he rides for a long time. The going is slow and each stretch seems to take longer than the last. By now, it is really hot. Michael is wearing his heavy cargo vest which contains about everything important that he owns, like visa, ID papers, medicine, and money. It weighs a ton but he does not dare to take it off, lest he drop it or it be snatched from him. He has nightmares about losing that vest.

Finally they reach the visa office and wheel their bikes through the gate into a small courtyard. The boy watches the bikes while Michael goes through the procedure to apply for the inner-perimeter visa. He quickly learns that the process which normally can take days can be shortened for an additional fee. He is directed to a long line of forms and officials, more forms, and, of course, the waiting. At last Michael is ushered into the private office of the head honcho who explains to him (after he had paid all kinds of fees) how it is really impossible for him to get what he wants today but that he, the official, early the next morning, would interrupt his day off and come down to this office and unofficially complete the visas so that Michael can have that permit. He will do this for Michael, if he, Michael, would like. "Would like" means he wants money.

Other than that, there is no hope for a quick solution. With that news, the fees already paid and forms filled, Michael has no choice but to agree. And while Michael pays him under the

table the man goes on and on about his philosophy of life.

With that said and done Michael heads back along the road to his hotel on the bike, this time mostly uphill. He feels that he is an even greater spectacle than before, puffing, panting, and just walking up the long hills. He does make it back, covered with sweat, exhausted, but somehow exhilarated. His butt is bruised and will be sore for many weeks from the ride. He sits himself down and eats at a small restaurant and waits for the day to end. He thinks about all that he has seen on his ride that day and takes a cautious walk around the area surrounding his hotel. Then: to bed.

What struck Michael first about this town (and the Cities in general) is how run-down and dirty everything is, at least outside the new areas. This is never made clear in all the reports on the outside. There doesn't appear to be any sanitation department and every kind of garbage and refuse is just shoved into the streets and alleys where it remains, ripens, and eventually decays. They don't appear to have trash receptacles, so the whole city has to serve as one extended dump.

This is immediately apparent the moment you step out on a street (there being few sidewalks). You have to watch where you step all the time because every possible kind of mess is right there in your way. He realizes that he is not being entirely fair because he did see a number of persons with short broom-like whisks sweeping their portion of the sidewalk or the dirt space in front of their stores. But still,

he has the impression that the amount of refuse, the extent of this problem, is way beyond control. It has become a way of life, but one totally foreign to Michael. It takes some getting used to.

Later, when Michael looked back on this time, he remembered the beggars. Everywhere begging. This he had also never read about. The really severely crippled are just there with their hands out or bowing before you, with no expectations. To these Michael always tried to give at once or gave after encountering them several times when he could sort them out from the next level of beggars, the proactive ones. These also have some deformity or disease but they are methodical and their methods always involve making eye and verbal contact with you. They make it hard for you to ignore them. Michael would vacillate on giving to them. Sometimes he did and sometimes he did not.

Next were those who really did not have all that much wrong with them and who were always making some kind of personal contact with you. You could see them getting going in the morning, having a coffee, like going to work. These Michael did his very best to avoid.

Next and most awful were the mothers with children. Where did these kids come from? There were not supposed to be any kids in the Cities. This was a tough one. He wanted to give to them, but when he did, there were ten more at his side, each a mother with child. They worked in teams or somehow communicated to each other when they

received money from someone. This made it very hard to decide to give to them. And they would follow him with their hands out, sometimes for a long way.

And last, there are the children. What can you say? Some were in need, but most were just scamming you. Or, yes they needed money, but perhaps they could get it in other ways. Michael was never really good with this group, tending to be too hard on them, trying to get them to back off. But he had seen that some other 'tourists' had this group down cold and they would look or laugh at them in such a way that the kids gave up their pleading looks and burst out into laughter. They made friends with them. Michael could never master that.

THE LECTURE

Professor Malcolm seldom gives public lectures anymore and this one is about the Prison Cities. To be more correct, the lecture is about the arts movement in the prison, but this is just a detail for most people. Information on the Prison Cities, particularly in a public forum is rare, and even the townspeople have come out. The hall is packed - standing room only.

Perhaps Malcolm is slowly slipping off his contacts, but his residual fame and magnetism still work. He remains the darling of the university, at least for tonight, even if all know his rose is fading. A number of the faculty have turned out and the students still love him. This particular night his publisher has come all the way from New York to hear him speak. Well, not just to hear him speak. There is the matter of his being over six months late in delivering to her his manuscript. The book-in-progress is on the arts movement in the prison cities. It is eagerly anticipated by a public who live for details of what goes on within the prison cities. In all fairness, the book is partially written, but Malcolm has been unable to finish it -- the first time this has ever happened to him. He is stuck, not just with the book, but with his whole life, a life which is slowly grinding to a standstill.

Malcolm gives what he thinks is a pretty good lecture. After all, he is still considered the last word on what is happening in the U.S. arts scene. After the applause at the end of the lecture, he sometimes (if he is feeling good) takes Q&A for maybe twenty minutes or so. He

is feeling good this night and enjoys the adulation, no doubt about it. But tonight there is a snag.

During Q&A, a young woman student stands up and questions him about his analysis of the Cities artists. She is perhaps in her early twenties and somehow looks familiar. He thinks that she has probably been in his classes at one time, although not recently. The woman actually questions his ideas. In fact, she challenges his analysis of the Cities artists and their whole approach to art.

It is Malcolm's thesis that the beauty of Cities art comes out of the terrible conditions and suffering within the prison cities. These are tortured souls. Great art often comes from pathos and suffering; this is Malcolm's view. The audience eats it up. This is not a new theory, but kind of the accepted view since the latter part of the 19th century – the tortured genius.

This student questions this interpretation. Instead she feels that the Cities artists are, considering their condition, bright and happy in their personal attitude toward life and their work. Their art comes from that brightness and a certain clarity of mind.

Malcolm is only too used to students, to working them in classes and in lecture halls. A good portion of his reputation comes from his ability to charm almost anyone, to subtly flatter them and bring them along to his way of thinking, especially women. Despite his disaster of a marriage (which lasted almost five

years), Malcolm is still the most eligible professor on campus, swamped by coeds. With his innate good looks and suave air, he makes a romantic living on the student body. Of course this is why he is divorced. The point here: he is completely at home captivating young women and he lays it on thick in this case.

"An excellent idea indeed!" he declares, "Good thinking! It is nice to see a student who has actually thought about these things." He rambles on in the same vein, and when he thinks he has her hooked, like the spider with the fly, he begins to reel the student in. He refers again to the 19th-century ideas of the tortured genius and how we all know that pain is the price we all pay for creativity. Certainly she understands that. It is all quite grand and it ends with Malcolm asserting his own experience in the field as definitive. He has her now... or so he thinks.

But the woman shakes him off without a blink. She stands up again and continues the conversation, saying that while she has read Dr. Malcolm's books and does not mean to be disrespectful, that, in this case Malcolm might perhaps be on the wrong track. By this time Malcolm has more than enough of this sort of thing and he declares the matter as simply a difference in opinion and turns to someone else. The subtext is that Malcolm has all the experience and knows what he is talking about while the student, an unknown quantity, is somehow off-the-wall. End of discussion. Thank you and let's move on.

Except it doesn't end there. For one, the audience, taking this all in, does not raise a hand. And the student now just a little strident without raising her hand this time is back on her feet declaring: "EXCUSE me. Have YOU ever been to the Cities? Have you met these people?" she asks.

Malcolm is beginning to unravel a little by now. No, he hasn't been to the Cities... not a very safe place for any of us to go.... And the student keeps right on. "Well, I have been there and I have met these artists, looked into their eyes, lived with them, and they are anything but how you describe them. These are clear-headed people! It would seem that in this case you don't have the facts. I feel you don't know what you are talking about. I would think you would want to hear this." She sits down.

Although Malcolm continues on with questions for a few more minutes, his mind is by this time racing. He feels upset and somewhat out of control. He is hurt by the student's persistence but most of all he is kicking himself for not listening more carefully. What is it the student just said? And all of this is not good, with the publisher here taking it all in. He has lost face... and in a major way, if only with himself. What had been an attempt to shake off his sour mood of late has now turned into a further confirmation of that mood. His bad luck continues.

After the final question Malcolm puts off the usual handshaking with the crowd, leapfrogs the band of well-wishers who flock up to the

podium, and races to catch the young woman who had questioned him, who is just then reaching the exit. By now this is personal for him.

"Hold on a second!" Malcolm says as he catches up with the young woman. He tries the same tactic again, but now more gently. Sure, the kid has been to visit the prison cities, but what experience does she have in evaluating these kinds of situations? Let's have some facts and see whether we can't come up with an interpretation that fits into what we know about artists, genius, and the like. It is Malcolm's last ditch attempt to reverse the situation and emerge unscathed from the meeting, to salvage the evening. The way he once again lays out his view asks a lot and the young woman knows it. From their looks, the small crowd which has formed around them is also now starting to question Richard's interpretation. The door is open for another interpretation.

But the young woman is on to him and she isn't having any more of it. And it gets worse as his publisher, who has followed him, comes up just a few feet behind Richard and is standing there taking this all in.

"Look! I have given you respect, Dr. Malcolm," the student says, "But please don't patronize me. You really have no experience with this and I have tried to share what I have learned, but you are not interested. I'm afraid you don't know what you're talking about here. It's that simple! Good luck with your book."

And she turns and is out the door. Malcolm turns around and is face-to-face with his publisher and some of his fans, who still want to shake his hand. He smiles and gives a “what can you do?” gesture after the departing student. It is not a good moment.

And it haunts him. Not because it was so embarrassing (which it was), but because it kind of brought out into the open something Malcolm has been long suspecting himself: that he is losing his touch and has fallen further into trying to imitate his own success. He has been observing himself for a while and he finds that he is in fact contriving to be what he had once spontaneously been. This incident with the young student confirms it and he falls to doubting himself and everything his life has become. Maybe the kid is right. Perhaps he doesn’t know what he is talking about anymore. He hates this sense of panic that has begun to invade his life.

Malcolm doesn’t sleep again, the third night in a row. No matter how he arranges himself, something hurts and there he is... flat on his back, just staring up into the darkness. Awake. He now admits to himself what he has known for some time anyway: things are not going well.

Lots of small signs around him are not good and they all add up to some sort of life crisis. Everything has become uncomfortable. And all these things gnaw at him. He has to admit that he will soon have to do something about his "situation." His life has become just too uncomfortable to ignore. It is becoming less

painful for Richard to face change than to live on as things are going now. He tells himself that he should seize the time, take his lumps, and find his way back to something more real. Maybe he should stop dying his hair. And he has to stop trying to imitate how he used to be. It is mortifying, being reduced to imitating himself, trying to continue being what he once was, but now no longer is.

And he should know. Richard is an expert in semiotics, the science of meanings -- reading the signs of the times. Sigh. Now in his late forties, it is somewhat of a long journey back to Malcolm the "wunderkind," the brilliant young critic of pop culture. In his late twenties and early thirties he was the darling of the media. His books were acknowledged as definitive on the interpretation of the music and arts of his times. He had even managed to land a professorship at the University of Michigan and a tenured one at that. Fully ensconced, he is now set for life, but what kind of life? Students flock to his classes and he is a matter of some pride to the deans, at least he used to be. Even he has to admit that life has been just a little too easy for him, with too many available women, too many parties, and really too little time to get any real work done. He is ashamed of what he has become. He once was pure.

Yet, locked in classes as he now is, and growing older too, he doesn't get around as much as he used to. His trips to faraway cities and his introduction to new artists are fewer now. He doesn't even like half the stuff that is coming out in the arts these days, which is yet

another problem, if you are supposed to have your hand on the pulse of the younger generation. He had originally made his living introducing younger artists to his own generation, but has somewhere lost track of that pulse. Now he is trying to introduce emerging artists to this younger generation, yet he knows himself that this really does not make sense. Richard is not an outright fraud, but he is well past the point of needing to make some adjustments in his self and life.

Although his articles still appear several times a year in magazines like "Rolling Stone" he hasn't written a new book in almost five years and his phone no longer rings off the hook as it once did. Although still very popular, Richard is indeed slipping away from what he has been into almost an imitation of himself. He finds himself working now just to keep up his own image, to make sure people treat him as he has become used to being treated. This is not a good sign and he of all people knows it. Somehow he just does not care anymore. Something has changed and he is being rubbed awake by all of these uncomfortable and irritating signs of late. After exploring every other possible exit, Malcolm feels that it may be easier to just face the music, so to speak.

And it is sometime during this third sleepless night that he gives up struggling to recover his balance and to rationalize things back to the way they used to be. You can't go home again he tells himself, and he lets go, opening his mind to whatever is being locked out. All kinds of thoughts rush in, the most terrifying of which

is that somewhere along in here (like Michael before him) he accepts the idea that he is going to the Cities. And going for a lot of reasons: to check out what the kid had told him, just to get away, just to get dangerous with himself, to find some part of himself that is real again, call it a vision quest, whatever. And yes, to know what he has been talking about. In the end, it is easier to actually go and see for himself than it is to take further abuse for his speculation and pontification.

For Richard Malcolm, travel to the prison cities involves a long dusty bus ride from Denver, Colorado. Richard can't help looking around at the other passengers and wondering which of these travelers are on their way to enter the Cities too and which are traveling to still other U.S. cities farther on up the road? Perhaps some of these folk are headed for work on the perimeter or in one of the gateway areas. There is no telling. The road seems to stretch on endlessly before him. Malcolm drifts in and out of a light sleep as the bus roars down an almost straight road.

Underneath, Malcolm is totally awake, anticipating what the Cities might be like. He still has twinges of forgetting the whole thing and trying to get back to where he came from, toward his past. He is more or less horrified to think of surrendering himself to the prison cities. He has everything. He must be crazy to be doing this.

The gateway to North City resembles a combination of a huge bus station and an extended doctor's office. The complete

procedure takes hours with most of it just spent waiting. Malcolm, seated in line on one of the long benches in the room, waits while each successive visitor enters one of several small courtrooms and presents themselves before a review board. Inmates, however, have the green light. Thoroughly shackled they pass right through to their final destination and when they do, lights flash, and buzzers honk. Doors electronically open and shut.

Finally, Malcolm too is led into a small courtroom. It is his last chance to withdraw his request to visit the Cities. Does he realize that by this act he waives all his civil rights? Does he understand that no one will be watching out for him or looking for him should he fail to return to one of the gateways? Does he understand that the Cities exercised their own legal system using convict police officers? The subtext of all the legalese is more like: does he know what a stupid move on his part this is? He does.

Further, he is told, visitors are not welcome except for the money they bring in with them and that is soon parted. And that from the moment he walks out of the gateway he is on his own. Why is he seeking entrance to the Cities? He explains who he was, his books, that he is a professor here to research the Cities arts movement. They just stare at him.

The fact that he is an academic only makes the board of officers try harder to dissuade him. In the end, he signs about a dozen forms and is led through a locked system of doors into an inner series of examination rooms. The door

clangs shut and he senses at once that he is now in the presence of not just other visitors but in with prisoners as well. You can't tell from their dress, but you sure can from the look in their eyes. A chilling sensation sweeps over him (what has he done?) and he moves into still another waiting room filled with men and women preparing for the next series of examinations.

After an announcement over the loudspeaker to prepare for body searches, a guard emerges and gives a short lecture about entering the Cities. It is made clear that no weapons or drugs are to be brought into the prison. And it is explained that there are now three prison cities, one at the north and south gates and a central city. Although originally called by other names, they were now generally just called North Gate, South Gate, and Center City.

A fourth city, which is not formerly recognized, is located in the sand dunes in the southeastern corner of the confine. It is called, appropriately enough, Dune City. Protected transportation between the cities is by bus only. For other forms of traveling, you are on your own. And outside of a few large trucks, there are some automobiles, mostly SUVs. Malcolm has entered through the north gateway is then given maps of all three main cities and their interconnecting roads. After that, one last attempt to frighten those who are visitors into not going in is made. Malcolm is then directed to sit in another of the many long benches that fill the forward part of the room.

A young dark-haired woman carrying too much luggage slowly makes her way along Malcolm's bench, bumping her way among those waiting. She looks vaguely familiar and she catches Malcolm's eye and seemed to recognize him as she slowly makes her way down his aisle. When she reaches Malcolm, one of her suitcases escapes her grasp and, as she reaches for it, she loses her balance and falls into him forcing Richard back against the bench and into the person next to him. There he is with this woman in his arms pinning him against the bench. Slowly she manages to extract herself from his arms and stands up. "Sorry," she says and flashes him the strangest smile. Malcolm knows he has seen her before, but where?

And he is a little flattered and smiles back to her, "No problem." So, he is still kind of attractive to young women after all. She moves on down the bench and toward the lines where the women are queuing up for their physicals. She kind of wriggles out of sight. Then it dawns on him. This is the same young woman who had recently stood up and challenged him at his lecture in Rackham Hall, only now she is dressed way down. Surely she must have recognized him, but she didn't seem to. She never said hello. He puzzles on that one for awhile and settles back in to waiting.

Some long time later Malcolm's name is called and he is directed through yet another door and becomes part of a long line of men waiting for physical examinations. Here he is told to remove all of his clothes except for his shorts

and wait. He is then fingerprinted, photographed, has his retinas scanned, and his body cavities searched -- not something he recommends. Dental and bodily x-rays are taken and he is shuffled off for a psychological exam, where he fills out a somewhat longish written exam and spends a few minutes in discussion with a psychologist. Satisfied that he is sane, Malcolm is passed to a still more inner sanctum. He can see that his ordeal is almost over because the next door leads outside into the desert itself. Richard can see the sky from here. People are being released, one by one, through that door. He waits his turn, anxious to be finished. When his turn finally comes, Malcolm, instead of being released, is asked to leave the line. He is directed to a small anteroom where he is told to sit. The door is locked behind him. And sit he does, for over three hours. He has no idea what is going on. He anguishes over losing his place in line.

At last, two federal officers enter from an inner door and sit facing him across a desk. "You have a problem," they informed him and threw a small plastic bag onto the desk. "What's that?" Malcolm asks, knowing just what it is. The men laughed and said "Never saw it before, have you?" Malcolm shook his head. "It's marijuana, and it was in your coat pocket. You have violated an entrance requirement. Your entrance to the Cities will be terminated. "

Malcolm is stunned. He protests... swears to them that he has never seen the stuff before and has no idea where it came from.

"Look, asshole" one officer says, "We could give a shit about your little bit of pot. How stupid do you think we are? We could throw your ass out of here for having this, much less for lying to us about it. We'd be doing you a favor too. Why bother smuggling this tiny bit in? They grow it by the field inside!"

Malcolm continues protesting, now pointing out that he is a well-known author, what journals he writes for and who his friends are. This does not help.

The second officer volunteers: "You're a nervy little bastard for trying to lie to us. I should throw you out. But, no, buddy. I have a better idea. You're in! You're goin' on in. You'll need more than that little bit of pot to forget what you're about to see. Now get your sorry ass out of here!"

One officer grabs him by the arm, leads him outside the room and to the doorway to the outside. It opens automatically. He is pushed through. The door clangs shut behind him. There is his luggage waiting for him on the pavement.

After new prisoners or visitors are checked in and released to the Cities, there is still a long walk from the outer perimeter to the inner perimeter. Entrance to the Cities is only during the morning and early afternoon hours. And while there are buses for those with a lot of baggage, they only run every two hours. Most choose to walk that half mile carrying whatever small baggage they might have.

But Malcolm's departure had been delayed and the sun, which had been intense white-hot at the high altitude of the San Luis Valley, is now going down, but everything is still warm to the touch from the heat of the day. Waves of heat wash over him as he stands and peers down the half mile corridor that leads from the gate to the entrance to the actual city. As the guard warned him: he is on his own. Richard picks up his stuff, looks back through the glass in the now-locked door, turns and starts walking.

Malcolm will never forget that long slow walk across the desert. He walks, flanked by chain-link, barb-wire fences on either side, the two-lane highway/walkway stretches out before him. Dusk is settling in and ahead he can see other walkers, bags in hand, heading for the city. There is no one coming toward him. It is all one way, into the Cities. He is the last one released that day although he keeps looking over his shoulder. No other walkers appear.

The outline of the city itself rises against the background of the high mountains in the distance, the Sangre de Cristo Mountains... the Blood of Christ. He can't believe this. It is like a Beckett play or a Kafka novel, this long line of sad creatures stretching out against the horizon, all heading to a fate they know little of, but have heard a lot about.

Through the electrified fences Richard thinks he can see the dreaded laser weapons ever sweeping the area. Scary. Nothing moves.

Far ahead of him he can just make out the silhouette of the woman who had stumbled into

him back at the gateway. "Punk kid, what's with her?" But there was something about that smart-aleck smile she gave him back at the gates that makes him certain that it was she who planted the marijuana in his jacket.

As he begins to gain a little on those walking ahead of him, he is aware that some of the people walking are probably visitors like himself, while some are prisoners sentenced to life here. But which are which? There is no segregation. You are just out there with everyone else. No guards. No identification of types, just this walking forward toward the skyline; the prison city growing larger with each step.

Malcolm thinks that perhaps he might still turn back. No one has attacked him on the road so far. The silence of the unknown is deafening. Just footsteps. No talk. "This is crazy," thinks Malcolm. But life as he knows it has bottomed out anyway. It seems easier to just go on with it than to retrace his steps. There is no going back now. He knows and accepts that.

And with each step Malcolm feels his identity, that which has always made him special, his uniqueness, ebb away. The professor. The author. The very important person that he is. Going, going, gone. He is shocked at the ordinariness that he feels. He is just one human walking this lonely stretch as darkness falls.

Malcolm shuffles along toward the edge of the Cities. Inwardly he is preparing himself for the worst, talking to himself. Perhaps he will be

attacked straight away, stripped of what money and belongings he has and left in a gutter to die. The truth is that he has no real idea what fate awaits him at the end of this road. And although he knows he is feeling sorry for himself and acting like such a baby, he also has glimmerings of not giving a damn, of getting on with his life, whatever that might be. These are his thoughts as he reaches the far end and passes through a gateway.

Inside it is a bus station, but without the buses. Uniformed guards with machine guns are waiting for him. It is strange because their uniforms did not look like American-style military or police outfits but more like something you might find in Europe or even China. They look poorly made and don't fit right. It is obvious to Richard that these authorities are convicts themselves. They are hard and strong men and they spot him for what he is without a word ever having to be said.

Two guards are gesturing to the small group where Richard is, almost herding the incomers into one corner of the station. They photograph him and provide him with a small passport-like piece of ID with his picture that clearly says that he is a visitor here. He is told to keep this identification with him at all times. Then they are led to a small door at the rear of the building and put outside.

He and about ten other incomers are now standing in the streets just outside of North Gate City, while just across from them a throng of men wait. Malcolm is relieved to make out

the dark blue of a police uniform standing between him and the end of the walkway. The man is keeping the mob back and the men across the street from him are pointing at him, calling to him as if they knew him. Does he want a guide? Just come over here. There are several cab-like vehicles with their drivers, all calling to him.

As the incomers move beyond the police, they are soon surrounded by those waiting to offer their services. These are mostly would-be bodyguards and tour guides, although these designations are more or less interchangeable. For a fee, they will guide you through the dangers of the Cities -- a deal you should not refuse. They all look equally bad to Malcolm -- just what he needs protection from.

Then, to his left, at the edge of an alley is a man with some kind of closed van, the side door of which has been slid open. He is smiling and beckoning to Richard. "Hey man. Those guys are only going to take your money. Look! I have a van and will drive you wherever you want to go." The man makes eye contact with Malcolm. He gestures for Richard to come over. He is a rough-looking sort, but aren't they all?

Richard nods to the man and steps beyond the policemen into the busy city street and makes for the van. Just then he feels someone firmly grab his right arm. "Not a good idea, man. Not cool." He turns to find himself face-to-face with the young woman from the lecture hall, the one who had stumbled into him. "You don't want to get into that van." She has him by the arm and

is steering him across the road toward a young man, while she speaks. "I know this dude and he won't harm us." Richard lets himself be led along like a blind man, humbled by the woman, happy for the hand on his arm and shaking his head at how close he has come to just getting into the van in the alley.

"But I thought we had differences," Malcolm mumbles, kicking himself for saying something so stupid. "We are all friends here, Dr. Malcolm," said the young woman, still walking. "I'm Mary Mack and I know who you are."

"Call me Richard," Malcolm says. She IS the girl from the gateway, the one who stuck him with the pot. She realizes that he realizes who she is and smiles.

"We've already met at the gateway," says Malcolm. She looks down, and then smiles again. "I'm sorry, man. That was an uncool thing of me to do. I was just scared." She turns to Malcolm and sticks out her hand. "I'm Mary, and I've already said I'm sorry". Richard takes her hand. "That's OK, forget it. What do we do now?"

Before Richard knows it the young man that Mary has waved to has taken his larger bag and together they push through the fringe of the crowd. The three of them are off down the street. "I figure you might need a little introduction to the Cities. Frankly, I was surprised to see you here. Takes a lot guts to come here. I'm proud of you," she says. Malcolm mumbles something but is really

grateful to be in their company. She is right. He does not have a clue what to do.

"Where are you staying?" Mary asks. "At Happy Valley?" Malcolm explains that he hadn't really worked that out yet. Did she have any suggestions? "Sure, Happy Valley," she says, "The place where you wake up alive every morning. How does that sound?" "Sounds good to me," Richard replies.

INSIDE THE CITIES

The Black Cat Café is almost full and very dark. Malcolm moves through the door and merges with the crowd. He can see the bandstand at the far end and is headed in that direction. It is slow going. A Chicano man steps out from the crowd and approaches Malcolm. "Hey, Man, can I take your picture?"

Malcolm looks around to see if the man is speaking to someone else. No one else is near. He shrugs. "OK, I guess." The man seems harmless enough, perhaps a tourist like himself. The man with the instant camera points and the camera flashes. A picture grinds out. Malcolm blinks and starts to move on.

"That's \$10 for the photo," he says to Malcolm.

"Wait a minute, I didn't ask you for that." says Malcolm.

"You sure did. That's what I do. So pay me," replied the man as he moves forward, now blocking Malcolm's path. He is somewhat menacing. A second man moves up behind Malcolm and pushes him lightly while smiling at the first man and says, "Pay the man!" Malcolm is trapped.

As luck would have it, a squad emerges from a back room and single files past where Malcolm and the men are standing. "Officer," Malcolm calls out. The squad member stops. "What's the problem here?" "These men are trying to charge me for a photograph I didn't request"

The squad member turns to the two dark-skinned men, smiles, and then turns back to

Malcolm. The policeman laughs in Malcolm's face and says "YOU!... Pay the man! Now!" The four squad members laugh and walk on. Malcolm reaches for his wallet, finds \$10, and hands it over. The two men standing there try to peer into Malcolm's wallet.

The first man grabs the \$10 bill and shoves Malcolm back against the bar. "Don't fuck with me." Malcolm looks down. He shoves Malcolm harder. "Don't ever fuck with me. I'll cut you, Man. You stupid tourist." The two men then move away into the dark and the crowd.

Malcolm is left standing there. He is shaken. He fumbles along the bar, bumping into people, and regretting that... and then out through the crowd toward the stage. There is almost no place to sit. At last, he finds a table for two all the way up to the edge of the bandstand. In fact, it is right in front of a large speaker complex. Malcolm slumps into a chair and manages to pump down three beers before the set starts. He keeps his gaze to himself, not looking right or left, up or down. His eyes are on the stage. He is trying to recover. The whole trip is a shock to his system.

A group of four musicians drift onto the stage, one by one. There is a keyboard player, a guitar, bass, and drums. They tune up, play some short riffs, and are ready to perform. Malcolm, although still shook by his run-in with the two men, starts to perk up. The beer is kicking in, sort of. He is excited to finally get a chance to witness Cities artists at work.

At last the set begins. It is incredibly loud and raucous music. Malcolm recognizes some mutation of punk rock straight out of 1970s. This is not the Cities music that he has heard while he was outside. People seem to like it; they are dancing. Malcolm understands why his table was empty, but is afraid to move. The speaker blasts into his ears. He waits it out.

At the end of the set there is deafening silence. Richard is grateful. The band starts to wander off into the crowd. Malcolm approaches the bandstand where the guitarist is changing a string. "Hey, nice set, man!" The guitarist turns and looks him in the eye.

"I'm new here" Malcolm stammers out. "You're a tourist," says the man.

"Can you help me?" asks Malcolm.

"What do you want?" the guitarist asks. "I am looking for the Cities artists, you know, the new music."

"You're lookin' at it. You just heard it."

"Your set was great, man, but some of the music I heard on the outside that came from the cities was, you know, different... kinda' weird. Have you heard it? Do you know what I am talking about?"

The guitarist laughs. "Sure, man. I've heard that stuff. I live here. I'm just giving you a hard time, jerking your chain, man. You're talkin' about the Viewers. They're gone."

"Gone" says Malcolm. "How could they be gone?"

"I mean, they've gone to Center City, all of them or almost all of them. You won't find them around here much anymore. There might be a few over at the "Two Sister"s Cafe." It's on B. Street near 29th, not far from here. Ask around there." Malcolm thanks him, and moves carefully through the crowd and back onto the street.

As he walks through the streets, Richard is frightened. Shadows and shapes move in and out of the shadows and threaten danger at every street"s crossing. But nothing happens. Malcolm manages to locate Two Sisters and is grateful to slip inside.

The café is mostly empty. With its bare walls and high tin ceilings, it harkens back to the Beat coffee houses of the 1960s. It must have been brought in especially from outside thinks Richard and then doubts that is possible. A few paintings are hung here and there. Cool jazz is playing on the audio system... maybe Coltrane. The sound of an espresso being made rises above the music. A few people are seated at tables in the back. It is a little dark in the place. Not much happening.

Malcolm approaches the man behind the bar. "My name is Richard Malcolm. I'm a music critic from the outside. I'm looking for the Cities artists that are making the new music. A musician at the Black Cat called them 'Viewers'. He said that maybe you could help me find them."

The man looks up. His clear, bright eyes hold Malcolm's for a moment. "Over there, in the

corner... where those two people are sitting. Feel free to join them. I'll be with you in a minute."

Malcolm moves toward the table in the corner but pauses some ten feet away. He is hesitant to interrupt the man and woman seated there who are talking quietly. He waits. The owner finishes serving some coffee and comes over. "Come on" he says. Malcolm follows.

"Here is someone from the outside," he calls out, "who is interested in the movement." They turn to greet Malcolm. He joins them. "I'm Scott," the man says, standing up. "This must be our lucky day. You're the second person today who is from the outside. Meet Mary Mack. She's a musician from New York." Mary turns toward him, her dark hair catching what little light is there.

"Richard!" Mary exclaimed, "What a small world. Join us. Did you get settled in at the guest house?" Richard thanks her and settles down to another cool beer. This is as close to feeling normal as he has been since he got here. For some reason Mary makes him feel safe.

One of the artists continues... "I'm afraid North Gate is not a good spot for the artists these days. There has been trouble in the clubs. Almost everyone has moved inland to Center City. Since it's not near a gateway, it is less political, and a lot less crowded. Food and stuff is harder to get there but there is less hassle. There are a few of us still here, in the outer cities... some more down in South Gate. Still,

most have gone to Center City. Perhaps the two of you could go together. It's safer that way."

Mary asks Richard why he is here. "Probably the same as yourself... trying to check out the Cities arts movement... find out what its all about. Wasn't it you who said I didn't know what I am talking about?"

Mary smiles weakly.

Richard, continuing, "I know the music, but next to nothing else about the movement. Why are you here?"

"Why am I ever here," says Mary, "I'm a student and a musician, a singer from New York. I fell in love with the music and want to learn how to play that way. I've heard something about the philosophy that drives the music and I'm here to study with these guys. This is my second time here"

"What philosophy? Tell me about it." Malcolm asks.

"I'm not qualified. I know next to nothing. Ask Scott here. He's studied the View. I haven't." Scott takes over.

"Mary. You say you want to play our music and be like us. Your heart is good; you mean well. Still, this alone is not enough. Without the View, you never will get our music. Yet, if you can establish the View, any music that you play will have our style. Viewers don't have to strive for perfection in their music. Any music they play already has a certain perfection, not because they are anything special, but

because they maintain the proper View.
Without that, all you can do is imitate us.

"I don't mean to lecture you. I don't have much time to spend with you tonight. In fact, I have to leave now and go to work. You both are headed for Center City. Conditions there are worse than out here by the gates. There is less food, less people, less of everything. But there is also less of the political machine and less squads. They all hate duty in Center City and avoid it whenever possible. It is in many ways safer there. And there is more freedom.

"But getting there is not so easy. The only transportation is by bus and the bus lines are filled with trouble. The bus ride is why many don't even go into Center City. The two of you should stay together. You will get less hassle if people think that you are a couple. Don't split up, especially you, Mary. This is no place for a single woman. Women in the Cities always travel with a man or in groups; never alone. Remember that."

"And you Richard, get rid of those clothes. You look too easy and anyone will try to take whatever you have. Stay close to Mar, and look like you are willing to defend her with your life. It's about the only thing of value that convicts have here. If a guy is ready to die and take someone else with him, people will let him alone.

"When you get to Center City, go to the "Flying Dragon." It is on 12th and N. Street. Ask for Mark. Tell him I sent you. Explain why you are here.

"As I mentioned, I don't know how easy it will be for either of you to grasp the View that makes this music unique. But Center City is the place where everything is happening right now. You can hear it there live and meet the groups.

"I was originally from Chicago. I grew up on the South side and studied music before I was sent to prison on a major drug charge. I can't say that I have the View but I have spent a lot of time with those who can hold it. It is worth checking out. There is nothing like it on the outside except maybe in the orient... some Zen monastery or something. I wish you both luck. Bye now. Gotta run." He is gone.

Mary and Richard are alone at the table, sitting across from one another. They look at one another. They are each happy the other is there. The difference in age between them vanishes for the moment and they are like two little kids grinning at each other. He asks, "Well, what shall we do next?" "How about a couple of beers and we listen to some music?" Mary responds. Richard nods, "That's a deal."

SCENE NOW LATER

It is a little later that night, and the bar starts to fill up as more people drift in to hear the music. The bartender suggests that they might like to move down front and sit nearer the bandstand where there is a long table for the regulars. That is the best spot, so the bartender says, and they soon are part of a lively crowd of drinkers. And Mary is no shy violet. Before long she is carrying on with all comers and all of them are convicts. They are loud and noisy;

she is loud and noisy, as is the bar, which is pretty soon filled with drunks. It is wine night and a lot has already gone down. A modern country band is playing on the raised stage toward the front of the bar. There is a mesh cage protecting the musicians.

Mary and Richard sit next to each other at a long wooden table, filled on both sides with drinkers, all having a great time. Across the table from Mary and to her right sits Michael. He is drinking orange juice. Mary spots that and Michael immediately becomes her next victim.

Mary had already made herself known that night as an aggressive, sometimes in-your-face woman, partly to prevent herself from being a victim. The convicts love it and eagerly await her next outbreak. She is loud and sexually explicit, always singling out the ones she feels would simply be embarrassed and not take her up on it. Michael is just fresh meat.

"What are you drinking there? Is that orange juice?," she loudly exclaims to Michael from across the table, making sure everyone in the vicinity hears it and gives her their full attention. They have seen her performances before and love a little entertainment.

"Yes, it is," said Michael.

"What are you, some kind of pansy?" Mary snaps back. Michael, who is already uncomfortable being the focus of attention, much less being made the butt of someone's comment, is not about to let this damned loud-mouthed woman intimidate him so easily.

"What's it to you what I drink?" he replies in a voice that carries just as well as Mary's. But she doesn't like comebacks and is used to these non-aggressive men just sort of bowing their heads and shrinking away. She has no quick response, but manages to get out "Who you think you're talking to? This conversation is ended."

And then a funny thing happens. Have you ever found yourself saying something and listening to it at the same time, almost as if you were someone outside taking it in? Anyway, that's what Michael experiences. He hears his own voice echoing back in his mind as he says to Mary: "This is not the end; this is just the beginning!"

And he has no idea what he means by it, and, as I mentioned, his own words resound through the air and into his brain as if the bar is suddenly silent and this is the only thing to be heard. It is like that and then the conversation ends. Mary turns away and Michael does his best not to engage her gaze again. She is soon off being loud with someone else. And wine night continues.

When Richard and Mary leave the bar it is already getting late. "Where to now?" Richard asks. Mary answers, "I guess we better get you into some decent clothes so that you can protect me!" They both laugh. "My things are over at the Lotus Guest Housel on L Street, as you know. Where are you staying?" He asks.

"Wherever I can," she relies. "My things are right here." She kicks the suitcase at her feet. "I don't have much money."

"You can crash with me, if you like," Richard replies. "I can sleep on the couch. It's too late for us to head for Center City tonight. We can start in the morning."

"OK," says Mary. "A lot of stores here are still open. Let's go find you some clothes, but first let's get some coffee. I could use the kick. Any chance of getting some coffee here?," she calls into an open store.

After some coffee Mary takes Richard to a store that looks like a blue-collar version of L.L. Bean, mostly utility clothing. Mary helps Richard pick out some clothes that will help him to blend in better and stop looking so much like a college professor.

Soon Richard emerges in his new duds. He looks good a little rougher. Mary likes that. They spend the night in his hotel room. He sleeps on the couch, but sex is in the air, unspoken. They may just get together anyhow. She is used to that; so is he.

TO CENTER CITY

The bus to Center City runs every hour during daylight hours only. It is only about a forty-minute trip and it is always full, resembling nothing so much as one of the third-world buses in India or Mexico, packed to the gills, with people hanging out all over and stuff on top. Some portions of the riders take the bus just to work gullible travelers. Cities buses are one of the worst aspects of City life. The driver is completely caged off from the other passengers and that about says it all. No one is going to help you if trouble happens.

Richard and Mary leave the hotel early. Skipping breakfast, they grab a couple of coffees and head for the bus station. Just missing the bus, they wait almost an hour for the next one. Standing around the bus station is a lot like doing the same at any large city, say Chicago. Every manner of person is there; every kind of business is taking place. Richard pulls Mary off to the side near the door and they wait.

From down the street Michael appears, backpack and all, also looking to go to Center City. They are close, but not close enough to make contact. Michael is quick to spot Mary Mack and remembers all too well the night before at the bar. He is careful to kind of keep his back turned, not that he has any fear of Mary, but he also had no wish to step in that cow pasture again. Mary is oblivious to Michael's presence and continues chatting with Richard.

But Richard is another story. He quickly takes it all in, has other ideas as to how to deal with it, and shying away from verbal confrontation is not one of them. Richard, who did not care for the way Mary handled the bar scene, was more than a little embarrassed at how she had treated Michael. He would never think of doing something like that and he makes a point of reaching out to Michael, trying to smooth things over. "Hey, how are you?" he calls to Michael, who gives him the minimum nod, just enough to be polite, but not enough to waken Mary from her chatter. She has still not recognized him, which is what he was hoping for. But Richard goes on.

"You were at the bar last night, right? Are you also headed for Center City?" he continues. By now Mary has picked up on who it is Richard is talking to and she feels a little sheepish at how she had treated Michael. He has come back to haunt her and she knows she had better make amends, in particular, if they are going to end up on the same bus. Before Michael can answer Richard she interjects with "Hey, sorry about last night. I was just kidding around. I had too much to drink." Now it is all out in the open and anyone's game. Michael feels this is actually better and responds to both of them. "I am headed to Center City and about last night, no problem."

Before long they have introduced themselves and all three of them are chatting away. There is no real residue from the previous evening. Richard and Mary are pleased to find that Michael is also a tourist and also has some

knowledge of the art scene, if not their burning desire to figure it out. Michael and Richard, recognizing that they have been at least passing acquaintances in Ann Arbor talk about that. Mary, who was in Ann Arbor for Malcolm's lecture, listens in. Richard is glad that Michael is literate, educated, and not a murderer or a felon. That alone is enough to make him good company.

They all are relieved when a large bus swings into view and pulls up outside. Richard and Mary are among the first to board and they slide into a seat about halfway back. Mary is against the window. Michael is on the window side of the seat in front of them. The bus quickly fills up. Seats gone, people keep on coming anyway, jamming in. Standing, leaning. It is packed. The driver does nothing to discourage the piling on.

Then the bus lurches from the station and heads out of the city. It is just too full and all aspects of the ride are uncomfortable. Things are close and people are bullying one another. A lot is going on. Someone steps on Malcolm's shoe. He looks up to see a huge black man towering over him. "That's my seat you're sitting in, Shorty. Move it!" Malcolm starts to get up.

"And you're sittin' next to my girl and that's where I like to sit," the man says, smiling at Mary. Malcolm realizes he is about to desert Mary. It is a hard moment. All he wants to do is make it to Center City in one piece.

"Who needs this shit," he thinks. Then he remembers the advice of Scott at the cafe. He will have to stand up to this man or it is a down-hill slide from here on. Mary is scared stiff. Malcolm stands up and places his hand in his pocket as if he has a weapon.

"You can have this seat but you are going to have to kill me to get it. And I'm going to cut you. Don't you fuck with me, man!" he says, mimicking what the Chicano had said to him the night before and shoving the large black man with his chin while bringing his hand and coat pocket forward. It looks like Richard has a knife. There is a moment of eyeball to eyeball. Then the black man blinks and thinks better of having to risk serious injury just to molest sweet Mary.

"Hey Man, it's cool. I was just jerkin' your chain. I thought you was a tourist. It's cool." He turns away. Malcolm sits down. Richard very slowly looks sideways to see where Mary is in all this. She is smiling at him. He brings his hand out of the pocket so that she can see. He is holding a fountain pen. The rest of the ride is not as eventful.

They are on a long straight road, passing though some disgusting third-world suburbs and we see dust. That is about it.

After arriving in Center City the first thing they do is find a place to stay. There is a lot to choose from. Richard and Mary are sharing a room; Michael has one of his own. With their gear stowed they head out on the town for the day. The Flying Dragon is a club in the middle

of a city block. Inside it is a long multi-leveled affair that stretches far back toward the performance area. It is empty as Michael, Richard, and Mary, her luggage still in hand, enter. Somewhat darkish, it smells of stale beer and cigarettes. There are several people drinking at the bar, even though it is now only early afternoon. Malcolm asks the bartender, who is busy restocking, "Is Mark around?"

He responds, "I don't know if he's here yet. If he is, he'll be somewhere in the back, practicing. Take a look around."

They slowly move along the bar, past dozens of tables, all empty now. In the darkness ahead are some lights around a small stage. There are figures there, moving. As they approach the stage, Richard can see that several men and a woman are working on the stage. They have instruments. Three oboes, some flutes, a drum or two, and (of all things) a bagpipe. Before they can reach the stage, the musicians begin playing a strange and beautiful music. Richard, Mary, and Michael stop and quietly sit down at the nearest table. This is the music they have come so far to hear. This is Cities music. The piece is quite long. The music is haunting.

When the music ends Richard and Mary continue on to the stage. The performers look up to see them move within the circle of light. Richard steps forward and speaks:

"That was beautiful! Sorry to disturb you. Scott in North Gate sent us here. We're from the

outside and are looking to hear new music just like that."

The musicians look up, and one of them speaks, with a slight smile, "Well, glad you like it, but that music is over 1000 years old. It is imperial court music from Japan. The form is called „Gagaku." It is striking, isn't it?"

Our group sits down at some nearby tables and a couple of other musicians soon join them. They introduce themselves and are soon all talking. Mary explains again that Scott has sent them.

[TIME PASSES]

Quite some time has passed. Michael, Mary, Richard, and others are still present, sitting at a table, conversing with some of the Cities artists. The place is now perhaps one-third full. The lights are low. Light, but serious, jazz is playing on the stereo system in the background. There are no Cities musicians performing just now. There is drinking and smoking and the sound of voices. Peaceful.

A young man is seen entering from the door area and picking his way among the tables, finally picking one at the back. He sits down. Nothing unusual about this except that he moves a little more quickly than the quiet atmosphere in the club might warrant. No special attention is given but then again, you can't help but notice him.

"How about a beer, Michael, my treat," says Richard, "You are not drinking once again. Come, on, a little wine? " He looks at Mary, to

catch her eye, even though he is speaking to Michael. Mary, not finding the humor in it, ignores Richard, and says “Michael is not a drinker, Richard. You know that.”

Michael, fidgeting with his orange juice, “I’m cool. I’m not a big drinker.”

Richard, looking around for support and perhaps somewhat taken with his new looks, “I have never seen you drink yet, buddy.” The house lights go up and the room is suddenly filling up with squad members, 15 or 20 of them. The music is shut down.

The quad leader speaks, “Everybody take it easy...”

The guards are spreading out, covering any exits, and positioning themselves for action, if needed. It is unnerving.

The squad leader continues, “Listen up. We are looking for a male, Caucasian, age not determined, who entered here in the last half hour or so. Turning toward Mark, who is manager that night and standing not far from him, he says, “Point him out!”

Mark has no intention of helping them, even if he knows, and responds, “I have no idea. I was busy.” This does not satisfy the squad leader, “Bullshit! OK, we do it my way, then. Search the place.”

Some squad members spread out and go into the back areas while others stand watch on the perimeter. The guard who was speaking moves to the table nearest them at which a couple is sitting and stoops down, level with

their faces, and peers into eyes of the man at the table. They don't move a muscle. He holds that pose longer than you want to watch and then snaps up, "Not this one. Just a Viewer."

He moves to the next table and then the next, each time staring down or staring hard into the eyes of any man.

"Not here, either. Come on, folks. Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the scared-est of them all. "

He laughs. No one moves or says a word. He gets to the table with Michael, Mary, and Richard, who all tense up.

"Ha! What have we here, a bunch of tourists?" he exclaims. He bends and looks Michael in the eye for a long while, says nothing, but moves on to Richard. He likes looking at Richard, "Who is this little cutie? Oh, dyes his hair, too. Faggot ass old man! Let's see some I.D."

Richard fumbles for his papers, embarrassed about the reference to his hair and also terrified. The squad leader grabs Richard's papers and puts them close to his eyes, so he can read better. He reads, in a high-falootin' voice," Dr. Richard Malcolm...

"Dr. Malcolm, Sir. Just what the fuck are you doing here, you faggoty-assed pussy?"

Richard, mumbles, his voice trailing off, "I am here studying the art scene..."

The leader responds, only louder, "Studying? Artsy-fartsy, are you? Hey, Richard!" The man bellows. Richard peeks up at him.

“Go home, you fat-assed pussy! Booo!”

Richard jumps. The squad leader moves on to the next table. The squad members repeat the procedure, bending down and looking very carefully into the eyes of each white man.

“Mirror! Mirror! A bunch of Viewers here.”

Somewhere along in here various squad members return from other parts of the building. The squad leader catches their eye and they shake their heads no, just enough so that he understands the man they are looking for is not back there. He gets to the table of the man who came in earlier. Same thing, the squad leader gives him a look-see. The man's eyes are scared and visibly move a couple of times while he is being scrutinized.

“Viewer!” states the squad leader and moves on and behind the man's table, as if to get to the back of the room. Then he spins around, “NOT!”

The squad leader, with one powerful kick to a chair leg, sends the chair spinning across the floor and the man goes straight down to the floor, falling on his side, almost faster than you can see. The squad leader has his big boot crushing the man's neck, instantly. Other team members rush forward and frisk the man. The squad leader removes his foot from the neck, and administers a hard kick to the lower back. Turning to the rest of them, he says, “Thank you, folks!”

The man is handcuffed and dragged out. The squad team members move to the exit and file

out. The lights are still up and there is no sound.

The place is dead quiet after the squads leave, but now it starts to return to normal. The background jazz is turned back on, although perhaps quieter than before. People are up and moving around or talking about what just happened. Michael, Richard, and Mary are still sitting where they were before, with several of the musicians. Now Mark has also just joined them.

“You guys OK? That was a little rough. Sorry.”

Everyone at the table looks at each other and perhaps allows themselves to move or adjust their seats for the first time since the incident. They all tend to avoid exchanging glances with Malcolm, who is obviously still a little shook from the event and feeling sheepish for having been singled out.

Michael looks at Mark, “We’re fine. What was that all about? Does that happen often?”

Mark, responding, “Too often, I’m afraid. I have no idea what it was about. They were looking for that guy. He came in here hoping to blend in. Didn’t work out.”

Michael, continuing, “What was the whole thing with looking us in the eyes and the „mirror“ bit?”

Mark looks at the other artists and they exchange glances, more or less very slightly nodding to each other, acknowledging that they should talk about this with these outsiders.

Mark turns to Michael, “The squads are getting pretty good about sorting the Viewers out from the rest.

“They can spot tourists right off but it is not always easy with the inmates. They have learned that those of us who practice the View usually are not involved in much of anything other than our own group, the music, and so on. So that is why they look at us so closely.”

Mary, speaking up, “What are they looking for when they stare at you?”

“I’m not sure, but probably for signs of fear, to see if we flinch or are hiding something,” replies Mark, “Let’s back up a bit. You guys are here because of the music and art scene here, right?”

The three of them nod. By now Richard is more or less back to normal and is looking around again.

Mark, continues, “What we call “The View” is not a result of the music. It is the other way around; the music comes from the View. If you have the View, then you can play the music. Understand?”

Richard is speaking again, (still a little sheepish), “I don’t understand the View.”

Another of the Cities musicians, speaks up, “The View is what keeps us from going crazy in here...”

Mark, picking up on this, “Bill is right. The View evolved as a way to stay calm when things get out of control, like tonight, a way to not panic

and draw attention to ourselves, and end up dead...”

Mary asks, “I don’t get it. What is the View?”

Mark, turning to her, “It’s not a simple thing, the View, especially for visitors.... outsiders. I’m not trying to be insulting but the View is not something you can just adopt or get, like a philosophical concept or idea you can read in a book. It’s more...” he pauses,

“Psychological. That’s not right, either. What it is, is a kind of action. We didn’t just read about it in a book, but were forced to learn it by our life here.”

“And, as I mentioned, the View „IS“ what drives the music, but not in an obvious way. It is more of an attitude. I wouldn’t call it a philosophy. It’s not an intellectual thing at all. It’s physical... more about how artists survive here in the Cities... our way to live... to have some sanity. You know, it’s hard to explain. I’ll give it my best shot.”

There is the sound of violence on the street outside involving a squad chasing down some target. The violence boils over into the club as a man falls through the door and is grabbed from behind by officers and is about to be dragged away. Malcolm starts to get up in response to the violence. Mark reaches out and grabs his arm.

“Don’t move, man. Keep real still. Just let them leave.”

Richard sits back down. Some of the squad members are looking around for signs of trouble... of insubordination, anything.

Mark, continuing, "You better understand how we live here. To survive and to keep sane we have found that there are certain things we have to keep in mind that help us to have the right attitude, the right view, a state of mind that will help us survive in this place. These are easy ideas to hear about, but hard... I mean painful to keep in mind all the time. They must be learned and practiced.

"If you really want to know about the View, what just happened is a good example. Around here, those of us in the arts movement say there are four thoughts that force the mind – that turn the mind to the View -- that make the view possible to remember and act on. All four are very simple. Let me run through them for you. We call them „The Four Thoughts.“

"First, there is impermanence... Look out there."

Someone unconscious from the squad violence is being dragged away. Mark gestures at the scene unfolding at the door to the club, and continues:

"What more of a reminder do you need? That's impermanence! We are surrounded by it. We're in here for life. The three of you can leave at any time, so it may be hard for you to keep this kind of thought in mind for very long once you leave, without the kind of reminders we get daily. For us, in a place like this,

impermanence is easy to remember, like: we are impermanent, vulnerable. Get it?”

Richard nods. The three of them are taking this in.

“Second concept: the preciousness of life. Living here, where life is cheap and death always near, we actually have developed a certain appreciation for life, call it thankfulness or gratefulness. We very much sense the preciousness of human life, at least our own. Any life here is difficult to sustain. And life here is easily lost and hard to keep. It is not difficult for us to imagine that life can have an objective greater than what you see here in the cities. Right? So, as strange as it may seem and as tough as it is here, life to us is precious, each day. Each day!

“Why do you think the outside world is so fascinated by the fact that, despite the suffering here, there is something like a celebration going on here, all the time?”

Malcolm, Mary, and Michael seem to understand and give each other knowing glances.

Mark goes on...

“Third, our own actions. The only thing that we have ANY control over here are our own actions and reactions. What we say and do can lead to further brutality and suffering or they can lead to greater clarity and relative freedom. For those of us in the movement actions here in the cities are considered cumulative and we each carry the result of our actions onward in

this life. With the squads, if you make very many inappropriate actions, an attitude develops, either on your own part or on the part of the squads about you. If you stand out or become too visible, if you get in the way of the wrong people, you're dead. It's that simple. So we watch what we do and we try to act in a way not to get ourselves or others killed or harmed. Does that make sense?

“And it has become more than just saving our own skins. Good and pure actions are just what should be done. We have learned that, too.”

Everyone nods.

“And last, there is a conviction among Viewers, and that’s what we call ourselves, that, when all is said and done, this clarity and the freedom it brings may be our most valuable activity and possession. Our everyday existence here in the cities means that some suffering is unavoidable and life here can be almost devoid of any lasting satisfaction. We have no hope of getting out and no hope of things getting much better here. It is what it is. Even our music and literature, however satisfying, are just a sideshow, something to do on the road to more clarity and illumination. You can’t depend on anything outside of your own mind. The political scene and the power mongering here will never cease. You probably can't see it, but it is not all that different on the outside, where you are.

There is silence for a bit and Michael, Mary, and Richard just look around, taking in what

Mark has just told them. Mary is first to continue, asking, “Where did these four thoughts on the View come from? How did you learn of them?”

The artists around the table exchange glances, and finally Mark speaks, “Some people here, who understand these things, taught them to us. They call them the “Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind.”

Mary, continuing, “What do you mean, „Turn the mind“, Mark?”

“These are the thoughts that can change your mind and turn it, turn it toward being more aware of what is happening. You asked about the source of the View. Now you have been told. For us, these four thoughts are constantly forced on us due to the circumstances here. Without these thoughts always in mind, no approach to the View is possible. As you can see, anyone is capable of holding the View, but without the day-to-day motivation provided by the four thoughts you can never attain much of a view at all. We have these in our face all the time, so we can't forget them. Look here:”

Mark points to a framed oriental woodcut of a flying dragon above their heads. It has been there all the time, but not spotlighted. About three feet wide by two feet high, it is of an oriental-style dragon flying in the clouds. In each of its four paws is a pearl or gem, tightly held. Michael's eyes light up. It is the same dragon that he put on the poster he made for Nyima Rinpoche.

“That is what that the Flying Dragon is all about. See that woodblock print? Each of those pearls in the dragon’s claws represents one of the four thoughts. The story is that the dragon can fly ONLY if it does not let go of those four pearls. If it drops even one the dragon plunges to the ground. Well, those four pearls are the four thoughts that turn the mind and only when we manage to keep them in mind, all four of them at once, are we cool... do we fly. That image is a reminder of what I just explained to you.

Mark turns to Mary, “Mary. You want to play our music and be like us. Your heart is good; you mean well. Still, this alone is not enough. Without the View, you never will get our music. Yet if you can establish the View, any music that you play will have our style. Viewers don’t have to strive for perfection in their music. Any music they play already has a certain perfection, not because they are anything special, but because they maintain the proper View. The players have that perfection, so everything they do has some of it. Without that, all you can do is imitate us and that means nothing.

“But it will be very difficult for those of you from outside. All of us in the movement have been driven to seek refuge in this View. It is the one way to remain sane in this place. So if you really care that much about the music, stop trying to imitate it and give some thought to these four basic thoughts:

“Life is precious; treasure it.”

“All things are impermanent; they don't last.”

“Your actions and reactions add up toward greater awareness or they accumulate obscurations. You need that awareness just to survive here.”

“And last, even at its best, there is nothing here in the Cities that you can depend upon, much less worth fighting over. The suffering will go on anyway.”

“Escape from this place is probably impossible, but refuge from this place is possible and that's where it's at for us. And we have nowhere to go but within ourselves. So if you really want to know about the music, try seeking refuge within your own mind. It may not be possible for you to get that serious, since you can leave here anytime. It is hard to hold the four thoughts that turn the mind toward the View. We did not learn it overnight. It takes practice and being aware. Anyway, that is the key to everything you love about this movement.”

Michael gets Mark's attention and points to the dragon. "I know this image. Nyima Rinpoche explained this to me, about the four pearls and how the dragon can fly only if he holds all four of them. He said these pearls are the four thoughts that turn the mind."

Mark, looking a bit surprised, turns and looks Michael right in the eye. "You know about this dragon and the four thoughts?"

Michael responds, "I know of the dragon and the four thoughts, but that is about it. I didn't know what the four thoughts were."

Mary asks, "Where did these four thoughts on the View come from?"

The artists around the table again exchange glances and finally Mark spoke. "All I can say is that we learned them from some folks in the prison cities that have that kind of wisdom and were kind enough to share it with us."

Mary continues, "Well, who was that? I would like to meet them."

"They really are not around here anymore," Mark replies, but a light had gone on in Michael's mind. He has a hunch he knows where this came from and wonders whether he dare ask about it. His curiosity finally gets the better of him and he blurts out, "What about the rinpoche? What about Khenpo Rinpoche?"

Now the crew at the table really a looking at each other. What Michael just said has obviously startled them and Mark is quick to respond. "Rinpoche? Who is that? I don't know anyone named Rinpoche," but his sincerity leaves something to be desired, although neither Richard nor Mary pick up on it. Michael gets it and is wise enough to let the subject pass and they soon turn to other topics.

It is not long after that people start to drift away from the table. It is late and people are getting ready to leave. Richard and Mary, who are staying together, make their goodbyes and hit the street.

Michael hangs on a few minutes, but gradually gets ready to head out himself. He still has

questions but knows enough to keep them to himself. He gets up and starts for the door.

Mark catches his eye, "Michael, got a minute?"

Sure he has a minute and Michael walks over to Mark's table and sits down. There are just the two of them.

Mark asks Michael why he asked about this Khenpo Rinpoche? Soon Michael is laying it all out for him, the reasons he has come here, his search for this particular rinpoche, the whole deal. Mark seems to be following him pretty well, too. Mark is intrigued about hearing about Nyima Rinpoche. After Michael is finished, Mark begins to speak:

"Maybe I can help you, give you a little background about the Tibetans and Rinpoche.

"Most of this started before the prison cities were even built. It had to do with the 40-foot stupa and small retreat center the Tibetans built way up on the eastern edge of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. When the plans for the prison came along, the Tibetans really did not want to leave the area. After all, the Karmapa himself, their teacher, personally came and blessed the land and more or less told them to stay there. And the Karmapa is the equivalent in their lineage to the Dalai Lama, so what he said was not taken lightly. And there was this huge struggle to get the Tibetans out. The government even went so far as to destroy the small retreat center near the stupa. And that was generally seen as a big mistake on their part, even though maybe legally they had some rights to do that."

Michael nods. This is what he needs to hear.

“Anyway, the public outcry led to the government pretty much giving up on trying to evict the Tibetans and some sort of unwritten truce was formed. After that the authorities gave up; the Tibetans stayed, at their own risk, but kept a very low profile. And the prison authorities made it difficult for anyone to visit that area. The bottom line is that the Tibetans stayed and this is before the prison was built.

Michael asks how Mark met the Tibetans.

“When we first got here we heard about the Tibetans being up in the mountains, but it took us some time to figure out where. A few of us managed to get perimeter permits, supposedly to look over the land for possible agricultural use, which we did of course, but mainly we wanted to meet these guys. Imagine how surprised we were to find that they had a whole community up there, not just monks, but families and kids. Anyway, we hit it off with them and became friends.

“There are children up there?” Michael asks.

“Sure, whole villages. Not that many inmates have met the Tibetans or are even that interested in them. When we first got to know them we brought them hard-to-find things that they needed and they would give us food that they had. More important, they began to teach us how to train our minds for life in the Cities. It was slow going for us at first, but what they taught us has made life easier here. We try to visit them whenever we can get permits and,

for a while, some of them even come down to the Cities too. Not so often anymore.”

Michael still has many questions, “How many of you have been up there?”

Mark, responding, “Most of us in the movement. It is hard to get permits for more than one or two people, so most of us visit there by ourselves. Whenever it gets too crazy down here, when we reach what we jokingly call the „point of no return,“ we head up into the mountains and visit the monks.

“What do you learn?” Michael asks.

“They have been teaching mind training for over a thousand years and here we are, literally a captive audience, and what they teach us, we need. We have nothing to lose and everything to gain. As it turns out, what they have taught us has been essential for life here.

“And that is where the Flying Dragon print came from.” He points over his shoulder to the print on the wall.

Mark nods, “...and the four thoughts that turn the mind, all from the Tibetans. But this has been kept somewhat quiet. We don't want a bunch of cons going up there and tearing through the place. These are our friends. This is why I did not acknowledge Khenpo Rinpoche when you brought up his name.”

Michael thanks Mark for sharing this. Mark nods, “I am telling you all this because you already know about Khenpo Rinpoche. It is

better for us to help you get there, than for you to be asking questions everywhere.“

“How did Khenpo Rinpoche get in here and when?” asks Michael.

Mark responds, “There have been many rinpoches that have visited the monastery. Like any other people wishing to visit the Cities, if they have the right papers and are foolish enough to want to come here, they are not turned away. It is always easier to get into the Cities than to get out. That is a fact.”

“It is years now since Khenpo Rinpoche arrived. No one here remembers seeing him come in, but that is true about most of the Tibetans living in the mountains. How do they get here? We don't know. When we first visited the monastery, there he was.”

Michael asks what Khenpo Rinpoche is like.

“It's hard to describe Rinpoche. Better to just see for yourself. Let's just say that all of us owe him a lot. He treats everyone with the same kindness. It is Rinpoche who taught us about the four thoughts. Once you meet him, you will understand.

“Unlike the rest of us here, it is easy for you to get a perimeter permit, but harder for us. The best that we can figure is that their security up in the mountains is not as good as down here and they are worried we might be able to escape. We are not sure.”

“How will I find him?” asks Michael.

“You never know where Rinpoche is on any given day, but I can help you get there. You

really need a guide. In fact, you might try to talk with Isaac over there.”

He gestures to a middle-aged black man at a table in the back.

Continuing, “That’s Isaac. He loves Rinpoche and knows his way around, both in the Cities and past the perimeter. It can be dangerous. I will talk to him for you. Be sure to take some warm clothes. It gets cold up there at night.”

“Mark, I appreciate your help...”

“No problem. Michael. Wait here. Let me check this out with Isaac.”

Mark gets up and walks back to the table and speaks with Isaac. Isaac gets up and they both walk over to the table where Michael is sitting. Isaac is a large Black man, well over six feet. He has a face that is used to smiling, one with all of those nice wrinkles around the eyes. Perhaps he looks too nice. Michael thinks for sure he is probably gay and that gives him some real second thoughts about having him as a traveling companion, especially here. For this reason, Michael is apprehensive and perhaps does not extend himself as much as he probably should. But Mark, if he even senses this, bulldozes right over it, soliciting Isaac.

“Michael, this is Isaac; Isaac, Michael.”

Isaac reaches across the table and shakes hands with Michael, who remains seated. Mark and Isaac sit down.

“Isaac can go with you. I will leave the two of you to work out your arrangement. The bus for

North Gate leaves at 9 A.M., so I suggest that you two meet here, outside the club, at 8 A.M. You need to get there early because the bus will be packed and there are never enough seats. Is that cool?"

They both nod in agreement.

THE MONASTERY

Isaac, who first appears a little intimidating, perhaps not Michael's first choice as a traveling companion, turns out to be invaluable and certainly worth whatever small amount of money he charges. And he more than pays for himself as their trip unfolds. If he is gay, Michael never finds out and soon stops wondering. But it does not start out that way.

Michael is up as early as his tired eyes will let him because there are only two buses a day to North Gate. Isaac is late. Michael, who has no idea where the bus station is anyway has little choice but to stand there on the sidewalk and wait. Meanwhile, the clock ticks on, each minute making it less and less likely they can make the bus. Mark said to get an early start. Isaac is not there at 8 A.M., not even at 8:30 A.M. and Michael is not happy. He spends his time looking at his watch, peering down the street, looking at his watch... At 8:45 A.M., Isaac comes running up, backpack in hand. Michael is pissed.

“Isaac, where have you been? I have been here since 8 A.M. We are going to miss the bus.”

Isaac, not apologizing, “Not to worry, Michael...”

To Michael's astonishment the first thing Isaac does is to leap into the street and jump in front of an oncoming car which comes screeching to a halt. As Michael watches, Isaac commandeers the car, gives the driver a bit of

cash, and whisks their stuff (and themselves) into it. They drive off.

They are at the bus station in less than five minutes, get out of the car, and head for the doors. Michael is hopeful; there is still a little time to spare. But this hope is fleeting. They go inside.

As they push themselves into the bus station Michael can see that everyone and his brother are already there, with lines almost out the door and everyone pushing and shoving, and these are not little or shy guys.

The problem is simple: there is a station full of would-be bus travelers, but only one bus is leaving that morning. Worse, there is only one small ticket counter and a couple of frenzied attendants trying to keep all of this under control, issuing tickets, and tagging and storing all the luggage. It is clear at a glance that there are too many people and not enough bus.

Being almost the last ones in the door, the odds are that they are out of luck. Michael is chagrined. They are at the back of the back, near the door they just came through.

Isaac, pointing to a spot next to the door, "Michael, you stand here."

What happens next is really impressive. Michael watches Isaac go into action. Paying no attention at all to the lines, Isaac quickly positions all of their baggage right up front by the ticket counter. Then he goes around behind the counter with the officials, greets them, and puts on an attendant's hat. In a few moments

Isaac is working at the front desk with a crowd around him as he looks at and handles other people's tickets.

Michael has no idea what is going on, but Isaac looks for all the world like an official. Before he knows it, Isaac has Michael at the front of the line, calling out his name, and motioning him forward.

“Mr. Michael...”

Isaac has their baggage checked through ahead of everyone's. Michael can see Isaac, not obviously of course, slipping bribe money to the two officials who really wish he would stay and help. It is an amazing display of grace and power. Isaac then takes off the hat, hangs it on a hook, hands Michael a ticket, nods to the driver and they board the bus ahead of everyone else. Any doubts about having Isaac along for the ride go out the window. Michael is in safe hands.

The ride to North Gate is relatively uneventful. Isaac has Michael in a window seat next to him and no one is about to mess with Isaac. When they get to the terminal the next task is to find someone willing (and who has a permit) to drive them across the perimeter into the Sector and beyond. Isaac finds one man and they shake hands.

Next up is a lengthy and hot argument between Isaac and the owner of the truck company they are catching a ride with. It seemed that the truck driver has not yet had his breakfast and (somehow) Isaac has offended his pride. It is something about the simple meal he is about to

have and he feels perhaps Isaac is looking down his nose at him. It is a short argument but it is a doozie, with shouting, shoving, and the brandishing of knives. Michael stands by the truck, waiting to see if they would have a driver at all. They would. It really is more about the owner than the driver, who doesn't seem to really care. Who knows what the real cause was.

When things cool down, Michael and Isaac pile into the jeep and slowly head off in what seems the right direction. Michael watches the Sangre de Cristo Mountains appear ahead and to their right in the distance with the wide plains of the San Luis Valley all around them. Yet there are things to worry about, as well.

In the terminal they had been repeatedly warned that the area just beyond the border of North Gate, I guess what could be called the suburbs, is very dangerous just now and has to be negotiated with great care. The best is to drive straight through without stopping or even slowing down. They were told that cars had recently been stopped and in the past few weeks several inmates killed in this area. Now they can only hope that their driver (the one who just had argued with his boss!) is not in cahoots with any criminals, ready to turn these fat-cat tourists over to a band of thieves. Such are the thoughts of Michael.

To aid in Michael's paranoia, as they set off for the perimeter, and while they are already rolling, another man jumps into the jeep, totally uninvited. Michael starts to protest but he soon finds Isaac's hand on his arm. Isaac explains

this kind of thing is common in the Cities where everyone wants to get on board any moving vehicle and hitch a ride. It does not necessarily mean anything. And the driver who must have picked up on the concern tries to calm them, explaining that this is his friend and he is only going to the perimeter. He has no permit to cross over. This new person speaks little English and explains that he is a travel agent (a travel agent within the prison cities!) and proceeds to scare them 'pretty good' about the dangers of the border area just beyond the Sector checkpoint that they are about to cross.

Soon they are passing through the new section of the rugged border town, not a place Michael really would want to spend the night in and really pretty rough overall. Their car creeps along, slowly crossing through congested streets, horns-a-blaring, and reaches the final border checkpoint, complete with the meticulous forms to fill out. Michael has to laugh. Here he is in the heat and dust of a one-room office with no screens trying to fill out a form in very little light that is more detailed than any U.S. Customs form. And the attendant in front of him is writing these details in an ancient leather-bound ledger while high on a shelf above him sits a stack of similar ledgers covered with dust and spiders. The official takes all the time of theirs he can, insisting on every detail. Michael imagines that he is just curious to see and watch tourists. Why else should it take so long? The North Gate entrance to the Cities when he entered was not this bad. At long last they are through the

border and on to the hot valley plain. And it is getting dark. It took that long.

Although their driver does not speak much English, they all know that the stretch of road just outside where they now are is the dangerous stretch over which they must pass at whatever speed they can muster, which is hard because of the many speed bumps that force them to slow down to a crawl or sometimes even reach a dead stop. These are the areas where they are most vulnerable to attack. And night is falling fast, the worst time to travel here, which make these areas even more disturbing. Worse yet, the road is filled with animals and people, dark forms slowly moving in the twilight.

At one point Michael can see another vehicle, probably in real trouble, pulled off to the side of the road at a little distance and a group of men busy removing the tires and hubs. No idea what happened to the passengers, but one thing is sure: if your car breaks down, you don't change all four tires at once!

But they make it through the dusty lowlands and on up into the hills. The road begins to climb very sharply and a coolness replaces the hot breath of the valley plains. And they are driving on a road that is about as wide as your average driveway. Also, the roads are less thronged with people now and driving is somewhat easier. They can relax, except:

There in front of them in the middle of nowhere on this perfectly straight road is a group of men who have lowered a huge beam across their

path and stand there with stop signs. They are armed with knives and clubs. Of course, Michael panics, but again Isaac calms him.

"This is common," said Isaac, "Some sort of road tax." It turns out to be just that, but a very arbitrary form of tax, ostensibly for some kind of local building project, a donation is being demanded. And, as it turned out, this is only the first of several of these polite holdups, always a group of armed men, and always some sort of made-up tax. They would lower huge poles to block the road and then demand money. Their driver handles this in one way or another, often promising to pay on the way back (which in fact might be a week away). At other times, he claims he has no small bills, but will catch them on the flip side. Still, all of this is worrisome to Michael. But they are leaving the dusty plains and this too passes.

For hours they climb higher and higher, now on switchback mountain roads, with an endless stream of packed buses that they are behind and require non-stop car horn to force them to pull off the narrow road and let them pass, often requiring that the bus back up to make this possible. After a while, things thin out. Michael breathes a sigh of relief to be going somewhere where the road is not packed with people. And there is the cool evening air. They only have a short distance (on the map) to travel, but have been driving for hours.

It is after 10 P.M. before they arrive at the area just below Crestone, high on the mountains. It is not hard to find directions to Karma Triyana Monastery, the monastery of Khenpo Rinpoche

and they make the slow climb up an even steeper, very narrow road, finally pulling into a flat gravel courtyard. The attendant, who had already gone to bed for the night and was already asleep, appears bleary eyed and a little grumpy, but is happy to see Isaac and to know that they are OK. In the cold of the mountain night he finds them a small (but warm) room with Tibetan carpet couches and proceeds to prepare a fantastic meal of eggs, rice, too-sweet cookies and hot water or tea. Food never tasted better. After two days of pure adventure, it is good to be at a safe place, one not filled with convicts. They are soon bedded down at a local guest house, where they are the only guests. Nothing works, the toilet won't flush and the water only trickles. The place is fairly seedy and creepy but they get out their sleeping bags and are soon fast asleep.

Michael and Isaac spend much of the next day at the monastery, just getting used to the altitude. They visit the 40-foot Tashi Gomang Stupa which contains a huge prayer wheel that rings a bell each time it is turned around. The stupa and the surrounding wall paintings are exquisite, as is pretty much everything about the entire monastery area, a reflection of the fine sensibilities of Khenpo Rinpoche.

As it turns out, in the afternoon there is a long puja, some form of Buddhist ceremony and they are invited to attend. It is dedicated to Amitabha Buddha and is somehow connected to death and dying. It lasts most of the afternoon. Khenpo Rinpoche himself is not at the ceremony but a visiting rinpoche and most

of the monks are in attendance. While Michael and the younger monks squirm and sit through the long ritual, the rinpoche, high on his raised seat never moves a muscle. Instead, he sits, rigid as a board, looking straight ahead of him with a stare that has no focus. Michael has never seen this look on a face before and is impressed. The rinpoche must be in some deep form of meditation.

During this long puja there are several servings of tea and also tsok, the traditional feast offering. At each break point, a flurry of the youngest monks dash around serving everyone, filling the cups to the brim with hot Tibetan salt-butter tea. Although Michael's knees ache after a while, there is a sense of peace and beauty, and of, surprisingly enough, not taking yourself too seriously. The large group of monks, in particular the young elementary school-aged monks, watch Michael like a hawk, and he them. These are the first children that Michael has seen beyond the perimeter.

Watching all of this and sitting at the rear of the hall in a special seat the monk in charge of discipline keeps a close eye on these youngest monks. He is not above moving quickly down the aisle and reprimanding those who are foolish enough to indulge in horseplay, finally evicting one of the worst offenders. Later, he goes down the line of monks giving a small sum of money to each of the monks, money that has been donated by patrons to have this particular ritual performed. He also gives a tiny sum to each of the child monks.

It takes about half a day for altitude sickness to really take hold and Michael, who gets the worst case of it, is not really prepared. As it turns out, he has a terrible time with it.

From reading the books, Michael did not fully get the idea that when they speak of 'altitude sickness', they really mean sickness, as in: you get sick. At altitude, you are getting about 60% (or less) of your usual amount of oxygen.

When Michael first got to altitude the night before, he began to have a different feeling, but that's all. His body had not figured out what the heck was happening. Michael felt a bit odd, but not really bad, perhaps a little spacey, but that was kind of cool too. It could be just the thrill of at last being up in the mountains with the bright, bright sun, the crisp, clear air, the clouds close overhead. He had that idea. He went with that.

Within about half a day, in fact the next morning and that first flight of hotel stairs, Michael begins to get a different picture. Today, he can hardly walk up the damn stairs, and that is one flight. There he is, leaning against the wall, gasping for breath, with his heart just racing. What is this, he wonders? And then he flops down in a chair. Boom. And there he sits for a long time.

This must be what it feels like to get really old, he thought. Michael can't do much of anything and he doesn't like the feeling. He struggles to his feet, determined to go and see the monastery and heads out, only to soon find himself feeling his way back along the hallway to the hotel room, gasping and grasping again

for that chair. So there he sits. Or he would lie down on the bed and there he would lie, and for a long time. Michael couldn't believe it. He was trapped in what amounted to an old-age body, limited to the least doing of anything. He manages to get himself down the stairs and over to the puja that afternoon, where he just sits.

Typically, or so he had read, you must spend three days getting used to the altitude. And that means three 24-hour days and nights. And, as often as not, you can't sleep. You just are awake but you don't feel good enough to do anything. Your head aches and your face feels puffy and tingles. Something seems very wrong or at least very different. Michael couldn't really do much because (against his will to get out and see this new country), he did not feel like doing much. Michael just does not feel too great even though he was raring to get on with the trip. He finds himself waiting this thing out.

And he has a bad case of it that, coupled with a cold, eventually results in two days of fairly high fever ending with the whole thing going into his lungs and bronchitis, and having to take the antibiotics he had with him. Michael is just being plain-old sick, likes it not one bit, but there is nothing he can do about it. Part of it was the cold, part was the endless presence of smoke, fumes, and smells that oppressed his lungs already weakened from a prior history of smoking, some years before. In a word, a bummer.

Michael knew that there is no known permanent human habitation above 20,000 feet. According to the books, altitude is measured by a scale, where High Altitude is anything from 8,000 to 12,000 feet, Very High Altitude is in the range from 12,000 to 18,000 feet, and Crestone Monastery, where he is, is almost 14,000 feet.

Michael waits out the two days just below the Crestone area until he felt well enough to head toward Crestone Peak and Khenpo Rinpoche. He still has altitude sickness, but it is time to go on with the trip's schedule. He and Isaac head southeast, traveling in their jeep. The road, at first, is paved but becomes progressively more bumpy, including sections where it consists of squares of rock laid together. He asks about the bumpiness and the driver says that it will get a little bumpy after they turn off the road just up ahead. "Get a little bumpy. What then is this now?" Michael wonders. But the guide is so right. It does get bumpier. After a short time the jeep makes a sharp left turn across a very narrow bridge and begins to head up the valley on almost no road at all. They soon get used to the steady pitch and roll of the vehicle moving very slowly up the valley trail, all in 1st or 2nd gear. It is like an endless series of speed bumps. They never really get going, before they have to slow down again.

Bumps and sickness aside, the 3-hour journey up the valley toward Crestone Peak is brilliant and fresh. It is late summer and all the small plots of grain are golden ripe and ready for harvest. The barley from this part of the valley,

introduced by the Tibetans, is reputed to be superb and there are hundreds and hundreds of plots, just along the side of the road. They move slowly along the rocky road toward Crestone Peak, mile by mile, so there is plenty of time to see. Everywhere, tiny mountain streams rush by, over, under and even on the road itself. At places the road becomes a stream bed. As they moved farther upstream, shaggy cattle appear both up close and far off - scattered on the mountainside around them.

Michael is told these are Scottish Highlanders, just about as tough as the yaks the Tibetans are used to in Tibet. As for other cars: there are none, and, as soon as they cross the bridge from the main road, there are no other vehicles. They are just out there by themselves. Here and there is a house or two and people are working in the fields. Harvesters and workers wave to them; children race toward them, waving and saying "Hello."

They continue on heading up the valley toward where the two ridges converge before them, always moving very slowly. After crossing the arch of a lovely stone bridge the guide points to a speck on a mountain in the distance. "Crestone Monastery," he announces. And Michael can almost see it, something sparkling on the mountainside. And, as they move on (time now slowed by their eagerness to arrive), that speck grows steadily larger. Now Michael can see reflecting golden roofs in the sunlight, but it is still so far away. And then the monastery is lost for a long time around yet

another curve. Will they ever actually get there? Michael is ready.

At last, just below Crestone Peak, they drive under an array of Tibetan prayer flags, now less than half a mile to go. Winding up the trail, they pass through a narrow walled road into the courtyard of Crestone Monastery and arrive before the large stone steps of the monastery itself. It is an imposing and welcome sight.

Michael comes armed with a letter of introduction that he requested from Nyima Rinpoche. But just who these strangers are, the monks gathering around them must have wondered. Michael proceeds to seek out monks who then sought out still higher monks, etc. until they found someone to present their letter to. He lays the letter before a small tribunal in a mid-sized, very dusty room. From the letter, the monks can see just who he is and that they are not a danger to Khenpo Rinpoche. They are not even searched for weapons as he had been told most are. And then one of the monks remembered Isaac from one of his previous trips, and things got even more relaxed. Pretty soon, they are then ushered up to a second-floor inner courtyard and into a good-sized room where they are served the legendary Tibetan butter tea, a thick buttery tea, laced with salt.

Michael is thrilled to be there. Waiting in that room, the sun pouring in through the thick, almost opaque, windows, he is anxious to know if they will be granted an interview with Khenpo Rinpoche, and, if so, when. They sit on the low bed-like couches, each covered with a

Tibetan rug slowly drinking tea. Every few sips of tea find the monks filling the cup up to the rim again as is the custom. This strange salty buttered tea is a new, but satisfying, taste for him. Michael almost inhales it. And there are the ever-present sugar-filled cookies and candy. It is a little cold up here at this altitude and smoke from the kitchen downstairs finds its way into their room, mostly through the open doorway that, due to the constant coming and going of the Tibetans, is impossible to keep closed. Faces peer in on them, some monks, but mostly lay persons, Tibetans.

And then there is lunch. Brought to them in large bowls, there are noodles and a big bowl of dried meat that seems to Michael (at the one taste he gives it) a little funky and old. But food is good after the long drive and they are thrilled to be getting what apparently is VIP treatment. Michael is on pins and needles until a monk comes and they are told that rinpoche will see them that day, at least briefly. They are just to hang loose and they will be told when. Until then, just relax and wander around a bit.

And there is a lot to see. Soon after their arrival, a long procession of monks pours forth from the monastery and files down the large stone steps. They carry large drums, some blowing horns, and wear tall red hats. Here is some ceremony and for whom? They are hours and hours from any city and there are few, if any, local people witnessing the event. The answer, which is so hard for Michael's modern-world mind to grasp, is that they are doing it for its own sake, just for themselves.

Outside the room where they are waiting, along the inner face of the second-story courtyard, are a whole series of small shrine rooms (side by side) dedicated to the fierce Tibetan protectors, the dharmapalas. Above the doorway of each of the rooms and stretching along the whole courtyard are a series of carcasses, mostly the heads of the yak-like cattle and the bodies of other local animals, all in various states of decay. Michael is given to understand that these animals had been found dead, killed by poachers, and are here for prayers and as an example of what should not be done. The effect is eerie and smelly.

All along this upper courtyard, beneath the carcasses, are these small shrine rooms, which are dark, candle-lit and often smoky from the incense. In each room is either a monk or a monk and an assisting monk or two, who are busy, either making tiny ritual statues out of what appears to be oatmeal, practicing some puja, or just watching over the place. It looks like many of them actually live in these rooms, for there are bed-like couches in most of them. Michael wanders from room to room, deciding finally to maybe to do some meditation practice himself in one room that has a benevolent looking protector. He asks the attendant monk if he can sit and meditate and is motioned to go ahead and take a seat.

Before Michael knows it there are quite a few monks in the small room with him. Perhaps they have never before seen a westerner meditate. They sit right next to him (often on both sides), behind him, and most disturbing,

often just in front and facing him, looking right into his face, less than a foot away. It makes for a difficult meditation to say the least (Michael is used to meditating in a room by himself). In this particular case, the resident lama (a lama is a monk who has done the traditional 3-year solitary retreat) wants to see Michael imitate how he meditates, and the monk assumes a Vulture-like posture, for those of you who understand this sort of thing. The monk pulls his shoulders up to his ears, pushes them together, and stares straight ahead, with his eyes wide open. The monk looks for all the world like one of those fierce Tibetan deities.

Then the monk takes off his watch, hands it to Michael and asks Michael to time him while he holds his breath in the traditional vase-breathing position for as long as he can, which turns out to be about a minute and a half. Of course, he then wants Michael to do the same for him. Michael fears (particularly with the low oxygen and his being sick) that he does not put in a very good performance, not to mention not being exactly in a competitive mood. He has to laugh. It is all in good fun, but a bit crazy too.

Inevitably in all these kind of situations Michael ends up showing the monks the small photo of Nyima Rinpoche he has brought with him. They can't get enough of looking at that picture. The monks would crowd around until the small photo would somehow just float out of Michael's hands and into theirs, taking on a destiny of its own. This happens again and again, and it is a job to retrieve it every time.

Michael waits to be led into the presence of Khenpo Rinpoche. Rinpoche has a public reception each afternoon where a procession of local Tibetans file up, offer the traditional white scarf, and get his blessing. Michael wants to go to that but is told to wait and that Rinpoche will see them privately. The time ticks away on the slow track as they wait, filled with anticipation. And at last the summons comes. The rinpoche will see him now. So off they go toward the interview room, some two stories up from where they are.

And as Michael stands he is painfully reminded that he is right in the middle of the worst of his altitude sickness. He is still sick and not yet getting better. As Michael climbs the steep ladder-like stairs toward the rinpoche he has to stop and do heavy breathing, just to keep enough oxygen in his lungs. Every few steps he is gasping for breath as he finds his way upward toward the interview room. They come to a small courtyard outside where the rinpoche is and where everyone takes off their shoes. Michael has to sit down and pant, while he unties his boots. How embarrassing. And then they climb a short flight of steep stairs to the room itself where Michael arrives still breathing hard. He sits down at the back of the room while several other visitors are up front prostrating to the rinpoche. Michael is so bushed that he does not (at first) remember to do the three traditional prostrations that practitioners do before any great lama.

And there the Rinpoche is, looking better than Michael could even imagine, and he has

imagined that he would be great. All of maybe 80 years old and something just over five feet tall but seeming seven feet tall and ageless, the rinpoche fills the room with his presence. All Michael is aware of is how glad he is to see rinpoche and he kind of stumbles through the prostrations, fumbling to offer a white scarf while kneeling down before the lama.

The rinpoche looks at Michael like he has never been looked at before. Rinpoche's eyes look straight into Michael's eyes and then he ups the ante by focusing intently. His dark eyes seem most like the ever-adjusting lens of an auto-focus camera, moving in and out, trying to get the right focus. Michael has never seen eyes do that, be able to lock the gaze and then still move in and out getting a fix on you. But that is just how it was. The rinpoche examines him for a few seconds, as if time stopped, and then all relaxes and time flows on again. He places the white scarf over Michael's head, gives him a welcoming kind look, and motions for everyone to sit down in front of him. They settle in.

Then the rinpoche and the monks begin to perform an elaborate ceremony with the rinpoche leading the practice, accompanied by a small number of monks. Gradually Michael realizes he is in the middle of the Mahaka puja. He has read about this practice, perhaps the most important daily practice for the Karma Kagyu Lineage. Later he finds out that they were experiencing a special form of Mahakala, one for insiders (those close to the dharma), complete with the Tsok, the ritual feast offering.

It is very intense, with the rinpoche leading the chanting with an intent and often fierce look. Mahakala is a wrathful practice. It is for the protector of the dharma, to protect the dharma from being stained or degraded. And this one is complete with drums, cymbals, and the various Tibetan horns. He doesn't really know how to describe what happens next.

Through this elaborate ceremony Michael finds himself looking at his own state of mind, aware of it. He begins to identify with his mind just now as not much different from his own meditation practice and he is soon examining where he is within it and what it is about for him. He has done it, without fail, every morning and afternoon/evening since Nyima introduced him to it.

Now, here in the presence of the rinpoche's mind, Michael begins to explore the meaning and nature of his own mind. What is mind practice and what is the essence of it? In his own thinking, Michael is somewhat of a tough character and he carries that strength or toughness into his practice. In fact he loves the fierce, wrathful deities, somehow identifying with them. And now, here in that room with Rinpoche, that same strength, toughness, or we might even say fierceness comes to mind and begins to be examined inwardly in a new light. But this is no idea that he is playing with. Instead, Michael is examining himself or to be more exact, he is realizing part of his self, in this case, that part that has been doing the meditation practice, the one who does the

practice as well as the person who has tried so long to learn about himself.

And as this realization takes place, Michael sees how his fierceness or toughness is but a shell covering up an extremely sensitive inside. He is tough, because he is so ...so sensitive and, at heart, even kind. Michael is flooded with a feeling of compassion or rather: the realization that he is (and always has been), in his deepest heart, compassionate, concerned, caring, and the like, and that this is his natural state. Not something to strive for, but already, in fact, the case -- the very state of his being, something to be uncovered, and opened up. Michael does not have to strive to be compassionate, for that is his natural state. All he has to do is to let it come out, shine through.

And again, we should point out that this is not a concept or idea, but a realization that totally involves him. He realizes that the essence of his practice, of his fierce presence, is none other than compassion. It is as if, like a glove, he turns himself inside out. Tears just flow as Michael is overcome with this, now so obvious realization. He is, in essence, very simple, just a soft-hearted, easy mark for this world. He is easy and all of his toughness, his fierceness is nothing more than an attempt to cover over and shield himself from responding too much to all the suffering he sees around himself. In that moment, Michael feels he understands himself and his practice, all in midst of that Mahakala puja with Rinpoche. He is at peace.

Michael is deeply moved and relieved from this experience. And later, the rinpoche comes out in the courtyard and just kind of spends a little time with them. Michael is deep in the zone, his mind blown quite open. He is just sitting around there, feeling very good. The rinpoche approaches them and gives both of them a special blessed knot to wear around their necks. The translator explains that this is a protection cord and that he should wear it at all times. Then the translator, taking Michael to one side says:

“Rinpoche wants me to tell you that he is glad to have found you, He says you have been his student before.” Michael is taking all of this in.

Then Rinpoche said goodbye to them all, speaking to them in his broken English,

"Tomorrow or next life, which will come first?"

Michael has heard and read many stories about the various rinpoches. Somehow these stories help to inspire faith and confidence in the rinpoche, that he is who he is, that sort of thing. Yet Michael now understands that these stories are nothing compared to the sheer largeness of rinpoche's presence. And this kind of experience defies words. How could he explain that when he is in the presence of the rinpoche Michael has a different idea of himself, of who he is, why he is here, etc. Michael learned things about himself when he was in the presence of rinpoche that he never knew before, important things. The word is 'realization'. He realized things about himself that he had never realized before.

After the interview, Michael and Isaac spend the rest of that day exploring further the various reaches of the monastery. Later, settled in their room, monks brought them supper which consists of thukpa (a meat and noodle soup), rice, that - sort of thing. And as night came everyone hunkered down. Night comes early and there is little else they can do. The small single light bulb glows for a short while, powered by a small generator and then the electricity ends. Isaac tells him that they have electricity at the monastery for perhaps thirty minutes a day. Aside from the candles, it is dark. Michael does what everyone else does here when the sun goes down – sleeps.

It was a special time that Michael spent in Crestone Monastery, a special state of mind that Michael finds hard to put into words. It is difficult for him to describe the experience of being with the rinpoche, way up in the mountains, so far from anything he could call home, but now so very much a part of him - a home for his heart. It is clear that Michael has entered into the mind and mandala of this great rinpoche. You can see it in his eyes, a certain softness and clarity. And the blessings of that trip remain in his mind in the form of an ability to concentrate more on what is really important in life, working to realize himself. After that day, Michael is less distracted by all the many entertainments available to him.

The next morning Michael (who is still struggling with altitude sickness) and Isaac are up early. Michael's mind is filled with thoughts of the rinpoche and the effect the interview had

on him. His mind is very peaceful and he is deeply relaxed. There is not a cloud in the sky and not a thought in his head. For some reason, meeting rinpoche has the effect of extinguishing Michael's endless mental chattering. Nothing happening there. Just calm.

And Michael takes to this new inner peace, so to speak, without a second thought. And he assumes that it will continue and just always be that way from that moment on. And so it does, for a day or so.

At any rate, Isaac and Michael pack up and begin the long ride back to North Gate. Once on the road they chat about rinpoche. Isaac, who has met rinpoche before, is just as cooled out as Michael. The trip back to Center City is pretty much uneventful.

It is hard to put your finger on but something has happened, some change in Michael from meeting the rinpoche. And Michael welcomes that change, that thoughtless calm that came over him and it has remained with him. For one, he is suddenly more outgoing, reaching out to others, giving a smile, where before he might have just averted his glance and kept to himself.

And when he gets back to the "Flying Dragon," it kind of just pours forth when he sees Richard and Mary sitting there in the cafe and they are of course anxious to hear about his trip. Of course, Michael recounts the journey, and in great detail. When it comes to summing up what he has learned from meeting the rinpoche, there are not so many words, but

Mary and Richard get the idea. It is not so much what Michael tells them but the way he relates it. And although they don't know Michael well, they sense the change in him and can feel the calmness in his mind in the way he looks and acts toward them. There is a kindness and almost a love that radiates from Michael. This is something both Mary and Richard take note of, particularly Mary.

In the meantime, their own research has managed to unearth the relation of the Cities music and the colony of Tibetans in the mountains, so they are now eager to listen. Mary is certain that there is a major connection between the art scene and the artist's contact with the Tibetans. Richard, who is slower to figure this out, is at least open to listening. Of course, Michael helps to make clear what this connection is.

While Michael was away Richard and Mary made a project of visiting as many of the clubs and coffee houses that feature the Cities art scene as possible. By now, they have met dozens of artists, musicians, and poets, and have had extended conversations with many of them.

And the artists are thrilled that someone like Richard from the outside cares about what they are doing and that people beyond the prison are aware of their work. Even in the Cities, many of the artists know about Malcolm's work.

And Richard has gone through somewhat of a transformation, as well. "Mary is right; Richard was wrong," he keeps jokingly reciting to Mary,

who finds it amusing, perhaps the first time. These artists are not suffering in the way Richard had imagined. Sure, conditions are tough, but what drives the Cities' art scene is, as Mary had pointed out: something more than anguish.

Both Mary and Richard are working to better understand the View by this point. After all, it is not all that difficult to grasp and prison conditions do help to keep the four thoughts in mind.

Richard has not yet gone as far as to actually attempt to train his mind, but Mary is already getting into it and learning as much about it as she can. And the artists are only too glad to share their knowledge.

And it is not, as they had already surmised, just the music or the comedians. The View affects all art and not just art, but every aspect of these artists' lives. As Mary points out to Richard, it is not entirely fair to call the Viewers "artists." Some are, some aren't. Adopting the View and becoming a Viewer seems a very sensible thing to do in the prison for any inmate. It is one way to maximize one's potential to stay alive and to keep out of harm's way.

The squads have learned to, more or less, ignore the Viewers, probably because time and again they prove to be not involved in anything they are after. And these artists really have learned to control their minds enough to avoid the knee-jerk reactions that precipitate trouble for so many others. The Viewers seem to

somehow float above the fray. In general, they are left alone by the squads and other inmates.

It takes a squad member only the briefest of examinations to decide if he is looking at a Viewer or someone else. Perhaps the most difficult part of all this to communicate or to at first understand is that the View is not just something passive, like freezing up, going numb, and escaping inside one's mind. It is not that.

Mary explains to Richard that it is something more akin to Aikido, which is a form of martial art that is responsive as opposed to initiating. The Cities artists have heightened abilities to respond to whatever confronts them. They don't just freak out and panic but can somehow take in whatever is happening and react accordingly, making the best of a situation.

[Shamata instructions]

In other words, this is not a case of the ostrich with his head in the sand. They are not doing that. They really do just what Mark pointed out, try to keep the four thoughts in mind, all of which do tend to sober one and guide the mind. Or, as the traditional phrase goes, these are the "Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind."

By "turning the mind," as the artists explain, they are turning the mind away from watching the endless stream of distractions on the outside and, instead, turning the mind inward, but not inward like going away inside and hiding, but rather turning the mind on itself, using the mind to look at the mind.

As I said, it is not easy to explain. And it is not just some mental exercise; far from it. For example, keeping in mind that life is precious is not some thought, but an active experiencing of that preciousness. Keeping the impermanence of life in mind is, again, not an abstraction, but actively experiencing that sense of impermanence, on a day-to-day, and moment-by-moment basis. And so on.

For most of those on the outside, the closest thing to having those four thoughts in mind and to experiencing our own mind turning is when someone close to us dies or something happens that is so profound that it throws us out our routine. We find ourselves standing outside of time for a moment considering life at a deeper level. It takes some huge event to tear us away from our continual distractions. That is the idea.

The point here is that many of these inmates, driven by the constant reminders all around them have worked with these four thoughts and turned their minds, to whatever degree, away from the flood of ongoing distractions.

And that is why Mark had told them that the View does not result from their music but the music results from the View. In other words, once you have the View, everything and anything you do partakes of it. If you play music, it displays the View. If you write poetry, same thing. And, if you cook dinner, that too exemplifies the View. The poetry, the comedy, the paintings, the music have a certain kind of perfection because the View has a certain kind of perfection. The image of the flying dragon

holding the four thoughts, one in each paw, is just about perfect.

That is what Mary and Richard have been learning.

JEFFERSON

The “Flying Dragon” is quiet tonight with only a few people there, mostly sitting at the bar, chatting with the bartender. Mark is sitting alone at a table some distance from the rest, just reading a magazine or something. Jefferson comes in. He is dressed in his civvies but his short crew cut and general demeanor mark him as a squad member.

He approaches Mark, “May I join you?”

Mark looks up and there is a surprised look on his face which he does his best to control, and he does. Mark looks around as if to see if anyone is watching.

Jefferson, continuing, “Don’t worry, I won’t bite.”

Mark, now ashamed of himself, “Of course, have a seat”.

“You know who I am, then?” asks Jefferson.
“Sure,” replies Mark.

“Even without my uniform, am I that obvious?” he continues.

Mark, now smiling, “Sure, I’m Mark.”

Mark extends his hand to Jefferson.
“Jefferson,” the man responds.

They shake.

Jefferson continues, “That is not all I am. I like the music here. I still play some guitar. I don’t want to be the enemy.”

“That’s a tough one,” says Mark.

Jefferson nods, "Yeah, I understand. I just kind of wandered into it when I first got here, trying to keep my head above water."

Mark agrees, "Aren't we all, my friend."

They sit quietly for a moment just kind of sizing each other up.

Mark is the first to break the silence, "It's not your fault. I might have done the same thing earlier on. It's cool, man. No hard feelings."

Jefferson looks relieved, "I appreciate that. You know, it's not like I can just quit the squads."

Mark nods, "That is what I have heard."

Jefferson: "It's a one-way trip. Once you're in, you're in for life."

Mark replies, "Sounds familiar, doesn't it?"

"Yeah, it does," says Jefferson, "I know a guy who tried to get out and he ended up dead in his room."

Continuing, "I like the way you artists handle things and I have seen a lot of you, close up."

Mark, looking eye-to-eye with Jefferson, "It's all about survival, for us. You know that. We try to stay out of your hair."

"And we try to leave you folks alone. You are seldom a problem for us," Jefferson responds, and then adds, "I want to learn more about the View."

Mark, still looking at him closely, "OK."

Jefferson: "I can understand that you might be afraid I might be spying on you, trying to get inside?"

Mark, shaking his head slightly, "Not really. There is nothing secret about the View..."

"In fact I wish all of you guys had it. Life would be better for us!"

Jefferson smiles, "Where do I begin?"

Mark, getting up, puts his hand gently on Jefferson's shoulder, "You already have."

Jefferson, by this time has taken to just hanging out with his new-found friends at the "Flying Dragon." When he has the time, he switches to his civvies, but sometimes he just shows up in his uniform. Gradually, the customers have learned not to fear him and understand that he is friendly. He still causes the whole place to start when he first appears at the door of the café, but they are beginning to get used to it.

Mark and Jefferson have become friends and are starting to hang out some. His growing interest in the View has him learning about the four thoughts and even meditating some. This particular night, Jefferson is sitting with Michael, Mary, and Richard and a few others, off to the side of the club, just talking. Jefferson is wearing his uniform. Not much is happening yet.

A squad comes in, and gives the place a look-over. They are questioning Mark about something or other. Mark, as usual, is calm and making no waves, hoping that they will just

move on. And they do. Most of the squad begins to file out and back into the street. However the one squad member who was questioning Mark stays behind and is pressuring Mark. Mark is cool but the squad member, who apparently is not getting from Mark what he wants, is not. Suddenly he has Mark up against the wall with his forearm across Mark's throat and is proceeding to choke him, until he is senseless. Mark goes limp but the squad guy keeps right on.

Suddenly an arm grabs the squad member and pulls him off Mark, who falls to the floor and lies there not moving. The squad guy whirls around, furious at being interfered with, to face Jefferson who, much larger, is holding him by the collar.

The squad member is shocked to be facing his own kind and immediately recognizes Jefferson. "Ease up, Man," says Jefferson, you are killing him." The other man pushes back, and growls, "What the fuck are you doing? This is my collar," and he takes a swing at Jefferson. Jefferson, the larger of the two, blocks the swing and raises him still higher off the ground by the collar of his uniform. The squad guy is sort of dangling there. "Cool down," says Jefferson, "No use killing this guy."

The other man responds, "Cool this, mother fucker" and he lunges at Jefferson with a knife which is partially deflected and ends up piercing Jefferson's left side. Jefferson, now hurt, still has the guy, holding him by the throat with his left hand. Jefferson's right hand already in full swing hits the squad member full

in the face and sends him crashing to the ground, out cold. Boom.

There is complete silence. A couple of people are already heading for Mark who moves just enough to make it clear he is not dead. He is starting to wake up. Jefferson, hurt, is holding his side and limps to the nearest table. Isaac helps Jefferson to lie down and they open his shirt. While the main thrust of the knife was deflected away from his heart, there is still a nasty gash along his ribs and a lot of bleeding.

Michael realizes that they have to get Jefferson out of there before the rest of the squad returns. He is up and explaining this to Isaac. Together they help Jefferson who now has someone's shirt tied around his chest to his feet and head for the back door. Jefferson understands and is walking the best he can. Mark has now recovered consciousness and is filled in on what just happened. It is clear to all that Mark had better not be there either. Mary and one of the musicians help Mark up and they also head for the backdoor. The various customers leave, quietly, as best they can. The squad member still out cold is lying on the floor.

Jefferson is taken to Michael's room at the nearby guest house. Everyone is there: Michael, Mary, Richard, Isaac, Mark, and Jefferson. Jefferson is reclining on the bed but mostly sitting up. His side is bandaged. He looks pretty good, considering. They are discussing things. Michael speaks to Jefferson, "Jefferson, you know more about what this will

mean than the rest of us. What's your take on this?"

Jefferson, looking up, "It's pretty simple. That guy recognized me and he is not dead. They are sure to be looking for me already. It is a rule that you don't hit another squad member. Even though I did not strike first, that's not the way it will come out. The standard thing to do is to hunt me down and kill me. Sooner or later, they will find me. It is a matter of honor. If I had been in that squad it might be different. But for a lone member to hit a team member; it's just not done."

"There must be something we can do," replies Mark, "You were only trying to help me."

"Makes no difference," says Jefferson, "We can't explain it away. It's not about what's reasonable; it's about the way they work. I should know. I'm one of them."

"Well, not anymore you're not," says Mary, "They want to kill you."

Michael joins in, "We have to get you out of here... go somewhere. Mark, where can we take him?"

Mark, shaking his head, "There is nowhere they won't find him if they want to, and I'm betting they want to. I agree with Jefferson that they must already be sending out bulletins to both the gates and of course here. That leaves Dune City which is still under construction and doesn't have that much yet in the way of communications. Perhaps we can get him there, but then what?"

Michael has an idea, "How about the Sector perimeter on the north side of Dune City. Isaac, how hard would that be to get through? "

Isaac, standing up, "That might not be that much of a problem. At least I have heard that you can bribe your way across. A friend of mine did it last month.

"What if we took him into the mountains, to the Tibetan community?" asks Michael.

Mark is not so sure, "We could try that but it puts the Tibetans at risk."

Michael responds, "What if we could get to Rinpoche? He would know what to do, I am certain."

Mark, "Rinpoche is the last person I want to see put at risk."

Michael, "Rinpoche is the only person that keeps coming to mind. If anyone can see the big picture, it has to be him. I say it is worth a try."

Isaac, turning to Mark, "I agree with Michael. Rinpoche will know what to do. I can't see anyone harming him. We can't just throw Jefferson here to the wolves."

Mark, reluctantly agrees, "OK. We will do it, but let's split up. There is a mini-bus that leaves for Dune City each morning at 6 A.M. Let's all meet there. Now you three from the outside spread out and do what you would normally do. Try not to draw attention to yourselves tonight. As far as I know you were not ever identified at the cafe, but you can't be sure. Jefferson, you

come with me. I have a plan that just may work.”

SCENE CHANGE

Michael is crammed in a booth just inside the door of a nearby bar, where he went to wait out the evening. He is seated just in front of an elevated stage where the musicians perform. He is with several of the arts people but as far as he knows none of them know anything about what just has happened. They are having beers and small talk. The night is still young and the bar is not too busy yet. Smoke hangs in the air and the smell of stale beer was ubiquitous. No problems so far.

Then in the door comes a customer Michael had just seen at the Flying Dragon that night who immediately spots Michael and makes a beeline for his booth. Michael cringes because he does not want talk about what came down with Jefferson. The rest of those present have no idea about this but Michael is certain that this man will soon enlighten them and with him sitting there too. It is clear from the look in this man’s eyes that he has Michael pegged and is about to question him. Michael knows he is in for it and without even thinking about it instinctively makes his move and leaves the booth, mumbling something about being back soon.

But where will he go? He is already on his feet and lurching down the aisle away from the front entrance and along the wooden bar. Where to settle? He knows he has to be careful what table he chooses to sit at. He could get his ass

kicked as easily as not and for just any reason at all. There is a rough bunch here already.

About midway along the bar sitting on a high stool all by herself is Mary Mack. "What is she doing here?" Michael wonders. He thought they had spread out. Michael winces on seeing her and hesitates. He remembers that she also bites, but it is too late. He is already within five feet of her and she has seen him, and is about to say something. Without asking, Michael slides onto the barstool next to Mary. "Hope you don't mind if I join you," he says, and mumbles something about having to get away from where he had been but this escapes Mary Mack, who is startled to see him appear and more surprised yet to find him sitting next to her. But it is OK with her. Michael is not a threat.

All Michael cannot stop thinking about are her rude remarks to him the other day, when they first met. He makes some joking references to her about that meeting, but these too just slide by Mary. She has apparently forgotten about the incident, and doesn't seem to know what he is talking about. Then something totally unexpected happens.

As they sit on the barstools facing each other for the moment, their eyes meet and their gaze locks. Michael at first freaks because they are way too close for his comfort. It is as if their eyes are tied together, fixed. And whether that moment was it brief or long Michael never knew. Let's say it was somehow timeless. In that moment, when their eyes meet Michael without even thinking suddenly sees beyond

the Mary Mack that he thinks he knows, straight into her heart. Perhaps the events earlier that night have unnerved her and her guard is down. Who knows?

Michael could not explain this then or now, but in that moment he sees a very scared (and innocent) little girl all alone in the world and not able to take care of herself. Behind her big front he can see how fragile she is, like a flower floating on the surface of this rough world. He can see that she will never make it here and he doesn't mean "make it here" in the prison cities; he means anywhere, in this life. She is way too hopeful and too pure. He has never seen this before in her. As far as he knew she was tough as nails.

All Michael can think of is: what will become of her? How will she survive? Who will take care of her or give a damn for her not just in this tough prison place, but in the equally tough (in these matters) world outside. The answer that comes back is singular: no one. It is too tough a call; she is too hard a case and the world has too little time and not enough compassion to gather her up in its embrace. He feels that she will slip through the cracks of life, unnoticed, and be pegged for the tough-ass broad she pretends to be, her inner purity stained and slowly stomped out. Who does she think she is? How can she expect so much? No one will care. Why is he witnessing this?

But for some inexplicable reason Michael is getting this and taking it all in. In a flash he realizes that only someone like himself could shield her enough to break it too her gently that

life is often cruel and impersonal. From that moment he is already protecting her.

His overwhelming response was that he could not let this fragile being just be crushed out by the way the world happens to be. It is clear to him that probably no one else has ever seen Mary this way or has a clue about the gentle creature within her hard exterior. Without a thought he responds despite any warnings that come up in his mind and they are many. There is no choice in the matter and no doubt - without a doubt. He alone is responsible. He finds himself responding to Mary.

Michael is simply speechless and has no idea what Mary feels or is experiencing at the moment but he is certain that Mary feels something as well. She too can see and feel things happening here between them and they feel good, not bad. And in some ways, that moment never ends.

Mary does not know what was going on either, only that suddenly Michael appears so different from before. And she sees him see into her and feels at once protected and known. She feels known, perhaps for the first time. Someone has found her at last. Her inner fear and anxiety, something she has carried all her life, just vanishes. She finds herself relaxing in Michael's gaze.

Michael wonders if he is falling in love. If so, it certainly is not what he expected. All of these years he has been looking for someone and has always kept an eye out. Not that he knows the first thing about it, but Michael has

imagined he would eventually find someone like himself, someone who is also looking for him, just like he is looking for someone. Like that. The big sensitive person that is him would encounter a big sensitive other person and the two would unite, come together, and be one.

But here, tonight in this bar, it is not at all like that. In that moment, when their eyes meet and fuse together, Michael does not have the sense of meeting another great sensitive one who is looking for him. Far from it. Instead, he has a simple, almost stark, realization, that there is no other "one" out there. Not another one looking for him, but just one, not two. The words of the Greek philosopher Parmenides flash through his mind: "Being Alone Is." He gets it now, being is alone; there is only one being, not two!

Michael didn't know if this made him happy or sad. He has always looked at it as sad, that being alone, being by himself, is sad and that we each should find another but Parmenides meant that "Being Alone Is!" There is only being, only ONE being, not two. There is not one being in Michael looking for another or second being somewhere out there to be paired with. That's not it at all. There is and always has been only one being, call it alone or all-one. It is, he can see now without a doubt, all one. Michael realizes that when he meets Mary that night at the bar.

In that noisy bar, surrounded by people, this timeless moment occurred. It is not just an experience that Michael has that will pass in time, but an actual realization, an

understanding that he can never lose. And he never does.

In that moment Michael has a mini-enlightenment, at least about his love life. His search-for-someone days are over because he instantly has lost any desire to search on. That hunger vanishes. A veil has been lifted. He realizes there is nothing to be found and through meeting Mary like that he knows this for the first time. And it lasts.

Instead of finding another "one" to love, he finds himself, probably for the first time in his life, actually responding to another person as he wished someone might respond to him. He takes her all in at a glance and he feels solely and absolutely responsible for her from that moment onward. It is a done deal. All he wants to do is to care for her and protect her from the harsh reality that surrounds them both. He knows that he alone can give her enough room, enough space to live in. For the first time in his life, another person is more important to him than his own concerns.

Mary can sense all this as well and they are suddenly together. It is not about words. Something has happened here. Together they soon leave the bar and walk back to Michael's room where they spend the night trying to understand what all of this means. With very little sleep they await the dawn and the bus ride to Dune City.

Michael and Mary are up well before dawn, have their day bags packed, and are prepared to set off. The hotel, as usual, is locked up

tighter than a drum, so they have to feel around in the semi-darkness for lights, wake the gatekeeper, who grumpily removes the huge iron chain holding the doors together. They are off.

They find Richard at the bus station well before eight o'clock trying not to look like the tourist he is. Isaac, who is there with him, points out that Mark and Jefferson are waiting just around the corner in case the squads arrive searching for Jefferson here at the station. It is Isaac's job to bribe the bus driver to make that extra stop about a block away and pick the others up. No problem.

But there is a problem. Today there is scheduled another of the prison-wide strike days protesting the advent of taxation. In fact this time they are striking for two consecutive days and this first day has been declared to be "very serious," whatever that means. In order not to have their vehicle stoned they have to somehow get from Center City to Dune City early enough in the morning before the strikers are up and about. They have been assured that the main bus to Dune City that day will run on schedule, despite the strike, and they are counting on this.

At any rate by 6:15 AM they have left the station on the small minibus, picked up Mark and Jefferson as planned, and are on their way out of the Center City area, heading south-east of the city toward the main checkpoint and the bus terminal to Dune City. Even in the pre-dawn darkness it seems like there is heavy people-traffic on the road, probably because it

is a strike day. Everywhere along the road are small tent shops with glaring lights in which are offered all kinds of goods, and with loud music. In many places along the road, bare 4-foot fluorescent tubes are mounted upright and arranged in rows on either side of a shop to create a funnel-like light effect converging into the tent or shop. Perhaps as many as 10-12 tubes would be set up this way giving an eerie and carnival-like effect. The endless music booms out of the darkness as they speed along. It is like a carnival, but spread out along the narrow highway, an eerie carnival at that.

Soon they arrive at the main checkpoint and the officials are not yet on duty. It is still early. There are huge booms across the road blocking all traffic from passing through. In their rush to avoid the strikers and the squads, Isaac sets about waking the local officials, who are in no hurry to help them until they are promised some bribe money. Even at that, it is a slow go.

Finally the customs officials appear and slowly put them through the long form-filling process while the rest of the group eyed the clock and the increasing daylight which means possibly more danger for them once beyond this checkpoint. Michael leaves Jefferson locked (like some folks lock dogs in a car when going into K-Mart) in the van in the semi-darkness. Of course, each member in the van has to personally come into the office and sign the forms. It is hoped that Jefferson's papers will still work and that word that he is wanted has not yet reached this far. His papers seem fine.

At last they are done and cross beyond the limits of the gate area. Unfortunately, it is now quite light as they head on down the road. Groups of strikers are gathering here and there. Some have rocks in their hands. But luck is with them and they wheel into the tiny bus terminal and pile out. Michael is pleased that all has gone so well thus far, and that they are already at the terminal. Now all they have to do is wait for the main bus. Little do they know.

It is still early and no one is around. Jefferson stays low. Their whispered conversation manages to wake a few people who have been sleeping somewhere in the open building. Their driver has an animated dialogue with one of these and then turns to face them, a little wide-eyed. For a second Michael thinks the driver is telling him the bus has been cancelled and that the bus will not be coming here today. The man next to him nods in agreement and in better English says the terminal has been closed due mechanical problems with the bus. He IS telling Michael that!

They are in shock and refuse to accept this information. The terminal crew are only too happy to repeat it and it sounds no better the second time. Michael's mind is racing. Let's see: the strike is on in the Cities, not just for today but for tomorrow also. The bus they need only comes once a day...

In other words they are stuck miles from safety with no bus and no way to travel on to another city. It is only a matter of time before Jefferson is discovered and everyone knows what that means. By now it is too late to go back to

Center City and try to catch a bus to either North or South Gate cities. And that ride is too dangerous anyway. They are sure to be looking for Jefferson there. Michael is not a happy camper and his protestations soon produce a bus official on a small motorcycle. The man is Hindu but he speaks some English. He assures Michael that they can stay here locally for as long as they want and be well treated. Not comforting.

"But I have no intention of staying here," Michael protests. The official appeals to the terminal manager who just shakes his head. There will be no bus here today and that is that. It broke down somewhere else. Then the terminal official says he will appeal that decision and that perhaps another bus could be sent down from Center City. Accompanied by a second motorcyclist the two men drive off to make calls or confer - whatever. Michael and the others are for the moment hopeful but when the men return, they just shake their heads. No bus today. They suggest that that everyone goes to the local restaurant and wait, gesturing toward a building that is little more than a hovel. "No!" said Michael, actually asserting himself.

By now quite a group of people have gathered around to enjoy the show, watching Michael freak out. The nearest city is back to Center City, but the search for Jefferson is sure to be there by now and there is still the strike to consider. The clock is ticking. A call to the owner of the mini-van they have been riding brings only the response that he will not allow

them to use his vehicle. There is too much danger of damage from the strikers. They are stuck and time is running out.

All of this is made worse by the fact that Jefferson is feeling worse today and not up for too much. He has lost some blood and they need to get him somewhere he can recover, where there is food and rest. Thoughts flood through Michael's mind of their being stuck here for days, trying to get out, getting caught, arrested, and who knows what else. No "Four Thoughts" just now for him.

Michael pleads with the different folks there for help and asks if there is perhaps an ambulance that they could hire to drive to Dune City. Surely, people will not stone that. Michael points out that his friend is sick and Jefferson moans a bit for them on cue. There is also an off-duty security guard who is standing around. Michael approaches him. Will he ride with them up front in the ambulance in his uniform and make them look more official?

Everyone likes the ambulance idea and they begin to call around looking for one. They find one, but it won't be there until that afternoon. "Better than nothing," is Michael's response. Upon hearing of the possible rental of the ambulance, the owner of the mini-van (who had refused its use of it earlier) comes down to the airport himself and dickers with them. He is also a Hindu and there takes place a Hindu war of words between the terminal official (who really is trying to help them) and this man who does not like to see them spending good money on an ambulance when he might get

some. Michael suggests that the security guard ride in the mini-van, of course for a stiff fee. The owner now sees dollars and says that, yes, he is willing to chance it but not with the mini-van. He has a larger truck that they can rent and they can start at once. They make a deal to drive through the strike zone to somewhere around Dune City and all they can hope for is that they will be able to find the back way up the mountain to Crystal Cave.

And sure enough pretty soon a large open bed truck appears and pulls up beside them. There are already quite a few people on the truck, obviously inmates from the looks of them and everyone is standing, hanging on to the open overhead frame that stretches over the truck bed. The owner is trying to make as much money as he can from this. Our group does not dare say a thing and they just toss their gear up onto the back and climb aboard. Jefferson, who is not well, rides up in the cab. The truck lurches forward and they are off.

And it's "hang on for dear life" as the truck lunges down the road, across the sandy roads, going as fast as the driver can push it. The convicts aboard love it and the driver knows it and is showing off. The rest of our crew get numb knuckles just trying to keep from flying off the side. Isaac flashes Michael a big grin as they hurtle along the dusty road. Michael is thinking whether he would be better off sitting down, wedged into one of the corners of the truck up there behind the cab.

And so it goes. After a stop for gas and to gather some sandwiches, with their uniformed

policeman sitting up front, they head out into the strike zone. The plan is to tell anyone who stops them that they are headed for Dune City to get medical help and, at the last minute push on through the city to the mountains beyond. There cannot be many people there. Jefferson is slumped over in the cap and hacks and coughs when they are stopped. He looks the part and does not look well.

And so begins what becomes a slow two-hour trip toward Dune City. They do stop at different checkpoints, local taxes, and pass many groups of men armed with stones but none really are thrown. Perhaps Michael hears one hit the side of the truck or was it just kicked up by the tires? Still, there is constant tension in the air as they drive along. The guard in uniform sits bolt upright and hangs one arm out the window as if he could care less (as a policeman should), surveying the endless throng of people along the road eyeballing him. The fact that the strike is on means that the roads are empty of cars but even more full of people and animals.

The short of it is that they make it to Dune City and through the barrier of armed throngs that have congregated on the edge of that city. The other riders get off at what appears to be a saloon, leaving Michael and the others without much cover. Once inside Dune City they have to play it cool, slowing way down, and just moseying along to the north-eastern edge of the city to the point where they can make a run for the dunes and the one road that will take them through all this sand.

Dune City is positioned roughly in the center of what was once the Great Sand Dunes National Park. The park is now confined to the lower half of the dunes and has continued on as a tourist spot, perhaps even more exciting because the large dune buggy rides run the tourists right up to the prison fence and let them get out and peer in.

Dune City is nestled right in the midst of the tallest sand dunes in the world, some 15 square miles of massive dunes with heights reaching 750 feet in height. The dunes are on the western side of the Sangre De Christos. The government built the three main cities in the prison. Dune City is something of an afterthought and work on it has been proceeding very slowly. Still it is more than half complete, and many small stores are now open. People are living there.

Isaac explains to them that there is a single road leading out of Dune City going north. It is little more than a two-track and it runs straight up through the dunes until they end. It is all sand, so the truck they have is perfect for the job. The minivan may have run into trouble in the deep sand. The wind blowing sand means that the tiny road is constantly covered over and very hard to follow.

Isaac and the truck driver have a long discussion. Isaac is selling him on the idea of crossing into the Sector and taking the back way home. The supposed reason is that the doctor Jefferson needs is a Tibetan doctor and can only be found in the Sector. The truck driver is not convinced but the money that

Isaac forces on him talks louder than his objections. He will drive them, if they can in fact get across the perimeter. Aside from Michael, none of them has a permit. It falls on Isaac to bring this off.

They head north out of Dune City hoping no one even notices them leaving. It is only a minute or two and they are over the first dune and out of sight. The perimeter guard station looms up ahead. It is not much more than a guard house and there look to be two uniformed officers at the station. Isaac signals to the driver to pull up short, far enough away that the guards can not get that good a look at them. The big question in everyone's mind is: have the guards already been alerted for Jefferson? If so, they are in big trouble.

Mark is counting that the vendetta with Jefferson is a local thing, something just involving the squads and not the outside authorities who have helicopters, gunships, etc. at their disposal. Jefferson affirms this. The squads like to take care of their own problems and would never alert the government. And they don't have the best communication systems. Everyone is counting on this.

Isaac is soon up at the guard house, talking. It is clear from the truck that the conversation is getting quite animated. Everyone holds their breath. Then there is a big round of laughter and then another. Isaac is doing his thing.

Pretty soon Isaac and one of the guards are walking toward the truck. Mary kind of gets herself out the way. They approach the front

cab. Isaac is showing them Jefferson and they are nodding. He is probably using the same line he did with the truck driver: get Jefferson to the Tibetan doctor. Next we see Isaac shaking hands with the guard and putting something in his shirt pocket. They laugh and the guard walks back to the guardhouse. Isaac jumps onto the truck and gives them the thumbs-up sign. Everyone is relieved.

The guard waves them through and the heavy truck lumbers across the checkpoint and on up the dune road. It is slow going at this point. Some of the dunes are hundreds of feet high and the road winds up and down between the dunes like a switchback trail. Only once and a while does it actually cross over the top of a dune.

As the truck very slowly climbs to the top of one of the highest dunes they can see not only Dune City but also in the distance the road that they came in on from Center City. In the distance, along that road from Center City, they can just make out what looks like a whole group of police land cruisers heading into the town. They are certain now that they are being hunted and without communicating this news to their driver (who would freak) they urge him to press on as quickly as possible. Soon they are over the top of the dune and heading downhill. The driver missed it, to their great relief.

As mentioned, the truck is not able to just go straight across the dunes. Instead, it moves slowly through the maze of sand dunes and hills. It is like the switchbacks on mountain

trails but here they are moving between a long series of staggered sand dunes. By now the sun is blasting and it is easy to get overexposed. It is roasting in the cab of the truck and hands and arms need to be kept inside the vehicle. Those in the back have it even worse, and protect themselves as best they can.

After what seems like an eternity they run out of dunes and are on a hard two-track that runs north-south along the desert. Now they can move at a pretty good clip and the moving air does much to make the journey easier.

It is not too long before Michael can see what appears to be a small village. This must be Cottonwood and what they are looking for is the Cottonwood Trail which is the only direct access to getting to the Crestone Peak area from the south. The truck finally rumbles to a halt in the little village and they all get out. They say goodbye to their driver and the police guard, gave them both some extra cash to continue on north rather than go back the way they came in, lest they run into the squads and give them information. Mark thinks they have figured this out by now, anyway, and are only too happy to head north and make the trip back to North City. It is the long-way round and they will probably hole up somewhere until the strike is over. They help Jefferson down from the cab. The truck drives off, heading north. And that was the easy part.

Both of the experienced Cities trekkers that Michael has previously spoken with say that trying to reach the Crystal Cave from the back

is just too difficult. In fact, neither of them had ever done it. It is just too high and tough a climb. Michael begins going from door-to-door in the small village looking for someone to guide them.

Michael locates one man with a tractor but, since it is the harvest time he has already agreed to work elsewhere that day. Things do not look good and they don't have much time. But then the man suggests that there might be one fellow, a newcomer to the area, who might be free. Knocking at his house arouses a fierce dog and brings his wife to the door. He is still asleep but she will wake him.

After some time the man comes out rubbing his eyes and Michael gives him the pitch. He speaks only broken English and Michael cannot understand it all, but he can see by the way the man is shaking his head that things are not going the way he had hoped. Isaac steps in, starts talking, and pretty soon the man is having some laughs. Isaac ups the price again and the man can't afford to refuse. This tactic works; the man agrees to take them and goes to his garage to get his machine. Although it seems from the outside like a garage, the man opens what turns out to be an enclosed courtyard (with no roof) where the tractor is kept.

Now the Cities tractor is not the beast we all know by that name here in the U.S. What they mean by a tractor in the prison is more what we would call a Roto-tiller, the small 2-wheel, 2-cycle engines that can plow a field and (in the prison cities) pull a cart. These tractors fill

the streets and side roads on the city outskirts pulling carts filled with vegetables, brush, or (most often) people.

Then there is the starting of the tractor and the fact that the cart (where they would ride) is filled with dust and trash which has to be removed. That done, Michael and the others climb into the cart, sitting on feed bags and blankets that his wife brings out. She tucks a small bottle of tea and some sandwiches under the driver's seat (his lunch) and they are off, although at what seems a snail's pace.

The idea is to ride the tractor as far up the mountain as it will go, saving their legs (and Jefferson's strength) for the really hard part. As it turns out there really is no road where they are going. Instead, they follow the bed of a stream uphill, moving very slowly toward the mountains. After a mile or so it becomes difficult for the tractor to pull them in the soft sand and everyone has to get out and push. Pretty soon Michael finds that they are spending more time pushing than riding and it is apparent that they can go no farther. So they bid farewell to the tractor and push on. Michael, after talking with the driver, thinks he understands how to go from this point.

As it is Michael cannot not even see where they are going for the next part of the trip, because they are shrouded in mist and then clouds. He does know that it is tough going, even from the start, as in: all uphill and steep at that. Their first goal is to climb to the small gauging station perched on a ridge from which they will push off up the mountain to Crystal

Cave, a hard 3-hour trip from the ridge. There are supposed to be a small group of villagers living up there for the summer. But reaching that village is a long haul from the valley floor, perhaps 5 miles and always going up. Even though Michael doesn't generally use caffeine, he has mental images of arriving there and having a nice warm cup of coffee. They finally reach the station, which is more like a couple of adobe houses, but there is no tea. The villagers have already abandoned the station to move back down to the plain for the winter. By this time everyone is breathing pretty hard. After a good sit, they move on.

From here on, it gets really steep, something Michael thought it already had been. It is hard to describe, but in many cases they are just scrambling up steep slopes of boulders or the so-called path becomes just a wide staircase of strewn rock and stone, as in: no path at all.

Their day packs, which seem light at the start, soon begin to feel very heavy indeed. Michael and Mary just kind of drop behind while Isaac and Mark go up ahead. Jefferson does remarkably well, despite his condition, but then, aside from his wound (which is bothering him less now), he is in perfect physical shape. After awhile even Isaac gives up any pretense of being tough and just begins to sit down when he needs to, which is all the time. At the worst, the group is resting every 20 or 30 feet and that means sitting down on the ground, backpacks off, resting.

Remember they are at an altitude high enough to become very sick. Even simple movements

are tiring. "What can I say? I am getting old, etc.," Michael says to himself, but it is tough. Isaac, who is still walking ahead, meets a local man who is up here looking for lost sheep, hoping to drive them back down for the coming winter. He and Mark move on ahead.

By this point they are literally walking in the clouds or at least surrounded by them. In time they begin to leave the mist and clouds behind and are able to see more of the mountains surrounding them. They are essentially walking up the spine of a great wide ridge on the side of a mountain with a deep canyon across from them. Aside from all the heavy breathing, this place is gorgeous.

From what Michael is able to understand from speaking with the tractor driver, the next place to arrive at will be a small Tibetan cemetery, dedicated to Tamdrin, the horse-headed deity. This is a traditional Tibetan sky burial place, where bodies are cut up and fed to the vultures. However, this spot is not readily forthcoming.

They climb and climb and climb. Somewhere along in here they meet an old Tibetan man with skin like leather coming down who motions to them to come close. He takes what looks like a piece of quartz crystal from his pack and begins to hack away at it, eventually handing each of them a small piece. It turns out to be rock candy, sugar. Michael thanks him and moves on. Those small pieces of sugar, something he would never eat normally, turn out to be just the thing, and that little bit of energy means a lot at this point. On they go

and, after a very long time, Mark points through the mist to a distant cemetery high on the mountain. Groan. This is the place they should have reached an hour ago, itself just a stepping stone on the journey. Panting and struggling, they climb on. The mist and clouds again prevent them from seeing into the valley below where the squads might already be following them.

One of the strangest experiences in this kind of climbing is that, sooner or later, you do reach these far-glimpsed places. It just takes time and suffering. They reach the sky burial place and sure enough there are human bones and meat-cutting tools scattered around, a wrist and hand lying under a small bush, and clothes everywhere. Apparently it is the custom in Tibet to scatter the clothes of the deceased nearby. Mary says the place looks like a Good Will store after a hurricane. And at the center of the cemetery is a small Tibetan stupa which is some kind of sacred Tibetan monument. And this cemetery is just a way station.

After what seems like another very long time, the trail begins to even out some and there are sections that almost resemble walking, but not quite and not for long. Michael offers to help Mary carry her pack and they take turns for a while. Far up ahead they began to have glimpses of a small monastery across a canyon that, believe it or not, is where they have to get to. It seems so far away from where they now are. By this time they are very high up and our sheep herder begins to find some of his flock but they are always on the

other side of the canyon from him. He has a sling and is adept at winging rocks across the canyon and near the sheep. They hit with a pinging sound but the sheep do not pay too much attention. Meanwhile, Michael can't even look around half the time, so hard is he breathing. It is all he can do to look at the ground in front of him and put one foot in front of the other.

The path turns into almost a rock staircase just before they reach Crystal Cave Monastery. They scramble up the last rock slide and into a wide courtyard. The monastery front has a single large door but it is closed and looks for all the world like it too is abandoned. "What to do?" Michael says. Isaac, laughing, "Try opening the large door," and, sure enough, it swings open.

They push inside and collapse on a porch in a sunny inner courtyard. There are a small number of monks here and Michael inquires about the rinpoche. "He is at the cave," they say pointing to a tiny white mark high on the mountain peak. Michael's heart jumps at the thought of seeing rinpoche again, but his mind groans at the steep climb before them.

They collapse in a sunny spot where the monks serve them a quick lunch and butter-tea. It is only hard-boiled eggs, some bread, and a few cookies, but it tastes like ambrosia after the long hike. They are so tired. As it turns out this monastery marks the end of the easy ascent. From here on it is almost straight up, like rock stairs. The good news is that in

this last stretch it takes less than an hour of climbing to reach the cave.

Starting out they cross a small natural rock bridge above a rushing stream and began their climb. From here on the way is indeed steep with sheer drops on one side and a flat rock face to cling to close on the other. The building and the cave high above them seem so far away, protruding out from the mountain side. They climb on, with Michael and the others often plopping down to rest and staring out over the valley or looking down the steep drop. As they hike, they begin to come across brightly colored strings tied to objects hanging from the rocks. Many pilgrims have been here before them and must have taken this very same path, there being no other.

Exhausted, but exhilarated (and proud of himself) Michael finally makes it to the top and to a small level area next to the two-story building that houses the Crystal Cave and a small adjoining building. From here there must be an incredible view of the entire valley below if only the clouds were not there. Next they climb some steep ladder-like steps on their left and enter a tiny room, which contains a few more steps to the cave itself.

Outside the cave one of the attendant monks greets them. "Rinpoche is expecting you. There is not much time. Please hurry," he says. Michael does not understand, because how could they have any idea way up here that they are coming.

As they file in, there is rinpoche seated on a small throne with some monks on either side of him. Khenpo Rinpoche motions them all forward. They move up and sit on the floor beneath the small throne that rinpoche is sitting on. Michael looks around, but there is no translator and he starts to explain but rinpoche puts up his hand, showing just a little of the palm, and very gently, now showing more palm, but turning his hand palm upward, it makes the slightest of motions for Michael to just relax and sit down.

Then, in pigeon English, he says, "I will take him."

Michael does not know what he means and you can see this by the look on his face. And rinpoche says it again, "I will take him" and he points with his open palm to Jefferson. "Come," the rinpoche says, now gesturing to Jefferson, "No time now. Hurry." Again he motions to Jefferson, who, looking around, slowly gets up and moves toward the rinpoche, finally kneeling down before him, big hulk that he is.

And rinpoche leans forward and ever so gently takes Jefferson's head in his hands, one hand on each side of his face, and then he leans farther until his forehead touches Jefferson's. Their foreheads meet for a moment. Rinpoche is saying a sort prayer or something and then rinpoche motions to an attendant and says something in Tibetan. The attendant comes over, helps Jefferson to his feet and leads him to the back of the cave, and off through a tunnel or doorway. Michael cannot quite see to where.

Rinpoche turns to all of them, smiles, and says, "Some tea?" He motions to his attendant who immediately brings cups for all of them and begins pouring the rich salty butter tea that the Tibetans all drink. Before they take a sip, rinpoche puts his hands together and begins to recite a prayer. Michael and the rest quickly put their hands in the same mudra. And then they drink tea, sitting in a semi-circle facing rinpoche.

Before they can finish their tea there is much noise and commotion outside, voices shouting, angrily. In come the police, somewhat more than a squad. They enter and spread around the perimeter of the room and they carry weapons, locked and ready to fire.

Rinpoche stands up and greets them, bowing to them respectively. They don't respond but are watching him closely. And the squads have with them one Tibetan who will translate. He speaks with the rinpoche. Michael can only guess at what they are saying, but it is clear that the translator is deathly afraid of the squad and also deeply respectful of rinpoche. He immediately gets down on his knees and prostrates to the rinpoche, three times, to the utter irritation of the guards. Michael can make out the word "Jefferson," so there is no doubt why they are here. The guards are looking for Jefferson and they want to search the place. Rinpoche turns to the guards and says something to the translator, who then says:

"Rinpoche says it is only his students here, but you are welcome here too, and to look anywhere." The guards immediately spread out

and explore every last inch of the cave, the buildings there, and the area outside. The cave is located very high up. Aside from the rock staircase the guards have just climbed, there is nowhere else, except a sheer drop on the side facing the San Luis Valley. If anyone is there, he will be found and the guards know this. There is no place to hide, only rock.

In time a very puzzled bunch of guards re-assemble in the main room of the cave. They are not happy. Michael and the rest are terrified but do their best to conceal it. Rinpoche turns to the translator and (when translated) says that he is sorry that the guards had to come all of this way and that night is falling and it is already starting to get cold outside. He wants to make sure that the guards have some hot tea and food before they journey back down the mountain. The squad members look around at each other, with some confused stares, but their translator motions to them to sit down and they do.

Altogether there are about 15 of them and they sit along one whole side of the cave. It takes almost half an hour for the attendants to get that much food and tea together, and it is somewhat awkward for everyone present. Not much is said. When the attendants have brought the food and tea, they serve the guards and also offer some to Michael and rest. Rinpoche says something to the translator, who tells the squad team that rinpoche would like to say a prayer to bless their food and give them safe journey. Again,

the guards all look around at each other for someone to say no, but then nod in assent.

Rinpoche says a brief prayer, as he had before, and then begins a second, much longer prayer, this one with a wonderful, but very simple, melody. The sound of rinpoche's voice fills the small cave and holds the complete attention of everyone present. Michael soon realizes that something very special is happening, something which is difficult to describe. As rinpoche chants the light in the room appears to change. It gets lighter and lighter until the entire room and everyone in it is almost transparent white. It is as if you can see through everyone's body and everything around, the people, the very walls themselves become white-light transparent. It is an utter lightness of being. For a brief moment it is as if everyone present loses touch with the solidity of the cave, as if they are no longer in time and space at all, as if the very walls of the cave are not real, but like a dream everyone is having. And they are somehow outside that dream.

And when the rinpoche stops everyone present looks different. First, the eyes of all are filled with tears, and tears are even running down the cheeks of those big-bodied squad members the same as everyone else. And faces have changed. Foreheads have broadened and the area around the eyes of each person seem somehow more open now. All the faces are shining, looking around – wide-eyed.

Some of the squad team just sit there on the floor blubbering away like babies. All sense of

sides has vanished. There is no “we” and “them.” They all are together. And there in the center of it all sits rinpoche, now beaming.

And when it comes time for the squad to leave, rinpoche goes to each one of the squad members and places a red protection cord around his neck. They allow him. Then he takes each of their huge heads in his hands and ever so gently presses his forehead to theirs and says a prayer. The squad members are looking around like little children. They can only mumble thanks as the big lunks file out the door and down the mountain.

When the guards have gone rinpoche sits with them and they have more tea. They cannot really converse because the translator has left with the guards, but it is pretty clear that all are happy to be there. It is getting late. Michael has no idea how they will get down the mountain and back to civilization. Rinpoche seems to understand because he says something to the monks and they began bringing in rolled-up carpets and blankets, spreading them out on the cave floor. Rinpoche makes it clear that they are to stay here for the night and head back in the morning. Jefferson never returns or is mentioned again. He just vanished there and then on that mountainside. Gone.

As everyone is exhausted, it is not long before they are fast asleep, warm under the blankets and under the protection of rinpoche. Michael and Mary share a blanket. There have only been a few times in Michael's life that he has felt so at home in a world that even outside of the Cities can be harsh and forbidding.

In the morning, they have some sort of gruel, hard bread, and more of the warm Tibetan tea and then they are off down the mountain. As he says goodbye Rinpoche takes each of their heads in his hands, touches their foreheads, and places a red protection cord around their necks. They thank him and say goodbye, obviously very grateful to have been with him.

When they exit the cave, there are no clouds, no mist. The sky is crystal clear and they can see everywhere into the San Luis Valley below. It is magnificent.

As they all get ready to leave Michael and Mary visit the small building near the cave and find that it contains a small shrine. The floor of the room is made of some sort of inlaid wood and very clean. At the far end, on a raised altar is a bronze statue of a somewhat fierce-looking deity in the shape of a man. It is not the Buddha that Michael has seen in books.

This figure is seated in the cross-legged position and wears some sort of hat. His expression is fierce very strong and he has a staff held by his left arm while his right holds some form of ritual object. The figure has a short mustache and small goatee. The face is very alert. The statue is surrounded by rich brocades. Michael later learns that this is a statue of Guru Rinpoche, one of the principal protector figures in Tibetan Buddhism. Michael and Mary sit quietly for some time and let all of this sink in.

And then they stand, leave the shrine, and look out over the entire San Luis Valley knowing

that they have come from the very bottom to here. They can see as far as they can see. This mountain and the valley which stretches on far below them is said to be a very sacred place. Indeed it is vast and beautiful, awesome would be a better word. Michael cannot imagine how in the wide world they can ever get from where they stand now (on top) back to the distant plain below. It just seems physically impossible.

But back down they go and it only takes them something over four hours and a bunch of blisters to reach the abandoned village. Michael's hiking shoes can't take the constant pressure from bracing for the downhill climb, and his toes suffer. With every step his feet are jammed tight against the front of his shoes. After a while it just hurts. He can feel it happening, feel the blisters forming, but there is nothing he can do about it. Down they go and down they go, mile after mile.

To their surprise the man and his tractor have returned and are waiting for them and they rattle back down the riverbed to town, just as the sun begins to really bake them. After some tea at the tractor man's home they climb back into the tractor and are driven to where there is a vehicle available for rent.

As they drive along, sitting in the little cart, Michael is in a sort of daze. He has never felt better. There are no thoughts happening. Everything has a smooth open feeling. Where before Michael had been irritated at the incredibly slow driver, now all of that is gone. Being with rinpoche has been like sitting next

to a wondrous waterfall. Michael now is completely relaxed and he feels an incredible openness and even love for the driver and for all the people that they pass on the way back to the city. He finds himself waving hello to just about anyone.

Their group now consists of Michael and Mary, who have become very close, along with Richard and Isaac. Richard is in a state of pleasant shock, having taken way too much in and, pushed well beyond his normal envelope. He knows now that here is the change in his life he has been waiting for. His mind is a delightful blank, but he understands everything. There is not the shadow of a cloud in any of their minds – a cloudless sky. The sun is shining.

There was no reason for any of them to stay inside the prison any longer. There are no more questions. The mystery is solved. They understood, at least in theory, what the prison art scene is all about. Richard gets it. Mary had been right all along. These are not unhappy people. Tortured by their situation, yes, but unhappy: not really.

They make it back to Center City where they say a tearful goodbye to Mark and Isaac, who will miss them too. Afterward, they pick up the rest of their things and head for the outside perimeter and back to Ann Arbor. Michael and Mary are inseparable and they will stay together from that day forward.

Back in Ann Arbor, Richard returns to his classes, but he is changed. He has finished his

book on the art scene in the prison cities and it is declared brilliant. And a different Richard now stands at the lectern, his hair now graying and in more simple (and less stylish) attire. There is a softness around his eyes and a sense of kindness that has not been there before. He even has a woman friend his own age that also has graying hair. They have been seeing each other for months. Richard has grown up at last.

Mary returns to New York, packs her things and moves to Ann Arbor to join Michael. They have been back for some months and are about to get married. Michael has become somewhat of a local celebrity now that he has been to the Cities and lived to write about it. The few articles he has written so far have gotten a lot of attention and everyone who is cool in Ann Arbor has heard of Michael's exploits and most know him to speak to. What he will eventually do is still unclear, but Michael has become very interested in dharma and Tibetan Buddhism.

Mary is happy living with Michael, happy playing her music, and she plays like she had never played before. And there is just one more thing.

An event that happened early on a Wednesday morning in the Ann Arbor farmers market, just across from Zingerman's deli:

Every Wednesday and Saturday this otherwise empty place is alive with activity as fresh produce and flowers from all over the local area converge here and are offered for sale.

Students, faculty, townsfolk, all vie for parking spots so they can pick up something a little bit fresher than the local supermarket. And it is almost always jammed.

The market is filled with vendor booths and Michael and Mary are carefully picking their way through the slowly moving crowd, arms full of apples, fresh bread, and a few other things. It is common for some of the vendors to call out to passers by, asking if they have enough peaches, beets, or whatever, and this has just happened. Michael, who has enough of everything for now, is routinely saying “no,” “no,” and “no, thank you.”

So when Michael hears an almost-familiar voice from behind ask, "Would you like some mountain flowers?" without stopping to think that there are no mountains in this part of Michigan, Michael politely brushes off the request with a "No thank you, maybe another time," and they are already well into the crowd, moving away from that booth, when he hears the same voice continue, "If not today, then perhaps tomorrow, or next life, which will come first?"

It takes a moment for this to register with Michael, but it does, and the voice suddenly is recognizable. It is the voice of Jefferson. Mary hears it too. Michael turns, and tries to move against the flow of people, back to that booth. When they manage to get there, it is empty, except for a bunch of cattails inside the booth, some of which are still swinging gently, as if someone had just brushed by them, only moments before.

Michael stares into the empty booth. No one is there. And then he turns, and slowly smiles, and says to Mary:

"Tomorrow or next life, which will come first?"

The End