Sharman Apt Russell

**Knocking on Heaven’s Door**

**Part One**

Brad understood why The Return had become sacred to the tribes. A hundred fifty years ago, the supervirus had wiped out almost every human being on the planet. In response—combining the power of the worldwide web with the psychic comfort of hunting and gathering—the survivors had re-created a Paleoterrific lifestyle, a stable and flourishing culture. Humans lived peacefully now among the resurrected Paleos. They beat their little drums and sang their heritage songs and decorated their camel skin tents. Moreover, the latest discoveries in physics only confirmed their cultural animism. Utopia! They had already forgotten the lesson they were supposed to learn.

**ChapterOne: Clare**

Clare breathed in the smell of blood. Sharp, metallic, in the air, on her skin. She slipped her knife into the space between the joint and bone of the mare’s hip—a small young female but still too much meat, more than enough for their next few days of hunting. Tonight she and Jon would feast on the rump with garlic and onion, some saltbush leaves, perhaps a mint paste. If they followed the stream east, they might find watercress. Clare felt happy thinking about her dinner. She felt . . . lust. A fervent yearning. Her mouth filled with saliva. A violent tenderness. Her heart expanded, blossomed, pressed against her ribcage so that she mewled without sound, kittenish. She slunk forward, barely in control, through the grass . . .

No, no, these were not her thoughts.

“Cat! Cat!” Clare yelled and stood, dropping the knife, picking up her spear from the bloodied ground. Her hunting companion rushed to join her, his spear also in his hand.

“Where?” Jon asked.

On the rock ledge above them. Of course, a perfect place for sleeping and drowsing and waiting for prey. Clare and Jon would never have lingered near such a ledge if that weren’t where the mare had been, their own chosen prey, the foolish young female separated from her herd and resting in the shade. Clare pointed and began backing away, always facing the low rock cliff. Jon understood and fanned off to the side.

Muck-a-luck. Claire’s hands were wet with blood. She took the time to dry her palms on her leather shirt. The sabertoothed cat was still slinking, still seconds away, his presence betrayed by that telepathic, reckless yearning. No one knew why these hunters and scavengers lusted for human flesh the way they did. Some receivers in the tribe claimed this was more than hunger and more like love, a desire to be *with* humans, *bonded* with humans, *inside* each other. Clare found herself muttering, “You’d like me to be inside you, would you?” as she pushed down her fear and gathered up her anger. This was her mare, not his, her life, not his. He could have the mare when she was done. She had a tasty dinner planned. She was on a hunting trip with a friend. She had worked hard and deserved this.

Clare estimated the distance, backed up some steps, and tightened her grip on the spear. When the cat leaped from the ledge, landed, and raced toward her, she would have to strike in one of two places.

There. That thump on the ground, heavy body, paws on dirt. Claire shifted to a slightly different angle. The blur of movement running. Her own rush of terror. I-adore-you, the big cat spoke clearly in her mind. I-love-you. I-want-you. Clare aimed for that thought—thought that could travel in waves—and threw hard into a liquid eye. Jon’s spear drove hard, too, slipping between ribs and slicing lung, so that the blurred form jerked, stabbed on two sides and seemingly pinned to the air. Motionless before toppling over, unconscious, and then dead.

“Are there more?” Jon panted. Sabertooths often hunted in family groups.

Clare shook her head. Her hands were trembling now, and she sat on the ground. But Jon’s release was different, an adrenaline kick of energy as he stretched out the sabertoothed cat to measure the length, 170 centimeters, looking at the teeth, 25 centimeters, estimating weight, 200 kilograms. An adolescent male, Jon proclaimed. Not particularly big. Most likely chased away by one of the other males in his family. Not thin or ill but inexperienced. Lonely and stupid.

Clare already knew this from listening to the cat’s thoughts. She sometimes forgot that Jon was a mute. That didn’t prevent him from being a good hunter. Paleos were not nearly as common as the modern natives—deer, elk, antelope, buffalo—or the imported species—horses, camels, African lions. In any case, no one hunted the Paleolithic animals. How could you hunt someone you could talk to?

Jon sang the butcher’s song and finished carving out the mare’s choice parts, wrapping the meat in her own skin, filling their packs. There was no question of disturbing or skinning the sabertoothed cat. Clare let the fear echo and fade somewhere in her chest as she stood and took her turn as guard. Before leaving, they looked back at the bodies, much of the mare still intact, opened and welcoming to the scavengers waiting for their share, the direwolf in the scrub brush, the teratorns circling above. The sabertoothed cat could have fed on this meal, too, roaring to scare away the other animals, gulping the still-warm flesh, his long canine teeth too fragile to break bone. But he had chosen another path, perhaps for something that resembled love. The big cats were a mystery.

The rest of the trip was uneventful, although Clare would have reason later to remember the last day’s hike back to their summer camp.

Of the two omens, the first was ordinary—a flock of crows blocking the light. Jon heard the cries *ka-ka-kroack* and sound of wings and turned to look behind him, pointing to the black belt undulating in the blue sky, bearing down on the sun like some mythical monster. Muck-a-luck, Clare thought again. Crows overhead, the world growing dark, crow sound, crow humor, crow feather, crow shit.

Jon raised his arms and began to scream. He specialized in crows and ravens, magpies and jays. Once Clare had watched him scold a bird trying to steal meat from the drying rack. “*Knocka-knocka-knocka,*” Jon’s shoulders had hunched in the effort of a liquid gurgle while the child whose job it was to guard the rack watched intently. “*Ka-skreet!*” Jon scolded, and the unrepentant raven dove in the middle of his response, the meat dangling from its beak, the child hopping up and down. Now Jon was also hopping up and down, a strong full-grown man carrying a pack, throwing back his head and shrieking happily, “*Ka-skreeeet-ka-skreeet*!” joining in the crow-river-storm.

The light was dimming fast. They would have to stop walking now and wait out the flight of birds, which might take hours. *Ka-ka-kroak!* The crows screamed. Jon screamed. Clare felt impatient. She had things to do in camp.

Then she shook her head, shaking out those thoughts. What would her students say? She lived in abundance, the best of times, the best of worlds. Jon was right to celebrate the crows gathering in flight, practice for their winter migration. Sour-smelling drops fell on Clare’s hair as she stood on the trail and untied her pack and set it on the ground: ululating, joining the wind, the black river above yellow grass, the yellow grass mixed with verbena and phlox. Jon shouted encouragement. He said something Clare copied, mimicking his *ka-ka*, his joy in the existence of crows who came winged and wild like a sign—for Jon would surely see this as a sign, Clare knew, of something good or bad about to happen, something obvious they should do, like prepare for the journey to their own winter camp.

And he would be right. Something good or bad *would* surely happen. Someone would be injured. Someone would conceive. The tribe would move to a warmer valley in the east. Clare screamed with gratitude, throat muscles straining, feet lifting. People like Jon were always right. The world formed a pattern, interconnected, interdependent. She, he, sabertoothed cat, mare, crows, without separation.

She hopped and hoped even so that the birds would fly fast. After a week in the field, she longed to be in her tent, bathed and dressed in clean clothes. She was hungry for something other than mare. She had the story about the sabertoothed cat to tell around the campfire and a few things to tell her girlfriends (about Jon, yes) and she was eager—she had to admit—to get back to her other work, for the pure lighted screen of her solarcomp and orderly appearance of papers scrolling down, each paper turned in on time, each a gem of rhetoric and composition. Clare cawed. Not likely! But the assignment was an important one, especially in this anniversary year. The subject of The Return evoked the best and worst responses from her advanced writing group, students of all ages but mostly teenagers ready to move past the mandatory courses in literacy. The sooner she saw what María had managed to write after weeks of procrastination and whether Dimitri had written anything at all, the better she would feel. She had a lot of grading to do. She wanted to get started.

And then it *was* hours before they were released from darkness, well spattered, Jon still smiling. Clare set a faster pace now—until close to the summer camp, when she stopped and held up her hand. She heard the baby cry, monotonously, whimpering with pain. Help-me, help-me, momma, momma. The mother groaned in anguish and anger. Monsoon rains had softened the soil of the canyon’s edge, soft soil that gave with the calf’s weight, rocks slithering under padded feet, causing the calf to land awkwardly on his front leg, rolling, bruising, thudding to the bottom of the streambed. The fall was not far. The fall did not kill the baby. The mother groaned as she made her way down, half sliding, her hairy rump scouring the ground clear of pebbles and thorny plants. She ignored the discomfort, the recklessness—she was not a reckless animal! Not someone to hurry like this. She lifted her trunk as she rushed to stand and sway back and forth before the baby, his leg twisted beneath him, the bone exposed.

I-saw, I-saw, the baby cried, something-beautiful.

The vibration in Clare’s head was so loud she almost swayed back and forth, too. Her head hummed unpleasantly. “A female mammoth,” she said to Jon. “A kilometer away. Her calf . . . I don’t know . . . saw something and went toward it, slipped down a canyon.”

“Two mammoths,” Jon repeated.

The baby wept. Clare felt the pain as an idea, not in her own body.

Please-momma-please.

“So?” Jon shifted the pack on his back. Female mammoths were not dangerous, and they were not meat.

“If we . . .” Clare hesitated. The mother would guard her son from predators until he died from thirst. The mother would sway back and forth and murmur comforting sounds and touch the baby’s face. The mother would not leave for any reason, not for her own thirst or hunger, not because of any danger—a pride of lion or shortfaced bear. The mother could not, of course, set the calf’s bone. Nor would she let Clare do that. Mammoths didn’t like human beings. Even if Clare could make the animal understand that she only wanted to help, that she could save the baby, even then the mammoth wouldn’t want, wouldn’t comprehend, this kind of help. If an injury did not heal on its own. If a tooth cracked. If a child was born weak or deformed . . . Clare felt the leather bag around her neck.

“He has only Thee,” she quoted the Costa Rican Quakers.

“How does that apply?” Jon wondered.

“It doesn’t,” Clare said and continued walking.

This second omen was different, a genuine prognostic. But Clare did not recognize that at the time.

Her tentmates were out dancing. From inside the camel skins, Clare could hear the drums. Whump-whump-whump. She was too tired to read but sat cross-legged in bed, solarcomp on lap, and looked quickly at the first few papers. Some of her students had approached the assignment as a summary, describing the supervirus in such a matter-of-fact tone that the death of almost every human being on the planet became just one more world war or melting ice cap. A few had their facts wrong. “The Return,” one student concluded, “was a natural result of the near extinction of the human race, a kind of silver lining in a stormy cloud since we have all gone back now to a better way of living harmoniously on the earth.”

Clare exhaled. The Return was not a natural result at all. The Return had been sheer breathtaking serendipity. She skimmed through the topics the others had chosen to highlight: the overheating of nuclear reactors, the compromise insisted on by the Los Alamos Three, the extraordinary decision to abandon guns and motor vehicles. Nothing she hadn’t seen before. She paused at Jon’s work on animism. Yes, he had included the latest TOE or Theory of Everything. Jon was a cultural animist, not a scientific one, but she was relieved to see he gave physics its due.

Powering down the solarcomp, Clare felt guilty. Should she feel guilty? Jon was not one of the younger students. No one could object to their having sex. She was a widow, after all. Okay, yes,Jon’s wife was still alive . . . but everyone knew the marriage had failed and the woman was living with another man. And Jon was sweet, a good singer around the fire, a good hunter, even a good student. Clare thought of his paper, which had depended perhaps too much on figurative language. Still, he must have worked hard to have it ready before their trip.

She thought of Jon now at the campfire, bragging about the sabertoothed cat. The force of their spears. The sight of the cat stopped so suddenly, motionless in the air. Clare nestled into her bed, unkinking muscles, curling and uncurling toes. The drums were beginning to fade. One more slow dance. At the last unkink, she pinpointed her source of guilt: she felt as excited about Jon’s paper as she had about anything in their new love affair.

Now she reached for the bearskin she used as a pillow, a scrawny black bear her husband had killed a decade ago when their daughter was born. Preparing for sleep, she searched among her favorite images of Elise, the one with the garland of flowers, the one by the river of shells. The bawling calf intruded into the scene. But there was nothing she could have done. Calves died. Daughters died. Clare touched the leather bag around her neck. Six years and the grief fading like the drums. The women in the tribe had said this would happen. They hadn’t mentioned how much else would fade, too.

A Bed of Bone, a Sea of Ash, submitted by María Escobar

Our assignment is to write about The Return and I have thought a long time about this. I found it very hard to do this assignment and then I realized that it was because my mind keeps going round and round and round about what happened before The Return when almost everyone in the world had to die and there were billions of bodies lying in the streets and in their homes rotting and filling up with disease. Men, women, and children just dropped where they were and lay on the ground. People couldn’t take care of each other because the supervirus struck them down so hard and so fast—like a bolt of lightning! No one knows where it came from. Maybe from a mutation in our viral-powered batteries and electrical stations since none of those things worked afterward. Or maybe it was made by someone who just hated the human race! Whatever the reason, all those people died and all those people were just like me with their own hopes and dreams, their special way of thinking about things. Maybe their lives weren’t as good as mine because they lived in a polluted world with constant wars and not enough food and water for everyone but they were still people and the fact is that my life is so good now because they died and made room for me and for all the other animals and plants. They had to die so we could have The Return and live like we do on a planet in balance with the right number of people and with social institutions like the quest and the Council and the elders and the right way to do things. But still it seems sad that this had to happen and I sometimes think we are all standing on a big graveyard, that we all live on a bed of bones and a sea of ash. I know I am turning in this assignment late but I hope you will still read and count it as part of my work in your evaluation of me as a student. I do need to be positively evaluated so I can go on my long quest next year and so I am turning this in late even though I know it is really late.

The Founder Effect, submitted by Alice Featherstone

Our assignment this week is to write about The Return, summarizing in four hundred words or less “the key elements that came together to create one of humanity’s most singular and impressive achievements.” Hah. That was an easy forty words.

In the late twenty-first century, scientists produced the first clones of extinct animals like the mastodon and glyptodont. The big surprise was that some of these Paleos were telepathic. The existence of thought that could move in waves sent physicists off in a new direction, with the dream of unifying quantum mechanics with the electrifying principles of panpsychism; at the same time, the idea of speaking to animals caught fire in the public imagination. Paleos were the latest and biggest cultural phenomena. More importantly for us today, Pleistocene Play Parks in North America and Mongolia expanded our understanding of the Paleolithic lifestyle, that grand period of almost two million years during which human beings evolved and flourished as hunters and gatherers.

In the early twenty-second century, when the supervirus hit the earth like a bolt of lightning, a conference of Pleistocene scholars at St. Petersburg, Russia hid for six months in an antique bunker readied for nuclear attack. These academics, people from all over the world, developed and pushed forward the idea of The Return. Meanwhile, a group of computer scientists in the southwestern United States lived for almost a year in a more sophisticated bunker prepared in case of biological warfare. These men and women were committed to maintaining the planetary wireless web which allowed the few survivors left to communicate with each other. At the same time, an extended family of Quakers in Costa Rica carried the exquisitely rare gene of immunity. These Friends relied on their civic beliefs; as Quakers, they insisted on consensus and worked around-the-muck sending out long-winded emails exhorting humanity to live harmoniously on the earth, forsaking the viral technology and intra-species violence that had crushed us like lice between your grandmother’s fingers.

The Return was a result of this founder effect, three populations kept connected by radio signals and the solarcomps. Although other groups in Africa and elsewhere died out or disappeared from the worldwide web, those of us committed to The Return survived. The re-creation of a Paleoterrific lifestyle, innate to our species, is our “final utopia;” or as the Russian tribes say, “We are home.”

Let me conclude, after 395 words, that we’ve reached the anniversary of our 150th year and we still can’t stop talking about how great we are.

A Question, submitted by Carlos Salas

I wonder if you would send us a new picture of yourself? I have just had the honor of participating in the Council elections, which as you know can be lengthy among the Costa Rican Quakers and are quite unlike your elections by majority rule in the Los Alamos tribes. This was my first time in the silence since I have proven myself as a young adult and I would like to thank you for your guidance in helping me reach clearness through my writing. During this process, the posted photos of the Council members struck me as particularly useful for we are, of course, visual animals highly attuned to nuances of the face and body. And this made me think of you and the fact that we have not had a recent image of you in many years.