



# Searching for Coffee

Sometimes,  
something better  
is what you're looking for.

Eric  
Tolladay

## Searching For Coffee

e-story edition

v.1.2

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This story exists because a lot of friends, family, acquaintances, or co-workers made my life easier, more rich, or even sometimes more difficult, but in a good way. Some of these people have been named within this story. Most have been not. None hopefully have been forgotten.

It was our sixth and last day in California and I was starting to get desperate. Mom had promised me over and over we'd do at least one day of real shopping. It was the only thing on my list of any importance, but every time it looked like it would finally happen, something else came up. At Disneyland all the shops were boring and out of date, at San Francisco we wasted the day watching some stupid game called baseball, ("Now Sarah," mom had said. "Its the only thing on your Dad's list."), and in Yosemite all they sold were stupid t-shirts (T-shirts?). Now that we were finally in Hollywood, mere inches away from all those incredible boutiques, we instead got to spend the day looking for stars.

Stars? Let me tell you, there are no stars in Hollywood. We spent a whole day searching and all we saw were mobs of tacky tourists from Europe, and boring street artists wearing bad make-up and smeared costumes left over from last year's Halloween. The only stars you'll find in Hollywood are on the sidewalk, and after a day of walking around looking at stupid names on the ground (I mean, who really cares about some old guy named Arnold Schwarzenegger?) I was ready to burst. Turns out, the real stars live in Beverly Hills, if they're poor, or on the moon, if they're rich. The Hollywood Star Tours bus promised a day of star sightings like we would never believe. They were right. The trip to Beverly Hills took half a day, the bus was crowed and noisy,

and one ticket cost more than I make in a week. And all we saw were a bunch of gated up houses with tons of dark point security floating above. Unbelievable.

So when we sat down for break that afternoon I decided I needed to do something, and fast. Our flight back home left the airport at noon tomorrow, and I knew we'd spend the morning packing and waiting. I had worked too hard saving my paychecks for months so I could afford something they couldn't buy back in Missouri, and I wasn't going to let this opportunity slip by. Besides, what would Marcy and the girls think if I showed up without so much as a designer skirt, or an off-the-rack flash? I simply could not let that happen.

I waited until Dad was half-way through his second scoop of ice cream before I said anything. "Um, I was wondering. Do we have any plans for tonight?"

Dad looked at mom and raised an eyebrow. I could see it in their eyes they were tired.

"Well," Mom said, "we talked about maybe catching a movie, but we can do that any old time at home. What did you have in mind, sweetie?"

I tried the frontal assault first, knowing it probably wouldn't work. "I was hoping we could finally go shopping."

Mom put on her tired but disappointed look. "Oh Sarah," she said. "I'm afraid I'm just too tired for something like that."

"But mom," I said, trying to not sound like I was whining. "You promised."

"I know dear, but right now I'm too beat to go anywhere, let alone shopping."

I started to protest again, but stopped myself. After making a big show of controlling my feelings, (okay, not all of it was show) I mumbled, "Maybe you'll feel up to it when we get back to the hotel room."

"Maybe kiddo," mom said with her tired smile. I tried to keep my face calm, but inside I was smiling. This was exactly what I wanted.

You see I learned long ago that parents don't like surprises. Don't ask me why. That's just how they are. I swear, even if God himself came down and showed my parents how to save the world, if it required they acted quickly, they would ignore him. Especially if he looked like a teen. At school we used to joke that if it was a teen giving out a tornado warning, half the town would be wiped out.

I let the second half of my plan drop while we were lounging in the hotel room. We'd all taken a short nap, and were taking turns freshening up in the small bathroom. Mom was going through her mail while Dad was scraping his neck with a super sharp knife. (I kid you not. Its some aggro thing he likes to do

called shaving or something. Its really creepy to watch. Sometimes he even draws blood.)

“Uh mom,” I said, and waited. She was sitting facing the wall, reading something from the web. It was an article I planted in her queue long before we left for our vacation, specifically in case we ran into this problem. And to think Mr. Peet swore I slept thought his Research class.

When I didn’t say anything else, she eventually turned to look at me. Its another trick I learn about parents: They pay more attention if you suddenly go quiet.

“Yes dear?” she said.

“Still too tired to go shopping?” I tried to keep my voice level. This was the part that would be easy to screw up.

She looked searchingly for a moment, and then nodded. “I’m afraid so, kiddo. I’m sorry. I know I promised, but your father and I think it might be best if we had a quiet night in the room to save our energy for the flight tomorrow. Do you want to go down and play in the lobby?”

There were lots of interesting immersers in the hotel lobby, some we didn’t have back in Springfield, but I was hunting bigger game.

“I’m sorry you’re so tired,” I said. Starting with sympathy always played well. “Maybe staying here is a good idea.”

“But...” Mom said with her knowing look. She knew me too well to know I would give up *that* easy. It was time to move quickly to the next phase.

“But... I’ve been looking into a few things, and maybe can hire one of these Angels, I’ve heard so much about.”

“A Red Hat?” mom said. “I don’t know, are the safe?”

I wanted to shout at her, but instead said nothing. I knew they were safe. One of the first articles I found showed that Angels, a semi-religious order that practiced the “Way of the Angels,” were safer company than even the LA Police. I knew she knew this. It was one of the first articles I planted in her queue. So instead of saying anything, I shrugged my shoulders, leaving the decision up to her. It was a risky move, but I was the one supplying the data.

“What about Buster?” she asked.

Did I mention we were traveling with my little brother? He was sitting on his bed playing some stupid computer game, still wearing the bright yellow Captain Swankypants t-shirt he had put on three days ago. I swear 14 year-old boys are the stupidest creatures on the planet.

Fortunately, I was prepared for this question as well.

“They’re not very expensive. Maybe, we can hire two. That way we can both hit our lists.”

Mom looked thoughtful for a moment, then a look of genuine surprise crossed her face. That’s when I knew she ran out of arguments. “I don’t know dear,” she said. “Let me ask your father.”

I knew what that meant. “Yes!” I wanted to shout. Instead I said, “Sure.”

She wandered into the bathroom where he was shaving, and closed the door. That’s when I jumped up, and did my little victory dance. Already I could smell the stores with their beautiful clothes, and designer flash. I was in.

Or so I thought.

She didn’t come out for something like 10 minutes. I know it doesn’t take Dad that long to scrape his face, but sometimes he can get sidetracked. When the door finally opened mom lingered for a bit, and finally emerged, her face flushed, and her smile kind of crooked. I was careful to wait for her to say something first. It never helps to look too interested.

“Your father liked your idea, Sweetie. So much so that we just hired two Red Hats.”

“That’s great mom. Thank you, than you, thank you,” I said as I gave her a quick hug and then pulled out my suitcase. I got so excited thinking about what I was going wear that I failed to notice she wasn’t quite looking me in the eye. That’s never a good sign.

She looked away at the wall, and then at my brother. “They’ll meet us down in the lobby in half an hour,” she said looking thoughtful for a moment. Then the same funny smile returned. “Make sure you’re ready by then.”

Did you ever try to dress for shopping in a strange town, especially one so fashion forward from your own? Knowing that your home town might be anywhere from three minutes to three years behind the most recent trends makes choosing what to wear a serious task. Do you try to brazen it out with something that is forward at home, and risk being years out of date here? Do you try to go for “simple”, and risk looking completely ignorant? Its a difficult task, with every choice holding risk.

After several minutes of lingering I finally settled on simple, with the slightest bit of sophistication. For simple I put on a plain white mid-length Adidas tennis skirt, and matching Reebok polo shirt (with the collar up. Please, this isn’t the 20s). For comfort I added my white Qua Dong tennies (all leather uppers, and only the smallest of flash space), and matching white socks. For flash I went with an off-the-shelf ware that cycled through a series of simple

polynesian graphics. Nothing animated, and nothing too fast. Sure it was an old Apple knock-off, but less is still more, and it was the thinnest ware I owned.

For sophistication I knotted a small green sim-silk scarf inside my collar, and flashed it with the latest Fake Kerry Fisher ware.

Mom hated Fake Kerry Fisher (or FKF as we called her), but at all the girls in art class loved her. She became a billionaire at 16 by stealing images and selling them for guys to post on QuarterSlave. At first she stole only shots of porn stars, but pretty soon she was selling practically every shopped pretty face she could find. All used the same name: Kerry Fisher. It started as a scam, then it became an inside joke as more and more guys bragged they had slept with Kerry Fisher. Practically overnight every guy who was cool had at least one KF on his QS wall. Finally the images were traced back to a single source; some Plain-Jane living in Ohio named Martha Orasanti. When she was discovered Martha put up an epic video blasting America's reliance on "the politics of beauty", and sold it on the internet for millions more. Someone took that video, and shopped Martha's head on the bodies of various Kerry Fishers, and thus FKF was born.

All this was still going through my mind as we entered the elevator. Only then did I notice mom was in her LWD (Little White Dress) she had picked up off the Sassoon rack at Target. The dress was one of my favorites of hers, and the flash was still stunning even though it must have been five year old or more. Dad was dressed up too, in his full suit and his regular grubby Flash (a mix up of family videos and comedy casts from the 20s and 30s). It was simple, but that was all most dad's really need. I mean, who looks at old men anyway?

When got down to the lobby I saw that my fashion choice was a good one. Most of the girls I saw were over dressed and over flashed. They looked like tourists trying to impress the crowd, and failing miserably. The few freelance net points paparazzied every time someone exited the elevator, but most of the time they hovered over me. That was a good sign.

Then someone came though the front door, and all the net points went splash in the flash.

It was the two red hats. One was an older man with thin arms and grey hair. He wore slacks but they were flashed with denim images so it looked like he was dressed down when he wasn't. His shirt was old, short-sleeved, and collared, and the flash was a long series of Hawaiian patterns in eye-bleeding color. The other Red Hat was a girl. She looked to be only a few years older than me, but she wore that age well. Her dress was a simple LBD the exact opposite of mom's LWD, with matching black pumps. The dress was running a white

background counter-flash of the same Fake Kerry Fisher on my scarf. She was perfect. Like finding a long lost sister. I knew right then I was going to like her.

The Red Hats introduced themselves to us. The old guy was Tristan something. I didn't catch his last name. The girl was Emylinda. She had the best makeup and her smile was even prettier than her dress. I was so anxious to talk with her that I'm sure I nearly started bouncing up and down. Fortunately for me, Buster took that moment to start acting like a complete clown. He was talking and bouncing around so much, like he sometimes does when he's around adults he doesn't know, that I missed half of what the Red Hats were saying.

Finally I corralled Buster long enough so I could listen. By then all four of them were looking at us expectantly.

"Are you ready?" Emylinda asked.

I nodded my head smiling, then Buster broke out of my chokehold, spoiling my concentration. When I looked up again it was to see Emylinda strolling towards the main door with Mom and Dad on either arm.

"Wait a minute," I said. "Where are you going?"

When they didn't answer I turned to the old guy. "Hey where are they going? I'm supposed to go shopping with her."

A look of surprised concern crossed the old man's face. "Didn't they tell you?" he said politely. "They hired two guides. One for them, and one for you and your brother."

"Me and my brother?" I protested. "Wait. That can't be right. They couldn't have stuck me with Buster. Mom promised..." I let the protest trail off lamely. In my heart I knew he was right.

So that was why Mom wouldn't look at me. She had double crossed me. Parents. Just thinking about it made me want to scream, but I knew that if I did scream I would blow my chances. Red Hats had their own codes, (I know, I had looked them up) and one of them was they didn't take abuse. From anybody. Including 16 year-old girls having a screaming tantrum over their parents behavior, regardless of how well dressed they were. Besides, I had come too far, worked too hard, to give up that easy. It was time to switch to plan C. Whatever *that* was.

"Okay," I said trying to gather all the maturity I could while inside my brain I was freaking out. "How exactly are we going to do this?"

"Well," the man said with an understanding smile, "let me first say I am sorry about the misunderstanding. And secondly, I appreciate how well you are handling this." If anyone else had said this to me I think I would have gone

orbital, but somehow when he said the words, he sounded real. Sincere. Not like an adult trying to pull a fast one on a kid.

I reminded myself he was a professional with years and years of experience as he pulled out an ancient tab, and ran a finger along the screen. As it lit up he looked at me. "I can see," he said while still looking at his screen, "that you and your brother's lists have almost nothing in common."

I tried to smile back, but there was not much to say. It was true.

He let out an even bigger smile. "For most Angels this would be a challenge, but I think I know just the thing," as he tapped the top of the screen.

"You do?" I said hoping it was true.

"Yes," he said. "We need to look for the list within the list."

"The what?"

"Would you like a little adventure?" he asked, changing the topic. I swear there was a twinkle in his eye when he said this.

"What do you mean?" I asked, trying to catch up with the sudden change.

"I think we should look for Coffee."

"Coffee? Can't we buy it right over there?" I said pointing to the Starbucks in the lobby.

"No. Not the drink. A person. Coffee. Coffee Anon. He's a man. A bit of a local legend."

"What's he do?" my brother asked, paying attention for the first time.

The guide turned to Buster and smiled. "Make coffee," he said. He had a smile on his face that told me there was more to the story, but Buster, as usual, wasn't paying attention.

"What's so special about that?" I asked.

"Everything," the man replied with that same smile.

It was night by the time we exited the hotel lobby. Buster in his bright yellow Captain Swankypants t-shirt and jeans, me in my nice white outfit, and Tristan in his fake Hawaiian get up. When we stepped on the strip, Buster and I literally stopped in amazement gawking like common tourists. Okay, to be honest, we were tourists.

Unlike at day, the street at night was alive in color and light. The pavement glowed and sparkled, the whole sidewalk being one huge screen of color and sound. The street lights above the sidewalk hovered over the crowd, moving hear and there, splashing the people in bright spots of light. Huge advertisements clung high on the sides of the buildings, climbing up from the street lights until they blended smoothly with the fading twilight of the night

sky overhead. Straight over head were hundreds of net points drifting over the street, looking like low hanging stars.

I had never seen so many net points before in my life. My parents had saved for a year just to have one installed in our house, but here without trying hard I could easily see a hundred or more. Some were paparazzi, some belonged to the locals, but many of them were freelance, hovering around to take your picture while standing over a star on the sidewalk, or next to the wax likeness of a celebrity at Madame Tussaud's. They would stalk your identity by matching your likeness to other images over the web, then spam your mail in an attempt to get you to purchase the photo. All the travel blogs had warned us to get an ambitious opt-in agent when visiting So. Cal., and I was glad I had. Already mine had found over 200 sites and ruthlessly opted me out of one scam after another, some with riders to automatically withdraw funds from my account in 24 hours if I took no action. Without the agent, I would have been broke even before I got back home.

The evening was warm, with a slight cool breeze, and the air was clean and clear. The people passing on the sidewalk were smiling, happy. Looking down the hill at Highland I could see the whole city laid out in front of us like a giant map. The immense towers of downtown, the Crystal Garden Monoliths on Mid-Wilshire, even the gargantuan guitar on the Sunset Strip could be seen from where we stood. It was just like all the vids of L.A. you've seen, only better, brighter, more alive. And we were right smack in the middle of it.

Then my brother had to ruin it.

"I wanna meet Captain Swankypants," he said with a whine.

Our Angel looked at me, his eyes smiling, and said to him, "Sure. Why not?"

"Really?" my brother said as his eyes got wide with wonder.

"Really."

"But... How?"

Tristan waved his hand as if he were a magician at a show. "I can show you, but I need you to do two things. Both of you," he said giving me a look as well.

Buster jumped to agree. I simply shrugged my shoulders.

"Okay," the old man said. "The journey of a thousand miles starts with a single step, but in your case it starts with these."

He handed us each a flash chip. I looked at the outside. Except for the long loop of chain, it was completely flat, no animations of any kind. On one side was written the word "seeker," and on the other "The Holy Order of The Way of The Angels." Nothing else. I looked up at our guide, the question in my eyes.

“Its a special flash,” he said. “Nothing permanent. It only works at night, and only while close to your body. Its yours to keep, but once the sun rises it will never work again, unless you chose to pick up The Way. For this night, this one time, it will work.”

“What’s it do?” I asked.

“Makes you a seeker,” he said.

“But what’s so special about...” I started but he held up his hand.

“You’ll see,” he said. Trust me, you’ll enjoy its benefits.”

“Benefits,” I asked.

“In this town, seekers are always welcome. Everywhere. They can go places, do things, see what most citizens cannot.”

I looked at the flash in my hand, still not quite believing him. Tristan reached over and cupped my hand with both of his. I looked up to find his eyes close to mine. Close enough that I could see the fine wrinkles around his eyes. “Smile lines,” mom called them. He stared into my eyes, and held my attention.

“This flash,” he whispered softly, like he was telling me a secret, “is the most unique flash you will ever wear,” his eyes flicked back and forth. “Maybe a thousand people in the world have ever worn it. Some of them quite famous.”

“But I’ve never heard of it,” said protested.

“Of course not,” he said. “It would be useless in Springfield, but here,” he said motioning with his arms grandly, “here it will bring you the stars.”

I giggled. Like a little girl. I couldn’t help myself. He was so funny, and so earnest.

“Alright,” I said holding it up. “So what do I do?”

“Put the chain over your neck,” he said, “and turn it on.”

“That’s it?” I asked.

“That’s it.”

Buster already had his on. When he flicked the small switch his clothes went to a strange color of brown. The texture remained, even the large face of Captain Swankypants was still visible in the middle of his shirt, only now it was overlaid with a thin coat of brown. I’d never seen the like before. It was a look as unique as the town.

I pulled the chain over my head, careful to pull my hair out from under it on the back, and then flipped the switch. My nice dress shirt and skirt turned an frothy brown. Even the leather on my shoes turned brown, which was not supposed to happen. It wasn’t my favorite color, but it didn’t look bad either. It actually looked good with my hair, which I had colored blonde for this trip.

I looked up at our guide and said, “Okay. What’s next?”

“Next,” he said with a wide smile, “we take the bus.”

I know what you’re thinking, “The Bus? Is he crazy?” Well that was what I was thinking. It turns out the busses here are not like the ones at home. For one thing they don’t have an engine, or at least they don’t use the one they have most of the time. Instead they have some kind of disk that spins really fast called a flywheel, and that is what they use to make the bus go forward (and brake too, but that part struck me as a little weird). But a flywheel can’t make itself spin, for that it needs some other source of power. What ultimately powers the bus are the riders.

If you’ve been to your local gym (and who hasn’t these days) then you know what a stationary bike looks like. Well imagine ten rows of these bikes, four bikes to a row, with two on each side of a central aisle. Add a driver space in front, a box over the top (to keep out the weather), and four wheels on the bottom to make it roll. *Violá*, instant pedal bus. Each bike can recognize the rider, read his/her public health file, and recommend a set of goals based upon how long you’re on, and how hard a work-out you want.

It also deducts your fee, based upon how much energy you contribute to the flywheel, which is pretty nifty if you ask me. Every workout in the more difficult ranges will result in a free ride, if you follow it. Since I work hard for the few dollars I earn, I appreciated this option greatly.

Which leads me to something else I learned. When we got on the bus the driver greeted our guide by name. “Yo, Tristan. How’s it rollin?”

“Hey Markus,” he replied. “How are you?”

“Fit and fine. Fit and fine. You got a couple of seekers tonight?”

“Yep. Taking them out on the town. You seen him?”

“Not tonight, but I’ll pass the word along.”

“I’d appreciate that Markus.”

“De Nada.”

Tristan and Buster moved near the back. I saw my brother stop near some boys dressed in yellow Captain Swankypants shirts and yell out, “Dudes.” To which they replied, “Dude.” Before long they were talking like life-long friends. The secrete code of pre-teen males. I decided to sit near the driver while Tristan kept on eye on my brother.

“You known him long?” I asked.

The driver turned one eye to look at me. “Tristan, you mean? Everybody know who he is.”

The driver was a heavy man, and old. Like Dad. Maybe forty something. He had four or five different screens up on the window in front of him, and he kept a careful eye on all of them as we talked.

“First time?” he asked.

I was trying to figure out the exercise settings as he spoke so it took me a minute to answer. “On the bus, you mean, or looking for Coffee?”

“Either,” he said.

“Yes,” I said. “To both.”

The driver shifted his head from screen to screen as he carefully maneuvered the large bus around a corner in busy traffic. Pedestrians and cars swarmed around the bus like flies, yet he made the difficult task look easy with deft simple movements.

“You ever meet Coffee?” I asked.

“One time,” he said.

“Does he really make good coffee?”

The driver shot a quick “huh” almost like a snort. I realized it was a laugh. “I’d been drivin’ the late shift”, he said, “when Coffee got on. He surprised me by asking if he could stay at my house. Everyone know he favors those who work for the city, but still and all it was a surprise.

“I said yes, of course,” he added.

The bus stopped and it picked up some more passengers. Some old lady with bright pink hair these really huge boots sat down on the other side of me, but most of the others went towards the back.

After we merged back into the traffic I asked, “So what happened?”

The driver smiled as he looked at his screens, then continued. “So I brought Coffee to my house, see, and my wife went all crazy. She doesn’t know, don’t get it. She thinks he’s just some freeloader with his dreads and all. Someone living off the good work of others as she like to say. Dora, don’t like that, let me tell you.

“So she pissed and moaned while I made him a spot on the couch, and then pissed and moaned some more when we went to bed. I didn’t get but a few hours sleep that night what with her carrin’ on and all.”

We stopped at a light and the driver let a few people off.

“So then what happened?” I asked.

“Well, come morning I wakes up to find Coffee sitting at the kitchen table just as happy as you please, and my wife, she making him breakfast. Now Dora, she don’t cook for nobody, no sir, but she cooking for him.”

“Really?” I asked.

He smile again. “Really. Later that morning he made us a second pot, grabbed his skateboard, and leaves Dora and me standing at the door, arm and arm.

“But that ain’t all,” he continued. “Ten months later, the Dora gives birth to a baby girl. She was supposed to be incapable of having children, see, at least that’s what her doctor’s said. But what do they know?”

He reached up and touched an image on the top of the window. It was a video of a pretty little girl, about 6 or 7, dancing and giggling about something. “That’s her,” the driver said with obvious pride. “Right there.”

Under the image was the girl’s name: Miracle Coffee Johnston.

I sat back and tried to let it sink in. Who was this Coffee Anon, and why were we looking for him? Buster was in the back with his new friends. He kept taking off his seeker flash, handing it to the other boys. The flash did nothing for them, but every time he took it off his shirt went back to the same bright yellow. She could hear the boys laughing from here.

Then the old lady with the boots pedaling next to me cleared her throat. “Excuse me,” she said. “Did just hear you talking about Coffee?”

“Yes,” I said as I took in her looks. She had to be close to 60. Maybe 70. We’re talking ancient. Yet she still dressed well, with style. Somehow I missed it when she got in, but her pink hair was spiked and pointed out every which way except where it was shaved flat over her right ear, which had about 20 piercings around its edge, the metal earrings and studs sticking out brightly against the shaved skin. The other ear was completely covered under her hair. Her boots were indeed huge, with large buckles and straps going every which way. Something that looked like spilled ink poured down her neck under the glittering of all that metal. At first I thought it was a skin-flash, then I noticed the pigment was in the actual skin. Tattoos they used to call them. I heard they were permanent. *That* was some serious old school.

“You’ve heard of him?” I asked.

“Oh honey, everyone in this town has. One of the programmers at my office used to spend his weekends as a seeker.”

“Really. Did he ever find him?”

“Coffee? No. But he did meet his wife that way.”

“By seeking?”

“Sure,” the old lady continued. “This town’s like that. Sometimes you find what your seeking. Sometimes you find something better.”

“So he’s real then? This Coffee guy.”

She shrugged her shoulders. "Does it matter?"

"If I'm looking for him, then yes."

"Don't worry honey," she said like she was my grandma consoling me because I didn't make the Pep Squad or something stupid. Come to think of it, she was the age of my grandma. "You'll find what you need. We all do."

"So did you ever search for Coffee?" I asked.

"Me. No. I'm too old for that. But I've done my searching. Back when I first moved here I thought I was going to make it as a musician."

"You didn't then?" I said. "You look like one."

"Bless you honey," she said. "No I didn't. Of course that was back in the day when most of the music industry was still stuck in one town, so it was easier in some ways."

"Then what happened?"

"Advertising."

"Advertising?"

"Well, first I met a boy, and played around some. Then one day I discovered I was better at making CD covers than I was at making music. One thing led to another and I found myself in an ad agency making good money and surprisingly happy with the work."

"And the boy?" I asked.

"Huh," she said with a wink. "There's been a lot of those."

"So you gave up on music?"

"No, I still write the occasional song, and still play with friends from time to time. I just gave up trying to make money at it. That's all. Believe me, it's better that way."

I was about to ask her more when a message from Tristan showed up on my tab. We were getting off at the next stop. I thanked the driver, and the lady with the boots (call me Evie), and found myself standing on the curb of a lovely street called Melrose in front of a chic night-club.

In Springfield you know you're at a popular spot when there's a line of twenty or more people out front. But that would be only on a Saturday night, and at a big restaurant like "Snaky Jakes." Here it was a Thursday night, and the line at Glamorpuss snaked down the block and around the corner.

The building was obviously screened, but the flash was the most sedate I've seen on a building; a simple black box with a diminutive white Glamorpuss over the door. The appearance as if it was a single story, but up close I could see the subtle flaws in the screen from the carbon frame rising up 60 stories or more. I

had heard of such vapor-scrappers before, with their carefully constructed flash that reflect the skyline behind it, making most of the building essentially invisible (and incidentally meeting LA's stringent zone requirements about a neighbor's "view"), but it was something else to stand next to one. You couldn't really see all that height, but you could somehow feel the weight of it over your head, if that makes any sense.

Tristan lead us to the front of the line while we tried not to gawk at the crowd. At the door stood two large men in very subdued suits; bouncers. Tristan walked right up to one of them, and I got to watch the bouncer's face switch from guard dog to ecstatic in under a second.

"Mr. Rudolfin. What a pleasure," he said as his two huge hands enveloped the one of our guide's.

"Your looking good Ricco," he replied. "How's your wife?"

The two chatted like old friends while Buster and I stood behind like useless appendages. From the front I could only see about one hundred feet of the line, but in that short space I saw more beautiful people in fashionable clothes than I knew existed. It was a bit of a shock to see so much high-end flash in one spot. At least three girls were wearing Gucci flash that I knew cost more than I made in a year, and some of the Apple flash was so new I hadn't even seen it before.

After a bit of talking, Ricco the bouncer opened a space in the velvet ropes and led us to the door. I saw a lot of frowns in the crowd as we passed. Some of them had probably been waiting half the day, but I have to admit it was fun for once to feel like I was special.

As we stepped inside a small foyer the thump, thump, thump of a high-powered sound system hit us like a wall. Another bouncer stood just inside (apparently another friend of Tristan's) and handed us earbugs. Like the building they were black with a tiny Glamorpuss in white lettering.

I stood there for a moment mesmerized by the opposite wall. I could see myself, but something about the screen looked funny to me. I looked up to see the bouncer was trying talking to me. I put in the earbugs so I could hear him over the music.

"Did you notice the wall?" he said pointing where I had been staring.

"There's something wrong with the screen," I said, remembering not to talk too loud. Speaking with earbugs is like speaking when you're wearing headphones, only they work better. "It looks funny," I said.

"That's cause its not a screen," he said with a smile. "Its actual glass. Mirrored glass."

“The whole wall!” I said in surprise, reaching out to touch it. That’s when I noticed what was wrong. Everything in the image was flipped from what it should have been. My right ear was on my left side in the mirror, which was weird looking. “That must have cost a fortune.”

“Actually its just old. Believe it or not, mirrors used to be cheaper than screens.”

“Sure,” I said. “Something like fifty years ago.” The surface felt smooth to my touch and slightly cool, with none of the texture you normally feel on a screen.

“Well that glass is even older, probably older than you think. I heard it dates back to when this place opened in the twenties. The nineteen-twenties.”

Wow, I thought as I pressed my fingers on the surface and marveled at the fingerprints left behind.

“It is fragile,” I asked, gently touching the surface.

“Naw,” the bouncer said. “But I do have to clean it every night, so I’d appreciate...”

“Sorry,” I said as I pulled my hand away.

“Its okay,” he said. “Everyone does that. At least once. Just don’t... You know”

I nodded my head. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome,” he said with a smile. Then he bent down to my ear. “We don’t get many seekers in here,” he said more quietly. “How’s it going?”

I shrugged my shoulders. “Dunno. We only just started.”

“Everyone talks about Coffee like he’s real,” he said.

I could see a hesitancy in his eyes, “But?”

“But... I don’t know. You hear stories about him, but some of them are pretty weird. I mean, common, the man makes coffee. That’s it. How can it be so great?

“And if he’s real,” he continued, “then why isn’t he a billionaire by now?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “But I’ll be sure to ask him if I see him.”

“Sure. Tell him Billy at Glamorpuss wants to know.”

“Thanks Billy.”

“Good luck, miss,” he said. “I hope you find him.”

How do I describe the club? Suffice to say it was the craziest place I’ve ever seen. The beat was boomin’, the place was hoppin’, and the VJ was spinnin’ some bright flash. There was a huge dance floor in the middle with tables and such all around. There were three of four bars too, although I’m not exactly sure

how many. The flash made it hard to tell what was real and what was screen. The only place that was easy to find was the girl's bathroom, but only because the line for that was almost as long as the one out front.

I got a drink for myself and my brother (alcohol free, please. I still had some shopping to do) as Tristan went to check out a rumor. Buster gets bored easy in adult places so I set him at a table with some game he liked, and I went to check out the floor.

There was a large crowd in the middle moving hard to the beat, but lots of room on the fringe for me to play. Did I mention I love, love, love to dance? Oh I do. Shawna at home has been doing aerobics with me for years. She thinks it a fun way to stay in shape, but I like it because it's the only legal way for a girl my age to dance non-stop for an hour, without looking like a goozer.

The VJ was spitting some nice effects, strobing the floor under us on the two and four, and the ceiling on the one and three. Then she started spitting odd shapes on the walls, and mixing them in with videos from the web and the club. At one point a wall appeared to open up and we could see ourselves dancing on a field of lava. The crowd raised their arms to that, and really got into it. Then our heads morphed, grew horns, or fangs, or fur, or fifteen other things. It was weird and exciting at the same time. At one point I wasn't sure which was the real dance floor and which was the flash. Which I guess was the point.

All too soon Tristan passed me a message (I had seen him in the booth talking to the VJ) telling us it was time to go. We collected Buster, found an exit, and soon were standing in a quiet grungy alley behind the club.

Talk about contrast. We went from the hottest place in LA, to the ugliest, in about as much time as it takes to walk ten steps. Nasty looking Graffit-e covered the walls, moving to its own rhythm, as we carefully made our way across a sea of trash and broken glass. It smelled like the inside of an alcohol factory after it had been cleaned out with rancid cooking oil. I literally had to watch every step so I didn't either cut my feet or slide in the crud. Note to self: Next time you're going to go dumpster diving in LA, leave the Qua Dongs at home and bring the steal toed boots.

After the crazy imagery of the club, it was a major core crash.

The reason for the broken glass soon became evident. One of the residents on the backside of the building was having a party. Rather than recycle their bottles as they finished them, they had the brilliant idea of simply pushing them out an air vent. We discovered this after the second or third bottle smashed into the pavement near us.

Buster, who had been dragging his feet the whole night, suddenly shot out ahead of us. It was nice to know that there was at least one thing in the world that could motivate a pre-teen boy. Too bad it was bodily harm.

The alley dumped us into a small residential side street. If you looked one way you could see the busy street with all its traffic, lights, and people (including the line to the club snaking past). If you looked the other way it was like you were standing in a GateBurb. Except for the mountains on the horizon, it could have passed for Toulane or any of the fancy Gates back home. Oh the roofs were not as steep, and there was too much Spanish tile for my tastes, but you get what I mean.

Tristan held us up while he checked his tab. "I heard a rumor, one worth checking on."

We stared at him while he popped a screen on the side of a building.

"There's a party going on in Culver City," he continued, "it might be a good stop for us. It's a diner in honor of Zack Ward's 200th episode."

"Zack Ward?" my brother said in total awe. "The, Zack Ward?"

"That's right."

"You mean Captain Ahab?" Buster said, still in shock.

I was at a loss, until I remembered who was speaking. "He's the old guy from Captain Swankypants, right?" I said.

"The very one," Tristan said.

"Great!" Buster said jumping up and down with enthusiasm.

"Great," I said in total sarcasm. "I thought we were looking for this Coffee guy, not hitting my brother's list."

Tristan raised an eyebrow and looked at me levelly. I knew that look. It meant he was going to get all adult on me. "Actually," he said, "it covers both your lists."

"How?" I asked carefully.

"Well I think Zack is still modeling for Swank and Zwicky's. If so, then there's bound to be some flash designers around. It's too good an opportunity to miss."

That wasn't bad, but Swank only did men's flash, and Zwicky's was sold almost everywhere, which was almost as bad.

"But," he continued, "the rumor was that Coffee was going to be at the party, not the other way around. So either way, I think we'll win."

"And they're going to just let us in?" I asked.

"You're wearing brown aren't you?" he said as if that settled it.

"Zing, zing, ka-bing," Buster said. It was Captain Swankypants favorite line.

"Indeed," said Tristan. "Shall we get started?"

Rather than take a bus, we decided to catch a cab. This wasn't quite as easy as it seems. Brown shirts (another name for us seekers, which Tristan told me has an even older meaning) are traditionally given a free ride with auto-cabs, but its also tradition to frown upon seekers who ask for a lift without pay. Tristan solved this by putting up a request on the taxi queue site. He offered a free ride for a single rider in our area and going near our destination. All this he told us while we waited for a reply. Within a few minutes we got a ping, so we walked a few blocks and met a tall man standing outside his house as the taxi arrived.

The man's name was James Baye, and he greeted Tristan like an old friend just like everyone else. Only, as it turns out, he really was an old friend.

"How long have you been seeking?" James asked politely as we quietly traveled down the road. He was seated in the back with me. Buster had elected to ride up front with Tristan.

"Just tonight," I said.

"So you haven't known him long?"

"Who, Tristan?" I asked.

"Yes."

"No. We met at the hotel when our parent's put in the request."

"Interesting," he said with a slight smile, touching his chin with his fingers.

James was tall and fair with short dark hair. He wore a suit that was fairly benign, with flash that bordered upon boring. It was an outfit that practically screamed politician. His one saving grace was his face. The man showed everything. Emotions seem to pass upon it like his own personal skin-flash. Either he was a master at expressing only what he wanted, or he was honest through and through. Since I was stuck sitting next to him in a cab in a strange city, I hoped it was the later.

We rode in silence for a few moments before curiosity got the better of me.

"What makes it interesting?" I asked.

He looked at me out of the corner of his eye, and a playful smile crossed his face. "Let me ask you," he said, his face getting serious again. "How much do you know about Tristan?"

That was a weird question, I thought before answering. "Not much. Why?"

"Well," he said, the twinkle coming back to his eyes, "you might find it a subject, uh worthy of study in the future." I swear, if it wasn't for the smile I would have thought I was back in school.

“Uh, o-kay,” I said. “Does that mean you’re not going to tell me anything? Cause if he’s some acidhead or something I’d like to know now.”

James waved his hands as if I misunderstood. “Nothing like that,” he said. He looked thoughtful for a second, his face going all serious, then it brightened again. “Tell you what, I don’t want to spoil the surprise...”

“Surprise?” I asked not liking the sound of that.

“Trust me,” he said. “Its the *good* kind of surprise. Anyway, what I was going to say was I don’t want to spoil the... um, investigation, but I can tell you some things that you may not be able to find easily on the web.”

“Like...”

“Like,” he said, “the story about him and Sam Contreras getting together in his apartment and working out the first Lake-Oh are true.”

“Lake-Oh?”

“Its short for LA Center of Healing, or L-A-C-O-H. Lake-Oh for short.” He waived his hand at the scenery passing by. “Its where we’re headed.”

“Oh,” I said, not knowing what he was talking about, but not wanting to sound like a total gooser-boozer.

“Yes,” he continued. “The truth is he was following the Way well before any one else figured it out.”

“The way?” I asked.

“Didn’t you,” James said in surprise before catching himself. Definitely *not* a politician. “You didn’t study the Way in school?”

I shook my head.

“Well,” he said, “in that case, the Way is a path, a series of steps.”

“Like a twelve-step program,” I asked.

“Hum... yes and no,” he replied. “Its more like a medieval religious order, only without the religion.”

“That sound weird,” I said. “Maybe even creepy.”

“Yes,” he said. “We get that a lot. The thing is, its really rather simple. We found -- really Tristan here found -- that if you need help in your life, the best way to help yourself is to help others. That’s the core to all of the Ways.”

“There’s more than one?” I asked.

“Sure. There’s the Way of Angels, only you know them as Red Hats, there’s the Way of the School, the Way of the Couch...”

“The couch?”

“Housing and shelter. You know, couches, tables, beds...”

“Oh,” I said “Wait a minute. Couches help others?”

He smiled. "You'd be surprised," he said, "but I should leave that up to Spark."

"Spark?"

"Well really its Clark. Spark is just a nick-name. He's the founder of the Way of the Couch."

"You know him?" I asked.

"We grew up together."

"Oh," I said. "Then what Way do you belong to?"

"The Way of the Insane," he said.

"Uh..."

"Don't worry," the smiled flashed on his face. "I'm not insane. At least not on even days."

"Even days?"

He put a hand on my knee. "Its a bit of a joke," he said, "for those of us at the Center."

"Um," I said, my mind spinning. Then something clicked in my head. "So Tristan was at the start of this. This Way stuff?"

"He was the first."

"And he convinced this Sam guy,"

"Contreras," he said. "The major of LA, back in the late 20s. You know, when we had the Great Crash."

"That major?"

"Yes."

"So he convinced the major to start this program?"

"Something like that."

Tristan spoke from the front of the cab. "You're not filling my client's head with anything silly, are you James?" It sounded like a serious question, but his tone sounded otherwise.

"Nothing that isn't true," James replied.

Tristan let out a "ha" that made us all laugh. Well, except for Buster.

James bent over and whispered. "He'd never tell you. He's terribly self conscious."

I let this sink in while we drove.

Then the cab turned a corner, and we pulled into a huge traffic circle with several tall buildings growing up around the sides. The space was so open, the buildings so large, that it was like driving in the middle of a immense concert hall with the road a central stage.

James touched my knee again. “This used to be a sports center,” he said with a bit of awe to his voice, “before it went under. It was James who talked the mayor into using it as a central spot. A place where the city’s residents could come for help, but that’s also close downtown.”

“He started this?” I said in looking around.

“Well, to be fair it was pretty small when we first started. Half the buildings were empty back then. Now its so full we’re practically living together.”

“All of this?”

“Its pretty big, eh?”

The cab stopped in front of a tall building. I glanced at the walls, and then had to look again. Everything about the building was subtly wrong. The walls were crooked, the windows tilted and odd shaped. Even the massive front door was uneven and looked unbalanced. Then I remembered it was the Center for the Way of the Insane. That’s when the building made sense.

“This is our stop,” Tristan said.

We got out of the cab as the doors opened.

As I got out I got a good look at the middle of the circle. In it stood the two statues. The Statue of Liberty, which is a copy of the one in New York but actually started off in Las Vegas (really, I’m not kidding), and the Statue of Service with its famous motto:

Feeding the hungry,  
Healing the sick,  
Defending the defenseless,  
Speaking for the voiceless,  
Educating all,  
and forgetting none.

“You work here?” I asked James.

He smiled and I could see the pride on his face. “Yes, you could say that.”

I wanted to ask him what he did for the insane, but Tristan interrupted me. We spent several minutes working out the cab fair, (it turned out I had to pay for both my share and that of my brother’s. He never carries any money.), and by the time we were done, James had gone into the building, and the taxi had left.

Later I found out James was the leader of the Way of the Insane. As in the big boss. That’s how he knew Tristan. No doubt it was also why he was going back to work on a Thursday evening. Still it was a shock to share a cab with a guy who’s so important. Only I didn’t know that then.

It turns out, Lake-Oh has its own train station, only its not really a train, train. Its more like an above-ground subway, if that makes any sense. Whatever it was, we hopped on it and took it to our next stop; Culver City.

The Metro Expo line is old. Ancient. Someone said it was finished in the tweens. I can believe it. The interior lights were those bright blue LEDs you sometimes see from before the 20s. Ghastly. The screens on the walls were so old some of them were peeling off. Out of boredom I pulled back the corner of one and saw it was stuck to an ancient window. Through the narrow hole outside I could see house after house blur past. People were walking on the streets, their silhouettes visible in the moonlight. The occasional bright flash illuminating them into stillness as we zoomed by.

The car we got on was already packed full. The crowd at the LACOH stop made it worse. I was crammed into an old seat between two dolled up hedonistic Scenesters (Way of the Eternal Party) who were searching for the Golden Unicorn. I think that's what they said. It was hard to tell. They spoke non-stop, mumbled a lot, and the train was loud.

Across from me was a man dressed as Dorothy from the "Wizard of Oz" (Tristan called him an Over The Rainbowite). He had short dark hair, an immaculately trimmed beard, and much too much makeup. On his feet he had the cutest little shoes running a flash that made them a deep red that glistened and flickered as he moved. Too bad they looked so out of place on his big feet.

Next to the Rainbowite was a Flocka, a Sister from the temple of Santa Meurte (the Way of Death). She was tired looking and exceptionally thin, with what I thought were dark circles under her eyes (which turned out to be skin-flash). Beside her bone- white skin, the only part of her that wasn't in flash-black was a ordinary white t-shirt which had a skull on the front that kept blowing me kisses every time I looked at it. Talk about tainted flash. Tristan told me the Flockas are some the the best hospice care givers ever. I had to look up the word hospice to understand what he was saying, then I wished I hadn't. I was glad when she got off at USC. The thought of someone going around helping people die was a little too disturbing.

A few stops later some boys got on that looked like they would be trouble. There was two groups of them. Both groups had the short hair, dark suits, and thin ties one normally associates with gangs. The only difference I could see was the color of their ties. One group wore red ties, the other blue. Within seconds a couple of leather-clad Deckers (real leather, they don't run flash) stepped in

between the two groups and calmed things enough for the red ties made a wise retreat at the next stop.

I'd never seen a real battle deck before; the long thin contraption (a cross between a skateboard and a weapon) that gives the Deckers their name. Followers of the Way of the Deck is their official name, but Deckers is easier to say. Deckers are trained to fight in close quarters, their battle decks both an offensive and a defensive weapon. They wear vision enhancing glasses at all times, and are supposed to have quicker reflexes than most humans. They certainly were beefy, like a football team in brown leather, only faster, and always moving in pairs.

I studied them while they stood watch over the crowd. The male half of the pair had thin blonde hair that was long and tied into a pony tail. The female half was dark, and had short hair, almost like the gangsters. Both had little marks, like small patches, sewn into the front of their vests. The lady having far more than the man. Later Tristan told me some of them were for the number of people they had saved or helped.

It sure felt safe when they were around.

As we approached our stop, I saw that the track rose up above the houses. The streetlights through the window changed from streaks of light above our view to pinpricks below. When we got off I walked to the edge of the platform and looked out. The city stretched before us, the houses and lights like a field of stars that grew smaller and smaller into the distance until they merged at the horizon with the stars in the sky, and folded back over our heads.

In the midst of this sea of lights was a huge irregular shaped shadow, a looming dark spot. My tab didn't have much information about it, but Tristan called it the Baldwin Hills.

Funny, you never think of LA as having hills. Sure everyone's heard of Beverly Hills, and the Hollywood Hills, but I always thought of those as names not features.

"I wanna go there," I said, pointing towards the top of the dark mass.

"Sure," Tristan said. "There's a nice trail nearby. Or we can take the old staircase."

"There's stairs going up that thing. There must be a million of them."

"375 steps, or so I've read. I never counted."

When I pointed out the hills to Buster he just said, "Oh," and then went back to his game.

Boys.

Anyway the party we were going to was nearby so we walked a few blocks and ended up in the strangest place. The buildings all around us looked twisted, like someone had left them in the oven too long and parts of them had melted. I thought something was wrong, but when Tristan pointed out the long line of limos, I knew we were in the right spot.

Our brown flash got us past the security at the side door and soon we were inside a large room full of tables and people. To one side was a small stage. Zack Ward himself was up there speaking. While he talked and made corny jokes (which really weren't all that funny) the wall behind him flashed scenes of him from Captain Swankypants.

There were a lot of scenes.

We stood there, waiting against the wall in the dark for what seemed like hours, until the ceremony was over. When the lights came up Buster went to join the line for autographs, while Tristan went table to table, searching for Coffee. I was left standing there with nothing to do.

Have you ever been left alone in a room full of people you don't know? Let me tell you, its not fun. Shawna back home is always telling me I need to learn how to talk to strangers. "Chat them up," she calls it. I swear that girl can walk into a room full of lions and end up talking like a cat. I don't know how she does it, but she makes it look easy. Right about then I was wishing I had paid more attention to her.

To kill the time I started working on my patterns. Grouping people by size, hair color, age, type of flash, etc. Its a fun exercise if you like to people watch, and this room was a perfect spot.

There were fat ugly bald men in expensive suits showing the craziest flash, there were girls so pretty you would think they were bots, until they moved. There were a lot of families, especially on the tables marked "crew". Everyone was pretty dressed up, and I saw a lot of flash that was uber crazy smooth, some of it on girls that were still in elementary school. It just isn't fair.

Then I noticed something else. It was supposed to be a supper, but the food was being served slow. And I mean snail-mail slow. Back home I often help my Aunt Tizzy who runs a catering company. Over the years she's taught me a few things about serving large crowds, and I could tell the two guys carrying the trays were amateurs.

I knew my brown flash would probably get me a free meal. After all it worked at the bar, and on the bus, and even the train. But there's something about accepting handouts that wrinkles my skin. Or as Grandma Tilden likes to say, "chaps my hide."

Without the flash my outfit was close enough to the servers that I doubt anyone would notice (so much for my attempt at class), so I turned off the seeker flash, grabbed a take-up tray, and fast walked it into the kitchen.

It turns out the servers weren't the only thing going wrong. The kitchen was down to one man who worked furiously trying to get the food out.

I knew enough to know I wasn't qualified to be on his side of the room, so I started picking up plates, and hustling them to the tables. Before long the room was served, and it was time to check the drinks.

I found the two other servers chatting by the soda machine. Without a word I picked up a few pitchers and started working the room. Before long the two guys got the hint and started to follow. Once they were working again I went back in the kitchen to check on dessert. The chef was starting to set it up, but I could tell it wouldn't be ready for a while. So back in the room I started to remove the plates. Once that process was started I switched to serving coffee, while the guys finished clearing. They finished just in time to pass out dessert. Then it was another round of coffee, another clean up round, and suddenly the room was empty.

The autograph line was still going, but Buster had been smart enough to eat first. I know, because I served him. Having nothing else to do I sat down to wait. That was when I noticed I was exhausted. It wasn't quite the kind of "working the room" that Shawna would approve, but Aunt Tizzy would have been proud.

The chef came out to survey the room. He pulled himself a cup of coffee from the machine, and joined me at my table, sitting down in a slump like he had just run a marathon.

"Well, I'm glad that's over," he said. He took a sip while he looked around. Even in his tired state I could tell he knew how to look at a room. Aunt Tizzy called it the server stare. She could look at a room and in a glance tell you which table needed water, which one needed more wine, and which one needed their plates cleared. I was still working on mine.

"What happened to your staff?" I asked out of curiosity.

He glanced at me for a moment, then did a double take.

"Wait a... I've never seen you before. Who are you?"

"Sarah. Sarah Stanton," I said, trying to make it sound casual, like the actors do.

"So you're not from Billfords?"

"Who's Billford?" I asked.

"The modeling agency. You don't work for them?"

I smiled at that. Its not every day one gets called a model.

“No,” I said. “I’m working freelance.”

I held up my little seeker flash, pulling it out as far from my neck as the chain would allow. The chef bent over to look, then sat back in surprise.

“You’re a seeker?” he said. “Why were you helping me?”

I shrugged my shoulders. To be honest I wasn’t sure myself. Then I remembered. “I took pity on your guests after watching the other two servers in action. Are they really models?”

“Well, actually they’re actors. At least they’re supposed to be. These days its hard to find an actor in this town who knows how to wait tables. There was supposed to be more, but apparently there was a mix up at the agency.”

“Ah. That explains it,” I said.

“What?”

“The size of the crew.”

“Well, it’s a good thing you decided to help. Otherwise I’d still be back there,” he said as he pointed towards the kitchen with his thumb, “serving the entree’s.”

He took another sip of coffee. “Since you’re working freelance, how much do I owe you?” he asked.

I suddenly felt embarrassed. I hadn’t thought that far ahead, and I’ve never felt comfortable talking about money.

“Uh, nothing,” I said.

“Nothing!” he repeated in surprise.

“Yeah, nothing.”

“Are you sure?” he said. “That doesn’t sound right.”

“Well I was bored, and I had to wait for my brother anyway. He’s in the line over there.” I pointed to Buster who was happily talking to a group of boys next to him. They still was pretty far from the signing table.

“Hum,” the chef said. “You hungry?”

I suddenly realized it had been a while since that ice cream on Hollywood Boulevard.

“Sure,” I said.

“Well it looks like your brother’s going to be standing for a while. Why don’t you let me fix you something?”

I was torn between hunger, and an instilled distrust of strangers. “Well, I don’t want to be a bother,” I said half-heartedly.

“A bother,” he said. “Are you kidding? You saved my meal -- Thank you for that, by the way -- and you won’t let me pay you for your work. The least you can do is let me cook you something.”

I had to admit he had a point, and the food on the trays had looked pretty good when I was delivering it. “Okay,” I said. “But I don’t have a lot of time.”

“No problem, Sarah,” he said with a smile. “You’re only one person. After a whole roomful, one person’s going to be easy.”

It turns out, he was right. The chef was named Evan, after his grandmother who apparently was some kind of celebrity chef in LA many years ago, and I discovered to my delight that the food he cooks for the staff is much better than what he serves the customers. He was mixing radishes from Brazil with lamb raised in Australia, adding some kind of pepper from Africa, and finishing it with greens from around the Mediterranean. A different piece of the world in every bite. It was so incredible that halfway through the meal I found myself wondering if I could count it as extra credit for Ms. Marshon’s Geography class.

Oh, and every single bite was delicious. Aunt Tizzy would have died and gone to heaven. Chef Evan and I talked while we ate. He was fun to talk to, and kind of cute too, but he was so, you know, old. Probably 30. Maybe even 35. Not bad, but a girl’s got to be careful these days.

As we were cleaning up, and I was enjoying working next to him (I said he was old, just not too old), Evan stopped to hand me a card. It was a little chip, like the one you often see for flash.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“A little gift. Maybe more for your brother than you. But...”

“What’s it do?” I said, thinking it might be some new flash or something.

“It’s an invite. To a party. One they won’t let you in, otherwise.”

“But I thought brown flashers could go anywhere?” I said.

“Not this place. It’s too exclusive. There’s not even any publicity about it.”

I held the chip up and wondered what he was talking about. What did he mean by a party without any publicity?

“It’s at Swank Tower,” he said.

I stared at him. “You’re kidding, right. Swank Tower? Isn’t that where...”

“Yes,” Evan said, “where Dustin Davis lives.”

Now in case you’ve just flown in from outer space, or have fallen off a cliff and hit your head so hard you can no longer remember any celebrities, Dustin Davis is the biggest actor in the world. THE WORLD. He also plays Captain Swankypants, which happens to be the biggest blog show in forever. Really. 4EVR. And Swank Towers, the place where Dustin Davis lives and parties, is the most exclusive, most happening hot spot in all of the firmament. It’s the buzziest of the buzz, the swankiest of the swank, the craziest of the crazy.

And I just got handed a ticket to see it first hand.

Oh my God, the buzz of it was too intense. Just showing this chip around school would radically skew my social life. And the flash. Every designer in the world wanted their flash to show up on video from Swank Towers. It was a sure sign of success. Just the idea of seeing all those exclusive designer lines up close, in person, was giving me the shivers. It was like handing Hitler a free plane trip to Stalingrad, paid for by jews. It was that intense.

Which is why the first thing I did was so stupid.

"I can't take this," I said handing the chip back to Evan. "Its too much."

Then I swear to God, the man just smiled at me with his arms at his sides, his head moving from side to side. "Sorry," he said. "but I'm not taking it back."

"But you don't owe me. Not this much at least," I said practically pleading. Like I said. Stupid.

"Look," he said really slowly, which was nice because I was starting to panic a little. "You did something nice for me. Right?"

"Sure but its wasn't this big..."

"No, no, no," he said, waving his hands. "Just answer the question. You helped me, right?"

"Right," I said looking down at my lap.

"And you didn't let me pay you, right?"

"You made me diner," I replied.

"Sure, but that was free for the crew. And its beside the point. Did you, or did you not, let me pay you?"

I looked around the room for a moment, thinking. "No," I said finally.

"Good," he said. "Then this makes us even."

I couldn't believe I was arguing with him.

"Are you crazy Evan? How can this be even? I helped you out with a little bit of work, but this..."

"Yes."

"This, this is too much."

"I think I'll be the judge of what is too much," he said. "Besides, Zack gave that to me as a gift for the meal. He had a whole bunch in his pocket."

"Aren't you going?" I asked in surprise.

"Me," he said. "I've already been there before. Dozens of times actually. Where did you think Zack got my name from."

"Wait a minute," I said, as what he said started to sink in. "Are you telling me that you cater for Dustin Davis?"

“Didn’t you know?” he said in surprise. “All the time. Dustin and I went to school together.”

“You did?” I was sure I was sounding like a complete goozer-boozer.

Evan put his arm around my shoulders, and gave me a hug. It was one of those “big brother” kind of hugs. The kind a guy gives you if he’s thinking of you like his little sister. Granted I really needed the hug at the time, but still it made me sad. Did I mention he was kind of cute?

“It’s okay,” he said. “You’ll be fine.”

“But, I...”

“Shush,” he said like he was talking to a little girl. “Don’t argue. You want to go. I can see it in your face. I don’t need the invitation, and your brother will love you for the rest of your life. What’s to loose?”

“Ick. Can we do this without my brother’s love?” I asked him. He didn’t answer me, which was fine. I was just being sarcastic anyway. Evan was right. Of course I wanted to go. I was just panicking.

“Good,” he said taking his arm off my shoulder. “That’s settled. There’s one more thing I want to give you before you go.”

“Not another gift I hope,” I said half serious, half not. “Cause I don’t know if I can take another one like that.”

Evan laughed. “Nothing like that,” he said. “I promise. I just wanted to slide you my number.”

I stared at him for a second, not sure if I should be hopeful or angry.

He noticed my stare. “Its my business number,” he said quickly. “For the catering. That’s all.”

I lowered my eyes. “Oh,” I said, trying not to sound hurt.

“Look, you’re good with a room, and in this business one can always use a good pair of hands. If you’re ever in town. To stay, that is. Give me a call.”

My eyes started to well up after that. What can I say, I’m part crazy on my mom’s side. I gave him a quick hug, and slid his number onto my tab. Then I ran out of the kitchen before he could see my tears.

I know, I know. I’m a chicken.

But I kept the invite.

I found my brother and Tristan sitting at an empty table. Buster looked happy, Tristan less so. When I sat down Buster told me all about meeting Zack and getting his autograph. He also had a special Captain Ahab limited edition flash. Sure he had the same one at home, bought off the internet. This one was different. Zack himself had touched it first. That made it special.

I was trying to figure out what kind of rationality goes on in the minds of boys when Tristan interrupted. "I think we may have hit a dead end," he said.

"What?" I asked.

"Coffee. I don't know where he is."

"But I thought..."

"So did I," he said, "but no one here seems to know anything." He held his hands out, empty.

"Hum. Does that mean we're done for the night?"

"That depends," he said, looking at his watch. "We can try to dig up another lead, but frankly I don't expect to find much this late in the night."

"I've got an idea," I said, "but I want to climb to the top of Baldwin Hills first. Can we do that?"

"Sure," Tristan said.

"Buster?"

"Sure," he said. You could have knocked me over with a feather. Being around a celebrity must have done something to Buster's brain. I know my brother. He never wants to do anything I do.

I think may have I mentioned the dinner was at this place where all the buildings looked melted? Well it turns out all those melted buildings were about to be blown up. But not right away.

Tristan told us this as we made our way through party after party. It turns out the buildings were so crammed full of people they spilled out onto the road outside because the city was giving everyone a last chance to see them. Next week they were all going to be dynamited. All but a small one in the corner which would be left as a single example of that architectural style.

"Why are they destroying them?" I asked. "Isn't there some society that wants to preserve them or something?"

Back home you can't move so much as a fire hydrant without having some historical society butting in. At least that's what dad says.

"Oh there's a Connect Points Historical Society," Tristan said. "They're the ones who want them destroyed."

"Wait a minute. The Historical Society is the one that wants to blow up the buildings? That doesn't make sense."

Tristan laughed. "Well they didn't start that way. See a developer bought this site with the intention of building vapor-scrappers over them. Only that proved not to be cost effective because the original engineering was so shoddy.

So when they talked about scrapping the whole site, a historical society formed with the intention of stopping the development.”

“Then what happened?”

“Well the developer was pretty shrewd. Rather than fight the Historical Society, he invited them to use one of the empty office spaces for free. The building were largely empty by then so it was no loss.”

“He invited them to work there?”

“Yes. See the developer had his own offices here. He knew what everyone who has ever worked here knew; the building are pretty on the outside...”

“If you say so,” I said, not so sure of their attractiveness.

“Yes, but inside, they’re a nightmare. Stairways going nowhere, lights you can’t turn off, structural members in the middle of offices, erratic heating and air conditioning, roofs that leak when it rains, the works.”

“Ug,” I said. I knew from my socialization class that interior shapes can dominate the emotional aesthetic. Or as my teacher used to say, “Form follows function.”

“Exactly. Its a pretty place to look at, but no one wants to work here. The Historical Society made it almost two years, but in that much time they went from trying to preserve the buildings to actively helping to destroy them.”

“All because of aesthetics?”

“All because one set of aesthetics chosen over an other. People like beauty, but they need comfort too.”

We finally reached the end of the melted buildings, and made our way down some quiet neighborhood streets. Here the homes were warm, and low, the streets treelined, and the sidewalks wide. About halfway down a block I noticed something was strange. I thought the street was lined with trees, but every other tree looked different. From the side they looked like the regular trees, but the bottom of each leaf shined with its own light source. Not a lot, but the cumulative effect of several thousand of them added up to about the same amount of light as a regular streetlight. Tristan called them Treelights and claimed they were both a tree and a streetlight. He even said they can be trained to focus their light all on one spot, a sort of natural spotlight. I thought they might have screened each leaf (which admittedly would have been a lot of work), but Tristan claimed they were grown that way; the leaves collecting sunlight in the daytime, and giving it off at night.

Not long after we came to the foot of a steep hill. At the end of the road was a stairway heading straight up into the darkness.

“Are you ready for all 375 steps?” Tristan asked.

Buster answered by running up the stairs. Not wanting to be last, I ran after him. Soon we were running neck and neck, slipping and sliding into each other, and generally having a good time. We stopped to catch our breath after several hundred steps. While we waited, bent over and panting, for Tristan to catch up, Buster reached over and held my hand. It was only for a second, but it reminded me of when we used to run together in the park. That was a long time ago; three or four years. Thinking about it again made me smile.

Tristan caught up with us, and we walked the rest of the steps in silence.

The view from the top was incredible. It seems like the whole city was stretched out around us. To one side you could see Hollywood, and the place where we started, turn another way and you could see the green lights of Beverly Hills (which turned out to be hills after all). Behind us stretched several beach cities, and then the lights chopped off like someone had spilled black ink on a map. The dark spot was the Pacific Ocean.

“Amazing, isn’t it?” Tristan said.

I nodded my head. Even Buster was enthusiastic, stopping his game long enough to look around. Only for me it was more than that. It wasn’t just amazing. It was peaceful. It felt... I don’t know, it was hard to describe. Even though I had never been here before, it felt like I had. It felt like home. Which was weird, except it wasn’t. If that makes any sense.

It was totally triple-chill.

“So is there a Way for people who like to climb to the tops of hills at night and look at all the street lights?” I asked

“If there was, I would have joined it ages ago,” Tristan said.

We both smiled at this.

“There’s something about the Ways I’ve been meaning to ask you,” I said. “Sometimes they sound like a religion, like when James talked about making himself insane every other day.”

“That wasn’t James. That was me who told you that, But yes he does do that.”

“But then other parts are like triple-chill, like taking some kids up a stairway and looking at the city.”

“Yes,” Tristan said. “This *is* triple-chill.”

I could tell from his voice he was smiling even though he was looking away from me as he said it.

“But see. That doesn’t make sense. Its both a religious and not a religion. See what I mean?”

“Oh, I get you,” he said. “it’s a bit confusing, but let me try.

“You see, when we first had the idea for the Ways, Sam and I were simply trying to find a low cost way to help the city without it going bankrupt. We knew we needed volunteers, lots of them, but at that time it was a hard sell. People didn’t volunteer to help their governments. Not back then.

“You have to remember, this was back before the national service act. The only people who served their country at that time were soldiers or the police and fire departments. No one else, even people who worked for the city or the state, didn’t think of themselves as servants.

“A friend of ours, a Father Joseph, who was actually a Catholic priest, suggested we needed more of a religion than a volunteer group. But that wouldn’t work either. Religions tends to divide as much as they help, and there’s still that wall between the church and the state.

“But Joseph’s idea was a good start. Take a church. Inside you find people. The people go to the church for two different reasons: Spiritual reasons, that is reasons of faith or belief, and social reasons, that is to feel good, to belong to a group larger than themselves, and to help others in need.

“So we looked at this and thought, ‘What if we took the spiritual part out of a church, and just left the social part?’ Only you cannot do that. You cannot remove the spiritual part, and still have a working social group. That is just a club, or any other secular organization. We knew how those worked. We were looking for something bigger. Something better.

“What we found that worked was to remove just the belief part, but keep the spiritual part.”

“Huh?” I said. “Run that by me again.”

“Remove the belief, but keep the spiritual. I know it sounds crazy, but it works pretty well.

“How do you do that?”

“By inserting nonsense. Stuff intentionally made unbelievable. We found a working social group needs to have a spirituality, but no one has to believe in it. In fact it works better if no one actually does believe in it.”

“I think you’re losing me,” I said.

“Let me give you an example,” he said. “Do you remember the Deckers on the train?”

I nodded my head.

“Did you notice the little badges on their vests. They looked like patches.”

“Like merit badges in Boy Scouts,” my brother said.

I turned towards him, surprised he was listening.

“Exactly,” Tristan said. “Do you know what they’re for?”

“Saving people or something,” Buster asked.

“Those are the silver ones. They’re fairly common. Its the gold ones I’m talking about.”

Buster and I looked at each other, and then shrugged our shoulders. I didn’t even know there was a difference.

“Could they be for wining a fight?” I asked.

“Nothing so believable,” Tristan said. “They’re for the number of times they go pee while riding their skateboards.”

“Eww, that’s gross,” I said. “Disgusting.”

“Chill,” Buster said.

“But what does that...” I started.

“Have to do with anything?” Tristan answered. “Nothing. That’s the point. Its silly. No one would think you were a better Decker if you had 20 pee patches instead of 10. But they do. Oh they’ll laugh at you if you mention it, and the Deckers joke about it all the time, but at the same time they work hard to earn those badges, and covet every one they earn as if there were made of gold”.

“But that’s...”

“Weird?” Tristan offered. “Yes. It is. Its also very human, and is the perfect thing for them follow. You see they are taught that the ability to pee while skating is a gift that can only come about by careful study and meditation.”

“Spirituality?” Buster asked.

“Exactly. That’s their spirituality. Now most of them don’t actually believe you need to meditate to ride a skateboard, but they know the meditation helps, and they know being a Decker helps, and they know following the Way helps. So while they don’t believe any of it is true, they follow it because the end result is the same.

“And the most important thing,” he continued. “They don’t believe their faith is better than anyone else’s. Who is going to be believed by arguing the benefits of peeing while skating?”

We both laughed at that.

“Exactly,” he said. “Its religion without belief. And *that* is the secret of the Way.”

Buster and I stood their in silence. Letting the city sink into our eyes while we thought about religion and belief.

After a long time Tristan said, “Are you guys ready to go back?”

I looked at my tab. It was already past 10:00. That's when I remembered the invite. "Does this answer you?" I said as I handed it to him.

He looked at the chip and his eyes grew visibly larger. "Where'd you get this?"

"From chef Evan."

Tristan's eyebrows shot up so fast I could read what he was thinking. "Don't worry," I said. "I earned it."

At this, his eyebrows went up even higher.

"Not *that* way, you old goat," I said. I could feel my face starting to blush. I hate that. "I'll have you know I earned it by helping serve diner."

"Oh, Tristan said, his eyebrows going back down to normal.

"Whaaat?" Buster interrupted in his whinny voice.

"Nothing, Punk," I said to him.

"You're the Punk," he shot back, but I could tell he wasn't angry. He was about to say something more when Tristan showed him the chip.

"Do you know what this is?"

"Some kind of flash," he said.

I had to smile. My brother sure does know me.

"No," Tristan said, "its something better. Its an invite to a party."

"What kind of party?" Buster answered in the tone he uses when he's not interested.

"One that's at Swank Towers," Tristan said with a smile.

Buster's face did the perfect OMG circle. Eyebrows up, mouth open, chin down, and eyes like saucers. I'd seen cartoons like this before, but never in person. It was funny.

Then suddenly Buster said, "Let's get going," and practically jumped down the stairs. After about ten steps he must have realized we weren't following because he stopped and turned. "Common. We don't want to be late."

I looked at Tristan. He smiled back. "No we don't," he said as he started to follow.

I took one more look around at the city, the lights, and then I followed after them.

Hollywood Hills, here we come.

Tristan must have done something with his tab because when we got to the bottom of the staircase there was a gang of Deckers waiting for us. There were six or eight of them, all decked out (sorry, I know, it's a bad pun) in their

leathers, most of them sporting 20 or more patches. Now that I knew what to look for, I saw that only a few had gold patches, the rest were all silver.

We were standing at the base of the stairs, winded from the long hike down, when one of the Deckers skated right up to us, and without stopping slammed into Tristan.

At first I thought it was some kind of attack, then I noticed Tristan hadn't fallen over and was busy wrapping his arms around the Decker. It wasn't an attack. It was a hug.

The Decker was obviously older than the others. Her hair was braided into a long thick grey ponytail which was wrapped with a very nasty looking piece of barbed wire that flashed in the dim light of the distant treelights. She had multiple piercings on each ear sporting various blades and knives, and her face was scarred on both cheeks. The scars were not symmetrical, one of them went all the way up to her eye protectors, which made me guess they were not skin-flash or some kind of aesthetic, but scars from actual combat. Like the rest of the group, she was armed to the teeth, and that's not counting the weapons on her deck. When she had her arms around Tristan I noticed her hands were covered in rings, most of which ended in sharp points. I got the feeling even her teeth were sharpened.

When they finally stopped aggressively hugging, Tristan introduced the Decker as Carly. From the look on his face, and the way they held hands, I could guess that Carly was an old girlfriend, or possibly a new one. Either way he seemed happy to be next to her. Somehow he stood next to all those blades and didn't get a scratch.

By then the gang of Deckers had moved over to surround us. Carly introduced them, which made me feel less surrounded and more welcome. For such a dangerous looking lady she had a surprisingly sweet voice.

Tristan told them what we had in mind, and Carly swiftly got the gang in motion. Buster and I were paired off with some of the younger Deckers (apparently learning to double up is the first skill they must master), two Deckers were placed to our front as lookouts, and two more took up the rear. Tristan himself rode with Carly.

Which is how I got my first ride on a speed deck.

Now I know most of you have seen webcasts of speed decks, or watched novelas like "Bad Streets" that featured them, but let me tell you they are a lot different in person than they are on your tab. For one thing you don't really steer with your tab, you steer by moving your body. Only that's not quite true either. See the deck will always stay under you. No matter what. So if you lean

to the right, it will move right to stay under you. If you lean back the deck will slow down, again to stay under you.

At least that's what it feels like. The reality is a little more weird than that. See if you lean right the first thing the deck does is go left so you can lean over further to the right, *only then* does it begin to turn right. Only while it is turning right it is also looking ahead, seeing what space there is in traffic, noting where the other vehicles are, e-vecing with the other vehicles, determining the best route to your destination, and checking up on your homework for all I know. There's a lot going on when you're dancing a few centimeters above the pavement at 90 klicks. So while you feel like you're leaning over to take a turn, in reality the deck is determining the best place to be on the road, and then moving around so your body is always balanced over the middle of it.

It sounds complicated but its easy, once you get the hang of it. The problem is that 90 klicks is a bit too fast to make a mistake, at least one you want to survive from. Which is why we had to double up on trainer decks. And which is how I got to meet Carlos.

This part is a bit embarrassing because Carlos turned out to be totally dreamy. We're talking ice cream, sugar pie, gorgeous, 'with whipped cream and a cherry on top,' as my grandmother used to say. I'm not kidding. He was tall, dark, had the most beautiful eyes, and when he first smiled at me I totally fell apart, like a complete and total idiot.

Grrr.

They shouldn't put guys like that on a trainer deck. Its just not fair for a girl.

So it took me a while to get the hang of balancing with the deck. To be fair, it really does move around a lot underneath you, and your natural tendency is to move with it. Only that makes things worse instead of better. On top of that, Carlos was such a distraction that I found it hard to concentrate. He stood right behind me, one hand always on my shoulder, keeping me safe (mostly from myself), and talking softly in my ear, trying to get me to get a feel for how the deck moved. Here I am trying to learn something new, and there is the most beautiful man I have ever seen standing right behind me, with an arm on my shoulder, and whispering in my ear. So of course I made mistakes. What's a girl to do? Then I found out that if I messed up really badly, the deck pushed me into Carlos so that both of his arms went around me. I'm afraid to admit it, but I might have messed up a few times more than was strictly necessary.

Can you blame me?

Eventually, as we got onto the wider streets and picked up some speed, I got a better feel for the deck. Then suddenly it switched from awkward to

heavenly. Carlos said it was a matter in learning to trust the deck. I don't know that. All I know is that one minute I felt all gangly and awkward, and the next minute I was flying.

And I mean flying. 90 klicks is no joke, especially as we flew around cars and busses like a cheetah zooming though a heard of gazelle. Carlos said the deck is constantly watching over you sensing everything you do. So I put my arms out as we were hurtling up Fairfax, and the deck was careful to keep us slightly further apart from the cars. But it also picked up speed.

"How fast do you want to go?" Carlos said behind me. The wind was loud even with the noise canceling microphone. He had both hands on my waist and my arms were stretched out, and I really didn't want it to end. Ever.

"How fast can we go?" I asked.

"Lean forward," he said. "Lets find out."

So we did.

And that is how we lost the others.

We didn't really *lose* them -- not in a town with more net points than people -- but we did loose them for a while. Long enough that we had to slow down and circle around a neighborhood waiting for the others to catch up.

Which is how we got to talking.

When I first got on his deck, I noticed how many badges Carlos had (12 silver, and 0 gold). That lead to us talking about our night and our search for Coffee, and that lead to my conversation with Tristan right before we left the hotel.

"So you're looking for the list within the list?" he said.

I had some ideas about that, but I wasn't going to tell Carlos. He may have been cuter than cute but I knew enough not to tell him that. At least not yet.

"Something like that," I answered.

He laughed at my response. "That sounds like something my grandpa Marco used to say. He'd say, 'Experience is what you get when you didn't get what you wanted.' I used to think he was just pulling my leg."

"Pulling your leg?"

"You know. Making a joke. Kidding me."

"Oh. Okay."

"Only now," he said, "I'm not so sure. Maybe it's like that."

"Like what?"

"You know. Life."

"Pulling your leg?"

"No. Experience. You know, the list within the list."

“Oh.”

I found myself saying “Oh” a lot around Carlos. Believe me, it doesn’t make me sound any smarter telling you now, then it did when I was saying it to him then.

Boys.

So we circled and talked. He told me about the first time he came to LA (and got lost, what a surprise), and then he told me he was thinking of taking up acting (he would be so good at it. I know it!). When the conversation came around to our search, he told me something about Coffee that surprised me.

“Googles,” he said, “I don’t envy that man.”

“Who? Coffee?”

“You know he started a coffee shop on Melrose?”

“He did?”

“Si. And it failed.”

“Failed?” I said turning around.

“Look where you’re going,” he chided me, but he didn’t take his hand off my hip either.

“Yes. Failed,” he continued.

“But, how? That doesn’t make any sense.”

“I know, right? Only it does make sense.”

“It does?”

“Well kind of. See his gift only works for individuals, not for groups, and one man can only make so much coffee.”

“Oh.”

“But I think there’s more to it than that. I think its like the list within the list thing we were talking about.”

Now he was starting to lose me. “How so?” I asked.

“Well you see, when Coffee was something you had to seek out, something hard to find, he was a mystery. Only when he started his business, then he was no longer a mystery. He was just some guy you could walk up to any time the store was open.”

“And that made his coffee bad?”

“No, silly. I just think it needed to be something you had to search for, not something you could find easily.”

“Are you saying the reward comes from the search, not from the goal?” I swear, that was straight out of my drama class.

“Something like that. Sure.”

I didn't know what to say about that, so we rode along in silence. Then we got a beep from his deck telling us the others were just around the corner.

"Do you know where you're going for your two-year?" he asked, changing the topic.

"Not really," I answered.

"You should really think about coming here."

"LA?" I said turning around to look at him. "Why?" I said staring straight into his eyes.

He looked away for a moment. "I don't know," he said. "Just a feeling I guess."

Maybe it was me, but his cheeks looked a little darker under his eye protectors.

Then as the others caught up with us, and the deck started to accelerate he whispered behind me, "You'll do well here. I can tell."

Swank Towers turned out to be in the Valley, or the San Fernando Valley as the maps call it. To get there we had to cross a small mountain range that everyone called either the Hollywood Hills or the Beverly Hills, depending upon where you crossed it, but in reality was part of the Santa Monica Mountains. Sounds weird, right? I know.

Anyway the Hollywood Hills are divided by only a few roads, and one major freeway (yes they still have freeways in LA. They tell me this is fitting because they originally started there, but what do I know?). We (meaning Tristan) decided to cross on one of the smaller streets called Laurel Canyon.

This brought up another misconception about LA. Everyone knows they were the first major metropolitan city to reduce street sizes. The 10 foot wide grass medians on either side of most streets now (wider on the larger streets) really are nice to walk along, but this did leave some traffic issues in other areas (which is why they still have freeways, or so I'm told). Angelenos, just like the rest of the U.S., now have less cars per capita than they used to, its just there are still *a lot* of people living in LA. A lot, a lot. Which means some of the streets still have a lot of traffic, even though there are less cars. Makes sense? I know, it didn't to me either until we rolled up the canyon road. Even with four lanes and two bikes lanes, even though it was 11:00 at night, even though it was 100 e-veced, Laurel Canyon was so packed with cars we couldn't safely skate fast. Which was a complete flash-crash, until Carly led us up a side street that took us though a twisty-turny neighborhood and rolled us up to this high

street called Mulholland. The street is nothing but a ledge cut into a cliff with a few rusty guard rails for safety, but the view... oh, the view is incredible.

After several minutes of oohs and aahs (even Buster liked the view) we dropped down another skinny road, zipping past houses and treelights at a rate most people would categorize as insane, until we suddenly found ourselves on a broad straight boulevard in the city again; surrounded by neon, LEDs, floating glowing net points, and the ever looming (but never seen) vapor-scrappers. I swear, the mountains in LA seemed to begin and end so suddenly that more than once I wondered if they were real, or just another special effect left over from the movie industry.

After the hills, finding Swank Towers was easy, you just followed the lights. I knew we were in the area when the net points started getting thick again. Then we turned a corner and before us stood the most famous building in America.

Eighty stories high, surrounded by glittering lights (most of them net points), lit from all sides, and covered in the most expensive street flash money could buy. I could go on about the stars lined up outside the front vying to get in (its true, I saw them myself), or the insane number of real-time net points on the top three floors of penthouse, or the never ending party (a world record 4 years, 261 days, and counting) or the crazy number of reality web shows devoted to the events inside, or... I could go on and on, but you get the point. No matter how you look at it, its a crazy, insane, amazingly awesome (in both meanings of the word) building.

Out of all those awesome facts what struck me the most, when I saw Swank Towers in person for the first time, was its height. You can see all eighty floors. I know its no taller than any other building around it, but you can't see the others, at least not above the first two floors. That's because they're all vapor-scrappers. But not Swank Towers. Its all there for you to see. All of it. Every floor. Its the one and only building in all of LA that the "view sensitive" Angelinos voted to keep visible. The only one. And that is what I thought when we turned the corner, and I saw it for the first time with my own eyes.

Then we showed up at the front door and it turned out to be a real flash-crash.

Now I know what you're thinking. Who hasn't seen "ST Line", or maybe an episode of "Swank Party Mix"? We all know the story; a smart, creative newbie manages to talk their way to the head of the Swank Tower line, rides the Elevator to Glory, and ends up starring in their own web show, or married to a famous star. Who hasn't seen that?

Well the truth is Swank Towers is nothing like that. First of all the line really is long, and it really is full of stars (I should know, I walked past it). The only problem is, the line has nothing to do with getting in the building. Its just a set, like any other. Even the background, all those expensive cars going past, and the crowds, they're all added in separately. The real background is just a flash-wall. Just like every other show you know.

We found this out as we walked past the line. We were standing right next to the actors, but when you looked up at the monitors, you couldn't see us. Apparently brown flashed Coffee seekers from Missouri weren't smash enough to be added in. Even Tristan didn't make the show, and he practically knows everybody.

So that was one myth crashed. The next one came at the elevator.

The entry to the elevator was guarded by only one guy with a tab. No bouncers, no silver ropes, no fancy people to bribe. Just one guy. He wasn't even especially handsome. In fact he looked downright bored. When we approached he took one look at Tristan and waived us by. No special password, no special kind of flash, no nothing. He didn't even ask my name. What kind of a place is this?

Then we got onto the elevator and waited, which was cool because we got to see what the Elevator to Glory really looks like. Only that turned out to be a major crash as well. Either the EtoG is just another flash wall, or its another set. Either way, we weren't on it.

I was sitting there feeling pretty down, when Tristan caught my eye, and let me on to a little secret. All he did was ask me how I imagine Dustin Davis got into his own house. I thought about it for a moment, and realized you never see him on the EtoG. Of course, a busy star like him cannot be on the set all of the time. So this must be the elevator he uses when he doesn't want to be on the show. I started getting goose bumps after that, thinking that I was right now standing in the same spot Dustin Davis used when he didn't want to be famous. How smash is that?

Then a couple of other guys got on, and the elevator started moving.

Now I don't mind waiting for others, after all we really were not anything like famous, but the two guys that joined us were plain old nasty mean. You know how some of the kids in your school are all caught up in their own flash (yes, I'm talking about you Craig Brown, and Micheline Plummer) well these two were just like that, only worse. Sure they were dressed in the latest, and sure their flash was so cutting edge it was practically bleeding, but that doesn't give them the right to be jerks, does it?

No sooner had these two got on, (I'll call them John John for reasons that were obvious once you heard them) then one said to the other in a very loud whisper, "Oh my God, John. Did you see the flash on her?"

"Which do you mean John?" the second John said. "The ugly one with the scarf around her neck?"

"Yes John, that's the one," said the first John.

My ears picked up. I thought they were talking about someone in the line when I realized I was the only one wearing a scarf.

"Oh my God, John," the John number two said. "What a fashion disaster."

"Yes John. All brown doesn't cover all ugly."

"Do you think, John, that she might be smart enough to strangle herself with that scarf?"

"I don't know, John. Too bad her parents didn't do it for her."

"And save our eyes the pain."

"Yes. And that boy, John," the first John continued. "Did you see him? The one with the old school shirt."

"That's not old school, John," the second one said. "That's just old. I didn't know they let regular fans on this elevator." He said 'fan' like it was three steps below a lawyer.

"Oh my God, John. I didn't either."

I looked up at Tristan, ready to burst. He looked like he was thinking of something to say.

"Look now, John," the second John said. "The beast with the scarf is starting to cry."

It was true. I was starting to cry. I'd never been around people like that before. They were absolutely vicious, and for no reason I could see, except I wasn't fashion forward enough. Which was weird.

Then the elevator stopped, and before I could say anything Dustin Davis walked in.

Really. No kidding. I was standing there ready to bawl and suddenly I was in an elevator with Dustin Davis.

Did you ever have too many shocks in one night? Well I hadn't, at least not until then. First the lady on the bus, then the crazy meal, then the wonderful view on the hill, and then the deck ride with the most gorgeous boy in the universe (who I think might like me), then walking up to Swank Towers and riding in the EtoG with two massive dark holes of stinky ick, and finally standing right next to Dustin Davis as if it was something I did everyday.

So I guess I shouldn't be surprised at the next thing that happened. It wasn't the two Johns, who suddenly went all syrupy sweet with their "Hi Dustin." "How ya doing Dustin?", and it wasn't Buster who for the first time in his life didn't have something to say. It was Dustin Davis himself. He turned he head, noticed Tristan and us, and then flashed the biggest smile I've ever seen on the man. Throwing his arms around our guide he said, "Tristan! What a wonderful surprise!"

After they talked with each other for a bit Dustin asked Tristan what he was doing here. That's when Tristan pointed at us.

"Of course," Dustin said. "Seekers. I should have known. That brings back memories."

Perhaps it was because I had had a long day. Perhaps it was because I was overly shocked. Whatever it was, I found my mouth opening and talking without the least bit of thought.

"You were a seeker?" I said in surprise.

The two Johns behind him both turned a marvelous shade of puce.

"Of course, dear," Dustin said to me. "That's how I met Tristan. Didn't he tell you the story?"

I managed to shake my head. Buster was still too shocked to move.

"Oh," he said, managing to make the word sound like a tisk. Then he reached over and touched part of the wall. The elevator suddenly stopped.

"This one's too good to miss," he said privately, "and Tristan here is much too modest to tell it.

"Lets see here. Back in 25 I think. Or was it 26?" He looked over at Tristan who only shrugged his shoulders in response. "Anyway, back in 25 I came out here for my two-year. And who do you think picked me up from the train station?"

He was asking a question, but it was obvious from the way he moved his hands the answer was Tristan.

"So the first thing he wanted me to do was go on a Coffee Quest."

"You've met Coffee?" I blurted out.

"Lots of times," he replied. "But not then. And not for years later.

"Anyway I was just a poor kid from a small province in Canada, so new to the town I didn't know the first thing about LA, and here I was walking around with this old guy caught in what I thought was the world's most complex snipe hunt."

"Do you know what a snipe hunt is darling?" he asked without waiting for me to answer. "Its a practical joke. A prank played on a person, usually one who has

never been camping before. You tell them you are hunting for a bird called a snipe, but the joke is, the bird is fake. It doesn't exist. So you take them out at night, deep into the woods, and let them wander around acting like a fool for a while. Then you come back and get them, after you've had your laugh.

"So here I was running out all over town every weekend with the crazy guy, and I kept wondering when I was going to finally be let in on the joke. Only, it turns out there is no joke. But I didn't get that then. I thought I was coming here to be famous. A huge musician. Only it didn't turn out that way, did it Tristan?"

"No Dunny. It didn't," Tristan said. "Thank God too," he added. "Dustin was a pretty good actor, but as a musician he was terrible."

They both laughed at this. The two Johns behind Dustin had plaster themselves against the wall as if they couldn't wait to get out. Both had looks of horror on their faces.

"Anyway," Dustin said with a waive, "We were running around, and I kept wondering when the joke would end, and in the mean time I kept meeting these wonderful people. Actors, agents, producers, writers, all young and stupid like me, and all destined to be a part of my career. Only I didn't know that then because I was so focused on being a bad musician."

Then he stopped for a second and turned to us. "Do you know the difference between fame and spirituality?" he asked.

I was so taken aback by this change of topic that I didn't know what to say. Dustin smiled and plowed on anyway. I was beginning to get the feeling he did this often.

"Fame is an outside force," he said as he moved his hands like they were skimming around an invisible ball. "That is to say, it is a power which is imbued from an outside source. In this case, from other people. If you think about it for a second, you'll see this makes sense. How much value would Captain Swankypants have if no one wanted to watch it?"

I thought about that for a second. How much value does something have that no one wants to see? The answer is pretty simple. None.

Dustin continued. "Now that's separate from spirituality -- and by spirituality I mean anything having to do with your soul or the spiritual world around you, whichever you believe -- spirituality is an inside force. A power that comes from within. So what I learned on my travels was that Coffee's power comes from his spirituality. His 'centering'. Of all the people I have met, he is the best person I know with being himself. With being centered. Which is why he always succeeds.

“Which is the exact opposite of me because I keep searching for power that comes from fame, from outside. Which is why I keep trying, and always failing.”

I thought I was following him pretty well, but this last part missed me. “Fail?” I asked. “You’re the most popular actor on America. How can that be a failure?”

He looked at me for a moment, then he laughed. “I supposed I forgot a story. Did you ever hear how Captain Swankypants came about?”

I shook my head, while Tristan gave a big smile.

“See the character started off as a laugh.” Then he gave us the famous Captain laugh. “That laugh came about from goofing off with some friends. Then one day another friend was doing a comedy, a play about the Donner party I think. Anyway she needed a character for a little comic relief, so we whipped up this guy we called The Incredible Mr. Swankypants. He had five lines, maybe six, that was it. Just a throw-away part. Only it didn’t work that way. That throw away character refused to go away. He kept growing and growing, getting funnier and funnier until now he sells 10 million masks of his face every year on halloween.”

I was sitting there not quite clear what to make of this. “So,” I asked. “Captain Swankypants was a mistake?”

“Exactly,” Dustin said with a huge smile.

“Uh,” I started to add when he stopped me.

“Look I don’t mean to be rude, but I have work to do.”

“Of course,” I said. “We understand.”

“Good,” he said. I got the feeling the performance was over.

Then I noticed Buster. He was in the same place, the same position he had been in since Dustin came in the elevator. I was too old to be a serious fan of the Captain, but I knew my brother wasn’t. Only he was too shy (for the first time in his life) to say anything. Much as I hated to babysit the kid, I knew if he didn’t have something to show his friends from this meeting, he would be crushed.

Gathering up my courage I opened my throat. “Um, Mr. Davis.”

He turned to look at me as if he forgot I was there.

“I hate to bother you, but my brother here is a huge fan. Is there any way he could get your autograph?”

Dustin Davis, the most famous actor in America looked at me, and then looked at my brother. Buster for his part managed to nod his head slightly, while I tried to look as humble as I could. I saw a sneer on one of the Johns behind him, and I thought we were sunk.

“I can do better than that,” Dustin said with a sudden smile. “Have him come up and ask my secretary. Her name is Candy Floss. No really, that’s her name. Candy will set him up with something spectacular. I promise.”

With that he reached over and touched the wall. The elevator doors opened into an unmarked hallway. Dustin stepped off, and quickly moved down the hall. A bouncer of stupendous size stood to one side, ready to block us if one of us was foolish enough to try and follow him.

We weren’t.

Then the doors closed, and the elevator continued on its way up. Within seconds we stopped at the 77th floor, and all of us got off. This was the final level before the big penthouse which could only be accessed by a separate elevator. Two men stood guard over that door, these were the last two gatekeepers before entering the longest continuous party in the world.

Only one of us couldn’t go.

See, when I got the pass from chef Evan, I didn’t look at it too closely. It turns out it was a pass for one, not for two. Only we didn’t notice this until the it was pointed out to us by the two goons at the door. Tristan could get in on his own reputation, but not so us.

Oh that was *so* uncomfortable. Here we were sitting right underneath the biggest event in the world. Just showing my face on one of those three floors (and any one of the hundreds of constant web casts) would guarantee my social status to be superluminal for life. I thought getting a high-end flash would be perfect, but this was like a hundred flashes. A thousand.

Only, only, I couldn’t do it. Not get in the elevator. I don’t mean that. I mean leave my baby brother behind. Sure Buster was a pain, and sure there were times when I wanted to strangle him (like right now), but still I also knew that of the two of us, he was the bigger fan.

A while back I mentioned he was wearing a Captain Swankypants shirt, and had been for days. What I didn’t say was that he was also wearing Captain Swankypants underwear, and Captain Swankypants socks, that his lunchbox featured Captain Swankypants, and his shoes as well. The walls of his room were plastered with Captain Swankypants flash, and the brush for cleaning his teeth gave a Captain Swankypants laugh every time you squeezed it (which he did *for hours* when he first got it). Even his skateboard had Captain Swankypants on the bottom.

See it was like that.

And I knew, *knew*, there was nothing I could do about it. I just couldn't go and leave him behind. Even though I wanted to be that heartless, even though I wanted to be so especially heartless right then, I couldn't do it.

But that wasn't even the worst part. The worst part was the two Johns were standing right behind us, and I could hear the smirks on their faces without even turning around to look. And that's what irked me the most. Those two were simply a waste of flesh, yet somehow they got to go in, while I had to sit there and take it.

Then before I could do anything stupid, like burst into tears, I handed the pass to my brother and shoved him into the elevator with Tristan.

As the doors to the elevator closed I had a perfect shot of the Johns. I was right. They were smirking.

And that's when I started to cry.

Did you ever find yourself alone crying in a strange place? I don't recommend it, but if you do, look for the kitchen. That's what I did.

See the 77th floor was more than the Final Portal to the Party Without End (don't ask me, that's what they call it on the net), it was also the building's main kitchen.

It wasn't used much either, and it could have used a dusting, at least that's what I found out when I finally got myself together enough to look for a tissue to blow my nose.

Why does crying make our noses run? What a pain that is. That's the second thing I want to ask God when I see him, right after why do cute boys never kiss you when you want them to, and why do golden passes to a perfect year in high school not come in pairs?

Anyway, it was while I was discovering the location of the tissue box (okay, and maybe snooping, but just a little) that I discovered the light switch (the whole place was kept dark) and when I flipped it (it was the old kind of switch that you had to move with your hand) that's when I discovered the old guy.

But let me set this up first because it's kind of important. When I discovered the kitchen I was still kind of upset. Okay, I was really upset. My eyes were dripping, my nose was running, like I said, and I must have been a mess. All that running around had to have messed up my outfit, and frankly at that point wearing that stupid brown seeker flash struck me as the unluckiest thing I had ever done, in a whole long line of unlucky things.

So the first thing I did when I entered the dark kitchen was throw that stupid flash into the opposite wall. It didn't break or anything, we're talking about flash

here, but hearing it crash into the window did make me feel a little better, and that's what counts.

So when the lights came on, and I see there's the old guy just sitting there I kind of went, "oh," or something. I'm not sure. I was a bit upset, and also a little embarrassed because I had just blown my nose really loudly because I thought I was alone.

Only when I got a good look at the guy I could tell he wasn't have the best night in his life either. He had these long dreadlocks. They ended a dirty blonde, but they were most definitely grey at the roots. And his face looked pretty creased. You know, wrinkles going after wrinkles, like he was tired all the time, or maybe sad. I didn't need to see the wet around his eyes or their red rims to know he looked like me, so the first thing I did after feeling like a complete idiot for blowing my nose so loud was to hand him a tissue, and then to laugh. Because you have to admit, crying in a dark kitchen in the most exciting building in the entire universe is funny. Especially when you're not the only one doing it.

So we started talking, me and this old guy, about life and stuff. I wasn't trying to lead our conversation to anything, like I had earlier with mom, I wasn't trying anything. After that experience at the elevator I think I had given up trying. If I could have put a skin-flash on my face, one that alternated between me laughing and crying. Like those funny masks they sometimes used to represent drama (and which my rather excellent net connection in the Most Exciting Building in the World told me was called Comedy and Tragedy) then it would have perfectly matched my feelings at that point. I was laughing and crying, sometimes at the same time. Comedy and tragedy.

So there we were, me and this old guy, and he started telling me about his day, and to be honest it sounded pretty sucky. People kept getting in his face over little things, and I guess he just had had it. As Carlos would say, "Googles. I know how that feels." And while he was talking I remembered something from that time when we were up on the top of the Baldwin Hills, something I didn't mention before.

You see back when we were kids we had these ancient tabs they made for kids, and one of the build-in functions on it was a "home" button. It worked like this. When you were looking on the map at your current location, and when you clicked on the "change home" button, all these dials would whirl and things would move, and finally the word HOME would flash on the screen at the new location, which was really your current location. So we used to press this button all the time. We'd go to a friends house, click on the "change home" button, and watch the screen come to life. Then we go to another friends house, and do

the same thing all over again. I did this every day, all over town, because I loved to watch the dials spin, and I loved the feeling it gave me; the centering of Home. It was like everywhere I went was home, if that makes any sense. And that was the experience I had on the Baldwin Hills. I suddenly felt the dials whirr, and felt like I was home, which is weird because I'd never been there before. Baldwin Hills, I mean, Not home, home.

So while I was listening to this guy, I started checking out the kitchen. He wasn't boring or anything, I was just curious. Restless. Anyway, in one cupboard I found this crazy complex coffee making machine, and right behind it an old "plunger" glass coffee maker. "Oh my Dad used to have one of these," I said as I pulled out the glass coffee maker.

Then because I had nothing else to do, I offered to make the old man a cup of coffee. He looked at me kind of funny, you know how adults are sometimes, raising an eyebrow, and looking at you like you just grew a third arm or something. But then he smiled and said "thank you," and "I would like that very much," or something terribly formal like that. Which was almost as weird as his first response, but I didn't think anything about it because, you know, he was an adult. They can't help it. Their default state is weird.

So while I was grinding some coffee, and heating the water, I told him all about our search for Coffee that night. The old man listened with strange smile on his face. When he heard about Miracle Coffee Johnson, his eyes went wide and he got a huge smile. So he sipped his coffee while I told him about the dinner party for Zack Ward, and the strange lady with pink hair on the bus, and even what Carlos said about feeling sorry for Coffee.

By the time I finished talking the old man looked better. Maybe different. I don't know. At least both of us were done crying, which was as good a start as any I knew.

Then he messed around under the cupboard and pulled out that crazy complex coffee machine.

I asked, "Do you know how to work that thing?" because I knew I didn't, and for some reason wasn't up to a manual hunt on the web.

Instead of answering he just smiled and started dusting it off. I could tell by the way he moved my question had been a dumb one. Of course he knew how to work it. But instead of getting mad or anything, he starting talking.

"In every complex system," he said, "in every group of people, there is a middle, a center. The hub on which the wheel spins, the nucleus of a whirling atoms. Mind you, that center is not always in the middle. It can be anywhere,

but the important point is it has to *be* for the rest of the thing to work well. It is central to the working of the whole, the heart at the middle of the body.”

Like I said, the default state of adults is weird.

“Most individuals,” he continued, “when they see a group of people, they only see the group. Every once in a while you’ll meet someone who can see a group, and point out the person who is the center. But it is exceptionally rare when you meet someone who can look at the group that’s not working well, and do the one thing that it needs to fix it; to occupy the missing center.

“Now,” he asked me, “when you were at Zack’s party, what did you do?”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“You saw something was not right with the meal, and what did you do?”

I thought about it for a moment. What had I done? I had noticed the servers, the way they were serving, and saw they were doing a lousy job. That was all, really. “Um,” I said, “All I did was grab a tray and start serving food?”

“That was *all* you did?”

“Well, I did kind of help the other servers,” I said, “but mostly by example. They weren’t bad or anything, they just didn’t know what to do. So I did it. I didn’t help them as much as showed them.”

“Exactly,” he said. “You saw the problem, and fixed it. Now let me ask you? Did the meal go better after that?”

“Well, certainly. They were short a pair of hands. Things went much faster after I joined. But anyone could have done that.”

He turned around and gave me that look. You know the one your mom gives you when she knows you’re not telling *all* of the truth, just the parts that make you look good. If mom or dad had been giving me that look, I would have gotten mad, but for some reason that look on this ratty old guy with dreadlocks hanging over his face, made him seem, I don’t know, comical maybe. Funny. Only not laugh out loud funny, just humorous. Not a big laugh, a little giggle. Only I didn’t even giggle. I just smiled.

Then I realized what he was wanting.

“Oh, I get it,” I said. “You think it was more that just the service going faster?”

He nodded.

“You think the whole meal was better because I helped?”

“That’s exactly what I think,” he said. “But I bet its not just there. I’ll bet there are lots of times when you helped a group; nudged them over the precipice of success.”

The words “nudged over the precipice of success” made me laugh. Then the old guy turned around and set this huge mug of coffee in front of me. I looked down, and felt my stomach do a bump. It was this tepid dirty tan color. Like the color of coffee when you add too much cream, and I hate, hate, hate cream in my coffee. Did I mention that?

“Uh,” I said, trying hard to not sound like I was annoyed. “I normally don’t put the white stuff in my coffee.”

“I know,” he said. “Black, in a small cup, with two bags of sugar. Right?”

I nodded my head. That was exactly the way I made coffee at home.

“Try it. Take a sip anyway,” he said. “Trust me. You’ll see.”

So I took a small sip. But I wasn’t really thinking about the coffee. My head was still back on what he had said about pushing something over the precipice of success.

And you know, the thing is, he was right. There was the time when the school play needed help with its costumes. I didn’t know how to sew them, but I knew Betsy Caple did. She was a big help, and I remember how happy she was to be a part of the crowd. All that time she was sitting there willing to help, but too shy to say something, and not one of the stage crew thought to ask her.

And then there was the time when Jeff Benson on our softball team was having trouble with his pitching. I don’t know anything about throwing a ball, but I could see he was too tied-up. What mom calls anxious. So I dared Martha Graham to walk right up and give him a kiss, right in front of everybody. And she did. Right on the lips! And after that, Jeff was so distracted that he forgot he wasn’t supposed to be able to pitch, and pitched a perfect game.

And that’s not all. There were more. Many more. Another school play, a dance recital, Jim Simmonds and the way he used to leap a bit before diving into the pool that always gave him false starts in competition.

All these things. All these small things. It wasn’t anything big or major. Heck, I don’t think anyone even thought to thank me for them, not that that mattered. But I could see a pattern to all of them. A middle. A missing center that needed fixing.

It was like a light was turned on in my head. I swear I could almost hear the click. Suddenly I could see it. It was a thing I could do. A knack. It wasn’t great or anything. It wasn’t anything I could get credit for, it wasn’t anything that would make me popular in school, but I could see that it was helpful. And more importantly, it was something I wanted to do.

Then I looked down and noticed the mug was only half full. My mouth had the most glorious flavor inside it. It tasted like someone had taken all the

happiness in the world, and the beautiful things around you -- your first kiss, the time you got an A+ in Spanish, the happy way a waterfall sounds as it shooshes in a cool pool of water on a hot summer day -- all those things and more, and somehow put them into a cup, and then put that cup into your hands. Only it wasn't that. It was better than that. A hundred times better. A thousand times.

Then it hit me. OMG! It was him! HIM! COFFEE!!!

I let out this huge gasp. I swear it must have sounded like I had a heart attack or something, it was so loud. I was so embarrassed, but I couldn't stop myself. I had found him. Coffee. Me. All by myself.

So while I was sitting there, all excited and embarrassed at the same time, the old guy, Coffee, leaned over and said real quiet, "You know, I often wondered if a Center could fix themselves on their own, just like I always wondered why every time I made coffee for myself it tasted like crap. Now I know."

Then he smiled and said, "Thank you for that, and thank you for the cup of coffee. It was the best I ever had."

Then he cleaned up the machine, and set the dishtowel back on the rack by the sink. Dusting off his hands he silently handed me a small chip. It was my seeker flash. The one I had thrown away. Then just as quietly as when I found him, he wandered out of the room without a good-bye.

And just like that, my heart still racing and my head still full of surprise, I was alone. Again.

Not long afterwards Tristan walked into the kitchen. By then I had screened up a part of the wall and was using my tab to skim the many web casts from above. Already my little brother was trending. Whatever had kept him from talking on the elevator in front of Dustin Davis had worn off because he was chatting up people like it was his last night on Earth. And you know, the thing I kept discovering, my little brother, Buster, can be down right charming. Now I didn't see it at first. I am, after all, his big sister; no matter how chill anyone else thinks he is, I still remember changing his diapers. But I had to admit that other people liked being around him. For a young kid, and hopeless Captain Swankypants fan, he really did present himself well. Which is why he was trending.

So when Tristan came into the kitchen and stopped to look at me I was already feeling pretty good. Then he noticed the partially cup of coffee still in my hands, and a knowing look came into his eyes.

"So you met him?" he asked.

I nodded, half my attention drawn to a party blog entry about my brother. I knew what he meant. “You ever,” I said, “you know. Meet him?”

He gave his head just the slightest of shakes. The smallest possible no. But his eyes showed something else. I saw sudden flash of envy, which surprised me. But it was quickly erased by another emotion; acceptance.

“That was interesting,” I thought to myself. Then I realized I knew exactly what those two emotions felt like, one after the other, because I had just experienced them myself.

So I got up and gave him a hug. A big one, so he wouldn’t think it was just a sympathy hug or something.

When we were finished he stood back a bit and asked, “What was that for?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Everything. Nothing.”

He gave me that knowing look again. The one my mom uses on me still.

“Okay,” I said. “For showing me the list within the list.”

“Ah,” he said. “Now I understand.”

We stood there quiet for a moment, both of us looking down at the Valley from 77 stories up and letting the winking of the millions of stars talk for us.

“When it comes time for your two-year, Sarah,” he said. “I want you to seriously consider coming here and working for us.”

“As an angel?” I asked.

“As any part of the Way.”

“Is this part of the list within the list?” I said teasingly.

He smiled. “Sure.”

After all the things we had seen or done that night, the subway ride back to the hotel room was pretty anticlimactic. Buster spent most of it laying his head on my shoulder. The cars rocked and swayed on the tracks making that clickity-clack sound that only trains make. Since it was too loud to talk without our earbuds we took turns watching his ranking climb on my tab, quietly guessing how high it would go. It was fun watching the numbers spin on the back of the seat in front of us. We laughed like fools as his popularity slowly kept climbing. It was exciting, and a bit surreal. We were also very tired.

We showed up at the lobby around 1:00 am. By then Buster was holding my hand, and for once I didn’t mind. I thought maybe dad and mom might be angry, but they had just come home themselves, and they had a certain glow about them that told me their evening had been wonderful. They always get affectionate when they go out together, just the two of them, and I don’t really

understand why. I mean who wants to spend all night with just your spouse when there are millions of people to party with? How boring is that?

Parents.

Anyway, mom wanted to know how our evening was. I looked at Buster, he looked at me, and in unison we said, "Pretty good." I swear we didn't practice it or anything. Everyone laughed at that.

Then mom said, "Seriously, Sarah Bearah, how was your evening?" Sarah Bearah was a nickname mom used whenever she was happy with me. She also used it whenever she wanted me to give her a straight answer, like she did right now.

"Um, we went on a search for...um."

"...For Coffee," Buster finished for me.

"Coffee?" mom asked.

"Its a... he's a man, not a drink," I said.

"I see," said mom. "Did you find him then, this Coffee?"

"No," Buster said.

"Yes," I said. Then I looked at Buster. "No."

I have to admit, we did sound kind of lame.

Mom gave us that look, the one she uses when she thinks I'm trying to lie to her, only it wasn't just me this time, it was Buster too. We'd never lied to her together before. Come to think of it, we'd hardly done anything together before. Her look was enough like Tristan's that I almost laughed out loud.

Finally she said, "It sounds like you didn't find any."

We both nodded vigorously.

"So," she added, "what did you find?"

What do you say to a question like that? Do you say nothing? Do you tell her everything? Did she really want to know, or was she just asking to be polite? This is one of the things that drives me crazy about parents. I wish they came with a net manual or something so I could look up the proper response to their questions. Googles, but that would sure save a lot of worry.

"Nothing," Buster said after a moment.

"Everything," I added with a smile.

Then we started giggling together, and didn't stop until we made it back to our room.