

## **The Volunteer**

**by H. W. Moss**

Nancy swept both hands along her flanks to straighten her skirt as she sat down in a folding chair opposite three people she really wanted to impress.

“Good of you to be so prompt, Miss Hastings,” the middle person, a gray haired woman with a steady gaze and matronly air said by way of introduction. “We are happy you want to volunteer to help hurricane victims. As you know, this is your final interview. We intend to put you on a plane tomorrow and send you where you will assist with Red Cross efforts. I am Mrs. Standish, this is Mister Howard and to my left Deedee Wells.”

“How do you do,” Nancy said politely.

Mrs. Standish wore a pair of glasses with a thin silver chain that fell in arcs from her ears and wrapped around the back of her neck. She lifted the lenses to hover over the bridge of her nose, squinted into them, dropped them back on her nose and gave Nancy a two second stare before asking, “Are you prepared for this sudden and abrupt change in your lifestyle? You will essentially be camping out with our staff and your fellow workers in a devastated area of the country where the humidity is overwhelming, the insects hungry, facilities few and your work load full with almost no time to yourself. In short, Miss Hastings, this is no piece of cake. You will be gone for two whole weeks. Have you any idea what you are getting yourself into?” the woman demanded. “I assume your employer,” the glasses rose again from the bridge of her nose as she read from a piece of paper on the table in front of her. “You work for a newspaper I see. And what do you do for this newspaper? Are you a reporter?”

Did Nancy detect a note of concern in the revelation that she was employed at the New Times? Perhaps the Red Cross did not want to open itself up to public scrutiny by accidentally accepting someone who might write about them. But that shouldn't be an issue, she thought. Glen and Chris had volunteered, spent two weeks aiding victims and they were senior editors. No, it could not possibly be that her offer to give up two weeks of her life as an unpaid laborer might be refused on such flimsy paranoid grounds.

Before she could answer Mrs. Standish, Nancy's phone rang. Damn, she thought, I forgot to turn it off. She leaned forward toward the interviewers as if pretending the opening notes of the trumpet brilliant from Rossini's "William Tell Overture" were not coming from her purse.

As the second staccato sequence began, Nancy reached for and withdrew the cell phone. She held a finger in the air toward her interviewers, said, "Excuse me," snapped the clamshell open and answered. She immediately attempted to interrupt the caller, to say she would get back to them, but a voice kept talking right over her.

It was Karla. She was bitching about the money from the estate. Then she began itemizing the household items she intended to pick up.

"Karla, listen to me, Karla," Nancy said. "I'm in a meeting. I can't talk. Let me get back to you as . . ."

"I need that money. If I can't get the money, I'm taking everything, the leather couch and the dining room table, chairs, beds, everything and I'm going to sell it all at a garage sale!"

Nancy kept her gaze lowered, off the three people opposite. She knew answering the phone was a serious breach of etiquette, not hanging up immediately another. But Karla was so insistent, so pushy and so mean.

“Karla, that’s not in our agreement. You gave me a list of the things you wanted, the couch is not on that list.”

“I don’t give a damn. Gerald left me \$25,000 and today I learned through my lawyer that the estate is challenging that. So I want every scrap of stuff in that house. I’m going to sell it all.”

As happened often, Nancy was insulted by Karla besmirching her brother. “You know what a shitty thing that is to do to Gerald’s memory? Karla, you’re a fuckhead!”

She snapped the case shut, let out a big sigh and finally looked at Mrs. Standish and the two who flanked her. Obviously, they had overheard one side of the conversation and from that formed an opinion.

Nancy began a preemptive response. “I’m so sorry about that. It was my deceased brother’s former girlfriend. I had to talk to her. I’m so sorry.”

Mrs. Standish allowed her glasses to dangle from their chain. They rocked back and forth in front of her chest several times, much like a hangman’s noose Nancy thought abstractly, before settling down in a stationary position.

“Nonetheless, Miss Hastings, we have come to an agreement. And we believe you are unstable, Miss Hastings. We cannot send you anywhere as a volunteer for the Red Cross.”

Nancy was thunderstruck and sat immobile for five full seconds before she could reply.

“No, you don’t understand. My brother died. His estate is being settled. That’s why I couldn’t get off the phone. I have to take care of the day to day household things for the executor. That was Gerald’s old girlfriend threatening to take everything in the house, not just the things she agreed to take last week. I had to talk with her. I’m so sorry.”

“We need someone with compassion, Miss Hastings,” Deedee Wells spoke for the first time.

“I am compassionate. I have compassion for everyone.”

Mrs. Standish remained silent. Then she closed the folder on the desk in front of her which Nancy took as a final gesture of denial. She resigned herself to the situation, thought evil thoughts toward Karla whom she never did like even when Gerald was dating her, and stood. She grabbed the purse by its handle, swung it over her shoulder and walked out of the room.

As the door closed behind her, a good looking young man wearing a white shirt and white slacks stepped forward.

“Hey, hi there. Did they tell you you’re going to Florida or Louisiana?”

“Neither one.”

“Don’t tell me they assigned you to Texas? That’s the pits.”

“No. They wouldn’t take me at all. I won’t be volunteering for the Red Cross any time soon.”

He seemed incredulous when he asked, “Did they tell you why?”

“Because I answered my cell phone in the middle of the interview?” Nancy ended with an upswing in her tone that emphasized the question and implied she was an idiot for having done such a thing.

“Oooooo. Bad career move. That’s a no-no when you’re in front of the Big Cheese.”

“Who’s that? Which one’s that?”

“Standish. She rules with an iron fist around here.”

“Yah? And who are you?”

A hand shot out. “I’m Carl. You are . . .?”

“Nancy. Nancy Hastings,” she said in reply as they shook hands. “What do you do around here, Carl?”

“Oh, my day job is to organize the office. But I have a weekend job as well and I could use a volunteer. It’s a legitimate Red Cross gig, if you care to hear about it.”

Nancy shrugged. He could be some kind of weirdo, but she didn’t really think so. Shouldn’t hurt to find out what he was talking about.

“Great. In my office, then?” He led the way down the hall and pulled open one of the many nondescript doors. He motioned her in, followed and took a seat behind a desk on which was a name plate that read Carl Ridenour -- Finance Officer. The room was big enough with two chairs, a desk and Ridenour’s own black executive chair. “Here’s the deal. I have to drive an emergency rig into the mountains over the weekend to be on hand in case there’s a problem at a campout that’s planned in the foothills of the Sierras. This is a weekend gig which I know isn’t like leaving home for two weeks or a month, but I’m short handed and could use a volunteer. All expenses paid. Well, not really since you’re a volunteer. But there’s a per diem with no place to buy food so you get a little money as a sort of perk when you get back.”

“If there’s no place to buy food, what do we eat?”

“Oh, that’s all arranged. I have a fully equipped camping setup in the truck and we take our own supplies including water. What do you say? Any interest in going camping over the weekend?”

Nancy had been fully prepared to hop a plane in the morning and was thoroughly disappointed in the response she received at the hands of the committee. This sounded like a good way to make up for that disappointment. If this Ridenour character was on the level.

“Sure. Why not? I’ll ride with you Mister Ridenour.”

“Good. Call me Carl. Since you’ve already been through the one day training class, you’re pre-qualified. I’ll have your application brought over and you can fill out the forms for a weekend in the mountains.”

That sounded awfully good, Nancy thought, compared to the privation she heard the guys describe while working with hurricane victims. Yah, sure, a weekend in the foothills of the Sierras sounded like a vacation, not volunteerism.

She filled out the application, read the hold harmless agreement twice, signed at the bottom and Carl congratulated her on being officially accepted into the program.

“I’ll pick you up early Saturday morning. We drive back Monday. Dress casual, jeans are all you’ll need. If you have a bedroll, bring it. I have one you can use, but you may need two. It gets kind of cold at night. Gloves and a cap are good. It gets kind of hot during the day”

“How early Saturday?”

“We want to be on the road by seven.”

It could have been worse, she thought as she began gathering her copies of the papers she signed. She was almost out the door with her hand grasping the handle when Ridenour said, “Oh, and this is very important. Don’t forget to bring earplugs.”

She nodded and thought little of this admonition as the door closed behind her.

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“This is a celebration in the mountains and we’ll be camping on private property. We’re going to Lahore Larry’s birthday party. We take 80 south to 580, pick up 5 for a little ways into Stockton where we hang a left on 4. We’re heading into Gold Rush country, into the foothills of the Sierras. There ought to be about 500 people camping with us and that means someone is going to require medical attention.”

Carl spoke as he drove. She had been waiting out front with her gear at the appropriate time. They crossed the Bay Bridge by 7:30 and drove along the Oakland estuary toward Hayward.

“It’s about a three hour drive, four on a bad day. We want to be the first ones there, the last ones out. First in, last out, filo, sort of reverse accounting.”

She had no idea what he was talking about and asked, “Are you a doctor?” Nancy had meant to ask this since they first met.

“No. But I have emergency medical training. I was a paramedic for four years while going to school for my finance degree. And, generally, I’m the only one with a working telephone.” Keeping one hand on the wheel, he lifted a square, heavy hand-held device off the front seat beside him and displayed it to her. “Satellite phone. Your cell ought to stop working about five miles past Angels Camp. At that point, this is all we have to rely on in case of a real emergency.”

They drove in silence punctuated by occasional interactive statements and questions such as, “I’m thirsty. Where’s the ice chest?” She fished out a soda for herself, offered one to him. Traffic was thin and they made good time. They were in Stockton shortly after ten.

“We pass near Copperopolis and Murphys and go through Angels Camp. Angels Camp was the setting for Mark Twain’s short story about the jumping frog y’know. And Bret Harte used it for his book ‘The Luck of Roaring Camp.’”

She was amused by these tidbits of literary knowledge. Sensing he had an audience, Carl continued. “The city of Stockton was named for Commodore Stockton who joined the navy at age 13. He fought in the War of 1812 and the Mexican American war. In 1846 he captured Los Angeles from the Mexican army. Know who General Vallejo was? He turned California over to the revolutionaries without any bloodshed in, I think it was 1849. And he was married to a woman named Benecia. Commodore Stockton’s duels are mentioned in the memoirs of one Dr. Squibb, founder of Squibb Pharmaceuticals, who was ship's doctor on one of Stockton’s boats.”

“How do you know all this?”

“I made California history a hobby.”

“So. Did Commodore Stockton ever live in Stockton?”

“You know, I don’t know. Never thought to ask. Have to look that up when we get back.”

“Who is this Lahore Larry?”

“He’s sort of a musician who has a following. They call it his birthday, but in reality it’s just an excuse for a bunch of young people to get together and get high.”

“No kidding,” she said with a chuckle. “So what is this, a rave?”

“That’s a good description. Except it’s not in a warehouse, it’s out in the open.”

Nancy sat stunned for the second time in as many days. “You’re serious? We’re actually going to a rave?”

“That’s right. With Lahore Larry as the emcee.”

“I can’t believe it.”

“What? What can’t you believe?”

“I can’t believe I’m going to a rave by accident.”

“Yah, it is kind of funny when you look at it like that.”

She thought for a moment, then said, “Everybody takes Ecstasy at a rave, don’t they?”

He kept his eyes on the road and answered nonchalantly, “Mmmm, yah, that’s kind of typical.”

A thought struck her. “And if it’s out in the open on private property and there are no cops around, there’s a good chance everyone is going to be smoking dope, dropping acid, eating ’shrooms and taking every other kind of psychedelic not to mention smoking hash, eating brownies and consuming any other recreational drug left over from the 60’s.”

“I’m impressed. About the only thing you left out is nitrous. You speaking from personal experience or did you do your own study of the subject?”

“Child of hippie parents. I grew up hearing about Love Ins and Human Be Ins. My middle name is Sunshine. No, I don’t normally put that on job applications.”

He smiled. “Nancy Sunshine Hastings. I kind of like that. It has a good feel to it.”

“I have to ask you something, Carl.”

“Shoot.”

“Are you going to be taking any drugs?”

“Absolutely not. And neither will you. And no alcohol for us either. Usually there’s quite a lot of wine at these things, some hard liquor. You and I, we have to be ready for anything. I also suggest you sleep during the day because you will have to spell me on night watch.”

Sunny and hot, they kept their windows up and the air conditioning on. Once they were outside the city, skinny wire fences on thin red metal posts hemmed them out as the countryside slid past. Orchards and farmland gave way to scrub with sometimes horses and occasionally cattle grazing contentedly. The flat land around them grew hilly and the road became an elevator ride that rose and fell as the grade changed. Eventually they began a gradual ascent into what could be described as the base of a mountain range, but the highway was still two paved lanes. That changed when they crossed a bridge above a miles long reservoir sporting recreational boaters on its placid blue surface.

Carl downshifted and kept both hands steady on the wheel as they began climbing a single lane dirt road that was probably originally a firebreak. The climb was not precipitously steep, but the angle kept her firmly in her seat. The hills must once have been covered with fir trees, but loggers long ago stripped them nearly bare. Few pines sprouted but many oak with their sharp pointed leaves clutched at the vehicle as it passed them. Reflexively, she ducked several times as a branch loomed only to brush harmlessly past on the outside of the windshield and door glass.

At one point she looked down at the reservoir which had receded in the distance below them until it appeared to be no bigger than a long bath tub with tiny toy boats the size of ants marching across the surface leaving white contrails in their wake. Her eyes followed back up the hillside until she was staring almost directly downward. Then she realized they were on such a narrow path she could not see the shoulder of the road they drove, merely the body of the truck hovering over the side of a cliff as they bounced along the rugged terrain.

To reassure herself, she turned her head and studied the runnels in the dirt path in front, made certain there really was a road and Carl was really intent on following it before she glanced down again at the drop off to her right. The road was so narrow, if they encountered someone coming down there was no way to pass until or unless one of them backed to the last switchback that was wide enough to accommodate such a maneuver.

They raised a dust cloud as they followed the turning, twisting lane and passed a dead school bus, its yellow paint covered by colorful paisleys with rugged coarse-woven cloth curtains on all windows except the front.

Carl stopped and got out to see if anyone needed assistance. When he returned and started the engine he said, "Just had to check. No one around. They probably hoofed it."

At last they came over a rise and Nancy found herself staring down into a clearing with too many parked vehicles to count. They came to a halt when a guard in baggy pants and colorful batik shirt with billowing sleeves approached with his palm up and open. He asked to see their tickets which Carl immediately produced. They were waved through.

The truck bounced over the rutted hillside and descended into a wide glade which had at its center two large spreading oaks paced twenty feet apart. Under this natural shelter from the sun Carl positioned the truck by backing the vehicle in and gunning the engine to rock it until it settled into a firm position. There were no other campers on either side, but dozens of tents were already in place nearby.

“We’re here,” he said proudly. “Let’s pick our camp grounds and set things up.”

It was not hard or difficult work, yet Nancy had to follow Carl’s directions. She was unable to make decisions on her own, at least not before she was secure in her own space. Until then, she had to ask and he had to tell and their relationship became one almost of boss and employee. She helped pull many nylon bags containing heavy objects out of the truck which he instructed her to pile beside it.

Carl indicated one of the bags and said, “Let’s start with that. That’s your tent and I’ll set mine up over here. The large tent goes with these cots and here is a chest full of medical supplies which doubles as a place to sit. It’s a glorified first aid kit is all, but you’ll be surprised at how much of the supplies in it we’ll use before the weekend’s over.”

The equipment began spilling out of the carrying bags. The tents were modern and easy to stretch over rods which were folded like a bundle of sticks. Elastic bungee cords inside held them stiff when they were snapped into one long skinny black pole. Four folding chairs widened with a gentle nudge and spread their canvas backs and arm rests invitingly.

Then the large tent was laid out on the ground and she assisted shoving its poles in the proper openings. When it rose to its full height and was firmly positioned, she easily

walked inside without dipping. Carl began hauling plastic crates inside and appeared satisfied with the assistance she was able to offer.

It was early afternoon before he stood with hands on hips in front of their home for the next two days. He apprised it and apparently it met with his approval because he said, “Great job, Nance. Couldn’t of done it without you.”

He waved at a circle of people ten feet away who were engrossed in making sandwiches. One of the men waved back, but none of the others paid much attention.

“Well, that sounds like a good idea to me. Let’s fix some food. Didn’t ask. You have any comestible prohibitions cuz if you do you don’t get much choice around here.”

“None I can think of,” Nancy replied with equanimity. So far, she was enjoying herself.

“One more thing.” Carl rummaged around in the back of their vehicle until he came up with what he was looking for. He went over to the tent flap and undid a tie back string. From that he hung the sign which read: RED CROSS EMERGENCY MEDICAL UNIT.

Then he took a seat in one of the folding chairs and opened a plastic container at his feet. He withdrew a loaf of bread, peanut butter and jelly jars and a metal butter knife. As he lathered the contents of the jar on a piece of bread he looked up with a smile. “Now we’re roughing it, aren’t we?”

Nancy sat next to him, took the gooey sandwich when he offered it and munched in silence. They were in an idyllic environment, a green glade with knee high grass that was quickly trampled by their efforts to set up the tents. They were soon surrounded by other tents and people who arrived, unloaded and parked on the hillside. Theirs was the only

vehicle allowed beneath the spreading oak trees. “How many of these events have you been to,” she asked between bites and after sipping from her soda.

“This is my tenth Lahore Larry event. It’s the sixth one here, but it is also the last. Seems the property has been sold and the new owners are not going to allow this kind of gathering again.”

From a nearby tent that was as large as their own there emerged a slender older man with long white hair that fell below his shoulders and a long white beard. He walked toward them with both hands extended in greeting. Carl rose, set his sandwich down and said, “Nancy, this is the Swami. I’d like to introduce you, Swami, to my assistant Nancy Hastings.”

The Swami never stopped smiling his broad, beatific grin as he embraced Carl then turned with the intention of doing the same to her, she realized as he approached. There was no dissuading him in his greeting style, so she caved in and hugged him.

He stood back with his hands on her elbows and said, “How are ye, lass,” in an Irish brogue that was totally out of character with his apparel.

“Well, I’m fine I guess. And you Swami? How are you?”

“Oooooohhhh, ye know. I’m happy as the sun and bright as the day and planning to dance my nights away. But do come see us in our tent. We have a shrine to Shiva over there and it is a place of contentment and pacification.”

With that he wandered away toward the next nearest group of people, those who had prompted Carl to break out lunch by feeding themselves. Nancy heard the Swami say again in greeting, “How are ye lads and lasses,” with the same outstretched arms and

method of personal greeting. As he thumped each of them soundly on the back, she asked wryly, “Does he hug everyone?”

“Only those he likes.”

“Well, who’s this Lahore Larry?”

Carl took in the ravine in front of them and pointed across at what appeared to be a shabby outdoor stage covered with bed sheets sewn together and hung on wires strung from poles. The area in front of the stage was large enough to accommodate several hundred people. Nancy estimated they were camped perhaps 150 feet from this area.

“See the short plump guy with long black beard and hair going gray? That’s Lahore Larry.”

“Why’s he call himself that?”

“You mean, Larry?”

“Funny. Very funny. No. I mean Lahore Larry. Why Lahore? Isn’t that in Pakistan?”

“Not bad. It is. Most Westerners usually say India. Well, when all the other hippies were heading to Kathmandu, this guy went next door.”

“So how old is he?”

“No one really knows. He won’t say. I’d guess early 50’s.”

“Is it really his birthday?”

“Not unless he has two a year. They held the same event up here over Memorial Day. It was really hot and I had several cases of dehydration.”

“What other kinds of injuries do you get?”

“Oh, I dunno. Usually someone falls and sprains an ankle or jumps off a rock wrong. There are some great views from over there,” he pointed toward a large outcropping of granite. “And I get a fair share of freak outs. That usually happens on day two. An accumulation of too many stimulants in the body, that sort of thing.”

The hours wore on. It was a lazy sunny afternoon and there was no work to be done once the camp was created. At one point she asked where the facilities were and Carl pointed behind them. “Up the hill thataway,” he said with eyes closed, the bill of a baseball cap pulled down to cover most of his face while reclining spread eagle in one of the folding chairs.

She took a walk around the area on her way up to the privies which were near the road they came in on and a good distance away. There were six stand alone toilets and they exuded the odor of chemicals redolent of their function. She forced herself inside one and, afterwards, found a hose dangling at the end of the row of green outhouses. She located it by following from the faucet some ten feet away. There were no other amenities, not even soap. She would have to remember to bring her own plastic wrapped bar next time. The water was chilly the way mountain springs are cold and she splashed some on her face as well.

She took a circuitous route back to the tent and on her way found it easy to stop at any of the clustered groups of people, say hello, introduce herself and mention that she was with the Red Cross. “We’re right over there if you need us.”

Everyone was friendly and some offered food or drink. There seemed to be all types, from scruffy young people who would have been indistinguishable in their apparel and demeanor from the Haight Street hippies of the sixties to clean cut kids with no facial

hair wearing hiking boots and set up with the latest camping equipment available. There were families with extremely young children, black and white, as well as teenagers who joined together and formed a ring and performed precision dance steps to rock music.

She was nearly back to the truck when a young man with a full black beard caught up with her. He tagged her on the elbow, said, “Hey, hi, howareyou? My name’s Andy. You are beautiful. Want to have sex with me?”

Nancy stood staring at him. Somehow she managed a blank expression which did not convey her absolute shock and surprise at the suggestion. He did not respond, but stood staring with a guileless expression of his own.

“Well, I, I, I,” she stuttered. “I’m absolutely flabbergasted at your audacity. Do you always greet a girl with, hi, you want to fuck?”

“Not always. Sometimes I let them talk. I just thought we’d cut to the chase. Why waste time, y’know, if you want to and I want to, why don’t we?”

He was so casual, so disarmingly up front making this offer, he did not seem threatening or dangerous. And for an instant, for just the merest fraction of a second, the idea of hopping into a tent with him and pulling each others pants off seemed like something she might give real consideration. But she devoted no more than a split second to the idea.

She held up a finger. “Hold that thought. I have to get back to work, Andy. How about we discuss this at a later date?”

She turned and walked away unable to shake the feeling she was slinking back to the tent rather than approaching it with dignity.

“Saw you talking with the locals,” Carl said raising his cap to study her as she took a camp chair opposite. She uncapped a plastic water bottle and took a slug. “Meet anyone interesting?” he asked.

“All of them are,” she said calmly.

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The sun was dropping low in the afternoon sky when Carl said, “Y’know, you really ought to take a nap while you can.”

“I’m not tired. Besides, we get to sleep late in the morning, don’t we?”

“Well, that depends.”

“On what?”

“On whether or not you get to sleep in the first place.”

“What do you mean by that?” There was something ominous in his reply she could not quite identify.

Carl stood and stretched. He was obviously in his element, among the trees and hills and surrounded by people who may need him, who were reassured by his presence. He held an important position in the instant community that had grown up around them. Their table and chairs and tents were now hemmed in on both sides and behind them. No one camped in front because that was where, like an ocean shoreline, the demarcation point began. A wide pedestrian area with a gully in the middle was all that separated them from the stage area.

“The music starts around nine. It gets quite loud so after that, you may not be able to sleep. You did bring earplugs, like I suggested, didn’t you?”

Yes, they were in her Dopp kit along with several important necessities a woman should not be without including tampax and condoms.

“You have got to be kidding. I won’t need those unless I hit the hay early, will I?”

Enigmatically, he replied, “That depends on what you mean by early.” Then he grabbed his coat and started climbing the hill toward the toilets. “Back in a while. Hold down the fort until I return.”

Nancy sat there contemplating what he had said. Eventually, she pulled a copy of Nelson Algren’s “The Man with the Golden Arm” from her tent, where it had been laid out next to a powerful yellow Eveready flashlight, and began reading. She did not like any of the characters and was not pleased with the plot which seemed to rely on a mean energy between Frankie the Machine and his wheelchair bound wife, Sophie. They did not like one another any more than she liked them.

An insistent voice saying, “Miss, oh, miss?” brought her out of the book. It surprised her how much concentration it required to read and, thus, how lost she could become with a work that did not appeal to her.

“Yes? Can I help you?” Just like a store clerk, she thought as she addressed the portly young man who stood in front of her.

“I hope so. I think I broke my ankle.”

She sat there staring at him wondering why he would bring such a problem to her. Shouldn’t he be seeing a doctor, getting an x-ray? Then it dawned on her: for all intents and purposes, she was the doctor. At least while Carl was away. Or was she the admissions nurse?

“Here, take my chair. Sit down.” He did so gingerly, hopping over using a tree branch as a makeshift crutch.

Frankly, at that point she was at a loss as to what to do next. She poured a cup of water, handed it to him, asked his name, which he said was Manny, and then she said, “The real guy you want to see is not here right now. He’ll be back soon.”

Manny seemed resigned to the wait, but at that moment she heard Carl’s booming voice saying, “Ah. Our first customer. Thank you nurse, I can take over from here.”

She was happy to step away and watch with growing awe and admiration at how he handled the patient. First he removed the running shoe and peeled down the sock. A nasty purple bruise had formed, but there was not a great deal of swelling.

“What were you doing when this happened, Manny?”

“Rock hopping with my friends. Seemed like a good idea at the time.”

Carl looked directly into Manny’s eyes. “What are you on, Manny? Don’t be shy, it will affect our procedure.”

“A little E is all. Took a hit about an hour ago, went out to play in the sun.”

Carl stood and went inside the tent, came out with a box of Ace bandages. He began wrapping the ankle. “You were lucky. It’s sprained, but not broken. You will have to stay off it and I advise you to get your friends to drive you back down to Stockton where they have a proper hospital and can make a valid medical determination of the condition.”

“Awww, man. Nobody’s going to drive me down today. Not even tomorrow. Everybody’s too high to drive and, besides, the music ain’t even started yet.”

Carl was not sympathetic. "I can only advise. I am not your mother. And only you can decide what you will do. I'm telling you to stay off the leg. I'm also telling you we can't do anything more for you. If you do walk on it you will make it that much worse."

"Can you give me something for the pain?"

"You are joking, aren't you?" Carl was stern but amused. He smiled when he added, "There are more pain killers out there," he waved an arm in an all encompassing gesture that took in the entire meadow, "than I carry in my truck. I don't think you will have to look very far for a sedative. How far away are you camped?"

Manny gestured toward the hill behind them.

"Nurse Hastings will assist you in getting back to camp. You may use her shoulder to carry your weight. It's up to you what course of action you take next. I advise a hospital."

Manny held his shoe and sock in his hand and wrapped that arm around Nancy's shoulders. She assisted him on his limping hop back to his tent site. There she was introduced to a half dozen young people who were milling about, some snacking, many with alcoholic drinks in their hands.

"You want a glass of wine? Or a beer?" Manny asked as he took a seat in the flattened grass and spread his legs out in front of him. "We got some great spliff if you like."

She said hello to everyone, introduced herself as the girl with the Red Cross and begged off accepting any of the offerings except a cold bottle of water. Back at the tent, Carl was talking with a teenage girl. As she approached, Carl handed something to the

girl, several small items which she gratefully accepted and then ran off before Nancy was close enough to greet them.

“Condoms,” Carl said before Nancy inquired. “Safe than sorry, that’s my motto.”

Throughout the afternoon they were visited by people who were just being friendly and others who needed help. The worst case was Manny’s ankle, but several freak-outs were brought in by friends, placed on the cots inside the tent and watched over until they calmed down. Usually, that took a few hours and it was getting dark when Carl said, “Well, it can only get worse.”

Nancy was certain their truck was the last resource for many of these people who seemed completely unprepared for the outdoors. One case of severe sunburn on face and arms was taken care of with zinc oxide; a cut finger got splinted and bandaged; two people had bad rashes that Carl diagnosed as poison oak. A guy named Vic took a header into the rut that separated their camp from the sound stage. Carl looked into Vic’s eyes with a small flashlight, pronounced him free of a concussion. Vic said he was looking for his lighter, was not paying attention, was looking at the ground when he fell. Carl bandaged his head.

The sun was long gone and Nancy lost awareness of time. The sunset had been brilliant. She watched it from a large outcropping of rock at the edge of the glade through a forest of trees and steep hillsides. When hunger demanded she eat, Carl dug out a portable propane stove with two burners and proceeded to heat plastic pouches that contained creamed vegetables, meat he claimed was steak although Nancy questioned that as she stared at a piece on the end of her fork, and macaroni which he boiled from scratch and mixed with a powdered material to form a cheese flavored sauce.

Carl collected the paper plates and plastic forks which he tossed into a large black garbage bag tied to a table leg on which the stove sat and said, “Won’t be long now. Music usually starts after the stars come out.”

She wandered over to the staging area and got back behind the altar on which sticks of incense burned. She examined the equipment. There were no musical instruments, but there were digital audio playing devices, a master mixing board with sixteen dimmer switches, a couple of CD players, a reel to reel tape player, two turntables and some very large speakers set up in front.

She was actually looking forward to hearing what kind of sounds this system could put out. Perhaps it would be as good as sitting in an orchestra pit with full surround.

Many in the encampment, Nancy estimated at least half the people in the glade, milled around in front of the sound system in anticipation.

And then it began, slowly at first with sharp drum sounds, deep and heavy, which gave way to a spirited electronic pinging mingled with a mechanical techno beat no human hand could duplicate in its precision. Then a creaky, stretched out voice, she assumed it was Lahore Larry but his lips did not move, said, “I’m baaaaacccckkkk.”

The volume was turned up and techno trance music began pounding really loudly inside her head as she was assailed by the repetitive cacophony of noise from which there was no escape and which she had to admit she did not enjoy. In fact, it would have been on the bottom of her list of musical preferences, right down there with hip-hop if she had her say in the matter.

Which she did not.

Carl sat back in his chair, his eyes closed and a contented look on his face. He enjoys this, she said to herself. He really likes listening to this shit.

Rather than fight it, she allowed the rhythms to flow into her body. She closed her eyes and tried to feel the warmth the music seemed to generate in others, but it must not have been the same for her. All she heard was annoying screeches, bumps and glissandos that trampled her ears and pulsated inside her stomach which reacted like it was trying to reject something bad she had eaten.

The volume was too loud to carry on a normal conversation so she said nothing for at least an hour. She grew bored and, noting that Carl was in no mood to move, grabbed the flashlight and went back over to the stage which was lighted from electric bulbs that must be operating on the same generator that powered the sound system. Lahore Larry stood behind the altar wearing a wide smile, his eyes half closed, bobbing from side to side as if carried away by the music.

The entire camp appeared packed into the space in front. The tightly knotted group wore equally contented smiles as they swayed and sometimes hopped in place. There was no room to really dance and you could not fall over if you tried.

There was no break in the flow of sound, no interruption as Lahore Larry segued from one powerful computer generated pitch to the next. Another hour went by and she found herself back beside the truck, earplugs in, but doing absolutely nothing to quiet the repetitive cadence which ran the gamut from clacking and chirping to rolling thunder and around again to electronic accents.

“How long will he play, you think?” She asked after fifteen more minutes without interruption.

“Hunh? You say something?” Carl’s eyes opened but he made no move toward her to hear better.

She shouted, “Yah. I asked how long this goes on?”

“Till Sunday, midnight. Maybe into Monday, but not always.”

“You mean he goes all night? He doesn’t stop at, like closing time in California, two in the morning?”

“Nope. For the next 28 hours Larry won’t eat, sleep, shit, shower or shave. He just stands there smiling, rocking from side to side and picking his pieces from the computer or cuing a DAT or vinyl record or tape. Frankly, I find his endurance amazing.”

There was no escape. She realized what Carl had meant about being able to get to sleep in the first place. The earplugs did nothing. They were not going to be of any use at this decibel level and unless you hiked over the mountain and pitched your camp there, it was impossible to avoid the thrumming, thumping electronic tones that emanated from the set of at least four and probably more very large speakers hidden somewhere nearby and planted on pedestals within yards of where she was going to have to spend the next two nights.

“Migod,” she thought as she wished for a strong shot of Tequila, “What have I gotten myself into this time?”

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