

would start with that route. Since his offices were at the hospital, it was easier to check in for a stay there while she received treatment. They had no children and had decided that they didn't want to take a chance on bringing a damaged child into the world after their radiation exposure from the San Mirado nuclear catastrophe that had occurred while they were living in Southern California. She thought about all those young Japanese women now heavily exposed to the radiation released when the Fukushima nuclear reactors melted down in 2011...and sighed heavily, thinking back on her own experiences.

But if she were going to continue her life, she had to rise above these thoughts and move on to what she enjoyed. She picked up her tablet and began to type an email to her friends. "I'm out of jail! I'm coming down to visit next week. Call me if you can go out to play. Sara"

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NUCLEAR ROAD TRIP - ONWARD to DESTRUCTION

PROLOGUE

THE FATUOUS BLOWHARD, Erich Schneider, was leaning over his desk, looking into a mirror placed directly in the center. He moved closer, and holding one nostril shut, sniffed deeply. The white powder on the mirror disappeared in a rush, hitting his brain with a jolt. He then inhaled through his other nostril; he loved the feeling of the jolt and the subsequent high.

He leaned back, thinking "aaahhhh," when claxons began to reverberate loudly in his ears at monitor #3. "What the???" he thought, jumping up from his chair. He glanced at the #3 monitor and saw the message: radiation exceeding maximum levels of emissions from stack.

He quickly scooped up the mirror, razor blade and the bag of white powder, folded a magazine around them, and put the magazine with its contents in a file marked, "Classified." This he stuffed into a desk drawer which he quickly locked. It cost extra for the powdered form, but he could afford it. Erich certainly did not want to do the work himself. It was called being inherently lazy.

Going to the door, he slid the deadbolt open and rushed past his secretary. "No calls, Margaret, not until I make sure this is under control," he called out as he continued walking.

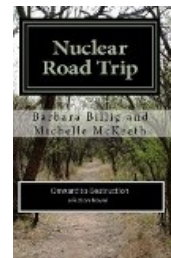
"What is happening, Dr. Schneider?" she shouted anxiously, trying to be heard over the ear-splitting noise. Margaret had heard one too many alarms blaring since she began working for Erich. Each occurrence made her want to quit and move west where there would be far fewer nuclear plants surrounding her - in any direction. The Chicago area was rife with them.

"Nothing to be concerned about, Margaret; it is probably just a bad sensor. But I want those damned alarms shut off," he said brusquely as he turned into the corridor and headed for the main control room. "God, I could use another hit; this place with its constant stress and pressure is getting to me," he thought to himself.

An employee wearing a white lab coat was coming toward him. As they came abreast of one another, the employee did a tight one-eighty, quickly swinging into step with Erich. "We are lowering the control rods now, Dr. Schneider," he said loudly, albeit in a reassuring tone, searching Schneider's face.

"Do NOT patronize me, young man," he stormed. "What is the chance it has a bad sensor?" Dr. Schneider snapped, continuing to make his way quickly to the control room.

"Not good. You know how it is: same thing, new day," the employee answered.



The main control room was ahead and he jerked the door open. "Turn off that damned siren," shouted Schneider. "We got the message already. There is a problem. Shut that damned thing off!"

The claxons were finally silenced. "Ah," he sighed, and thought, "The sound of silence really can be wonderful."

He looked around at the various employees, most in lab coats, in front of the computer banks, dials and gauges.

A young woman stepped forward and said quietly but firmly, "The rods are dropped, sir. We are going to have to shut it down, however." Her voice sounded almost like a whisper after the noise of the warning horns.

Dr. Schneider looked apoplectic. "Pancorp is going to have a cow. A massive one which is going to dump all over me," he exclaimed. "The bad publicity, the lost revenue from a shutdown, angry customers, and the cost of repairs are bad enough. But the board and the shareholders will be looking for someone to sacrifice. Are you certain?" he asked, a pleading look in his eyes.

"Sorry, Doctor, but once again, it is definitely a leak in the cooling pipes. They are old and have been patched in so many places already," she shrugged. "A temporary patch simply will not do; it needs to be permanently repaired. We have to shut it down to remove the damaged section and weld a new pipe in its place. This time the hole is too large. We could replace all the piping, but that requires a permit. It would be really expensive, and the plant would probably be down for a year—at the very least."

"Okay, okay," he waved his arms in the air, declaring defeat. "No big deal; and we will not be down for a year replacing pipes. I will prepare yet another press release," Erich looked up, a glare upon his face as he spoke to the gathered employees. "No one here is to say a word to the media. Not if you value your jobs," he said, grim-faced. "In fact, no one, and I mean no one," he practically growled, "discusses this with anyone outside this plant, including spouses, lovers - hell, even pets! Is that understood?" he demanded, staring in turn at each person in the room. "I am certain I can have you arrested for treason if you do," he assured them. "And you can enjoy Guantanamo Bay for the rest of your measly little lives," he turned on his heel and stomped back toward his office.

When Dr. Schneider returned to his office, Margaret was busy answering the plant's phones. She slid the microphone from her headset aside and said, "Reporters are calling; they want to know what has happened. The alarms can be heard outside the plant," she told him. "And the General Director of Pancorp called. They are sending five evaluators who work for the Nuclear Regulatory Commission to the plant. He said to make sure the leak is repaired by the time they arrive. Pancorp wants to look like they care, but in order to downplay the seriousness of the situation, the evaluators have been given two weeks to arrive; they were essentially put on vacation. The plant, however, is to remain closed until they have finished their evaluation; the employees who were told to stay home are on paid leave. And the rest of the employees will stay unless told otherwise." Margaret moved toward the keyboard of her computer. "I will print the directive which just arrived by email."

Dr. Schneider gazed blankly at Margaret for a moment, shaking his head in disbelief. "They are giving them a vacation when we are shut down? What the???" he thought to himself for the second time that morning. He entered his office and dug out his magazine. He really needed another hit. Maybe two.

JAKARTIAN SAT IN the Barnes and Noble Book Store in Joliet, Illinois, west and south of Chicago. He was sipping the cheapest and smallest coffee the store had to offer, which he had loaded with sugar and cream at their expense. He sat watching the doorway. His name was really Jakarta, but felt Jakartian sounded more sophisticated and Jakartian did not make him sound like a city. He, as much as any other person, desired respect.

A dark-skinned man entered and casually glanced around the room before proceeding to the order station. After a few minutes, he had a cup of something hot and walked out the door.

Jakartian casually stood up, and he too left the book store. He followed the dark-skinned man as he continued around a corner within the covered shopping mall, leading him to a more deserted section. There was a vacant unit next to a music store where the dark-skinned man stopped, looking through the glass at nothing.

Jakartian approached and said casually, "Have you decided?"

The man responded, "No. We are still looking at a dirty bomb, or infecting their software, or both."

"You have the contact, though? That came through?" Jakartian asked softly, but firmly for assurance.

"Yes. We believe we have someone who will work with us. We have had many discussions."

contacted.”

“But you can get the virus for the software prepared.” Jakartian made it a statement, not a question as he would not tolerate hesitation.

“Again, yes. We have hackers just as everyone else does.”

“You know they allow no strange personnel in these nuclear plants. They all have to have security clearances. And they cannot bring in portable devices either, as they are always searched.”

“Snowdon had security clearances. How much good did it do them? None. And he was not allowed portable devices either. Everyone thinks a rule makes it happen.”

“So what is next?” posed Jakartian.

“Look into the water supply for the nuclear plant. Check out how the pipes bring it in and from what source. And get drawings or photos of the blueprints. They are public record. Look for vulnerable areas outside the facility,” replied the man.

“All right. Give me a week. Check my drop for the signal telling you I have the material prepared.” Jakartian moved casually away, tossing his empty Barnes and Noble cup into the trash.

The dark-skinned man walked the other direction.

ONE: John and Aadhil on Vacation

“**WHAT DOES ROUTE 66** have to do with anything?” asked John (Rocky) Rockford, a trim, solidly built six foot, five inch, tall man who exuded strength, reliability and trustworthiness: a rock among men. “Nowadays, it is no longer traveled with any degree of frequency. It is not even on the maps anymore, although there is a movement to put it back,” John smiled. “Did you know that parts have been overtaken by Interstate 40?”

Lick, lick.

“Darn it, Bear, stop licking me!” John grumbled for the umpteenth time, wiping his face with a towel he kept at hand. “Remind me why we brought this dog again?” asked John, although it was a rhetorical question and treated as such by Aadhil, who just grinned at John. Bear licked only John; it was a game they played. Well, Bear played anyway. He licked. John complained. It worked. It was routine. It was funny.

“More than thirteen million people now travel Route 66 each year, so that is probably why it will go back on the maps,” responded Aadhil Nazir proudly.

“Over the years it has been called, the “Will Rogers Highway,” “The Mother Road” and the “Main Street of America,” continued John, ignoring Aadhil’s comments. “And it stood as a symbol of opportunity, adventure and exploration for all travelers. It represented the golden years, when the world was still fresh and new, possibilities were endless, and life was simpler. It was completed in 1926—about midway between WWI and WWII— but in 1985, Route 66 was officially decommissioned. The familiar highway markers came down, essentially closing the road. Oh, and it was also known for the song, “Get Your Kicks on Route Sixty-six” This was from the song, and the television show of the early 1960s, ‘Route 66.’” John was smiling with glee.

John was on a roll now. “Route 66 is a historical landmark. Its distance has changed over the years, from 2,448, in 1926 down to 2278 miles in 1947, running from Chicago, Illinois, to Santa Monica, California. It was the first cross-country road built and used extensively for travel, especially during the “dust bowl” years, which is somewhat ironic as it was initially a dusty, unpaved two-lane road. Parts of Interstate 40 eventually rolled right over it, so now there are bypasses and frontage roads. There are still many folks trying to make a living from Route 66 on those bypasses and frontage roads. Indeed, in a recent study done by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior, more than \$132,000,000 is spent per annum in communities along historic Route 66, shedding new light on the importance of preserving it. Money speaks,” he finished.

Route 66 was important to Aadhil Nazir. He wanted to better understand his country of choice, and Route 66 represented a major role in the making of the United States. He also wanted a much needed vacation, as did they all, so it had everything to do with him, and ultimately, with all of them.

“You have stolen my...my, I forget, but you have stolen it. Parade. That is it. Thief! How do you know so much about Route 66?” he demanded, now accusatory and suspicious. “You did not even want to come this way! Bear. Lick!” Bear obligingly licked John, who wiped

"Some people have all the nerves," replied a disgruntled Aadhil. "But I bet that is all you know."

"You have me there, Aadhil. I have given you everything I memorized from the guide book!"

"Good. Steal the parade from someone else in the future," he blurted.

Aadhil Nazir was Muslim, still fighting for his place in the world. After twelve years of residency in the United States, he knew Muslims were largely disliked and automatically thought of as terrorists. Often he struggled with the concept of how to convey the reality that terrorists were a minority group, and not always Muslim.

Aadhil had very refined and pleasing features, with prominent cheekbones, black hair and nearly black, fathomless eyes. He was also a very good-natured, kind and gentle thirty-one year old man. Many of his colleagues considered him to be far too young to hold the degrees he had earned. Aadhil was a genius who achieved his Ph.D in nuclear engineering at the ripe old age of twenty-four. He accomplished this feat within a very suspicious country, in which he was only now a new citizen, even though he had moved here at nineteen. He was 5'9", of average build, usually hiding his musculature under Muslim garments. Friends and strangers alike found he always had their backs for a good cause, because he was also a loyal and caring person. "This is my parade," he declared, again wearing a determined look.

"Please stop the truck, John. Bear-Lee-a-Dog needs to take care of his business and have some water as he is thirsty," Aadhil reached into the back seat to pet his yellow Labrador Retriever, who looked rather dashing in his red mesh 'Service Dog' harness.

"Did we not just do that?"

"Quit telling of the jokes, John. You know he has not done his business since before we left, and he must be thirsty as well. I know I am."

Once they had stopped, Aadhil let Bear out the back door and they began walking a short distance from the road, with Bear glued to his side.

John watched them, smiling fondly. Aadhil's doctor had suggested that a Service Dog might help Aadhil deal with the stresses of his job. The doctor had written a medical need letter after Bear had been adopted. The medical letter permitted Bear immediate access to any facility or building. But the dog had progressed with more training far beyond his initial service designations. He was, as far as John knew, the only dog allowed within the walls of any of the sacrosanct nuclear power plants in the entire world, making him quite unique.

Bear, beloved as he was, even had his own harnesses in a variety of colors, announcing he was a Service Dog and was entitled to be accepted within any establishment. Aadhil kept Bear's paperwork in his wallet, just in case he was detained for any reason. Bear also had several sets of work clothes, each with its own lightweight cooling system so Bear's core temperature could be maintained between 100 degrees and 102 degrees while inside any plant. The dog's work clothes were emblazoned upon the sides with the words, 'Service Dog' as well and 'Do Not Pet'. These work clothes met two important standards. First, Bear was clearly designated as a Service Dog, permitting him entry anywhere. And secondly, the dog had a sterile uniform which controlled his hair and dander while he was inside a nuclear power plant. The garment was made of a very lightweight mesh with such small holes it appeared to be a solid fabric. It was constructed somewhat like the pads available for human beds which kept the dust mites at bay, but was lighter. The material, which controlled his hair and dander, was developed specially for him, and for the other dogs that might follow in Bear's footsteps. He had become quite the phenomenon within the nuclear industry.

John was very fond of Bear, but grumbled when the dog licked him, just because he could. And it gave Aadhil a kick. Aadhil was his friend whom he had sponsored for his American Citizenship. He was hoping the two other team members they would pick up in Albuquerque did not grumble about Bear when they saw a dog was traveling with them. Bear had earned his seat. Furthermore, as far as John was concerned, if either complained, that person could sit among the baggage for all he cared. When John died, he wanted to come back as Bear-Lee-a-Dog III, for someone as amazingly wonderful as Aadhil. Of course, at thirty-nine, John hoped to wait awhile.

BACK IN THE CAR John and Aadhil were continuing their conversation as they sped along Route 66. "What are you talking about Aadhil?" John grumbled. "Caribou in one sentence and the Murrilltown, Illinois, nuclear power plant in the next? What do Caribou have to do with Murrilltown?" John Rockford turned piercing blue eyes to the right, glancing at his passenger. "Caribou. Really. They are in Alaska, and we are on Route 66, which is not even in the general direction of Alaska. By the way, this is a really slow way to travel," he sighed.

A nervous passenger, Aadhil Nazir, replied, "Please keep your eyes on the road, John. Yes. Caribou. You know what...2011," he said.

the wind from the open window spiked his straight black hair.

"No, and you are aware I know the significance of 2011. The nuclear disaster in Fukushima was one of the major events of the twenty-first century, not to be dismissed lightly. But I am on vacation now, which is how I know you are not dressed appropriately," John displayed an impish grin, dimples prominent as he baited his friend. "He is such an easy target," he thought.

"What is wrong with how I dress?"

"Well, you are wearing a t-shirt instead of a Kurta. And jeans? Really? I like your Kurtas and white baggy pants; they look so comfortable."

"I am on vacation, also, remember? And I am American Citizen now," Aadhil proudly announced, a glint in his eyes. "So I will be wearing of the jeans anytime I want, and I want," he retorted, with a curt nod. "And you are trying to change the subject, my friend. Again."

"The Caribou population has been decimated, John. The herd normally declines an average of 3% per year, which is bad enough as it implies the herd die-off, and it has been declining for a very long time. But since 2011, it has dropped by 28%, for an overall decline of 52% in just eight years. The largest drop in the herd occurred during 2011 and 2012," Aadhil informed him, with a look resembling horror upon his face. "This is why Caribou are important. They are very important to us right now because of Fukushima. Studies have shown the airborne radiation has increased from Fukushima," Aadhil concluded.

"What importance does it have right now?" John asked, still confused.

"Because of Morristown. Because of its leak."

John shook his head, frowning. "Well, that situation is under control at the moment. They have closed the plant and fixed the leak; I thought we were on vacation," was John's retort. "We are going to be very, very busy once we get there, so we really need this vacation. Now."

"We are, but the Fukushima meltdown had a severe impact upon both sea life and of the wildlife along the Western Coast of the United States. Do you not ever wonder what it is doing to the people who live there?" he persisted. "And especially if they have been eating of the local seafood. Morristown uses the same Boiling Water Reactors as Fukushima, but Morristown is so much older," he commented, "and it has the leaking of the radioactive particles and gases, which is why we are traveling there now, and why Caribou are important."

Aadhil slapped his forehead. He was not to be deterred. "The Caribou are important, yes, but what about the children? Who is to think of the children?" he cried.

Aadhil was so upset John pulled off the road and stopped the car, giving him a questioning look.

"What about the children? What children? What are you talking about?" John could clearly see Aadhil was agitated and about to panic, so he reached behind the seat and unbuckled Bear, calling him to jump into the front seat. Aadhil promptly wrapped his arms around his dog-child.

"The children on the Western Coast, especially in Washington, and now even in Nevada. The Caribou and the children. In 2011, right after the Fukushima, there was a sudden and dramatic spike in the number of children born with the horrid birth defects; especially the babies born with only the partial brains, or none at all. And almost all died immediately, but the parents suffered." Aadhil wore a horrified look with good cause.

John blanched. He was completely focused upon what Aadhil had to say now, while silently berating himself for getting sucked into this conversation. He was not ignorant of the impact Fukushima had upon the populace; it was not as if he did not work in the industry. But their colleagues, both in the United States and in Japan, were almost fanatical in not admitting anything was wrong after the Fukushima disaster. Their state of denial was thought to be an effort to protect their jobs. So much money had been invested in nuclear plants, the government was determined to continue their operation to generate profits. Somehow, various groups associated with nuclear had refused to see all this information while in pursuit of their own goals.

Aadhil continued, his face buried Bear's in fur. "All this slowed down in 2012 but it is still happening."

"I am so sorry, Aadhil, and you are right. It is catastrophic!" he exclaimed. "And Morristown, as you correctly pointed out, is a Boiling Water Reactor just like Fukushima. As old as it is, it probably should be permanently shut down."

"Thanks. Aadhil. One of the primary reasons I enjoy our friendship is because you are such a caring person; your empathy is what caused me to want to be your friend. But this denial of consequences from nuclear accidents is a problem within our industry. It is good you have Bear. Perhaps, though, you should work on your emotions a little more, Aadhil. You store so much knowledge in your brain. You sometimes become hyper-focused. That is why I think you never want to forget the children. Not even for a moment," John added, sympathy clearly displayed in his eyes, along with sadness for all those endangered children and their families.

John continued, "Bear has an innate sense for knowing when you need him. I will move his seat belt so he can stay up front with us for now. Of course, Bear seems to sense licking me will make you happy, so I will just..." John grunted while tugging the towel from beneath Bear, "hang on to this," he smiled, dangling the towel in front of himself. As if on cue—lick, towel, sigh, and a chuckle or two ensued.

John moved Bear's seat belt to the front and then restarted the SUV. They reentered traffic and proceeded along Route 66. "So, my friend, we must set these worries aside for now and move onward. Now, Morristown had a leak, which is very serious, as it released radioactive material into the air. So, yes, we need to discover how and why, and fix this situation. Permanently. What you may not know, since I have not mentioned it, is that Pancorp is putting me in charge. I have the authority to do whatever it takes to either fix the plant from head to toe or to shut it down permanently. This has been weighing heavily on my mind since we were ordered to Illinois by the NRC. We need to focus on Morristown, absolutely, and prevent more of the same."

"But right here, right now, we enjoy our vacation and let work wait until we get there. Trust me," John said, "it will still be there once we arrive," John urged. "And they did give us this vacation time, and we have not had a vacation since I cannot even remember when. So we will use it as such. Then we will be relaxed and ready to hit it hard when we get to the Morristown nuclear power plant," he said, a little more forcefully than intended. "You said this is a vacation, so vacation. And just think of poor Bear," he gave Bear a sad look. "He has never been on vacation." Lick. Sigh. Towel.

"This is true," replied a guilty-looking Aadhil Nazir. "Eyes. Road. Thank you." He gave Bear a big hug while Bear, never allowed to sit up front, enjoyed the sights.

"What did you want to stop and see?" John adroitly changed the subject. "Since this is a vacation, after all, and I can see you have been bursting with excitement all morning, where to McDuff?"

Aadhil looked very confused. "Who is McDuff, John?" Aadhil looked at John, a little worried about his sanity.

Small things made Aadhil happy, and John was willing to oblige. They were on Route 66 after all, which was certainly not his idea; he would have rather gone straight to Chicago to see the myriad of sites there. It would have been a much more relaxing and enjoyable vacation. Chicago was a thriving metropolis.

"Why, you are McDuff, Aadhil. It is a joke," said John, realizing this joke, like so many others, flew right over Aadhil's head.

"Ah. I see," he said, although he really did not. But that was okay with him since John thought it was funny. They were back on track for now. "Well, when we go to Missouri, we need to stop in Fanning to see the "Route 66 Rocking Chair," Aadhil responded excitedly. "It was completed on April Fool's Day as a joke, and everyone thought it was funny because who would be looking for a rocking chair off Route 66?"

John could not help himself. "Okay, I'll bite; what is so special about this rocking chair?" he asked. "They are a dime a dozen."

"No, they are not," he replied. Aadhil could be rather literal minded at times. "A good one is very expensive."

Aadhil then looked at John, a huge grin forming upon his youthful face, an unmanly giggle escaping his lips and excitement glowing from his eyes. "This one is 42 feet 1 inch tall and 20 feet 3 inches wide, and weighs 27,500 pounds. It does the rocking, although they have to keep it tied down as it would be very dangerous if it begins to rock and falls over. It was completed on April 1, 2008. I saw it on an annoying food show where this man eats a ton of food," he shuddered, "and looked it up. I have been waiting for this for a long while."

John smiled, a big grin forming upon his face while shaking his head in amusement. "You sound as if you are quoting text, but you are a font of information, Aadhil. And are we planning to sit in this chair?" he asked.

"That fat annoying eating machine did, but they had to hoist him up, so I do not know yet. He is famous. We are not. I hope we can. I have my camera, and four of us will be there to see," he noted. "And the owner said if anyone is to build a bigger one, so will he, and he will call it "Mama Bear," and the original would be the "Baby Bear."

"We must see first if it is safe for him to be up so far from the ground," responded Aadhil.

"What other sights have you chosen for our vacation?" John asked, giving in to the inevitable. "Or will we be bored until then? And where did you hide your itinerary? I have yet to see one."

Aadhil pointed at his head. "Here," he smiled. "is where I keep all good things," he winked at John. "No, of course we will not suffer boredom. Did you know the original Route 66 was unpaved?" he asked, reverting back to guide book mode. "And for your predilection," he smiled broadly, "we have The Rock Cafe, halfway between Tulsa and Oklahoma City. The Rock Cafe had burned to the ground at one point, but it was re-built from sandstone which was removed as Route 66 was being constructed. It was completed the same time as Route 66 was finished in Santa Monica. Now it is historically significant," he proudly informed John, "And do not forget most people call you Rocky, so you should be right at home there."

"Ha! How many of these sights you have so carefully chosen are just places for you to eat to fill that bottomless pit you call a stomach?" laughed John.

Aadhil frowned at him. "None, but this one is important to Route 66 and just happens to be someplace where we can have an eat. It is a lucky happenstance, yes? As will be the others," he gave John an impish grin. "How far have we traveled?" he asked.

"About 90 miles. Why?"

"Because the Petrified Forest is 120 miles from Flagstaff, right off Route 66. It should be our first stop because we need to take a break for Bear every two hours," he pointed out. "We are very close. I hope the restaurant is tasty."

"Really?" exclaimed John. "Are you planning on eating the restaurant, Aadhil?" he joked.

"I do not understand you John. Have you the crazies?"

John was chuckling. "No, Aadhil; I was joking because you said you hoped the restaurant is tasty, not the food at the restaurant."

"It is very clear to me you are trying too hard to be funny, John."

John was still chuckling, but Aadhil continued. "Yes. Well, it is 142 miles from Palo Verde to Route 66 by Flagstaff and another 120 miles to the Petrified Forest. Even you must be getting hungry, John."

"Well, yes, but please do not tell my friend, Aadhil, or he will start teasing me."

They both laughed and drove on in companionable silence. They had worked together for seven years and considered themselves close friends.

When they were almost to the desert area known as the Petrified Forest, they stopped at a local pub to enjoy cheeseburgers smothered with grilled onions surrounded by curly fries. John had a beer while Aadhil, as a Muslim, drank water. Of course, Bear-Lee-a-Dog ate his kibble and slurped his water with gusto. His water was bottled by a well-known U.S. manufacturer, and cases of it were packed for him when he traveled. His stomach, therefore, would not be exposed to possible upsets from local water sources. After getting a tiny bite of burger as a treat, the dog smiled and thought, "This vacation is pretty much fun."

While they were eating, John mentioned his sister, Chloe, who had once asked about petrified wood. She wanted to know if it could be burned in the fireplace. "She was born late in my mother's life and was only twelve at the time. She was so upset when I told her it really is not wood anymore, but rock. The striated colors come from the various iron and manganese compounds in the rock. On a sunny day these produce vibrant reds and oranges. The wood petrifies to become something else, while still maintaining the look of wood."

"She gave me a look full of horror because she thought it was just really old wood which had dried out and become really hard over the millennia. I think it was a week before she would speak with me again," he said. "Even now, she still gives me the stink eye as she states, "petrified wood."

Aadhil looked appropriately sympathetic. Mostly. He could also see her side, and hers was the most charming concept.

They had a fun afternoon sightseeing through the National Monument with Bear. After they exited the park, Bear was allowed to go off leash so he could sniff everything around him, and there was a lot to be sniffed. Aadhil even allowed him to briefly chase a squirrel before returning to the truck.

John nodded and proceeded to open the back door for Bear so he could jump into the truck. He was removing the leash when he noticed Aadhil had moved a short distance away. He could hear him speaking to someone. But the conversation was in a foreign language

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