

Chapter I

See Naples and Buy

Richard and Eleanor Eames had been married for almost sixty-five years. They watched television in separate rooms. Even so, they both saw the flicker of blue light slip in round the closed curtains. They knew the noiseless, ghostly hue announced another death. Wailing ambulances brought hope to The Lucent Park Estate. Vehicles which entered the retirement home complex to take away bodies were under orders to proceed through the grounds of The Estate without sirens, to remain as silent as the dead they were sent to remove.

Julia, one of two Eames grandchildren, was reading a book on the terrace of her grandparent's apartment when the engine of disposal crept in along The Inner Estate Road. Tacky yellow streetlights stood watch as the ambulance crawled through Lucent Park. Julia wondered how her grandparents could cope with the constant exit to eternity so commonplace in this, the last refuge of their lives.

Fiercely independent, Richard and Eleanor planned ahead for these years so as not have to rely on anyone but themselves and the services their money could buy. Suddenly, Julia's help had become essential to their comfort and well-being. These two committed members of the Everglade's Elderly Happy Ending Fraternity could not be totally prepared for the unpredictable. Lucent Park had been sold to a corporate giant. Slowly but surely, the foundations of the luxurious retirement home were shifting. Or, as Eleanor Eames might have said, when all her mental faculties were in peak condition, "Someone is moving the goal posts."

On the telephone, four nights earlier, Julia had heard the panic in her grandfather's voice. Ellie was not well. To see a doctor you had to go to the doctor's office. Ellie wasn't sick enough to be hospitalized. The Lucent social worker could only help Eleanor by arranging for the couple to engage the services of a home help aid. "Ellie won't have it," her grandfather explained. "Ellie says, 'All they do is hold your hand and take your money'. No, she won't go into The Care Clinic either. She thinks they won't let her come home once she's been admitted."

From Atlanta, Julia managed to get a seat on a flight that brought her to Southwest Florida late, late in the night. Julia was shocked to see how awful her grandmother looked. Ellie's eyes were rich with gratitude when she realized Julia was by her side. Eleanor Eames gave Julia Eames a huge bony hug. Julia had never known her grandparents or herself to be more emotionally demonstrative than normal self-respecting White Anglo-Saxon Protestants ought to be. On this occasion, Julia ignored tradition, let herself be loved and was able to return her grandmother's affection with ease.

Fortunately, Julia had been free to come to the aid of her grandparents in their time of need. Julia was at the beginning of a two-year sabbatical from teaching language teachers. Until today, Julia had been planning to use this period to create software for a French English dictionary which could be called up over a cell phone.

Three nights after her arrival on The Estate, Julia was seated in the Lucent dining room with her grandfather, several Lucent residents including Cary Cunningham and Cary's guest, Paul Vanderstappen. Cary insured Paul was seated next to Julia. The conversation of the newly-introduced couple was limited until Paul suddenly asked Julia, "Do you think you can introduce me to an American woman whose name does not end in eee or uh?" He looked straight at Julia. She thought for a while.

Julia's eyes wandered round the table. She recited the names of the ladies present, "Rebecca, Marjorie, Cary," Ellie was not there. Grandma E. was still too weak to come to the dining room. "There are lots of Lynns, Anns and Carols, you know" Julia said to her new acquaintance. "But you have a point. Giving ourselves little girl names must make us feel pure and innocent or maybe names simply go in and out of fashion but, surely, there is some kind of cultural link.

Did you ever notice," Julia continued, warming to the subject, "how the same swear word can shock in one language, yet be acceptable in another? I can think of common words in French I would embarrass myself to say out loud in English, even today. Someone should do a sociological, etymological kind of comparative study on the subject."

"Probably too late for English," Paul said. "The big bad F word has been absorbed into many languages. Most folk in this world can even say the F with their fing...hands. Tell me, how is it you know so much French?"

"I taught English in Brussels for three years. I gave one of those total immersion courses. My students were Eurocrats and corporocrats and the odd local catcrat." Julia, embarrassed by the weight of her words, blushed. She was aware her attempt to make a verbal joke had stalled, not taken flight.

Paul didn't seem to register the laborious wordplay. He was thinking of Brussels. "In Brussels? We're into 'small world' here. I am Belgian, well half Belgian," he said. "I was raised in Brussels. My mother is American, my father Belgian. I have dual nationality. All my early formal education was in French-speaking schools in Brussels. I spent almost every summer with my mother's family in Kansas. Now I live here in Florida, well North Florida. You know Cary is putting me up at The Guest Haven? She calls me Inspector Leek, her very own Hercule Poiereau. The only thing I'm missing is the accent and the moustache. I'm not sure you've heard but Cary's let everyone think I'm her grandnephew from Brussels. I'm supposed to be here on behalf of my doctor uncle, doing research to help him establish an American style clinic and retirement home in Belgium. I'll tell you all about it later when we're not so close to interested company. You might be able to help me too." Paul quickly changed the subject. The others at the table had started to focus their attention on them. "Are you staying with your grandparents?"

Their conversation was interrupted by an elderly, not to say ancient woman draped in a designer dress. Expensive as it was, bright as it was, the dress would have looked better on a younger female form or even a doll. Grotesque, this poor purple haired, skeletal being was determined to live her delusion of youth to the bitter end.

"How's your grandmother, dear? We do wish you could get her to come to the dining room."

The dress seemed to flit off without its contents waiting for an answer. Julia looked around the glitzy dining room into a sea of purple hair.

“I’m not staying in their apartment,” Julia finally said in response to Paul’s question. “I’m at The Guest Haven too, where you are. I’ve seen you coming and going. My room’s at the end of the hall. As much as I enjoy being with Grandma and Grandpa, I’m happy they can afford for me to have a place for myself. I do need some space on occasion and, more than that, I am desperate to have my own air. In their apartment, one must not touch the thermostat. I hate air conditioning! Besides irritating my eyes, more often than not, I’m cold! This is the first time I can remember being in Florida during the season. The real air is delicious. I have, finally, understood why people vacation here. But, why they come here to live year round in air conditioning is beyond me.”

Paul smiled. “As much as I long for the dripping, low, leaden skies of my other native land, I can put up with everything in Florida except, maybe, its success.”

“Yes, hasn’t the traffic gotten just horrible? I’ve always come in the summer. I didn’t realize how bad was bad.”

“The car is wrecking the world. Belgium is just as swamped by traffic congestion as Florida.”

“In Florida the automobile has swamped the swamp.” This time, Julia laughed at her own joke.

“You know,” she said quietly to Paul, “I see Naples and buy. The secondhand market here is just fantastic. Sometimes you uncover the richest treasures in the Goodwill stores. They are donated by people who are so wealthy they can’t be bothered with consignment shops. You should try it sometime. I know most men don’t like to shop. Heaven forbid, the “hommes” of this world should buy used clothes. It’s their loss. There is greater choice on the masculine side, especially in the charity shops. Men’s wear is always a lot less picked over than the women’s apparel.”

“I’ll be glad to try once, if you will show me where to go.”

“Hang on a minute. I’m doing a double think. What did you mean about being a Poireau?” Julia questioned.

He answered with another question, “Can we meet tomorrow to talk-shop?”

“Of course, if you can pick me up behind my Grandparents’ building at around ten o’clock; I’ll be there. That will give me enough time to get their day started and the stores to be open.”

Richard Eames rang his water glass with a spoon. The Haitian waiter waited. Once the orders were in and Julia’s grandfather had requested “cold cream” on his baked potato for the thousand and one’th time and everyone had politely laughed, except the Haitian waiter who didn’t quite get it, they trooped to the salad bar to load their plates with the best part of the meal. Since the new direction had taken over The Lucent Park Estate, now refreshingly described as A Place of Excellence by Incor, the quality of the food had dissolved down to what you would expect to get in an airplane. Not quite that bad, but pretty bad, mostly cooked

ahead, zapped tepid by microwaves and led undercover to unhungry diners. The large majority of the older Parkers found their sense of taste as diminished as their ability to hear, nevertheless, the ritual of formal meals kept up their morale. The ladies and gentlemen of The Park were highly critical of anyone who drooled. "Excellence" had introduced new rules, which added to the ceremonial rites required for their communion. Men now had to wear jackets every evening of the week to be seated in the dining room for dinner, not just on Sunday. If a resident couldn't keep up with the new standards, an order for the evening meal had to be placed with the kitchen before noon. Someone needed to pick up the food after five. Who that someone was, was the consumer's obligation to recruit on their own, if they could; otherwise, a Parker had the option of paying Lucent to deliver their daily bread to their door.

Julia wondered what the real connection was between Paul and Cary. As for Cary, Julia thought she was the prettiest older person she had ever met. Cary was, also, the only older person Julia had ever met who could wear fabulous clothes with style. Cary was cheerful. She was thoughtful. The twinkle in her eye sparkled alongside her sparkling necklaces and shimmering scarves. Her whole being stood up to age and said, "I'm here. I am what I am and I'm going to make the best of it." Cary helped everyone else to be comfortable. She was forever saying, "Are we having fun yet?" When Julia was a little girl visiting her grandparents at Lucent Park, Cary had always let Julia drive her golf cart, "The Pink Panther." "Don't run over the alligator," Cary would caution. Julia didn't know how much to believe in this jolly warning. She had heard tales of alligators reclaiming their lost territory from the Florida developers and their clients. Occasionally, the odd dog went missing. There had been a couple of attacks on children. Julia, the child, quieted her anxiety by reminding herself that being in "The Pink Panther" did give her an advantage if she were ever to roll onto a fast fossil. She was, after all, riding on a panther.

As the wine continued to be liberally served, the conversation at the table became more animated. Mr. Eames insisted his glass be topped to the top. "Three fingers," he demonstrated. Mr. Eames didn't spill a drop of wine but after dinner he did stumble several times before Ellie's meal reached the kitchen counter in their apartment.

When Richard Eames was tired, he invariably walked on the tips of his toes. The best he could do with Ellie's dinner, this night and most nights, was to drop the packaged food harshly next to the microwave, trip off to his chair and let himself fall down into his personal solid, soft, safe place. Ellie usually took these "slam bam thank you mam" gestures to be aggressions towards her. Sometimes her husband positively threw things at her. On some level, Richard knew, but was too proud to say, he couldn't take another step without crashing into his wife. He therefore flipped objects in Ellie's direction before he fled to seek out the security of his chair or bed.

Once, Ellie had left a thick catalogue on the carpeted floor beside her chair. Richard stepped on it, slipped on it and tumbled across Ellie. One of Ellie's arms was trapped between her husband's lower back and the arm of the armchair. Fortunately, Julia's sister, Penny, was there when the incident happened. Penny saw it happen. Fortunately, Ellie's arm wasn't broken. Ellie screamed as if her significant other could move, if only he would; as if her arm really was broken; as if Richard had fallen on her on purpose. Penny braced her body, gave Grandpa E. her arm to hold. Richard pulled. Penny held firm. He was a big strong man. With Penny's support, her grandfather got to his feet.

The event left terrific bruises on Ellie's arm. They all wondered what the doctor would think. Once Julia had taken care of her grandparents for a period of time, she realized why Grandma E bruised so easily. The catalogue incident deserved a bruise but Ellie could hardly touch herself without coming up black and blue. Before considering the presence of a possible granny basher in the family, a thoughtful doctor should have recognized clear signs of dehydration in his patient. Grandma E. didn't drink water. She did drink wine. Grandpa Richard brought wine to her by the gallon. The pink liquid was called "Blush", the most popular choice of grape offered in the Lucent dining room. Many "Parkers," Ellie included, would start their "Blushing" in the late afternoon, continue through dinner and keep sipping until bedtime.

Grandpa Richard wouldn't let Julia help carry her Grandmother's meal home but now, having arrived at his destination, he was too tired to warm the food or even to present one or other dish to his wife. Eleanor Eames complained bitterly for a few minutes before losing her thoughts to the television. Julia was sure this was no special occasion. Julia had found stacks of meals molding in the refrigerator. Julia had been discretely fishing out and throwing out pots of this, cups of that, reams of food, green and stinking, from the bowels of her grandparents' huge refrigerator. Ellie was living, almost exclusively, on wine, candy and potato chips.

Julia asked her grandmother what part of the meal she would like to eat. Eleanor said the soup was all she needed.

"Have you taken your medicine?" Julia asked.

Her grandmother wasn't sure. Over the last few days, Julia had emptied the medicine cabinet as she had the refrigerator. Pills, drops and in-halers that were weeks, if not years past their sell by date were everywhere. Grandma Eames had enough baby aspirin to supply a hospital ward of cardiac patients. Julia also found at least twenty-five rolls of Bounty kitchen paper towels and ten double gallon bottles of "Blush". These had all slipped out of sight and mind into the back of beyond on a lower L shaped shelf of a kitchen cupboard. Grandpa Eames drove his Cadillac Seville to the local Publix at least twice a week to top up on supplies. In addition to other multiples, the kitchen also stored six pounds of navy beans and a cabinet full of Campbell's soup.

Julia drew up a chart. She listed all the medication her grandmother was to take morning, noon, night and at bedtime. Ellie was sure she didn't need a method to check on herself. "Of course I remember," she said. When Julia insisted her grandmother mark each square of the schedule as she took the medicine, Ellie was annoyed, indignant. Julia wanted to create a habit her grandmother could maintain when she was gone. "Don't worry. I'll remember." Without a written reminder, Julia couldn't keep it all straight herself. How could she expect Grandma E. to get it right?

Ellie wouldn't listen to Richard either. He tried to get her to have a bath at least once a week. "I don't need it! I don't do anything! I don't get dirty!" Half of Eleanor's thought was true enough. Ellie didn't get a lot of exercise. She was on oxygen twenty-four hours a day. Eleanor had smoked a pack of cigarettes daily for fifty-two years before she finally quit. One of their oldest friends described his wife, another x-smoker, as now being tethered to her oxygen tank. Ellie was the same. Eleanor had about fifty-five feet of tubing that constantly

followed her through their apartment. She deftly looped and un-looped the plastic lifeline as if it were a mini garden hose. Occasionally, she would have to shake it, snake wise, to take out the kinks. Richard was responsible for changing and regulating the tanks. Their system, with the help of monthly delivery and maintenance calls by the oxygen supply company technician, seemed to work fairly efficiently.

The other medical delivery device that didn't work at all was the motorized in-hailer. If either Eames remembered Ellie was meant to use the appliance in the first place, neither of them could put it together. Ellie would deep breath into the mouthpiece without the machine functioning, or the instrument would be turned on but one of the tubes would be disconnected.

"Dear, oh, dear," Julia fretted. Something had to be done. Here they were, an eighty-eight year-old man taking care of an invalid, slightly fuzzy in the head eighty-five-year old woman. They didn't seem to have any support from anyone on the staff of The Estate. Julia thought she remembered her grandparents had once explained to her that after they entered the retirement home, Lucent Park was supposed to take care of them until they died. It hadn't taken more than four days of common sense, unskilled, untrained TLC from Julia for Ellie to rise from her deathbed and return to a comfortable state of being.

The next morning Paul waited in his car for Julia to arrive. The Estate provided guest parking behind each residential unit. Julia was a little late but Paul didn't mind. The delay gave him an opportunity to watch the last of the birds on their morning feed. A ditch by the fenced border of The Park grounds, in this x-Everglade territory, filled naturally with water. The resulting wetland soon attracted a multitude of creepy crawly settlers. These creatures caught the attention of sharp-eyed egrets and their fellows. One large, long-beaked specimen, rather than spring and spear for its breakfast, seemed to set its beak in the bog, systematically pry open the mud and then wait for an unsuspecting passerby to enter his trap. The bird would clap shut his beak, uplift his long bill skywards, toss his catch from horizontal to vertical and swallow the unfortunate captive, whole and wriggling, down through the length of his long throat. Nearby, a flock of doves cooed as they pecked at the ground under a lime tree. They broke and flew up onto the telephone line when Julia arrived.

"Tell me where to go," Paul said.

"I'm sorry I'm late. I tried to convince Grandma to have a bath. She promised she would have one tomorrow."

Julia shook her head as if to disperse her frustration and concentrate on their morning excursion.

"OK," she said. "To quote Cary, 'Are we having fun yet?' Let's start at the little shopping U round the corner. Go out the front gates, left, then left again at the light and another left opposite the grocery store."

When they reached the small plaza, Paul parked in front of the church shop, aptly named "Reincarnation".

“They could call it ‘The Second Coming’,” Paul said. He opened the store door to a blast of air-conditioned cold. Paul winced when he inhaled the stale odor of closeted sweat. In spite of this pervasive and unpleasant perfume, he went through a rack of summer jackets. Most were plaid or striped. All were wild with color. “Somehow they’re not me,” he said, smiling broadly. Julia took him to the shelves that held records and books. “Better. Much better,” he said.

Paul found a collection of early Armstrong jazz records. “I’ll have these for sure.”

They paid the ladies who manned the cashbox. Julia led Paul across a grassy ditch to the other leg of the U.

“No one is expected to walk in this country, even from here to there,” Julia said with apologies.

“Belgium has sidewalks. They have become Pooh Corners and parking lots,” Paul said.

Julia directed Paul to a consignment shop. “There should be no smell in here. The proprietress is very strict about all clothes being cleaned before she will accept them.”

This door opened to the flavor of a small drama. The shopkeeper’s attitude was hard and false. You could see she had learned to ignore any sort of suffering or pain manifested by people who wanted to sell their clothes. This was no charity shop. A woman of a certain age, visibly upset, was pleading. “We had an agreement. We made an appointment last fall. I spent two weeks, day and night, washing all these things.” The distraught woman, by now close to tears, paused before a wall of silence. The shopkeeper made no eye contact with the woman or the dresses she held in her arms. “Do you mean you won’t even look? I have more in the car. They’re beautiful clothes.”

Finally, the store owner didn’t so much answer as sneer, “Sorry, I don’t take synthetics. Size eight is too small. They would not suit my clients.” The distressed woman pulled herself up in defeated rage, anger and frustration. She left the shop.

Before the door had time to close, the shopkeeper eyed Julia and Paul. She addressed them in a tone that expected they would understand the kind of people she had to deal with, “What can you do? I have standards to maintain.”

For a second Paul was struck dumb. Julia was numb with anger and embarrassment. Then Paul found words to express his feelings. “We can’t afford your standards, at any price. We will not do business here. We will tell everyone we know why they should never put their foot across the entrance to this wretched door.” Paul and Julia exited with as much dignity and disdain as they could throw into their postures. They crossed back through the sunken grass island to their car. Julia wondered what Paul was thinking. She liked him. She liked him a lot. He was calm. He was quiet. He didn’t fluster.

Julia now directed Paul to the chicest secondhand shop in the area. When they arrived Julia said, “Uh oh! My heavens, she must still be trying to sell her mother’s things. See, that’s her car, the one with all the clothes on the backseat.”

This third repeat boutique door opened into an atmosphere of sophistication and kindness, definitely no smells in this establishment. The woman they knew from the last shop was having her mother's dresses rejected here too. The grieving daughter had to accept the obvious. She would inherit no pecuniary treasure from her mother's lovely wardrobe. February was the high season. This shop, the best of its kind, was organized to work; now or never. Their goal was to turnover merchandise efficiently and fast during these months when customers were on the ground in huge numbers. Clothes and accessories were accepted by appointment only, nevertheless, the shop had more fine rags admitted and still to be admitted than most major department stores housed on a whole floor. The managers couldn't let themselves be overwhelmed with merchandise but they could deal gently with those they had to refuse.

The lady in charge of receiving, pricing and labeling consignments apologized to the distraught woman. She recognized this person was in deep mourning, only just on the edge of understanding the meaning that echoed between these clothes and the loss of her mother. The shopkeeper had seen it all before. Having to reject was the most difficult part of her job. Sometimes, she thought Florida was no more than a gigantic fashion house that specialized in hand-me-downs from the dead. Ashes and bodies were shipped off to all parts of the country but clothes, much furniture and almost all beds stayed in-state until they were recycled to further use.

Julia was about to give up trying to introduce Paul to the joys of finding a beautiful bargain. He sensed her feelings. "Don't worry. Let's see what the old men have left to young rakes like me." Beyond the bustling ladies' side of the boutique, they found a room for men's wear. One customer was trying on a snappy pair of all but new shoes. Paul and Julia began to look through the shirts and suits. The clothes were of the finest quality but there was a hitch. Paul was not especially tall by American standards but he was thin, long and very thin. The older richer retirees of South Florida had usually become a little thick with age. Paul had a lightness about him that made him look French, definitely un-American. His features were delicate yet totally masculine. Even his rounded shoulders, the gift of growth spurts and long hours of study seated at ill-fitting desks, gave him an air of vulnerability. He pleased more than one woman, including Julia.

Julia asked Paul if he liked Mexican food. "I mean real Mexican food. We can be sure not to meet anyone from The Estate there too."

"Why?"

"So far, the restaurant mostly serves the local Hispanic population. Our Lucent friends don't trust authenticity. Even if they would move all their prejudices aside, the food's too hot for them. Every year I've come down here the restaurant has been improved in some way, although the food is not quite as good as it was in the beginning. I guess they have too much business now to sliver the beef like they did at first. I still think you'll like it."

The restaurant was in another little U shopping center. Most of the premises in the mini mall were empty and for rent. A group of cars and pickup trucks were huddled in one area. "I suppose that's where we're going?"

Inside the restaurant they found a free table. Paul let Julia choose their menu. She ordered chips and salsa, guacamole, cokes and the house special. A small, shy boy, smiling and

obviously proud of his work, served them a black stone bowl of salsa, a basket of tortilla chips and their drinks. Paul and Julia were having trouble getting the salsa from bowl, to chip, to mouth without dribbling. They each cupped a hand under a loaded chip and brought their chins forward to meet the snack. They laughed together when, in spite of their best efforts, the delicious salsa dripped red onto the paper placemats.

“This is absolutely marvelous,” said Paul.

They talked of this and that. They played “small world”, trying to find common friends. They explored the others’ attitudes towards Belgium and America. While Julia concentrated on picking out and setting aside the seeds of the hot peppers in her plate, Paul pushed the conversation towards The Lucent Park Estate. “If it’s not too indiscrete, can I ask you how you have come to take so much responsibility for your grandparents?”

“Originally, we’re from a small town in northern Indiana. My mother died of cancer when I was seven. My grandparents lived right around the corner from us. They were able to help my father in many ways. Grandma and Grandpa Eames took my older sister, Penny, and me almost totally into their care. My sister pretends she became my substitute mother but, in reality, Penny didn’t have much time for me. It was said, ‘she ran after boys.’ She did run. She was the fastest sprinter in the state. She almost had a place on the American track team but a boy tripped her up. She married at eighteen, had a baby when she was nineteen and was divorced before she could legally drink alcohol.”

“For better or for worse, but not for long,” interjected Paul.

Julia laughed “Hey, very good. I’ll have to remember that. Oh my, oh!” Julia waved her hand before her open mouth as she sucked in air to cool the fire ignited in the back of her throat by a missed pepper seed.

“Eat some rice,” Paul said “Rice absorbs the heat.”

“Oh yes. That’s better. I’ll definitely remember the rice solution.” Julia blew a breath of air out of her mouth. “Let’s see? Where was I? Anyway, Grandma and Grandpa Eames were always there for Penny and me, always, all the time. They did a tremendous amount for the three of us. My father was a professor at the local engineering school. His hours were pretty flexible but he never could have managed without their support.”

“Has he ever remarried?” asked Paul.

“Alas, yes but only just a few years ago. I don’t like her, a new model, flash and fast. Her name is Carol Ball. None of us will call her Eames. She’s too awful. She drags my father round the world like he was her personal porter or something.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Paul said.

“Maybe I’m jealous. It makes me so angry to see him able to tour the globe behind Betsy Bopper yet he can barely find one day in a year to visit his parents or us either, for that matter,” said Julia.

“At certain periods in their lives, men are often foolish and weak. The irony is, they sometimes lose their past by trying to hang onto their youth.”

“Speaking of men, who are you Paul Vanderstappen?”

“I am Cary’s friend. My visit to Naples, however, has nothing to do with my Belgian uncle. Cary is responsible for me being here. She has been concerned with the changes that have been taking place on The Estate since it was acquired by The Incor Group. Cary wanted my opinion. Cary’s first suspicions about the administration of The Estate started when she noticed the number of aids and Private Duty Nurses that had flowered in ‘The Park’. She knew there had always been a few PDNs on the ground but never so many as now. Cary became especially disturbed when a plethora of private nurses began to support people who had been checked into The Care Clinic. Cary’s understanding had always been that once she entered Lucent, her basic healthcare was to be provided by Lucent until her death.”

“That’s what my grandparents’ believed too. They thought Lucent was responsible for home healthcare if they needed it; what’s called ‘assisted living’. They thought The Care Clinic was for temporary recuperation periods after serious illness or injury or for when they were finally so sick or disabled they couldn’t live independently or required constant supervision, like if they had a stroke or got Alzheimer’s or something like that. Now, the social worker tells them they need to hire someone to help them in their home. Grandma and Grandpa will have to pay for ‘assisted living’. They would need a doctor’s certificate for their health insurance to kick in and absorb some of the costs and even that insurance cover is limited to a few weeks each year.”

“Do you think you could find your grandparents’ original contract? I could get Cary to look up hers. We could compare the two to see exactly what is written down in black and white.”

“It does seem unreal when they have paid huge amounts of money to be in a home where they have everything they don’t really need, superficial frills all over the place; golf, tennis, dances, bridge rooms, glitz but the services they really need, the ones they can’t live without, are not provided. They had an enormous entrance fee to get their apartment in the first place. The monthly charges are staggering. I can’t figure out what essential care they get in return. Look at my grandparents’ case. I keep hearing myself say, “This is an eighty eight-year old man literally, physically, taking care of an eighty-five year old, slightly fuzzy in the head, woman who has chronic lung disease. These people live in what is supposed to be one of Florida’s best retirement homes. Something must be wrong!”

Julia was wound up with indignation. She took a big bite of her food. She didn’t notice she had mixed the pepper seeds, the ones she had so carefully put on the side of her plate, in with the sauce. Suddenly, Paul was encouraging her to eat rice and more rice.

Paul called for the little boy to bring them the bill. The wide-eyed child looked at Julia whose cheeks, full of rice, bulged like a chipmunk carrying nuts. Heaven knows what the boy was thinking? He didn’t speak or react.

As Paul paid the bill, Julia could feel her face go warm. She was embarrassed to have made the same mistake twice. She was not sure if she was blushing because Paul had witnessed her stupidity or because she was having a continuing reaction to the hot chilies.

Meanwhile at The Lucent Park Estate, today was the day of the annual boat excursion to Old Naples and back. To participate in this diversion, the Parkers had to sign up a week in advance, remember at nine-thirty sharp on the day to be present at the designated place for the Estate's mini-van to give them transport to The Dock. The bus stops were on The Enter Estate Road but the less hardy explorers could wait in comfort at The Bench, conveniently situated undercover on the ground floor of every living unit. This seat was beside the elevator and next to the mailboxes. When the van arrived, the Parkers still had to hear Bill, the bus driver, toot from beyond the open air car stalls. On his signal, they would make their way, as best as they could, past the car boxes to the road.

The Lucent Park Estate included twelve residential blocks each containing eighteen apartments. These units were built on three levels. All the apartments had inward views onto a dual purpose footpath and cart way, manicured lawns, planted palms and two linked ponds, each with a fountain. The ponds were crossed by a wooden Japanese style bridge. The only visible wildlife at the waterside was one very ugly duck. Otherwise the ponds were dead, poisoned on schedule by The Lucent groundskeepers.

Now that The Incor Group had purchased The Estate from its original owners, expansion was in the air. Construction had begun on both sides of The Enter Estate Road where it connected the residential campus with The Care Clinic, The Sunset Memorial Gardens and The Dock. A new residential unit of 15 floors with an underground parking lot, an enormous new clubhouse and an Alzheimer's facility were being built. The whole area would be strung together with a second, new nine-hole golf course.

Many of these "wrinkly, withering, dithering warriors of time," as Mr. Eames liked to describe his fellows, did not remember their appointment with the special bus or did not hear its toot when the van passed to take them to The Memorial Gardens. Some excursion candidates were in place and on time, able to load themselves onto their transport. Mrs. Barton and Mrs. Farnsworth, their private duty nurses and their wheelchairs waited in the sun by The Enter Estate Road for the bus to pass. When it arrived, they were lifted into the vehicle with the help of an elevating device designed for this purpose.

Mr. Charles Chastain waited alone in his wheelchair expecting the van to pass. He was soon joined by Cary Cunningham who had been visiting a friend in his building. "You're lucky they're late," he quipped. Charles Chastain was impatient to "Get the show on the road". When the bus arrived, Mr. Chastain and his fully automated chariot rolled up the ramp onto the elevator and was then slotted into the van unassisted by human hands. Charles Chastain's wheelchair had five gears and a step hopper device. He had replaced the standard high flying orange fluorescent signal flag attached to his chair with his own faded black and white checkered banner. This cloth had been presented to Charles Chastain many years earlier for services rendered in the promotion and support of the Indianapolis 500.

During his working life, Mr. Chastain had made a fortune building and operating grain elevators. Viewed from across the corn fields, these clustered bins of seed looked like the lost sky lines of great cities. When soybeans became "the other crop" of Indiana farmers, Charles Chastain built squat, tubby storage bins which encouraged the visitor to imagine they were seeing rural oil depots across the Hoosier horizon.

Mr. Chastain's life long exercise in holding together agricultural commodities had not dampened his desire to splash out. He loved speed. If he could no longer use his own two legs, he would substitute them with the fastest, individualized, land-based wheels money could buy. While Mr. Chastain fast forwarded himself onto the bus ramp, Cary watched in amazement. Cary, self propelled but in need of assistance, was helped up the minibus steps by Bill.

Mr. Thomas Spitz and his grandson, John, and Mrs. Marjorie Crawford and her granddaughter, Kay, were to join the group in front of The Care Clinic. Mr. Spitz drove his brand new Rolls Royce whenever possible. He was not about to be chauffeured by anyone but himself. In addition, this outing was to be a double treat, both a Rolls ride and a boat ride for the young folks.

Sandra Krock, assistant director of The Lucent Park Estates, entered the bus at The Club House and Activities Center. As their vehicle approached The Care Clinic and The Sunset Memorial Gardens, Ms. Krock stood at the front of the bus, clipboard in hand and called the group to attention. "I hope everybody understands they are not, under any circumstances, to go off on their own today." She couldn't imagine how anyone could be lost when they were only going as far as the dock and being ferried by such a small vessel but Ms Krock had seen it happen before. More than one near disaster had animated these excursions. Sandra Krock always maintained strict discipline. She was polite. She was correct. She did not ever lose her reserve. She could receive a wink or a joke with complete indifference. Mr. Eames called her "The Cracked Krock".

The day trippers' transport stopped on the north side of The Care Clinic which was situated by the entrance arch to Lucent's Sunset Memorial Gardens. Mr. Spitz, Mrs. Crawford and their grandchildren, John and Kay waited for their arrival under the arch. The children, now ten years old, had met two years earlier while they were visiting their grandparents here at The Estate. John and Kay had become such fast friends, their parents now made huge efforts to arrange, where possible, for the children's vacation days at Lucent Park to coincide. Mr. Spitz and Mrs. Crawford had little in common except the children and their desire to see them happy. Mrs. Crawford was a liberal intellectual who believed in food supplements, vitamins and herbal medicine. Mr. Spitz, conservative and Catholic was also a man with a great enthusiasm for the way of the flesh. Cary called him her "dot com," "com" for "cute old man". Mr. Spitz didn't quite agree with the rest of Lucent Park that Mrs. Crawford was a weirdo and her granddaughter out to consume John. In truth, Mrs. Crawford read "The New York Times" and "Scientific American", clear signs of decadence in the opinion of most Parkers. John was everyone's favorite young man. Whatever their opinions or politics, all the residents of the retirement home enjoyed young people being with them on The Estate.

When the passengers had successfully descended from the bus and were ready to begin the trek across the Sunset Memorial Gardens to The Dock, Rebecca Hirsch emerged from within The Care Clinic. Lucent's chief social worker, Sara Sue Sedgwick followed fast on the heels of her charge. The two might have been making stage entrances for a theatrical performance. Rebecca, straight and dramatic, marched proudly onto the scene. Sara Sue waggled her head and rolled her eyes, defeated into following Rebecca's lead yet determined to let the audience know exactly what she thought of this kind of behavior.

Suddenly, Sara Sue shifted up stage to speak to Sandra Krock. Sara Sue explained in a loud, furious whisper how Mrs. Hirsch had used Cary's guest invitation allowance to sign herself up for the outing.

"I beg your pardon," interrupted Mrs. Hirsch, "I do not think I have broken the law. I do not know of a rule that excludes residents living in The Care Clinic from participating in all Lucent activities."

Sara Sue made an effort to pull her face into an agreeable yet patronizing smile. The best Sara Sue could manage was to twist her expression into a grin of sarcasm and loathing. S. S. caught herself again. She repeated the exercise; this time with somewhat more success. "Mrs. Hirsch," she mewed, "Yuh al kin have yer little fantasies once. Yuh al be clear bout this, yuh al are, in the future, gonna be allowed on trips organized exclusively from The Care Clinic." Sara Sue turned to her now gawping audience. "Yuh al are all witnesses," the social worker declared, triumphant.

"We'll see about that," Rebecca answered. Rebecca's posture was always stately. Now, since she had had the car accident and sustained a whiplash injury, she wore a collar. The collar held her head even higher than usual. Rebecca Hirsch was no longer simply noble, she was a great reigning monarch. Her eyes flashed superiority at the upwardly mobile Sara Sue whose efforts in refinement gave her person the markings of a second rate country western singer. Rebecca's hair was pulled straight back into a bun. The strong, sharp, chiseled structure of her facial features, naked and unadorned, strengthened the force of her eyes. Rebecca's powerful, riveting gaze held their beholder in a medusa-like bond. Sara Sue, by contrast, had long stringy dripping curls that hid her devious, nasty eyes from the inquisitive world. Sara Sue's clothes, frilly and light, gave her the façade of a Barbie doll dressed for an appearance on The Midwestern Hay Ride. Ms. Sedgwick's deepest emotions were sentimental and superficial.

Rebecca joined Cary and melded into the group. Sara Sue shadowed her movements as if Rebecca would be in need of her assistance in an instant.

The Parkers crossed carefully through the palm gardens, determined to have a good day. John and Kay chattered intensely. The dock was to present the first obstacle to straight forward motion since they had left the bus. Captain Jack, retired old man of the sea, was waiting to welcome the company aboard "The Fiddlesticks". The channel where the Lucent boat was moored led directly west to the Gulf. At this point, the water was a good ten feet below the level of the land. Therefore, the ramp to the dock had been constructed in a zigzag pattern to accommodate the descent of wheelchairs, walkers, canes and numerous rickety legs. There followed another laborious set of maneuvers before the Lucent community was safely settled onto "The Fiddlesticks". The craft, packed full of excursionist, pattered through the canal. Up beyond the banks, which became gradually lower and lower as the channel approached the sea, resided impeccably well-ordered lawns, gardens and homes. Most of the houses were built in the Florida style, stucco and tile. All homes seemed to come fully equipped with private docks, boats, screened in swimming pools and large American flags on tall flag polls.

Once the tourists reached the gulf, they caught sight of a dolphin. Everyone got excited. The children broke off their conversation to admire. The Fiddlesticks cruised along the coast past the building site of about a dozen high rise condominiums. These were being squatted by an

army of crows. Suddenly, the Lucent boat turned round for home. Everyone moaned. They had only just met the latest wall of newly completed towers. This was not their intended destination. Rebecca drew the children's attention to the gulf side balconies of these buildings. Their terraces all had unbroken views of the beach and the sea. The panoramic scene in front of the older apartments was now into a wall of cement siding and plate glass windows. The goal of The Lucent cruise had been Old Naples and its old-fashion beaches which lay further down coast. Captain Jack had noticed an unexpected storm was approaching from the west. Sandra thought it best to save their Old Naples visit for another day.

When they were back into the shelter of the canal, Captain Jack let Kay and then John steer the boat. In the moment Sandra Krock saw that young John Spitz had taken the wheel and was about to chastise the captain for his indulgence, Captain Jack leaned down to pick up a paper stored below the helm. At this precise instant, the boat was guiding itself straight into the bank. John froze in terrified awe. Sandra gave a little hiccup of a scream. The Captain stood upright, saw disaster looming, grabbed the wheel and lurched the wayward craft into the mainstream of the channel. All the elderly onboard wobbled. Three crashed to the deck.

The captain was horrified by his mistake. John was mortified by his panic. There was a general checking of bones and reattachment of oxygen tubes. No one seemed to be seriously hurt. All had racing hearts in reaction to the narrowness of their escape. Most decided that Kay had distracted John with her chatter. "Poor boy."

A black line of rain followed their return to the Lucent dock. Everyone knew how wet a Florida shower could be. This storm however was a freak event, appearing out of season and out of a blue sky. Already agitated by their near-crash, the party waited anxiously for the boat to land so they could find shelter before the rain began. A pelican, perched statue-wise on a dock post, was waiting for their arrival. A troop of crows played on the top of the grassy bank with the same expectation. All these birds were hanging around anticipating fish heads and entrails. The Lucent boat would disappoint.

The Parkers disembarked down one ramp and up another. This exercise was never a simple one. Sandra dreaded the angles. Mrs. Krock helped the weaker walkers. Bill, the bus driver, assisted those who needed a stronger hand. The boat passarelle was fairly easy to negotiate but the long, angular incline up the embankment boardwalk was difficult for many in the group. When the wheelchairs of Mrs. Barton and Mrs. Farnsworth reached the steepest rise of the ramp, Bill relayed the upward and onward push of their vehicles from their Private Duty Nurses. Florida was so flat; one wondered why Lucent couldn't build a dock which would require a lesser degree of momentum to ascend.

Mr. Chastain waited in his wheelchair, on the dock, by the boat, until the boardwalk was clear. When he had a free run, he put his formidable machine into second gear and raced up the zigzag ramp. His black and white flag fluttered in the rising breeze.

Any minute, the storm would catch up with their party yet the elderly still had to cross through the palm park before they could reach the shelter of the bus or The Care Clinic. The breeze strengthened in velocity. The pelican took off, B52 style, for the protection of his nesting site. The crows, still hoping for a crumb or crust, hopped along at the heels of the agitating group. When it was clear no sustenance would be offered by the fleeing masses, the

crows turned their last hope of gratification onto Mr. Chastain. He had arrived at the end of the dock and onto land, unassisted and alone. The crows waddled into a circle around him. Mr. Chastain revved the engine of his wheelchair and made short, sharp attacks at the aggressive birds. The crows tripped deftly out of harms way. After several maneuvers, Mr. Chastain had turned his chariot all the way round, back towards the canal and onto the edge of the embankment. His eyes were drawn to a fissure of lightning that cracked out of the long back storm cloud. The dark squall continued to advance parallel with the western horizon. Then, a great rumble of thunder rolled through the air. The black birds flew off, circling and diving towards their iron roost at the high rise construction site. A curtain of rain cut down to the sea below the cloud. Next to the northern extreme of the storm, a rich, deep blue sky was slowly being pushed out of sight. The wind was shifting into a higher gear. Temperatures were dropping. In spite of his predicament, Mr. Chastain couldn't help feeling the same thrill he had always felt when he experienced an impending tempest. In the Midwestern version he knew best, this was the kind of weather that called out tornado warnings. Energy seemed to be generated by the very sky itself. Danger pricked at the edges of one's senses. There were things to do; rules to follow; family, friends and property to protect. On this occasion, here in the tropics, here in this wheelchair, Mr. Chastain froze into a reverie of memory and speculation, "Is life the storm or the blue sky? Is death the blue sky after the storm? More likely, life is going to crash out of mind and body, straight into an empty void."

From long ago and far away, Mr. Chastain recalled a day when his mother had been washing his hair at the kitchen sink. He could almost feel her fingers combing out the last of the shampoo. His sister was tucked up, reading a book in the cozy nook that hooked around the kitchen table. A storm was brewing then too but the family kept on at their business. His mother had just lifted his head out from under the water when a pillar of fire rushed out of the faucet. Before time could be marked, a huge crush of noise thundered so loudly they could barely hear the sound. Instantly, an atmosphere of emptiness, which seemed to swallow both time and space, filled the room with silence. Mr. Chastain remembered the strange dim luminosity that settled round the light fixture hanging over the table where his sister had been reading. Mr. Chastain reckoned the transition from life to death would be as sure and quick as the lightning strike in this long remembered family history.

Charles Chastain returned his thoughts to his present position. He began fiddling with the gears of his wheelchair. In a rare moment of self doubt, the old man wondered if he shouldn't be waiting for someone to come and help him.

Meanwhile, getting the group through The Memorial Gardens to the van waiting undercover by The Care Clinic took time, so much time everyone was soaked to the skin before they found shelter. Sandra realized Mr. Chastain was not with them. Through her gritted teeth, she spewed aloud her opinion about rich old men who would not accept help when, clearly, personal attention was needed. Most of the party was too wet and too exhausted by their flight to notice the comment. Cary heard and caught herself before she could make a cute reply.

Sandra turned back into the blasting rain and away from a volley of complaints. "I need a toilet!" "Where's she going?" "We're soaked!" "What does she think she's up to?"

Sandra's clothes were already drenched, so she didn't bother to take an umbrella. One active AOL or "Attractive old Lecher" also known as David C. Chalmers would have chased Sandra into the storm if he hadn't had a heavy oxygen tank to drag along with him. In his humble opinion, her clothes needed to be peeled off. Her red boat pants were sticking to her body. They outlined soft and sensuous buttocks. He loved women but he was usually repulsed by this one with her hard, bossy character. Now, he fantasized stripping her garments as he would old wall paper. He would start with the bubbles and work his way in every direction over her smooth haunches. As the Krock woman disappeared into the palm park, David Chalmers shut his eyes and, on the wave of his fantasy, drifted into a standing sleep. When he woke, he realized his dream had ended with him scraping at little bits of paper stuck hard to a hard wall. Sara Sue Sedgwick was in his face. She was guiding him roughly towards the bus.

The van took each tripper to his or her individual apartment building. The Parkers were all ignorant of the fate of Charles Chastain. He was not with them. Neither was Sandra Krock. S. S. had stayed at The Care Clinic. No one offered an explanation. At this moment in time, the remnants of the Everglade's elderly excursion party were all, pretty much, too exhausted to care. By the time Sandra Krock returned to The Activity's Center, word of death had slipped through the community. A swarm of golf carts and people, milling about waiting for news, blocked Sandra's access to The Club House door.

At this juncture, Paul and Julia, returning from their own excursion and genuine Mexican eating experience, parked in front of The Guest Haven. From there, Julia led Paul around by the pool towards The Club House and Activity's Center. They waved to Kay and John who were swimming. Julia wanted Paul to see the two huge planters that hung on the columns which stood at either side of the entrance to The Estate's main activities and administration building. She thought these baskets were especially successful. They were made up of vigorous stag horn ferns that reared their great antlers above a skirt of cut-leaved ferns. Julia tried to remember the botanical name of these frilly fern, ferns. She guided Paul away from the joyful children onto the circular drive that headed towards The Club House porch and entrance. As they approached the area, they saw a scene of chaos. The sliding glass doors, under its automatic eye, opened and shut at odd and frequent intervals. Confused, anxious residents waited in motion for some explanation.

Sandra waved her dry umbrella in the air and called, "Attention! Attention everyone! Would you please quiet down and listen? You may have already heard but I am sorry to confirm the fact that Charles Chastain has had an unfortunate accident. He has passed." There was a group murmur made up of "I knew it!" "I don't believe it!" "How is it possible?"

"We will hold a meeting in The Club House Lounge and Bar at five o'clock this evening," Sandra Krock announced, "to explain to anyone interested, exactly what happened at the dock today, as far as we know. Meanwhile, I suggest you all return to your apartments. Those of us who were on the outing need a little time to refresh ourselves and rest. Please do not call on any of the trippers for information. They need a period of repose. They have no knowledge of what has taken place." With that brief, strident declaration, The Assistant Administrator to the Chief Executive Officer of The Lucent Park Estate descended her umbrella to a thrusting position. Her gesture had the effect of clearing a path which allowed her to march through the eye-opened door and onward to the quiet of her private office. Sandra Krock locked the door behind herself.

Paul took Julia's hand. Julia looked from the distressed faces of the old, who seemed very old and vulnerable just now, to the menacing points of the stag horn ferns. These vegetal antlers, swaying in the dying winds of the storm, appeared to Julia to be alive; threatening their very souls.

"Dryopteris!" Julia exclaimed.

"What?" asked Paul.

"Dryopteris, The American Shield Fern. I remembered the name of the common fern."

Paul laughed. "Faint protection when it's in a pot with the horns of the devil."