

## CHANGELESS TIDES

Sandpipers sprint from the waves, darting and pausing as they pluck the sand for tiny appetizers. The tide surges shoreward grasping for, but never catching their stick legs. Two seals bark from an island of rock. A crab scuttles in front of me, too small to be anything but a sea gull entree. Vague shadows haunt the wet sand as gulls screech in competition to claim it. A brown flecked bird wins out and plunges to the hapless creature.

In the distance, shrouded in light fog a boat chugs outside the harbor -- one of the traders laden with our bubble goods and bound for coastal cities still operating under a guise of civilization.

Rustlings from the side grasses alert me. With the coordinator's warnings nagging my conscience I investigate and I'm startled to see an outsider, crouching. Are there others? She stares like a deer caught in a poacher's light.

"What do you want?" My tone is sharp, every muscle taut.

She leaps up and bounds through the waist-high grasses toward the crumbling road. No others follow her flight. I breathe a sigh of relief as body rhythms regulate, and laugh at my fears. She was only a child of thirteen or fourteen at the most, probably gathering mussels or digging clams.

Bubble paranoia is infectious.

Mists lift and reveal the protective shimmering of several bubble fields. Although not true bubbles their energized walls discourage outright takeover by outside forces. Each one a stubborn testament to our tentative grasp on accepted civilization. Lifesavers, yet also life takers.

For twenty years we have worked and lived within their insulating domains, ever vigilant against those who will tear down and complete the job of two decades past when blood littered the rural routes, when mobs of unemployed and social dependents thrown to the ocean breeze by bailing governments thronged our postcard shores. Dissatisfaction and hate swelled a world gone mad.

Limited hope from technology.

The sun position tells me to get to the bubble before I am missed and our coordinator lectures me on my waywardness.

Returning, I see an armored school bus rolling to a noisy stop in front of the entrance. Buckskin-clad guards jump down from the bus, weapons at the ready for an outsider ambush. The older kids are home, after their four-month term, for spring planting, summer tending and autumn harvest. They won't return to the school bubble until late fall.

Andrea, my one time preschool pupil is the last to disembark. She will not be returning in the fall, she's gone as far as she can in the school bubble. What will become of her?

"Noreen!" she shouts when she sees me and runs past the guards to hug me.

She's grown in the last few months, stands taller than I do now.

"Does Dad know you're out here?" she asks with a wink.

"No," I say trying to be nonchalant when in truth I am a little nervous at what he might say. Although I don't readily agree with their fear philosophy I feel a certain amount of indebtedness to the community. They did take me in after....

"Oh, it's good to be back," she breathes out and swings her arm over my shoulder.

I wonder how long her good feeling will last. Always before she had school to look forward to in the fall, but now -- now all she has is season after season of planting, harvesting and regular daily chores to keep the community running. An admirable life, but I can't help feel it will be a

defeating one for Andrea. Yet, I'm glad she's back. There is no one else I can talk to with any sense of kinship.

The entrance guard scowls at me. I nod and smile. Many years before he was also one of my pupils, but never as promising as Andrea.

We reach Andrea's house and she insists I come in. I do so reluctantly, never feeling comfortable in the sprawling ranch style. The coordinator walks from the workshop as soon as he hears Andrea and greets her with a bear squeeze.

His expression tightens upon seeing me. "I understand you were out on the beach today without any escort or side arm." I roll my eyes heavenward. He rolls his in exasperation. "How many times do we have to tell you it's dangerous out there?"

"Such is the price of freedom," I blurt without thinking.

His face darkens, premature wrinkles deepen. Verbal explosion looks imminent. "One of these days that price may be much higher than you're willing to pay."

I leave. The discussion is an old one and I am uninterested.

My house is just a hundred feet down the road. It's an old two story bell-roofed Victorian, complete with gingerbread frontage. I'll never forget the look of delight on my mother's face when she showed it to us for the first time so many years ago.

For years she longed for such a house overlooking the ocean. One of her many dreams. Another dream had been a place to call home. I wonder if the only reason I remain is to keep her one and only realized dream alive. Shuddering at the decrepit verandah I turn swiftly down the walkway to the back door where memories do not plague.

Old Chester greets me with a wag of his tail. "Hello, old pup," I say and check my energy ration meter. Lots left for some frivolous stereo activity. The stereo, although old, works well and the sound is full. A little Gustav Holtz Die Planeten revives my spirit, a little homemade wine plays tonic to my nerves.

Stretching out on the sofa I look around at the eclectic collection of three generations, moved from house to house over the course of a century. I reminisce about family and friends and possibilities missed; only checking myself when that inner voice chastises foolish meanders of what might have been. My mother would frown at such thinking. "This life should be lived, Noreen, not wished over." I wonder what she would say about my life. Productive and safe. Too safe? But I am needed, and as that thought enters so does the maternal voice. "No one is indispensable. Life goes on." There is now one who could perform my teaching responsibilities of the three to ten year old children.

I sip my wine and treat my ears to the lilting tones of Gustav's Mercury and wonder what it would be like to abolish the safety net. My mind wanders to the girl on the beach. She has no safety net and survives.

Chester barks a feeble eruption and scrambles to his arthritic feet informing me of company. He trots out to the kitchen and brings Andrea back with him.

"You haven't eaten supper yet?" she asks.

"Supper?" I repeat and look at the grandfather clock. Six p.m. Strange how the hours float by. Signs of age? I'm not really hungry anyway so I pour out the end of the wine.

"You don't mind some company do you?" She stands on the kitchen/living room border.

I try to smile encouragement. "Of course not. I look forward to it. Please sit down, Andrea." I drink. "Your father must be in a better mood to allow you out."

"I'm eighteen, Noreen. I don't need his permission."

"My mistake. Wine?" I hold up the empty bottle. Plenty more in the basement.

"No thanks." She sits in the old rocker. A little piece of Europe my mother brought back years before when Europe glowed and sang with individuality. "It hasn't changed much," she comments.

"I never move the furniture anymore," I answer. "Chester's weak eyes can't take it. He keeps bumping into things."

"Not just in here -- the whole place," she states waving her hand at the outside scenery.

"Nothing ever changes here," I say.

"Why?"

"Why?" I ask, temporarily perplexed. "Because change scares them."

"It didn't use to scare you," she challenges.

I sit up straight and suck the bottom out of the wineglass. Dissatisfaction is setting in much sooner than I expected. A good thing if something could be done about it. A bad thing, a very bad thing when nothing can be done.

"Do you remember that community meeting when I was ten?" She stares at me. I shake my head. "Of course you remember," she prompts. "When we all gathered together to discuss how we might expand the bubble. We were running out of room because children were growing up and two couples were just married. Ideas ranged from trading for new generators so we could enfold more of the outside houses, to resettling four couples to other bubbles." She leans forward in the rocker. "You suggested getting together with some of the outsiders and setting up a treaty - peace plan." She chuckles. "I'll never forget the glorious silence that followed."

Yes, I remember. I also remember how quickly they recovered from their unusual silence and pointed out I remained secure only because of their good graces.

Anger begins to overpower the pleasing effects of the wine and music as memory returns.

Although I had practically grown up in the area, my family wasn't ancestral. The generation bond of the village usually didn't allow interlopers no matter how useful or productive. My mother warned me of this years before. "Noreen, we will never be accepted here. Oh, they are polite enough and sometimes helpful, but we will never belong." Funny, it never bothered her. More anger tightens and stresses each muscle as another memory forces through. A pyre in the back burns bright and savage. The local graveyard was forbidden us.

"What happened to that spirit?" Andrea interrupts.

Swallowing bitterness I shrug and begin to wonder about the eight years since that meeting. Has it really been eight years? "It's their community, not mine. I'm just along for the ride."

"You have every bit as much right as they do." She jumps up from the rocker and paces over to the window lined with tomato and green pepper seedlings. "You're becoming one of them."

The statement grates my nerves, but she's probably right.

"They have never listened to me and never will," I defend.

"So?" she whirls from the window. "It never stopped you before."

"What's wrong, Andrea?"

"I don't know," she grumbles and slumps back in the chair. "I guess I look around and see them and know this is it. I always hoped you'd change things before I got to this point."

"Why don't you change things?"

"Me?" She looks surprised. "They wouldn't listen to me. I'm just a kid," her eyes widen. She springs out of the chair. "I better go. Have to be up early. We're tilling the gardens for planting."

"Andrea?"

"Yeah?"

"Don't change. Keep that spark because once it's gone it's really hard to rekindle." Wise words from a wizened spirit?

"Yeah. I'll see you tomorrow."

Sleep is elusive and tormenting, teasing me from the edge of conscious slumber. When it finally arrives, faces spin in an unrelenting frenzy and taunt imagined (or real?) deficiencies. The outsider girl stares at me with large accusing eyes, my mother shakes her head, Andrea challenges, a bleak future beckons with a fleshless hand.

The next day I till my own gardens and mix in a winter's worth of worm compost. Thirty years ago my mother and father dug up the gardens picking out a century collection of garbage the previous owners had thrown to the back with no thought of the land. Bubble land would never be treated that shabbily now.

After several years of hard work my mother coaxed vegetables and flowers from the mistreatment and eventually the gardens became the envy of the road. Over the last few years I've been forced to dig out most of the perennial flowerbeds and replace them with vegetables. Every piece of land within the bubbles is used to the fullest benefit. Mom would have approved, although she would have missed the flowers.

I figure I've earned a walk so I call Chester, hoping if I'm seen leaving with him it will silence wagging tongues.

*The rest of the short story along with five more can be down loaded from Kindle or Smashwords.*