

# The Community

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I don't have roots. I go from place to place. I'll take a consulting job solving whatever computer issue someone has, and when the job is done, or I get tired of that scene, I take the money and move on. I've spent time in just about every corner of the country. I even did stints in Alaska and Hawaii, but I kept moving.

So, it came one brisk April morning to be working my way across South Dakota. I had spent a few weeks in Rapid City doing some web development and had made my way up to Mount Rushmore. From there, I decided to hitch my way back eastward. I stopped in Wall, a sort of a tourist trap. I thought I might stay there, but there wasn't any work to be had. I was making my way back out to the interstate when I passed a small airstrip used by crop dusters. The planes were landing, refueling, taking on their spray chemicals, and departing. I walked over to watch more closely.

"You a pilot?" an older man addressed me.

"Me?" I said with a little smile. "No, just always interested in it."

"What are you up to then?"

"Just watching the operations. I'm hitching my way towards Sioux Falls."

"Ah," the man said with a smile. "Well, if you don't mind flying, I can get you in that general direction."

I didn't have to think about that. Never turn down a ride. Flying would be cool. I quickly accepted, and soon, my knapsack was stowed, and I was in the front seat of an open cockpit plane. He gave me a pair of goggles. "Keep the bugs out of your eyes," he said with a smile. Off we went. It was beautiful, and I turned towards my pilot in the rear cockpit. He smiled back, but with the wind, there was no other way to communicate. I just resumed looking at the countryside from the air.

A bit over an hour later, we started descending. We must be getting close to our destination. We passed over a small green sport in the larger nothingness of rural Dakota. A neat little town with lawns, a few buildings, a school perhaps. Farm fields surrounded the edges. Cute. Perhaps I could get a small job there before I continued down the road.

We soon touched down on a small dirt runway, swung off, and shut down. I got down from the cockpit, and the old man handed me my bag. "Can I chip in for gas?" I offered.

"Nah, I was coming here anyhow. The interstate is about half a mile up the road. You want a lift?"

"I saw it when we flew over. No, thank you anyhow. You've done enough for me. I can hike it," I said as I swung my bag over my shoulder. "By the way, what was that little town just west of here?"

"Old commune. You don't want to go there," he said with the gravity of a warning from the ages.

“Hippies?” I asked, suppressing a smile.

“Babies,” he said and then turned and went off into a nearby barn.

Strange old man, I thought to myself. But kind enough to get me, as near as I could estimate, about two-thirds of my way to Sioux Falls. I walked toward the highway. Sioux City would be to my left. I’d just head down the road with my thumb out. But I thought about it. Screw the old man. I’d go check out this Commune. I suspect that even hippies had computer issues, and maybe just for a meal and a bed for a couple of days, before I continued, it would be an interesting experience.

I set out to the right. It was further than I estimated from seeing it from the air. It was late afternoon when I reached a dirt road that headed off the interstate frontage road. A mailbox read simply “Pleasant Valley Community.” It was kind of an idyllic name for an idyllic place. I started up the driveway. It was nearly a mile until I came to an arched gate in the fence that also read the same. Through it was the main street of a town that could have come out of a Norman Rockwell painting. Tidy little houses stretched out before me with picket fences and green lawns.

A building was just to the left of the entrance. Town Hall? I wandered up the steps and through the open doors. A young woman, perhaps eighteen or so, was sitting at a desk cursing at the computer in front of her. This had promise. People with computer problems were always a good sign in my line of work.

“Can I help?” I asked.

She looked up, apparently not having noticed me coming in.

“I think that’s what I am supposed to ask you,” she said, smiling. She was pretty, with blonde hair and blue eyes. It was as idyllic as everything else in Pleasant Valley.

“I was just passing through and was curious about this place. I’m a migrant computer expert, working my way towards Sioux Falls. Perhaps I can help you with that.”

I leaned over to see the screen. “I think I’ve got some sort of virus,” she said. I looked at it. It was one of those annoying web page popups that tell you that your computer was infected and doesn’t let you do anything else.

“No problem,” I said. I leaned over and knocked down her browser, cleared out the offending data from the history, and opened it up.

“Thanks,” she said. “Were you hitchhiking?”

“I was,” but I got a ride in an airplane at Wall from a man who doesn’t seem to think much of this place.

“Old man, Davis,” she said with a smile. “He’s done some business with us. Anyhow, it’s getting late in the day. Too late to be hitching. You’ll need dinner and a bed for the night.” This was what I was hoping for. “You can come home with me.”

I waited while she closed the office, and we headed out to the street. "So, this is some sort of commune?" I asked.

"We call it a community. Commune is so sixties. My parents were part of a group that established this. I was born and raised right here. Let me show you around. My name is Lynn, by the way."

"John," I said, "John Pennington."

We set out on a walking tour of the community. She explained that her parents and others of their generation decided to get away from the evils of the country in general and set up a community, as self-sustaining as they could make it. They had built houses and planted gardens. Some still had jobs outside, but they transitioned more and more into doing things with the community. There were internet-based businesses operated from here. They sold some locally produced items, even some wine. There were schools, doctors' offices, and just about everything you'd find in a small town."

"They wanted it to be like the small towns of old," she explained. One was a doctor, and a couple of the kids went off to medical school and returned to practice here. We've got one computer guy now, so we're a bit short-staffed. I couldn't tell if that was a job offer.

"I could help out for a while if you need someone," I offered.

"Great, I'll introduce you to our computer guy, Bill, tomorrow. This is my house."

We walked up the garden path to a front porch. She pushed into the backyard, where two toddlers were tumbling over one another and came running when they saw her. They stopped short and fell quiet when they saw me. I was quiet, too. As young as she was, I didn't figure she had kids. Things must be different in the community.

"Daddy?" the little boy said, putting his arms around my leg.

"No, Mikey," Lynn said. "Just a visitor."

The little girl took a few steps cautiously towards me but fell over, plopping down hard on what her lifted skirt showed to be a diapered rear end.

"Your kids?" I asked Lynn.

"No," she laughed. When she regained her composure, she paused. "These are my parents."

I burst into laughter but looked at Lynn, and she was looking quite serious.

A woman walked over carrying a baby girl on her hip.

"Hi, Lynn. Who's this?" she asked.

"John Pennington. He just stopped by and helped me with a computer problem. He's staying for dinner. John, this is Jane."

Jane extended her free hand, and I shook it. "Hi, Jane."

"I was just explaining to him about my parents."

I continued to smile. "And I guess this is your mother," I said to Jane.

"No, silly, this is my daughter. My parents are over there." She gestured into a yard where two more toddlers were playing.

This joke was getting more involved.

"I'm going home now. See you tomorrow," Jane said. Her "parents" joined up behind her as she left.

"She comes over and watches my parents while I work in the office most days. Some days, they come with me and play there."

The joke was getting tiresome at this point. "How about some lemonade," Lynn asked.

"Sure," I replied. She went to the kitchen and came back with a glass.

"These are Mikey and Jeanie," she said, explaining the kids. "Have your lemonade while I go change their diapers."

She disappeared with the kids. I looked around. There were family pictures, showing a much younger version of Lynn with two adults. Her parents, indeed. A framed newspaper article showed a more recent Lynn in a cap and gown with her parents. The caption read 'Graduate Lynn Holmes together with her parents Michael and Jean.' Isn't that what she said the kids' names were?

I looked around. No sign of a husband. No pictures of boys Lynn's age. Perhaps she wasn't married. Perhaps they didn't bother with those formalities in the Community. However, her parents appeared to have been married in the other pictures.

The kids came tumbling down the stairs, followed by Lynn. "I'll start making supper now."

"Are you married?" I asked.

"Oh, no. Not even a boyfriend right now."

"Where did the kids come from?" I asked.

"I told you," she said with exasperation. "They are my parents. Look, I know it is confusing, but we don't know what happened either. It started about ten years ago, but the initial founders of the community started to change one by one, regressing to two-year-olds."

I still didn't believe it. Lynn got a laptop computer out and opened a page. "Here, read about it while I cook."

I started in on it. Sudden Regression Syndrome was the name for it. Sure enough, the article claimed that some adults in the community woke up as toddlers. There seemed to be nothing to do but to care for them as such. The teens and young adults of the community ended up playing parents to their parents. Other than being stuck as perpetual two-year-olds, there didn't seem to be any ill effects on the affected community members.

I'm still not sure I believed it. But now Old Man Davis's comment was making sense. Babies. "How long ago?" I asked Lynn.

"It started happening about ten years ago. It's only been two years since it happened to my parents."

"How?"

"We don't know. We've tried to figure it out. We even went outside the community for answers, but nobody believed us. The few that did believe didn't have any answers either. I just woke up one morning to find a couple of toddlers in my parents' bed. Fortunately, by that time, I knew what to do."

"And the community just went on?"

"The kids had to step up, but our parents laid a good foundation."

"And it's happened to everybody?"

"No, just the founding members. Over the past decade, every founding member who was still living in the community has regressed. A few who moved away seem unaffected based on correspondence we have."

"Wow..." was all I could say. Things were definitely different in the community.

"Are you afraid it will happen to you?"

"None of the kids have been affected. Nor has any of the people who have moved here since. It doesn't appear to be age-related. "

"And Jane?"

"Jane's parents turned about four or five years ago. She's married to another boy who grew up here. They just had their first child."

At this point, Jeanie climbed next to me with a book. "Story?" she asked.

"Read to her while I finish cooking."

I took the book, and Jeanie snuggled next to me, and I started to read.

Lynn set food on the table. She lifted Mikey and Jeanie into their highchairs and fastened bibs on them. She put food on their trays, and they commenced using their hands to stuff it into their mouths.

I sat down with a more adult meal of turkey and mashed potatoes and green beans. “This looks wonderful.”

“Thanks, leftovers. No problem.”

“Do you feel sad for them?” I said, referring to the parents.

“No, not really. I did at first, but they seem to be happy and carefree. While it’s not exactly the dream they had when they founded the community, it’s in line with their values.”

“And you?”

“They’re my parents. I don’t mind caring for them. They give me a lot of joy. Yes, someday I want to have my own children and raise them to adulthood, but until I meet a guy I want to share that with, I’ll take care of my parents.”

Lynn pulled out a bottle of wine and opened it and poured each of us a glass. “This was my father’s collection. I guess compensation for caring for him means it is mine now.”

We drank and talked, and she put her parents to bed in a crib in the nursery. “This had been my room, she explained. But about a year after they changed, I figured I should take the master, so I flipped things.”

She showed me to the guest room, and I settled down to sleep.

I awoke the next morning to the smell of bacon cooking. I dressed and headed down to the kitchen. Mikey and Jeanie were sitting on the floor playing. Lynn was in the kitchen. She set a plate down for me. I ate heartily.

“This is great,” I said.

“The eggs and the bacon both come from community farms.”

The kids, I mean, parents, were sitting in their highchairs using plastic-coated spoons to shovel oatmeal into their mouths, depositing a good deal of it on their faces. It was cute.

“Are we done?” Lynn said to them. They both nodded their approvals. “Give me a hand,” she said to me, “Just follow along with what I do to Mike with Jeanie.”

Lynn got a wipe and cleaned off her father’s face. I did the same with Jeanie. We got the bibs off and carried the children up to the nursery and proceeded to change Mikey’s diaper. When she was done, she handed him to me, took Jeanie, and did the same.

“I can’t say I’ve ever changed a diaper,” I said.

“I figured that was the case, you being a young single guy. You might learn.”

“Do you resent having to do this?” I asked.

“No, not at all. They are my parents. They did the same for me.”

“But you were toilet trained after a few years. This is going to go on for how long now?”

“Nobody really knows. They could have a normal life expectancy or maybe longer.”

With the diaper changes completed, we headed downstairs and out the door. We walked the opposite way on the main street than I had come in. Soon, we came to a large building. Children of all ages were playing in the yard and running in and out of the building.

“Daycare?” I asked.

“More of a community center. It gives the kids some time to play. Both those who went through the transition and the regular children and grandchildren now,” she explained. She set Mikey and Jeanie down, and they went running off into the crowd. She waved to a woman who appeared to be running this chaos. “I’ll be back in a bit. I’m showing John to the computer center.”

We headed back towards the building I had met Lynn at but went around to the back side. An outer office with several computers was sitting there with manuals and books strewn around. Typical IT office, I thought. We made our way into the machine room, and a young man was pulling manuals out of a computer box.

“Ben, this is John. He says he’s a migrant computer worker and could help out for a bit.”

Ben looked up and beamed. “Well, I don’t care if he’s a migrant apple picker. I could use the help. Ben Cranston,” he said, extending his hand.

“I’ll leave you two to do your magic,” Lynn said, leaving the room.

“Is it just you, here?” I asked.

“Pretty much. I’ve got some teenagers I’m training; they’ll be over after their morning classes. It’s been just me since the fellow I worked through underwent the change.”

“Wow, that promotion must have been a shock,” I said.

“You’re telling me. It was especially difficult because I saw it happen. With my parents, I just woke up one morning, and they were toddlers. I saw it happen to Richard.”

“You saw it happen?”

“Yeah. We were right here, motioning to a rack of communications equipment. The fiber optic trunk had been giving us problems all morning, and Richard had finally troubleshooted the problem. He just started to relax and then said he felt dizzy. He sat down on the floor, and before I knew it, he was shrinking into a toddler. I picked him up out of a pile of oversized clothes that he had managed to wet in the process. Not much I could do. I called my wife and told her to bring over some diapers and let Richard’s children know what happened.”

“So, what’s this morning’s order of business,” I asked, changing the subject.

“I’ve ordered some new servers. Our existing ones are getting a little long in the tooth. We’ve got to get these set up and VMWare installed, and then we can start migrating our existing stuff over to them.”

“I have experience with VMWare,” I added.

“Good, it’s new to me. We can get the racks ready, and when the help arrives, they can help us get them mounted.”

We worked together, arranging the racks and getting the power ready. We ran cables to the networking racks and removed most of the packing materials from the servers, leaving them sitting naked on the floor.

“Come, let’s walk over to my house for lunch.”

We made our way down the street and around a corner to another neat little house. We walked through the kitchen. Ben kissed a woman who was in the kitchen. “Hi, hon. Got a guest for lunch.”

She turned to me. “You must be John,” she said. “Lynn called and told me you were working with Ben. Ham sandwiches and soup OK for you?”

“Sounds fabulous.”

“I’m June, by the way.”

Ben and I sat down at a large table. June stepped out the back door and rang a bell. A slew of small children toddled in and took seats at the table. Ben started with introductions. “My son, David,” he said, pointing at a boy who was probably about eight. “My daughter, Sarah.” This was a bit younger. “My parents, Saul and Ruth, June’s parents, April and Will, and our youngest, Gabe.” The remainder all looked to be the same age, two years, just like Lynn’s parents.

Ben and June, like clockwork, applied bibs to the toddlers. Sandwiches were distributed, and the older kids and Ben, and I got soup. Sippy cups were distributed to the toddlers.

The food was great, and I thanked June. She told Ben that she could handle cleaning up and he could take me back to work.

We got back to the computer center, and two teenagers were waiting. “This is Kristin,” he said, pointing to the girl. “And this is Tyler,” pointing at the other. “John’s a computer expert who’s going to help us set up the servers.”

We all worked at getting the first one in the rack. We got it powered up, and I grabbed the software disks and sat down at the console. Tyler and Ben started to work on mounting the second. Kristin sat down with me. “I’ll show you the setup on the first one, and you can do the second.”

“Great,” she said.



Kristin was a quick study. When Ben and Tyler had the second machine ready, she did the installation with minimum prompting. By the time the third was in place, she had it down.

By the time we were through it was quitting time. I said goodbye to this bunch and walked back to Lynn's. Mikey and Jeanie came running as I approached and threw their arms around my legs. "Daddy," they cried.

I found it amusing and bent down and picked the two up, and wandered into the kitchen with them. Lynn checked on a roast in the oven and then shut the door. "It needs a few more minutes."

"They called me 'Daddy,'" I said, setting them down.

"Wishful thinking on their part, I guess. It's a bit harder on them that there's not a male in this house. I have no brother, and I don't have a husband or boyfriend. I think they're hoping you'll stay."

Stay? I pondered that. I have never stayed anywhere long. And stay and be Daddy to a couple of perpetual two-year-olds? But Lynn hadn't said it like she expected me to do it. Just a statement of fact about the kids. I let it slide.

I spent my days working with Ben, Kristin, and Tyler. Meals were divided between Lynn and her family and visits with others in the community, from Ben and his family to Jane and her family and others. I did spend some downtime checking the Community's online resources about the syndrome.

I didn't learn anything because they didn't seem to know either. Over the course of five years or so, every one of the original residents of the community regressed. None of the second generation had, nor had anybody of any age come to visit. A couple of people had left the community over the years, and they appear not to have been affected either. What triggered it was uncertain. It was not simply age, though certain stresses seemed to be a factor in some cases, such as the former IT man. Others just made the transition in their sleep.

It was after dinner at Ben's house, and I had his mother or perhaps his mother-in-law on my knee. "Do you think this will happen to you someday?" I asked Ben who had a male member of his family with him.

"Nobody knows," Ben says. I guess we have to be prepared for that to happen."

"Does it bother you?"

"Not really. I guess we've all learned to live our life to the fullest, expecting that it will happen. If it does, I guess I won't be unhappy. Look at these children. They're happy. They have little care other than being fed and having their diaper changed. It's a pretty good life I think."

I nodded and reflected to myself. Fed and changed. I had noticed the prevalence of that. I'd not changed a diaper yet, but I've watched countless times as one was changed in front of me. I'd handed wipes and diapers to Lynn and disposed of the dirties when she was changing her parents.

Diapers. The syndrome had indeed changed things. Some of the founders were of the age when one might expect them to need geriatric services. But other than having their diapers changed, there was no call for that. They were healthy. No arthritis or heart disease or other ailments of the elderly. The community did have to embark on a diaper composting facility to cope.

One night, after a fine dinner and the parents had been put in their crib, Lynn got out a bottle of her father's legacy. We each had a glass of wine and were on our second when Lynn moved close to me. I was expecting her to say something, but she just stared at me with an intent look. For a second, I feared she might be going through the change, but no, she leaned forward, put her arms around me, and kissed me.

It surprised me at first, and she sensed this and pulled back, but I just smiled, and she started in again. Her lips were warm and firm, and for one who professed no real experience, she was a passionate kisser. After a few minutes, she took my hand and led me upstairs. Guiding me toward her room, I had to ask, "Are you sure?"

"Yes. Are you?"

"Yes."

We got out of our clothes and into her bed. We kissed some more and explored each other's naked bodies. We made love. We cuddled and explored more. A second round of lovemaking ensued, and we drifted off to sleep in each other's arms.

The next morning I unthreaded myself from Lynn's sleeping embrace and padded into my room and threw some clothes on. I looked into the parents' room, and Jeanie was standing in the crib. She saw me, eched out, and started to cry.

I walked over and picked her up, and immediately she stopped. "What's wrong, little girl?" I asked. I looked into her eyes and then felt her diaper. She needed a change. Well, I guess there's a first time for everything. I set her on the changing table and unfastened her sleeper. I peeled open the diaper and dropped it in the pail. I cleaned her up and was just fastening the new one on when Lynn's nude form snuggled up against me.

"Thanks for taking care of that," she said, kissing me.

"Sure," I said.

Lynn changed Mikey and then set about getting breakfast. After faces had been wiped and the kids were dressed, Lynn asked, "I hope I'm not asking too much, but could you take the children down to the center today? I have some important calls to make."

"No problem," I replied.

I grabbed a toddler's hand in each of mine, and we headed out the door. Here I was a single man walking what might be my prospective in-laws down the street. Now, now, John. Don't get ahead of yourself. You're not committed to marrying this girl after one night.

I got to the center, and when Mikey and Jeanie saw the other kids, they pulled away, and I let them go. They ran into a mass of others. I smiled at one of the other adults. The kids were huddled together in some sort of game that I couldn't figure out. "They do that at times," the woman standing next to me said. "I've never figured out what it means."

"Kid's games," I agreed.

"But it's only the changed ones. The natural kids don't participate for some reason."

And it didn't look so much like a game. More like a football huddle. It was like they were planning the next play or some other course of action.

A second later, the crowd broke from their huddle and rambled towards us. Mikey and Jeanie grabbed my legs as they had done a few times before. They looked up and said, "Daddy." The other kids surrounded me. Each tried to grab onto some part of me or just to touch me. "Daddy, daddy, daddy," were their cries. Then, after a moment, it stopped, and they ambled off into normal play.

"Well, I've never seen that before," the woman said.

"Lynn says that the kids are hopeful that I'll stay with them," I said.

"But what about the others?" she asked. I didn't have an answer. Moral support? I guess as far as the kids, that is, the parents were concerned, they wanted me to remain with Lynn.

I went to the computer center, and Ben and I started doing work that took us most of the morning. A man entered around lunchtime. "Hi, Phil," Ben said. "John, this is Phil. He's the current chair of the community council. I guess the closest thing we have to a mayor."

"Now, Ben, you know that's an exaggeration. I'm just there to make sure the council meetings run smoothly. I don't wield any direct power. John, I thought I might have lunch with you."

We headed down the main street to what might have been called a shopping district. At this point, all my meals had either been in people's homes or brown bags, but there was a little café here. I ordered a sandwich, and Phil did the same.

"Ben tells me you've been a big help to him and that you're doing wonderfully teaching Kristin and Tyler."

"Thank you. I've enjoyed doing it."

"We were hoping you were happy. I've talked not only to Ben and Lynn but also to a number of the members of the community. I'll tell you this isn't something we consider lightly, and we've not even done it before to my knowledge, though our organizing documents describe the procedure."

I had no idea what he was talking about. Was he talking about them paying me? I was hoping that I'd get a little money for my time, but I was having a good time and willing to settle just for the room and board I had received.

"We'd like you to become a member of our community."

There it was. It hit me like a ton of bricks in its implication.

"This is independent of whatever your relationship with Lynn is. We can give you your own house if you want. If you want to continue to live with Lynn, that's fine, too. We hope you've seen enough of the community to realize what a great place this would be for you to settle down in."

I was still stunned.

"Think about it," Phil pleaded. "As I said, I believe you are the first person that has ever been asked to join since the founders established the community."

"I'm honored," I said sincerely. "But I'm going to have to think about it."

I didn't go right back to the office. I grabbed a glass of iced tea and just sat down in the park area in town to think. Could I settle down? I'd never spent more than a month in the same place in my adult life. Did I love, Lynn? Did I want to marry her? Did I want to spend the rest of my life raising kids and caring for her parents?

Her parents. What happens if the younger folk start to change? If Lynn changes? If I changed? My head started to spin.

No, I couldn't do it. I went to the house and threw my stuff into my bag. I took out a piece of paper and wrote.

"Lynn, I'm sorry. I'm very torn about staying, but I can't. The uncertainty is too much, and I'm not the settling down sort. Thank you for all you've done, and I'm sorry that my leaving will likely distress you. —John."

I pushed out of the house and down the street. I heard a voice call "Daddy" as I moved away. I knew it was Jeanie. I didn't dare look back. I hustled down to the interstate and waved frantically at an eastbound truck. He slowed down and pulled over, and I jogged down to the cab and climbed in.

"You looked desperate," the driver said as I climbed in.

"I just need a ride badly," I said.

He pulled the rig back onto the highway. "Where are you headed?" he asked.

"Where are you going?"

"Chicago."

“That’s fine by me,” I replied. I’d bypass the idea of Sioux City and head east.

I made it to Chicago, well, Joliet, actually. I found a small tech company that needed some temporary help, and I stayed there for a month before moving down to Champaign-Urbana for a few weeks. I was getting back into my nomadic swing.

Years passed. I continued my life. I had a few other brushes with relationships, but in the long run, I couldn’t live with that long of a commitment. Still, as I got older, I did slow down. My gigs lasted longer. I spent more time seeking companionship. And, at night in bed, I dreamed of Lynn and the Community.

Christmastime was the worst. I thought about going to see my family. I’d not seen my mother in several years, so I worked my way down to Virginia. My mom was happy to see me as was the rest of my family. My sister and her husband and kids were there. The kids swarmed around me, and I played games with them.

“You should find a girl and settle down,” my sister told me. “Have kids of your own.”

“I got close there once,” I said, thinking of Lynn and Mikey and Jeanie. I went to my room and laid down, and tears filled my eyes. It had been, what, sixteen, no seventeen years since I ran away from the Community. I couldn’t get that back. I had wasted the opportunity.

Or had I? I looked online for any mention of the Community. Even knowing what I did about their computer presence, it was hard to find. It appeared to be there still. Would they remember me? Would they bar me for what I did? Would they at least let me visit? Lynn probably had children of her own now and a husband.

I put it out of my mind, or at least I tried. It came back to me in my dreams. Tugging at me. I was finishing a job in Silicon Valley, and it pulled on me hard. Without knowing why, I was at the airport buying a ticket to Sioux City. Two changes of planes later, I was on the ground an hour away from my destination. I got a cab and told him where I wanted to go.

“That’s going to be a rather expensive fare.”

I opened my wallet and handed him two one-hundred-dollar bills. Money, I had. A mission I was on.

He dropped me at the gates of the community and drove off. I was committed. I walked down the main street as I had done years earlier. I climbed the steps to Lynn’s house, or what had been her house. I knocked.

A blond-haired teenage girl answered the door. I just stared at her. She smiled a second as if to ask what I wanted, but then she got a serious look and stared. The resemblance was there, but there was something else I couldn’t identify.

“Is Lynn here?” I finally asked.

“She’ll be home soon,” the girl replied.

We continued to stare. “Are you Lynn’s daughter?” I asked.

“Yes, my name is Jean,” she stated. That answered that. Named after her grandmother, no doubt. I wonder if Mikey and Jeanie were still around. She went over and picked up a picture. It was Lynn and me at Jane’s house drinking wine. “Is this you?” she asked. “Are you John Pennington?”

She knew I was, but I did nod. “Mom told me all about you,” she said with a sigh. She opened the drawer and pulled out a piece of paper. The note I had written so long ago. “I was always wondering if I’d ever meet you.”

“Because of what your mother told you?” I asked.

“Because a girl is curious about her father,” she replied.

It hit me like a ton of bricks. That’s what I couldn’t place at first. She looked like my mother. There was a Pennington family resemblance. She was my daughter. The product of that one night in Lynn’s bed. I had to sit down.

“I didn’t know,” I said, “I’m sorry.”

“I know. Mom told me that she never told you. She didn’t want you to feel trapped into coming back to the community. But you’re here now.”

I heard the door open, and a blond girl, two years old, ran in. She looked at me and froze.

“Lynn, look who’s come to see you,” Jean told the girl. I looked at her.

“Johnny,” the little girl said, coming towards me. I knew now. The change had happened. I was looking at the Lynn. Two years old and in diapers. She threw her arms around me and hopped on my lap. She kissed me.

I felt warm even though it was odd to have the affections of a two-year-old. The warmth was oddly placed. I realized that it was that I had just peed my pants. My head started to spin, and I was sliding on the couch. My clothes fell oddly around my body. Lynn and I were now the same size. I started to cry.

Jean leaned over and picked me out of the mess of oversized clothes. “Don’t cry, Daddy.” She took me up to the table where I had changed her grandmother’s diaper years before. She put one on me and then sat in a rocking chair, holding me on one knee, and Lynn climbed on the other.

“Don’t cry, Daddy. Everything is going to be fine now.”

I dried my tears and snuggled close to her, knowing she was right.

EPILOG

When I wrote this story, I intentionally left it open like this, as John Varley did at the end of *The Persistence of Vision* which I took the basic premise for this story. Still, people hounded me. What happened to the parents they wanted to know. I'd like to think they are still alive and well, living in immortality as two year olds. Their social group of other toddlers of their generation moved off to their own section of the community to allow the subsequent generations to develop. I thank all my readers for their support.